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Indonesia's foremost democracy and human rights campaigner murdered

Indonesia's most prominent, bravest, and innovative democracy-and human rights fighter is no more. He was the 2000 laureate for the "Right Livelihood Award", often referred to as the "Alternative Nobel Prize". Munir was a prominent human rights activist who first earned his reputation during the years of the Suharto dictatorship, when he frequently clashed with Indonesia's entrenched interests.

At 38 and at good health the legendary activist boarded Garuda's evening flight to Amsterdam on the 6th of September, for a study visit at the University of Utrecht. While in transit in Singapore he began to feel uncomfortable. During the second leg he became seriously ill. He received the medical attention that was possible to arrange, but before landing, by dawn, he had passed away. The news drowned in the bomb set off two days later in front of the Australian Embassy. The mystery surrounding his death was rather mixed with the grief and a feeling of powerlessness. But now this has changed into big headlines and anger, as the news spread that the autopsy undertaken by the Dutch Forensic Institute discovered lethal levels of arsenic in his body. Why these results had not been disclosed earlier remains a mystery. By now, moreover, his wife Suciwati, with a background as trade unionist, and the couple's two children, had to wait for the autopsy results, while various Dutch authorities, diplomats, Indonesian authorities and the new president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono were first informed. The Indonesian authorities have later stated that they will carry out a criminal investigation into the poisoning. But apparently hesitation is still there.

Munir often said he had lost track of the number of death threats he had received and the number of attacks against human rights campaigns that he had been involved in. By now everything suggests that he became a victim of an assassination carried out in the same tradition of brutal violence that he had devoted his life to fight against. The news of the assassination represents an unwelcome resurgence of the brutal tactics that many Indonesians had hoped had become a thing of the past. Munir's death is yet another indication of the amount of work that remains to be done with regard to democracy and human rights in Indonesia. The police, army, and the judiciary are part of the problem. They continuously faced Munir's sharp criticism. The question remains whether they are willing to mobilise as much energy in the hunt for his killers, as they have on Muslim terrorists. That will be a good test of the true character of the new government as well as the international community. The recent news is that Munir's wife has received death threats, warning her against connecting her husband's assassination with the military.

Munir's work must go on. He personified the best of the New Indonesia. In the early 1990s he changed from being an armed Muslim youth activist into a spokesman for Muslim social values and universal humanitarianism. That (and a good portion of humour right in the middle of all troubles) became his guidelines in his fight for human rights and democracy.

Munir's refusal to bow to pressure earned him iconic status among other dissidents who suffered for their decision to challenge the authorities. He was an activist who moved beyond the legal aid offices in Surabaya and Jakarta, and went into the field and encouraged victims to get organized – in order for him to be able to help them fight abuse and in order for them to make a difference together. This was the manner in which he combined the fight for human rights with workers' pledge for better conditions and farmers demands for their land. This was the way he campaigned against the abuses by the military and militias, from Suharto's death squads, the atrocities in East Timor and the ongoing violence in Aceh. This was his approach to efforts at truth and reconciliation regarding the long history of violation of human rights, including the massacres of leftists in 1965-66. And this was the way in which he wanted to transform elitist urban NGOs into democratic peoples' movements – a move he saw as the only way for which they could play a decisive role in the process of democratisation.

No wonder he was fascinated by the historical evolution of democracy in a remote place like Scandinavia. And so he was hoping for closer cooperation in that tradition. He was for example one of those who made possible a series of extensive studies by DEMOS (which Norway and Sweden contribute to the funding of and which I share the responsibility for) of the problems and options of democratisation, based on activist's own experiences. The aim remains to build a new and more efficient agenda. With the assassination of Munir, a cold breath of air from the Soeharto times is again descending upon democrats in the midst of the tropical heat. At the press conference in Jakarta last week, his wife Suciwati covered her shoulders with her Norwegian cardigan. Continued support for the work for human rights and democracy in Indonesia is more important than ever.

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