

“The Flower and the Wall”: Poet-Activist Wiji Thukul and Progressive Martyrdom in Post-Suharto Indonesia

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Abstract

Since the fall of Major-General Suharto’s “New Order” regime, Indonesia has struggled to deal with its authoritarian legacy. This article argues that in the quarter of a century since his disappearance, the Indonesian poet-activist Wiji Thukul (1963–1998?) has become a martyr for the still unfulfilled progressive ideals of the Reformasi (reform) movement that helped to bring down that regime in 1998. Using the developing body of theory around “secular” or “political” martyrdom, this article examines the process by which this status has been achieved, situating its development alongside the emergence of the Refusing to Forget movement, as well as comparing and contrasting his fate with that of two other candidates for the label of Reformasi martyr: those of the labour activist Marsinah (1969–1993) and the human rights lawyer Munir Said Thalib (1965–2004). It argues that Thukul’s role as a martyr has been significant in maintaining progressive public discourse about the human rights abuses of the Suharto period, as well as the continuing illiberalism of the period since the end of the regime, and that Thukul remains relevant to efforts to stimulate and nurture the fragile democratisation project that was initiated in the late New Order period. In particular, the authors see Thukul’s brand of grassroots creative practice as playing a central role in his emergence as a progressive icon and in giving his life and work international significance.

Keywords

democratisation; human rights; Indonesia; Marsinah; Munir Said Thalib; Reformasi; secular martyrs; Suharto; Wiji Thukul

1. Introduction

This article will consider a particular kind of hero (the secular/political martyr), in a particular context: the relatively stable, but illiberal and possibly degenerating, democracy of Indonesia in the post-Suharto era. Its focus is the poet, dramatist, community organiser, and working-class political leader, Wiji Thukul.

It argues that the character of Thukul's creative and political practice and the way his public memory (and therefore his martyrdom) has become established has made him a leading figure among a number of icons who lost their lives in the years around 1998 when Major-General Suharto stepped down as president and the current era of party political democracy began.

It compares his fate in public memory with two other key candidates for consideration as martyrs of the movement for democratic reform that, in the 1990s, grew out of opposition to the Suharto regime (the Reformasi movement): Marsinah and Munir Said Thalib. We assert that the political context of an illiberal—but surviving—democracy, in which the gains of reform seem fragile and democratic ambitions can sometimes seem to be distant goals, has made the public remembering of murdered (or “disappeared”) activists important, providing both inspiration and maintaining morale.

2. The Context of Post-Suharto Indonesia

In the years following Suharto's withdrawal from the political stage, Indonesia entered a period of intense political reform (and political instability). These reforms saw the re-establishment of free parliamentary elections, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press, among other improvements in political life (Aspinall, 2005; Mietzner & Aspinall, 2010). In this period, it seemed possible that many of the ambitious democratic and social justice goals of the Reformasi movement might be within reach. Indonesia was rated highly (“free”) by Freedom House in its annual ranking designed to measure political freedom in different countries (Freedom House, 2006). As Power and Warburton (2020) note, by 2013, this rating had fallen to “partly free” and a number of other indices tracked a degeneration of democratic life in Indonesia throughout the presidencies of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”). At the time of writing, the front-running candidate to replace Widodo is Prabowo Subianto, Suharto's former son-in-law and a Suharto-era general associated with alleged human rights abuses, including being linked to the disappearance of Thukul and other progressive activists (Barrett, 2024; Birtles, 2023; Easton, 2022; Ratcliffe & Mulyanto, 2024; Teresia & Christina, 2024; Utama, 2023).

A range of explanations have been put forward to explain this persistent, and sometimes growing, illiberalism (Bourchier, 2015; Hadiz, 2017; Mietzner, 2020). These explanations have been based on elements of both Indonesian and global history and politics, but most have indicated a degree of fragility in Indonesia's democracy, which has nevertheless endured for over a quarter of a century (much longer than its 1950s equivalent) and shows no clear sign of imminent collapse (Graham, 2016; Setiawan, 2022b).

However, in a situation where the oligarchy of the Suharto era persists (Ford & Pepinsky, 2014; Hadiz, 2001; Winters, 2011) and democratic reforms achieved since 1998 seem under almost constant threat, it is understandable that those looking to defend and extend reforms should look to inspirational heroes, even martyrs.

