

West Papuan separatist leader murdered in suspicious circumstances

By John Roberts
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The murder of Papuan Presidium Council leader Theys Eluay in murky circumstances on the night of November 10-11 has provoked accusations that he was killed for supporting independence for the Indonesian province of West Papua or Irian Jaya. More than a week after his death, few details have been released.

Eluay's body was found on the morning of November 11 in his overturned car outside the provincial capital of Jayapura. In an earlier frantic mobile phone call, Eluay's driver, Aristoteles Masoka, told his father that he and the opposition leader had been ambushed and were being kidnapped. Before being cut off, he reportedly used the word "amber"—a local colloquialism for non-Papuan. The driver is still missing.

Eluay's exact movements prior to his death are not known but his last appointment before he was killed was a dinner in Jayapura with the commander of the Indonesian special forces—Kopassus. Under the Suharto dictatorship, Kopassus was notorious for its brutal suppression of political opposition, including by separatist movements in East Timor, Aceh and West Papua. Eluay was on his way from the dinner to his home in Sentani near Jayapura's airport when he was killed.

Various official statements have done nothing to answer any of the questions surrounding the killing. In fact, the accounts are contradictory and smack of a rather crude attempt at a cover-up.

On November 11, Jayapura police chief Lieutenant-Colonel Daud Sihombing declared that lacerations around the neck of 64-year-old Eluay indicated that he had been strangled with a rope and his car pushed off the road in a remote area to make his death look like an accident.

Two days later, provincial military chief

Major-General Mahidin Simbolon insisted that the Papuan leader had died of a heart attack. The following day a doctor from the Jayapura General Hospital who had examined Eluay's body told the *Jakarta Post* that there was no bruise on the neck. "What we found was the usual condition of a person who hangs himself," he stated.

Yet another story emerged from the National Police spokesman Saleh Saaf. He told the *Jakarta Post* that Eluay had indeed been murdered, but by his own men for advocating a non-violent approach to Papuan independence.

None of the versions provide a convincing explanation as to how Eluay died, let alone the reasons for his death. No account has been given of what transpired at the dinner with the Kopassus chief.

Local Papuans, including Eluay's widow, Yaneke, and his sister Hindom, immediately pointed the finger at the Indonesian military and called for an independent investigation. The US-based Human Rights Watch has also issued a statement saying that Eluay's death was "a well-planned assassination" and calling on President Megawati Sukarnoputri to establish an impartial commission of inquiry, including international participation.

On November 11, angry Papuans torched several buildings near the airport. Two thousand people followed Eluay's body to the Jayapura General Hospital and two days later 10,000 marched peacefully behind the body as it was returned to his home. Last weekend, 10,000 supporters attended a funeral service for the slain Papuan leader, at which the political demand for independence was prominent.

Significantly, just a week before Eluay's murder, the Papuan Presidium Council had strongly rejected a special autonomy law for the province and called for

independence. The legislation provides for limited provincial control over internal affairs and a greater share of revenue from mining, oil and gas ventures as a means of forestalling local demands for independence.

The most likely perpetrators of Eluay's assassination are the Indonesian military or their local militia thugs. Its purpose is to intimidate the remaining members of the Papuan Presidium Council and other supporters of a separate West Papuan state.

For well over a year, the military have been demanding a tougher stance against separatist movements in Aceh and West Papua. Backed by Megawati and Golkar, the ruling party of the Suharto junta, the generals insisted last year that the former president Abdurrahman Wahid end his conciliatory stance and halt the use of symbols of the independence movement—in West Papua, the Morning Star flag.

The military and police bolstered their presence in West Papua. Provincial police officials then arrested Eluay and other Presidium leaders on charges of sedition for advocating secession and raising the Morning Star flag. Despite demands by Wahid for their release, the police proceeded with the charges. Eluay had been due to face trial shortly.

In the course of the lengthy impeachment proceedings against Wahid, which culminated in his removal in July, his political opponents repeatedly accused him of not being tough enough on separatist movements. Since her elevation to the presidency, Megawati has acknowledged past atrocities in West Papua and Aceh but insisted that she will not tolerate further breakaways like East Timor.

In a speech to parliament on October 29, after her first 100 days in office, Megawati stressed the need to prevent the breakup of Indonesia and warned the country faced the same fate as Yugoslavia. In a speech to provincial administrators last week, she repeated her warnings, telling officials that additional changes will be made to the limited autonomy law passed in January to ensure it will not “endanger national unity and the integrity of the nation.”

West Papua occupies half of the island of New Guinea—the other half being the nation of Papua New Guinea. While it has one of the lowest standards of living of all of Indonesia's 27 provinces, West Papua has important economic resources, including the world's largest gold mine run by the US-based

Freeport McMoRan company.

For years, the Free Papua Movement (OPM) has engaged in an ongoing guerrilla struggle against the Suharto junta and the military. After Suharto fell in 1998, a number of Papuan leaders, including Eluay, who had previously backed Jakarta's control of the province, began to call for independence as a means of getting greater control over the revenue.

The 31-member Papuan Presidium Council was formed in June 2000, after a congress of 3,000 Papuans rejected Jakarta's plans for autonomy for the province. Its continued opposition to autonomy proposals, including its latest statement just over two weeks ago, clearly represented an obstacle to the plans of Megawati's administration. Eluay's murder is a warning of what Jakarta's tough line on separatism will mean in West Papua, Aceh and other areas demanding independence.

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