I t was a meeting of old friends. In Jakarta, former president Suharto, 86, was on his hospital bed. He was suffering from multiple organ failure.

Minister Mentor Lee Hsuan Yew, 84, flew in to meet him, and to pay tribute to Mr Suharto who has been in hospital since Jan.

Once there, he spoke to the family. And visiting Mr Suharto at his hospital bed, Mr Lee touched his old friend. MM Lee said: “I feel sad to see a very old friend with whom I had worked closely over the last 30 years, not really getting the honours that he deserves. He deserves recognition for what he did.”

Both men were leaders during a difficult period in this region. There was racial and religious strife, and communism was spreading.

Tough decisions were made and tough measures, imposed. Then a general, Mr Suharto took over from then president Sukarno during a period when Indonesia faced its military muscles with its neighbours.

Dr Katterius Sinaga, 46, a sociologist with the University of Indonesia, said Mr Suharto was instrumental in fighting communism in the 1970s.

Picture the scenario. Communism was spreading up north in Indochina and down south in East Timor, there was fear it had taken root. Singapore was stuck in the middle. Enter Mr Suharto.

Said Dr Sinaga: “After taking leadership from Sukarno, he launched an ideological war, and projected Indonesia as a secular state. “This way, he successfully convinced the West that he was the right man for Indonesia.”

MM Lee, who flew to see ex-Indon president Suharto in hospital, pays tribute to his role in bringing stability to the region

The day that MM Lee visited an OLD FRIEND
Then a general, Mr. Suharto took over from then president Sukarno during a period when Indonesia flexed its military muscles with its neighbours.

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NOT HIS FAULT

That was not all. Together with MM Lee, Mr. Suharto pushed for a united ASEAN.

Mr. Sinaga added: "When Sukarno was in power, ASEAN became one of the strongest organisations in the world. "Development was brought through modernisation and collaboration with other international organisations."

"It was during this time that the region's economy grew. Mr. Suharto's fortune changed soon after the Asian financial crisis in 1997. After 32 years in power, he was accused of corruption and human rights abuses."

Few dared to call him a friend. Even then, Lee remained open about his relationship with Mr. Suharto.

In 2006, he visited the former president at his home. MM Lee said: "From 1967 when he became president right up to 1997, the economy grew and Indonesia was on the path of taking off the economy. "It didn't take off not because of his fault (but) because bank Indonesia's interest rate was too high, and so the companies borrowed in USD for low interest rates."

"When confidence was low after the Thai last crisis and people wanted to pull their money out, the whole thing collapsed. It was not his fault."

KINDER

Mr. Suharto's 80th birthday was celebrated in style at the national centre for political violence and terrorism research at the S Rajaradman School of International Studies. He said: "History might be much kinder to Suharto than some Indonesians may think now."

Mr. Sinaga had worked in Indonesia for more than five years, and had covered the fall of Mt. Suharto as The Straits Times' bureau chief in 1998.

She said: "Some might view him as a dictator, but he had a system which worked and created stability for Indonesia and the region. "One must not forget the important role he played in building up Indonesia to what it is today."

In his comments to the media after his visit, MM Lee also said: "The younger generations - both in Indonesia and in the world - do not remember where Indonesia started. "It's why I came here to visit him."

"Yes, there was corruption. Yes, he gave favours to his family and his friends. "But there was real growth and real progress. I think the people of Indonesia are lucky."

They had a general in charge, had a team of competent administrators - including a very good team of economists to build up the country."

MM Lee added. Not only did he build up his own country, Mr. Suharto ensured regional stability.

Mr. Sinaga said: "Mr. Suharto did not use Indonesia's strategic clout to bully its neighbours, and this ensured regional stability."

So is Indonesia in better shape today?

Mr. Sinaga said: "Over the last 10 years, Indonesia's political scene has been evolving. "Whether this development is for better or for worse, history will tell. But Indonesia has definitely moved on."
"I feel sad to see a very old friend with whom I had worked closely over the last 30 years, not really getting the honours that he deserves. He deserves recognition for what he did."

– MM Lee (below, in a 1973 picture, with Mr Suharto during a game of golf)