3. Martyrs and Memory

While the idea of martyrdom is rooted in religion (Middleton, 2011; Mitchell, 2012), it has been used in secular contexts for at least 200 years (David's *The Death of Marat* from 1793 might be considered the premiere early modern image of secular martyrdom). Discussion of the concept in the religious context has a long scholarly history, but attention has only relatively recently moved to specifically political and secular notions of it (see, for example, Outram & Laybourn, 2018). Murphy (2023) prefers the term “political martyrdom” and differentiates three key elements to the process of martyrdom: firstly, an “unnatural” death linked to the martyr’s identity or political commitments; secondly, the “consecration” of the martyr’s death in a community/social group; and finally, the transmission of narratives relating to the martyr’s death (and life).

We argue that Thukul, and the other two figures we discuss, have fulfilled these criteria. Murphy also emphasizes the importance of memory studies to scholarly understandings of martyrdom, quoting Karl Mannheim: “Past experience is only relevant when it exists concretely incorporated in the present” (Mannheim, 1952, as cited in Murphy, 2023, p. 476). In short, martyrdom is not the creation of the martyr, whatever their intentions may be; it is the creation of a community or communities after their death. As Halbwachs (1980, p. 84) argued, “Every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time.” Public memory is not passive, it requires “active engagement with past events, driven and shaped by the concerns of present actors” (Murphy, 2023, p. 476). These actors and this process are situated in a particular context or set of contexts and particular political circumstances (Olick et al., 2011, p. 37).

The life and creative/political practice of Thukul has been important to the way he has been taken up as a hero/martyr, but it is also important to recognize “where the real action of martyrdom lies: in the narratives that communities adopt after death, and the political and cultural work done by those narratives over time” (Murphy, 2023, p. 468). Moreover, a martyr/hero’s legacy “represents a locus of mobilisation” (Murphy, 2023, p. 470). This article argues that the current context of a fragile, relatively illiberal, and possibly degenerating democracy in Indonesia provides a particular poignancy to narratives concerning Thukul’s life and death and is important in explaining the prominence these public memories have had in the past 25 years. However, this context is not sufficient to comprehensively explain the contours of his place in public memory in this period.

In the next section, we give a brief outline of Thukul’s life as well as an account of his political and creative practice. This cannot be a comprehensive or even relatively detailed account (we provide this in Miller et al., 2023). We do seek, however, to give the reader some sense of Thukul as an artist and activist, as well as the context of his work and activity. The article then describes the process which has seen Thukul become a Reformasi martyr.

4. Wiji Thukul’s Life, Art, and Activism

Wiji Thukul, whose name translates as “a seed sprouts,” was born Wiji Widodo in 1963 in the Central Javanese royal city of Surakarta (Solo). His parents were from the urban working-class and he spent his childhood and much of his adult life in a poor *kampung* (a neighbourhood, something akin to the Spanish *barrio*). When he was still a toddler, his city and many other parts of the country were intensely affected by the “anti-communist” killings of 1965–1966 (Cribb, 2001; McGregor, 2018; Melvin & Pohlman, 2018). Solo and the area around it was a communist stronghold in the early 1960s and tens, if not hundreds, of

thousands of people were detained, tortured, and murdered for real or alleged links to communism in a pogrom organised by the Indonesian military and backed by Western governments (including the United States and Australia; Melvin, 2018).

The killings were the “original sin” (Farid, 2005) of the Suharto regime, destroying possible sources of opposition to the new regime, creating an atmosphere of fear and providing a key plank of illiberal politics that has stubbornly outlasted the fall of the regime for more than a quarter of a century (Graham, 2016; Hadiz, 2017; Melvin, 2018; Mietzner, 2020; Miller, 2018). It was in this political context that Thukul lived his childhood. Indeed, almost his entire life was lived within the bounds of Suharto’s authoritarianism.

