

Indonesia: the drawn-out saga of Tommy Suharto's jailing

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It is now six weeks since the Indonesian Supreme Court found Tommy Suharto, the youngest son of the former president, guilty of corruption and sentenced him to 18 months in jail. Efforts by the government of President Abdurrahman Wahid to arrest him have proven to be problematic, however.

On September 26 the court found that Tommy (whose legal name is Hutomo Mandala Putra) and his co-accused and former business partner Ricardo Gelael had defrauded the state of \$US10.7 million by swapping a tract of swampy land for a prime site belonging to the National Logistics Agency (Bulog) in order to build a superstore. The Supreme Court overturned two earlier lower court verdicts.

Tommy formally applied for a presidential pardon on October 3, forcing a stay of the execution of his sentence. Wahid agreed to meet him privately at the Borobudur Hotel on October 7 and 8, giving rise to media speculation of a secret deal. In order to dispel such reports, Wahid declared that he would reject any clemency plea, a decision that he ultimately confirmed on November 2.

While Gelael surrendered to Jakarta's high security Cipinang prison the next day, Tommy evaded the authorities. When prosecutors and police arrived at his mansion, near his father's official residence, no one was home. With more than 100 Indonesian and foreign journalists on hand, Public Prosecutor Fahmi knocked fruitlessly on the gate door to serve the arrest warrant. Officials announced that a further attempt to detain the 38-year-old multimillionaire would be postponed until November 6.

Since then his lawyers have made a series of last-ditch efforts to thwart the authorities. They have objected that they had only received a photocopy, not a carbon copy, of the presidential decree rejecting

clemency; that the police had no search warrant to search his premises; and that he had received a death threat just as he was about to surrender to the authorities. To add to the confusion, National Police spokesman Brigadier General Saleh Saaf said the police had not received an arrest order from prosecutors.

Pressed by sections of the media, both domestic and international, to explain this fiasco, Wahid's spokesman Wimar Witoelar pleaded for understanding of the government's political problems. He told a foreign correspondents' lunch that Tommy's arrest was "very, very difficult" because "we have never before arrested the son of a super, super strong person". But, on the other hand, if Tommy escaped jail, "the people will not accept it".

Wahid personally appealed for public patience over the saga. "I implore the public not to hastily regard Tommy as a fugitive who is trying to evade his jail sentence," Wahid told reporters. According to the official news agency Antara, the Attorney-General informed the president that Tommy was simply out of town, and had not fled the country.

No large demonstrations have been reported demanding Tommy's jailing, but about 70 former prison inmates staged a highly-publicised protest outside the Cipinang penitentiary on November 4, calling for Tommy and his co-defendant to be given the same treatment as ordinary prisoners. "Before us, Now Tommy," proclaimed one banner.

With a playboy image and a liking for racing cars, Tommy has become a symbol of the economic power, corruption and extravagance of the Suharto clan. He and his five brothers and sisters were given controlling interests in some of the country's largest conglomerates, part of the estimated \$70 billion empire amassed by the family during General Suharto's 32-year rule.

Tommy also represents a substantial layer of the Indonesian capitalist class that has clung to key assets and privileges despite the demands of the IMF and the Western powers for the complete restructuring of the economy. When the IMF bailed out the Indonesian government and banks in 1998 in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, it forced Tommy to relinquish his exclusive franchise for the production of the Timor, which was to be Indonesia's national car, and his lucrative monopoly on cloves, a key ingredient in Indonesian Kretek cigarettes.

Nevertheless, through the Humpuss conglomerate that he set up in the 1990s, he still has sizeable shareholdings in an estimated 90 companies that range from oil exploration and natural gas to pharmaceuticals, construction and shipping.

His treatment, therefore, has become a test of the Wahid regime's willingness to tackle the entrenched business interests, including those of former high-level military officers, that still survive from Suharto's dictatorship. The English language *Jakarta Post*, which has tended to speak for sections of business that were excluded from the Suharto patronage, published an editorial on November 6 declaring that for Wahid personally and the entire administration, Tommy's arrest "could be an important test case of the government's credibility".

Reflecting the position of the Western powers, the BBC commented: "Our correspondent says his [Tommy's] imprisonment is regarded as vital to Mr Wahid's campaign to clean up the endemic corruption that flourished during Mr. Suharto's 32-year rule."

If Tommy is jailed, he will become the first member of the Suharto family to suffer that fate. Media pressure for his jailing grew when a South Jakarta court two months ago accepted medical evidence that his father was unfit to stand trial on charges of siphoning off a fortune in state funds. After protests involving thousands of students and clashes between demonstrators and riot police outside Suharto's residence, Wahid ordered prosecutors to call for a retrial, but also pledged to pardon Suharto in the unlikely event that he is ever convicted.

While proceeding cautiously against Tommy and his father, Wahid's administration has been careful not to raise the underlying crimes of the Suharto regime—such as its seizure of power in the 1965 US-backed coup,

resulting in the murder of up to 1 million workers, peasants and members of the Communist Party of Indonesia, the brutal suppression of workers' struggles for three decades and the 1975 invasion of East Timor.

Wahid, who was installed as president last year with the backing of the Golkar party, the political machine of Suharto and the military, still requires the support of this apparatus for his political survival. His tenuous hold on office was underscored on November 3 when, for the second time in recent weeks, he dared the House of Representatives (DPR) to convene a special session of the Peoples Consultative Assembly (MPR) to debate an impeachment vote against him.



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