

A Spy Brought to Book in Indonesia

Contributed by Lisa Murray
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Traces of the murder of a human rights activist climb higher into Jakarta's power structure

As far as headquarters go, the small office tucked behind a crumbling villa in central Jakarta, with just four computers and a fish tank, is underwhelming. But from this room, dedicated rights activists have waged a battle with Indonesia's most powerful institutions for four years. And to the surprise of everyone, they are making ground.

The tireless campaigning of the "Action Committee in Solidarity for Munir" helped to bring about the arrest earlier this month of retired major-general Muchdi Purwoprandjono, who now faces charges over the premeditated murder of high-profile activist Munir Said Thalib, who was poisoned aboard an airplane on his way to Amsterdam.

The arrest of Muchdi, a former head of the Special Forces and the deputy chief of the country's main intelligence agency until early 2005, took everyone by surprise. Not because he was an unlikely suspect in the case but because people thought that the former military man was untouchable.

Indonesia's military has long been immune from prosecution. No senior military officer has ever been imprisoned for human rights violations despite the disappearance of student activists under the Suharto regime and the many and varied reports of military abuses in Papua, Aceh and the-now-independent East Timor.

While Muchdi's arrest was welcomed as a significant breakthrough in the case, Munir's supporters, including his widow Suciwati, claim the trail does not stop with him. They are pushing for the arrest and questioning of more senior officials, including the former head of the intelligence agency, Hendropriyono.

They may be left unsatisfied. Close observers of the country are skeptical about whether Muchdi's detention is a harbinger of more arrests to come.

"Muchdi was no longer in a position of influence and while he has some important friends, he was somebody who was dispensable, perhaps, in the security hierarchy," says

Sidney Jones, senior adviser at the International Crisis Group.

"I don't think that this necessarily means that we're going to see prosecutions of past abuses on the military."

Even so, "it was a very important arrest given Muchdi's seniority," she says.

"After the news of Munir's murder came out no one believed that the investigation would go beyond the lowest level."

Andi Kurniawan peers over the stacks of files on his desk at the Munir Action Committee headquarters. The graphically enhanced image of Munir against a red background stares down from the scores of posters around the room. The office is like a shrine to the activist, who spent his life railing against human rights violations and corruption.

"Muchdi was not the only actor in this conspiracy," Andi says. And to emphasise his point he pulls out a chart with photos of the main players he believes were involved. Lines criss-cross the page to show the various links between each player and their role in the assassination. Muchdi ranks somewhere in the middle, alongside other deputy chiefs of the security agency and below Hendropriyono.

"We are not really confident these people will be brought to justice but we hope they will," Andi says.

Munir's assassination rocked the nation, not only because of the loss of the country's most high-profile critic of the Suharto family and the military but because of the bizarre nature of the crime, with links to the top spy agency and the national airline, made for a gripping tale.

Munir was poisoned with arsenic en route to Amsterdam, where he was going to take up a Master's degree in international law. He was just 38 years old. Pollycarpus Budihari Priyanto, an off-duty Garuda pilot, gave up his seat in business class for the activist and shared a drink with him during a stopover at Singapore's airport. It was there that he is believed to have spiked Munir's drink. Earlier this year he was sentenced to 20 years in prison for the murder.

The former CEO of Garuda, Indonesia's national airline, was also jailed for one year for helping with the plot, by making sure Pollycarpus was assigned as part of the security team on Munir's flight.

Muchdi's links with Pollycarpus were uncovered two years ago by a fact-finding team set up by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to help with the investigation. It claimed that Pollycarpus and Muchdi phoned each other 35 times, with the most calls taking place in November 2004, just after it was made public that Munir died of arsenic poisoning. Muchdi insists he has no knowledge of the calls, suggesting that someone else could have used his phone.

Muchdi's name was also mentioned in the sworn statement of a former intelligence officer, Budi Santoso, who claims that he was often ordered to check on Pollycarpus.

But Munir's supporters believe the mastermind behind the assassination was further up the chain of command.

"The Muchdi arrest is a very significant achievement of the police and will reduce the military impunity in Indonesia," says Usman Hamid, who now heads the human rights organization founded by Munir.

"But we believe that there is another person who played a more significant role in the murder of Munir and we urge that the police also investigate the former chief of the intelligence agency (Hendropriyono)."

Hendropriyono has repeatedly dismissed allegations he was involved in the plot.

Muchdi is now being held in a detention centre in South Jakarta, which has been criticised for its special treatment of detainees.

Reform of Indonesia's military and security agencies, while slow, has been much more progressive than in countries like the Philippines and Thailand. The military has no formal role in politics any more. It has given up its seats in parliament and declared its neutrality in elections.

However, many see this separation of powers as superficial. And the Muchdi arrest has been held up as a sign that there should be more reform, particularly of the spy agency.

"This case demonstrates need to have more effective reform and oversight of the intelligence community," says Hamid. "We don't have laws that define the role of intelligence, the power of the intelligence agency and the limits of that power."