Thukul is best known for his poems. Poetry has had a prominent role in national life in Indonesia, with figures such as Chairil Anwar (1922–1949) and W. S. Rendra (1935–2009) widely revered. Poetry readings and poetry reading competitions are common in national rituals, such as Independence Day, Youth Oath Day, Kartini Day, National Language Day, and Armed Services Day. It was at one such event that Thukul had his first experience of the power of his words. Already known for a love of writing, he was invited to read a poem at Independence Day celebrations in his local *kampung*:

I had no idea it would cause such a commotion in the community. It was short and simple. But rather mischievous. The title was, “Independence in 1982.” The lines were: “Independence is rice/when eaten it becomes shit.” Just that. Very brief. But what happened? The next morning, the whole organising committee was called in to face the neighbourhood authorities. (Thukul, 1995)

Thukul considered the experience “beautiful.” Ordinary people in the audience responded with delight and hilarity, the authorities with fear and repression. Thukul began to hone his skills by busking his style of sharp-edged comic poetry. As opposed to the staged declamation of school competitions and national rituals, Thukul had to work hard to relate to his audience, who were ordinary people going about their business (“Keliling kampung baca sajak dan mendongeng,” 1985). Thukul expressed the power relations implicit in such staging, relations reflective of broader divisions and marginalisation, in his famous poem, “stage boundary”:

to the players
this is our zone of authority
do not cross this boundary
do not interfere with what happens up here
because you are spectators
you are outsiders
do not change the story we have prepared
do not adjust the plot we have planned
because you are spectators
you have to be silent
this broad stage is not for you
it’s ours
what happens here
don’t try to dispute it

this broad stage is for us
not you
do not try to introduce dangerous questions
into this performance
this broad stage is only for us
you have to pay us
for what we do up here
let us do what is in our authority
you just watch
your place is down there (Thukul, 2014, p. 34, translation by Stephen Miller)

Thukul became involved with local artists and intellectuals with connections to wider regional and national networks. He joined Teater Jagad (“World Theatre”), which was led by Lawu Warta (a student of Rendra) and came into contact with many intellectuals with national profiles, such as Arief Budiman, Ariel Heryanto, and the dissident Catholic priest and writer, Romo Mangunwijaya. Through these networks, he was able to access underground literature, including books by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Karl Marx, and Antonio Gramsci. By the late 1980s, he had emerged as an important progressive intellectual. He was often invited to speak or perform at middle-class events, but had an equivocal relationship to such events, to the timidity of intellectuals involved in such events, and to the patronising and opportunistic empathy such thinkers might express for working-class people like himself. Thukul himself was an auto-didact, his education, like so many others, having been cut short by poverty. He expressed his discomfort with this mainstream middle-class intellectualism in his poem “root out the clever people”:

I root out
the clever people
inside my head
I’m not intimidated anymore
by the words of clever people,
who speak with such passion
the world doesn’t change because of the chatter
of speakers in seminar rooms
whose pronouncements are published
on the pages of newspapers—
maybe their readers are in awe
but the world doesn’t change
when the newspaper is folded and put away (Thukul, 2014, p. 72, translation
by Stephen Miller)

Thukul came from a working-class background and never left the community into which he was born. He was directly involved in the struggles of the community around him, such as the Sritex textile workers strike in 1995, one of the largest strikes of the Suharto era (Adiningtyas, 2018, p. 49). He also organised an alternative educational workshop for children in his *kampung* unable to continue their education (the Flood Prone Workshop, an allusion to the frequent flooding that covered the neighbourhood in water polluted by the textile factory).

When a number of left-leaning activists and organisations coalesced around the illegal Democratic People's Party (Partai Rakyat Demokratik [PRD]), which was declared in April 1996, Thukul worked with the party as a key leader of its cultural wing, the People's Cultural Work Network (Jaringan Kerja Kebudayaan Rakyat). The PRD soon became involved in one of the biggest campaigns of the late Suharto era—the Indonesia Democratic Party (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia [PDI]) crisis in 1996. Mass demonstrations and riots followed the government's forced ousting of Megawati Soekarnoputri as leader of one of the two alternative political parties that were allowed by the regime to play a largely symbolic role in the national parliament. The campaign culminated in a military attack on the PDI headquarters in Jakarta, which had been occupied by supporters of Megawati, including many students and PRD activists (among others, many from the PRD's student front, SMID; Aspinall, 2005).

