

Electricity Reform

EA S Sarma's observations on the system of regulators in the course of his book review of S L Rao's book on regulation (October 16, 2004) are as refreshing as they are insightful. Himself a bureaucrat, he points out how the regulatory commissions have been captured, being packed with retired bureaucrats and engineers from State Electricity Boards, leaving the much needed gap in professional approach yet to be filled. At the same time, he is rightly critical of the World Bankers' prescription of short circuiting the regulators through concepts like "Regulation by Contract" and "Distribution Margins".

In the medium term, electricity distribution must be privatised and regulatory commissions professionalised. But the necessary first step in the short term is to make the existing SEBs accountable in bringing about real and significant reductions in technical and financial losses by appointing talented professionals to head them. For this the government must look beyond the normal catchment areas of civil service and existing SEBs.

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Munir: In Memoriam

Indonesia's bravest, most prominent, fighter for democracy and human rights is no more. Winner in 2000 of the Right Livelihood Award, Munir was an activist who first earned his reputation during Suharto's dictatorship, when he frequently clashed with Indonesia's entrenched interests.

At 38 and in good health, Munir boarded Garuda's evening flight to Amsterdam on September 6 for a study visit at the University of Utrecht. While in transit at Singapore he began to feel uncomfortable, and became seriously ill in the second leg of the journey. He received whatever medical attention that was possible to arrange, but shortly before landing he passed

away. The news drowned in the bomb set off two days later in front of Jakarta's Australian embassy. The mystery surrounding his death was mixed with grief and a feeling of powerlessness. But now this has changed into anger, after the revelation of the autopsy results that lethal levels of arsenic were found in his body. Why these results were not disclosed earlier remains a mystery. The Indonesian authorities only later stated that they would carry out a criminal investigation into the poisoning, but the hesitation is apparent.

Munir often said he had lost track of the number of death threats he had received. By now everything suggests that he was a victim of an assassination carried out in the same tradition of brutal violence that he had devoted his life to fight against. The assassination represents an unwelcome resurgence of the brutal tactics familiar in Indonesia's past. Munir's death is yet another indication of the 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. Munir's work however must go on. He personified the best of the new emerging Indonesia. His refusal to bow to pressure earned him iconic status among other dissidents who suffered because they challenged 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 organised – in order for him to be able to help them fight abuse, so that they could make a difference together. Thus he combined the fight for human rights

(Continued on p 5184)

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Economic and Political Weekly

Economic and Political Weekly

Hitkari House, 284 Shahid Bhagatsingh Road, Mumbai 400 001

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Editor (December 1969-January 2004): Krishna Raj

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and Publisher** : K Vijayakumar

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Letters to editor

(Continued from p 5066)

with workers' pledge for better conditions and farmers' demands for their land. This was the way he campaigned against 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 – the only way in which they could play a decisive role in the process of democratisation.

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