

Did the Indonesian military murder human rights activist Munir?

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A well-known Indonesian civil rights activist, Munir, died an agonising death on an Air Garuda flight to Amsterdam on September 7. While there were suspicions of foul play from the start, it was only in early November, when a Dutch autopsy showed Munir had died of arsenic poisoning, that his death became a major public issue.

Friends and associates of Munir have branded his death as an assassination, possibly carried out by elements connected to Indonesia's military and security apparatus. The longstanding hostility of sections of the military to Munir and the unanswered questions surrounding his death certainly point in that direction.

When Munir, 38, boarded the Garuda aircraft after a stopover in Singapore, he appeared to be in good health. During the flight he became violently ill and was treated by a doctor on the plane. He died about two hours before the flight reached Amsterdam.

Holdups in the autopsy, along with diplomatic and bureaucratic wrangling over its release, suggest a conscious attempt to keep the lid on a probable murder and to slow any investigation.

Even though the death was clearly suspicious and involved a high-profile figure, the Netherlands Forensic Institute (NFI) delayed the autopsy—because of a heavy workload, officials claimed. The report was due to be released three weeks after Munir's death, but the NFI without explanation announced that the case had to be re-examined, further delaying the outcome until November.

Dutch authorities also decided to hand the matter over to the Dutch Foreign Ministry, contrary to an agreement between Munir's family and the state prosecutor that the report would be made available to the family via the Dutch Embassy in Jakarta as soon as it became available.

When Indonesia finally appointed a police team to go to the Netherlands on November 18, it left without the necessary formal documentation requesting the handover of the autopsy report. As a result, Dutch officials refused to hand over the report.

Whatever the exact reasons for the delays, the end result was to postpone the release of an autopsy report for more than two months. At the very least, the sequence of events suggests behind-the-scenes pressure on Dutch authorities to help put off any police inquiries, if not facilitate a full-scale cover up.

Even though the autopsy report is yet to be officially released, it is known that Munir's body had high levels of arsenic in the stomach, blood and urine. Neither Dutch authorities nor the Indonesian police have offered any explanation of how the arsenic got into Munir's body. It is highly unlikely that he accidentally poisoned himself or was accidentally poisoned by someone else. And there are plenty of people who wished him dead.

Munir had a history of investigating human rights abuses by the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) and police in Aceh, East Timor and Papua. He was one of the founders of two human rights groups, Imparsial and the Commission for Missing Persons and the Victims of Violence (Kontras). In September 1999, he was appointed to the Commission to Investigate Human Rights Violations in East Timor set up by the National Human Rights Commission.

Munir lectured on human rights issues to military and police trainees but clearly he was not popular with the security forces. Sidney Jones of the International Crisis Group, who was expelled from Indonesia earlier this year over her reports on Aceh and Papua, described Munir in the *Asia Times* on November 16, as someone who "stood up to people in power, made them angry,

got threat after threat, and never gave up”.

According to an article in the *Jakarta Post* of November 25, Munir had one quality that marked him as different from others involved in official inquiries into human rights violations: “Unlike some of his senior colleagues, he was not constrained by an excessive ‘patriotic’ spirit when dealing with problems such as those of East Timor and Aceh.” In other words, he was not prepared to overlook the military’s flagrant abuse of democratic rights as it sought to maintain “national unity” and crush separatist movements.

Munir and his family have been repeatedly threatened. On one occasion, thugs smashed up his office and accused him of being unpatriotic because of his criticism of the huge military offensive launched against the separatist movement in Aceh in May last year.

Munir’s house was fire bombed last year and a bomb, which was eventually defused, was placed in the house of his parents while he was staying there. He received numerous telephone threats. Two days after his death, Munir’s wife, Suciwati, had a warning mailed to her home in West Java. A box containing a mutilated chicken came with a typed message: “Do not connect the TNI to Munir’s death. Want to end up like this!”

While there is no doubt Munir had been a marked man for some time, the exact reason for his probable murder now is unclear. But it may have been related to the second round of the presidential elections in which the eventual winner Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono defeated the incumbent Megawati Sukarnoputri. Munir died just two weeks earlier.

One of Munir’s last interviews was with the business journal, the *Australian Financial Review*. He used the occasion to warn that Yudhoyono was “a very dangerous man”, adding it would be impossible for Yudhoyono to “take a position to investigate abuses by the military because he was part of them”. He blamed the ex-general, who was Megawati’s security minister at the time, for what was happening in Aceh. “Aceh is SBY’s model for stability,” he declared.

Such comments—all of which were true—would not have been welcomed by Yudhoyono, who was attempting to distance himself from his military past and present himself as a man of the people. Despite heavy censorship, there have been numerous reports of abuses, including torture and extra-judicial killings, by

the security forces in Aceh as they have sought to crush separatist rebels.

Munir, it appeared, was intent on further exposing the military’s crimes in Aceh. Aboeprijadi Santosos, a journalist with Radio Netherlands, stated in the *Jakarta Post* that, in the months prior to his death, Munir “was preoccupied with investigations for the campaign to oppose the laws on the Indonesian Military (TNI) and possible corruption related to the budget for the Aceh war and military civic mission. It is believed he planned to write a dissertation on Aceh at the University of Utrecht.”

All of this points to the fact that Munir was murdered by elements of the military or their agents in order to shut him up. If Yudhoyono or those close to him were involved, it could perhaps provide an explanation for the extraordinary delays in carrying out and releasing the autopsy report as well as the lack of any significant police investigation. To date, Dutch police have only examined the aircraft’s medical equipment, interviewed the crew and doctor who assisted Munir, and taken the passport numbers of all passengers.

Such has been the public outcry in Indonesia that Yudhoyono has had to promise an independent inquiry. But given the highly suspicious circumstances surrounding the death, it is unlikely that such an investigation would be anything more than an official whitewash.



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