In the aftermath of the military's attack on PDI headquarters, the PRD was singled out by the regime as the communist "puppet master" (*dalang*) of the campaign (Heryanto, 1997). A look-alike of the party chairman (and later PDI-P member of parliament), Budiman Sudjatmiko, even made an appearance as the black hat villain in a popular television soap opera. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of activists were pursued by the regime's security forces and then detained and tortured. Often family, friends, and organisations such as the Indonesian Legal Aid Institute (Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia) were not informed of their whereabouts. Many activists went missing for weeks or even months. Some, like Thukul, never reappeared.

5. Thukul Becomes a Martyr

With security forces pursuing PRD activists intensively and key leaders, including Budiman, already detained, the party continued to organise underground and Thukul became a member of the party's underground leadership. He remained active throughout 1997 and early 1998, but disappeared sometime around or shortly before Suharto stepped down as president in May of that year (Curtis, 2000).

Initially, fears were not held for Thukul, as other activists who had disappeared reemerged from hiding or were released from detention. But Thukul and several others did not return. Thukul's wife, Siti Dyah Sujirah ("Sipon," 1968–2023) campaigned for answers regarding the fate of Thukul and others who had not returned (Gitiyarko, 2023). She and other family members worked with NGOs, especially the Indonesian Association for Families of the Disappeared (Ikatan Keluarga Orang Hilang Indonesia) and the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (Komisi untuk Orang Hilang dan Korban Tindakan Kekerasan), of which Munir was a founding member and key leader. PRD activists, such as the Indonesian Association for Families of the Disappeared chair, Mugiyanto, were active in both organisations. The Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence worked with those looking for answers and justice in relation to people who had been tortured or disappeared in the final period of the regime, as well as those concerned with the horrific human rights abuses at the beginning of the regime in 1965–1966 (Azhar, 2014). In this way, the Commission brought together the violations that marked the foundation of the regime with those that marked its demise. Failure to come to terms with both waves of violence and suppression, especially the former, is important to understanding the resilience of illiberal politics in Indonesia since 1998, despite the apparent consolidation of electoral politics (Miller, 2018; Setiawan, 2022a).

This struggle to pursue clarity and justice for victims of Suharto era violence and oppression naturally had a strong public memory aspect, as it required the public recovery of the experience of victims of the regime, all

the way from its bloody genesis in 1965 to the disappearances (including that of Thukul) in 1997–1998. It led to the development of a movement to Refuse to Forget (Menolak Lupa) or Resist Forgetting (Melawan Lupa; Hearman, 2014; Prawiro & Rahma, 2021; Setiawan, 2022a; Wardana & Hutabarat, 2012).

By the early 2000s, Thukul was emerging as one of the main icons of the movement. In 2000, the first comprehensive collection of his poems, *Aku Ingin Jadi Peluru (I Want to Be a Bullet)* was published (Thukul, 2000). A documentary including interviews with his family, friends, and fellow activists was released, and he was posthumously awarded the Yap Thiem Hien Award for Human Rights in 2002. In 2003, a major article was published in English, “Wiji Thukul, People’s Poet,” alongside 10 translated poems (poems and articles had appeared during the 1990s in English in forums such as *Inside Indonesia*). In 2004, the Indonesian Association for Families of the Disappeared produced another documentary that included interviews with friends, family members, and survivors.

Thukul’s status was further enhanced during week-long commemorations in 2007. A highlight of these events was the launching of the book *Kebenaran Akan Terus Hidup: Catatan-Catatan Tentang Wiji Thukul (The Truth Will Live on: Notes on Wiji Thukul)*, edited by ex-PRD activist Wilson bin Nurtiyas (who was detained following the 1996 events; Wilson, 2007). This included essays and testimonies by cultural and political associates of Thukul. On the Thursday of that week, families of the disappeared and dozens of human rights activists gathered around the National Monument in Central Jakarta to protest, display banners, give speeches, and discuss developments in various cases. Inspired by the Argentinian Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, *Kamisan* (from the Indonesian word for Thursday, *Kamis*, with the suffix -an, which implies collective, mutual, or ritual action) has since become an ongoing tradition (Febriansyah, 2009; Setiawan, 2022a; Suh, 2012). This demonstration brought together those campaigning for justice over the violence of 1965–1966, the violence in the last days of the regime, and the violence that continued into the Reformasi period, especially the murder of Munir (see Section 6). Since 2007, it has continued to include new cases, such as that of the probable murder of North Sumatran environmental activist Golfrid Siregar in 2019 (Wiratraman, 2022).

Around this time, Thukul’s case and image increasingly entered public discussion and popular culture. His family and friends appeared on popular talk shows such as *Kick Andy!* and *Mata Najwa (Najwa’s Eye)*. Thukul’s children came to play an increasingly important role, producing their own artworks that related to their father’s life, work, and disappearance. In 2009, a bilingual (Indonesian and English) collection of the poems of his daughter, Fitri Nganthi Wani, was published and launched with great fanfare (Wani, 2009). The over 1,000 invited guests included well-known journalists, writers, celebrities, and politicians. The event closed with Indonesia’s Bob Dylan and rock legend, Iwan Fals (“Ivan Off-Key”), singing a version of a poem that Wani had written when she was just eleven years old: “Pulanglah Pak” (“Come Home, Papa”).

Coverage in the mass media continued into the 2010s. Among others, in 2013 *Tempo* (Indonesia’s foremost current affairs magazine, something like Germany’s *Der Spiegel*) ran a special issue on his life and case, accompanied by another collection of poems, *The Generals Are Furious*. In 2014, Indonesia’s foremost publisher, Gramedia, published a comprehensive collection of Thukul’s poems (Thukul, 2014). From around this time his son, Fajar Merah, began releasing versions of his father’s poems put to music with his band Merah Bercerita (his version of “The Flowers and the Wall” has attracted over 2.6 million views on YouTube, as of January, 2024). In 2016, a major feature film, *Solo, Solitude (Istirahatlah Kata-Kata, or Rest Now, Words in the original Indonesian)* was released about the last months of Thukul’s life and, in 2018, another

documentary, *Grassroots Ballads (Nyanyian Akar Rumput)*, was released. The latter won the 2018 Citra award (the Indonesian equivalent of an Oscar) for best documentary feature film and was given a full cinema release in 2020 (it was then released to the public domain on Youtube on what would have been Thukul's 60th birthday, 26 August 2023).

Thukul's image continues to adorn murals around the country and cultural products such as t-shirts and posters remain common. Although Thukul is probably the most prominent Reformasi martyr in Indonesia (although not internationally), he is certainly not alone. In the next section, we briefly discuss two other Reformasi icons before proceeding to a discussion of the meaning of this public memory.

6. Other Reformasi Martyrs

The democratic struggles of the late New Order and Reformasi era have produced a number of martyrs. Thukul, Munir, and Marsinah stand out for their particular prominence and all regularly feature, Che-Guevara-like, in murals and other forms of popular culture (Mansfield et al., 2023). This article is focused on Thukul, but for comparison and discussion, we will also discuss the latter two figures.

Marsinah was an East Javanese factory worker who became a union activist during an industrial upsurge that swept Indonesia in the early 1990s. In May of 1993, she was a key leader of a strike at a watch factory that was demanding, among other things, the implementation of minimum wage regulations and the disbanding of the "yellow" government-run union, SPSI (Serikat Pekerja Se-Indonesia, the All-Indonesia Workers' Union). The campaign came under pressure from the local military command, which physically confronted the strike picket line and then summoned 13 workers to its headquarters, forcing them to sign letters of resignation (Silvey, 2003). Over the following days, they forced a further eight workers to do the same. Marsinah went to the military headquarters to ask about her comrades after the initial detentions and then disappeared shortly afterwards. Three days later, her raped and mutilated body was found in a rice field. While a police investigation was undertaken during the Suharto period, all of those initially charged and convicted had their convictions later quashed and were released. This raised the suspicion that the investigation was manipulation to deflect attention from the local military command (see Collins, 2002; Mohamad, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Weix, 2002). The case remains unsolved.

Following her death, Marsinah became a symbol of the struggle for workers' rights in Indonesia. Her image and story have continued to be used, with her silhouette still frequently being seen at union and student events, as well as on murals, t-shirts, and other political paraphernalia (see Figure 1 below for an example). In this way, she plays a role similar to Munir and Thukul (Avonius, 2008).

Like Thukul, her story has found its way into art and popular culture, although in a more limited way. In the 1990s she was the topic of two dramatic works by the prominent dissident writer, Ratna Sarumpaet (Hatley, 2007; Sarumpaet & McGlynn, 2000). In 2002, a feature film about her case, *Marsinah, Cry Justice*, was released. This was directed by the legendary actor, director, and screenwriter, Slamet Rahardjo, who won a Citra best director award for it.

Munir Said Thalib (1965–2004) was a lawyer and activist involved in a number of campaigns around human rights abuses throughout the Suharto era and in the early Reformasi period. This included the campaign to find



Figure 1. A demonstrator waves a flag with an image of Marsinah's face during a demonstration in 2018: The flag reads "Marsinah: Make Her a Workers' Hero and a People's Hero." Source: Courtesy of Elma Adisya.

justice for the families of those who "disappeared" immediately before the fall of the New Order regime, such as Wiji Thukul. In September 2004, he was assassinated by arsenic poisoning on a Garuda Indonesia flight from Jakarta to Amsterdam, in the Netherlands, where he was due to undertake postgraduate legal studies.

Munir was well-known internationally and won the prestigious Right Livelihood award in 2000 (Right Livelihood, n.d.). Consequently, when news of his death spread globally, significant international pressure was brought to bear on the newly elected government of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to investigate his death. Before his death, Munir had reportedly wryly commented that Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, as a former army general under Suharto, was a "user of democracy, rather than a believer in it" (Easton, 2022, p. 136). While his government did establish an investigation into Munir's death, and this did lead to the conviction of Pollycarpus Priyanto, a Garuda Indonesia pilot, those responsible for initiating and authorising what had all the hallmarks of a state intelligence assassination operation were never identified or pursued (Harsono, 2020; Wahyuningroem, 2014).

Like Thukul, Munir's image is common on murals, posters, and other forms of popular material culture. Several books have been published about his case and life, including a graphic novel. Like Thukul, his case has been the focus of a few films, although none has had the same reach as *Solo, Solitude*. Unlike Thukul's case, his has not been picked up by popular talk shows to the same extent, although a number of current affairs segments have garnered hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube. Munir has had more coverage outside of Indonesia, including Easton's (2022) account of his life and the aftermath of his murder.

7. Discussion: Thukul and the Other Major Reformasi Martyrs

While we argue that the three figures considered in this article all have and do play similar roles in maintaining the public memory of Suharto's authoritarianism and the continuing illiberalism that flows from the unfinished process of Reformasi, it is clear that there are also differences. To begin with, each lost their life at a different stage in the process of the transformation of Indonesia from a dictatorship to the present day's relatively illiberal democracy. Marsinah was murdered during the massive upsurge in wildcat industrial action that, in retrospect, can be seen as marking the beginning of the end for the regime. Five years later, Thukul disappeared just before Suharto stepped down and Munir was murdered six years into the process of this transition. By the time of his murder, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had already won by far the largest share of votes in the first round of the presidential election and was about to easily defeat Megawati in the final run-off. The presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a military faction member of parliament from Suharto's last term, can be seen as the transition point between the period of substantive democratic reform to "democratic recession" and even regression. Consequently, the period covered by their deaths covers the period from the emergence of a mass democratic opposition movement to the authoritarianism of the Suharto regime up to the stabilisation of the post-regime political system as a fragile and relatively illiberal democracy.

All three figures became icons of the Refuse to Forget movement, but this manifested differently in Thukul's case. Marsinah and Thukul were both working class and never left that class milieu. Munir, although he had some experience in labour politics, made his name as a lawyer and human rights advocate. Although Marsinah's murder had national influence and national impact, her activity was entirely local and her murder took place in the context of a local industrial dispute. While Thukul was rooted in and engaged with his local working-class environment, he was also integrated into national networks and had a profile as an important intellectual and artist. Munir was a national figure, well-integrated with international human rights networks. When he was murdered, this meant that the international outcry was immediate and his case continues to be the best known of the three outside of Indonesia.

Family has played a key role in keeping alive the memory of both Thukul and Munir. The latter's wife, Suciwati, continues to publicise his case and campaign for democratic reform, but this is particularly the case for public memory of Thukul. His wife, his younger brother, and his two children have all played important roles in his public memory. His wife, Sipon, spent 25 years struggling to get justice over Thukul's disappearance, but died on January 5, 2023, without finding satisfaction. Along with Thukul's younger brother, Wahyu Susilo, she was a regular guest on television programmes and both made frequent appearances in other media. In addition to this, the role of Thukul's children has been especially important. They have also appeared in the media (particularly Wani), are artists themselves, and have produced a significant body of works that focus on his life and disappearance.

Thukul was not simply a political figure and community activist, he was also a well-known artist. And he was one with a relatively unique background and creative practice. He was working class and stayed working class. His art was thoroughly integrated with his community activism and this class perspective. Not only this, both his children are artists who have produced artworks that directly focus on his life, work, and fate. All of these factors have combined to mean that Thukul's role as an icon has perhaps loomed largest among the key martyred icons of the Reformasi movement.

8. Conclusion

We are flowers
that you don't want to grow
...you are the wall
but we have spread our seeds
in your wall
and one day we will grow up together
with the conviction: you must be destroyed. (Excerpt from "The Flowers and
the Wall"; Thukul, 2014, p. 81)

In his 1993 poem, "The Flowers and the Wall," Thukul uses a metaphor that may seem strange for an energetic and radical working-class activist: that of flowering weeds gradually bringing down a wall. The image contrasts the grand ambition of bringing down the seemingly impervious wall and the apparent impotency of small weeds seeking out their place in the sun. While Thukul wrote this poem in the context of the New Order regime, it is, nevertheless, perhaps even more apt for the situation that has faced the Reformasi movement since 1998.

Thukul was a captivating and charismatic leader of a movement that set out in the 1990s with great and hopeful ambitions for progressive change in Indonesia. While the mass strikes and student demonstrations of the 1990s did play a role in bringing the Suharto dictatorship to an end, they were not able to change the politics of oligarchy that formed the backbone of the regime and, consequently, Indonesia's democracy has continued to be fragile and, to a significant extent, illiberal. From this point of view, the period since the fall of the Suharto regime has been more difficult and potentially more demoralising. Progress has been slow and, at times, difficult. While the human rights situation continues to be much better than during the New Order period, in several areas political developments have stalled, stagnated, or even regressed, leading some observers to describe Indonesia as being in a "democratic recession" since the stabilisation that came with the Yudhoyono presidency.

As we have seen, Murphy (2023) argues for three key phases in the public memory of a "secular" or "political" martyr: (a) unnatural death linked to a cause, (b) consecration of the person as a martyr for that cause, and (c) social/communal transmission of a narrative concerning the person's life. Moreover, he states that the classic religious notion of the martyr often included an element of being socially or politically marginalized, making narratives of hero-martyrs "a classic weapon of the weak" (Murphy, 2023, p. 472). He sees this as also being relevant to non-religious martyrdom. Nevertheless, such processes of public memory produce "a powerful story that links past and present, reinforcing communal solidarity" (Murphy, 2023, p. 470). That is, it creates and maintains both identity and morale. In the difficult circumstances faced by the Reformasi movement since the fall of Suharto, this role is significant. But solidarity is more than identity and morale, and narratives of a hero-martyr need also to be a "locus of mobilisation" (Murphy, 2023, p. 470). That is, the narratives need to inspire continuing activity, possibly in circumstances where progress may be slow or fraught (such as has been the case in Indonesia since the early-mid 2000s).

We argue that Thukul's story, as it has been told since 1998, provides precisely these characteristics. His principled and uncompromising stance in the face of violence and repression is inspiring. Moreover, by comparing Thukul's place in public memory with that of Marsinah and Munir, we can see that his place in

public memory is not solitary, but rather is part of a complex of narratives that include other martyrs to the cause of progressive political change in Indonesia.

The public narratives of memory around Thukul, Marsinah, and Munir have been constructed around both similarities and differences in the stories of their lives and work. The process of public memory associated with them has likewise included both parallels and contrasts. While Thukul was working class, like Marsinah, he was also an intellectual who produced a body of artistic work giving voice to the progressive politics for which he gave his life. Not only this, creative work, including by his children, has produced a set of stories that give him particular prominence. These narratives have helped maintain progressive public discourse about the abuses of the Suharto era and the illiberalism that has often continued to characterize Indonesian politics.

Finally, we argue that Wiji Thukul should be remembered outside of Indonesia's borders. The quality and character of his work are enough to justify this, but his place in public memory in the world's fourth most populous country and third-largest democracy is also grounds for him to be known and discussed in a broader international context of progressive political martyrs.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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