

When his boss took a new job, Mamat didn't expect a drastic change. He was a chauffeur. His job was mainly to drive his boss from home to the office and from the office back home. "It was steady work, morning to evening, sometimes driving him to dinner receptions," Mamat said.

Mamat's boss, Erry Riyana Hardjapamungkas, was a mining executive and the former head of a state-owned tin company. In December 2004, Hardjapamungkas took a job as commissioner at Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK — Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi).

Hardjapamungkas brought along his chauffeur, Mamat, to the newly established office. It turned out to be a tough job. Hardjapamungkas had to start his work without an office. He and four other commissioners met in restaurants and brought their own computers.

Lighting a Candle in Darkness

It took them almost a year to set up an operation, establish an office and start investigating possible corrupt activities. Their first catch was Abdullah Puteh, then-governor of Indonesia's rebellious province of Aceh.

Puteh allegedly marked up the purchase of an MI-2 helicopter, which cost the state 4 billion rupiah (US\$424,384) in losses. The Corruption Court later sentenced Puteh to 10 years in prison and a 500 million rupiah (US\$52,891) fine. It was the first time that a governor was arrested since Gen. Suharto took power in 1965.

In *Menyalakan Lilin di Tengah Kegelapan*, or "Lighting a Candle in the Darkness," a book published by the KPK, Hardjapamungkas' colleague, Taufiequrachman Ruki, recalled the difficulties in setting up their operation.

"I hired and paid my two assistants myself. I told my secretary, 'Buy a computer and sit down here,'" Ruki said, referring to his temporary, crowded office. "We have to pay our staff above the average."

The Puteh case was followed by the arrest of Mulyana W. Kusumah, an election commissioner who tried to bribe a state auditor in a hotel room. Later KPK also arrested Irawady Joenoes, a member of the Judiciary Commission, whose job was to help select and train Supreme Court judges.

History of corruption

No one knows exactly when corruption began to breed in this archipelago. When the Dutch began to colonize Java in the early 17th century, stories were already emerging about corrupt colonial administrations. A Dutch writer, Eduard Douwes Dekker, wrote about corruption in Banten, western Java, in his classic book “Max Havelaar,” published in 1859 under the pseudonym Multatuli (Latin for “I have suffered greatly”). It chronicled a young Dutch civil servant in a corrupt colonial administration. But Indonesian history began before the Dutch colony and outlasted it.

Indonesia became a sovereign state in December 1949. Corruption grew much faster after the Indonesian army, led by Suharto, took power from President Soekarno late in 1965. Suharto centralized power much more than Soekarno by consolidating the civil service, the military, political parties, businesses and many other organizations under his rule. He ruled with an iron fist, befriended Western governments and enriched his family and cronies.

When Suharto resigned in May 1998, he had allegedly pocketed as much as US\$15 to US\$35 billion during his years in office, according to Transparency International — earning him the title of the biggest kleptocrat in the modern world.

Many political organizations and individuals asked successive post-Suharto administrations to prosecute Suharto. But he remained a free man until he died and was buried like a Javanese sultan in January 2008. His legacy, including a corrupt Indonesia, however, lives on.

Stephen Sherlock, an Australian scholar, wrote in a 2002 research paper about the state of Indonesian government operations after Suharto, “The current civil service is process based, not results based, and performance is measured by obedience to one’s superiors.” Sherlock continues: “Interactions with the public are regarded not as occasions to deliver public services but as opportunities to levy informal taxes.”

Corruption is like a cancer. In Indonesia it spreads to many, if not all, government institutions: police, civil servants, military, prosecutors, judges, the Supreme Court, the media, the House of Representatives, state-owned companies, ministers, the Merdeka Palace, among others.

Growth of anti-corruption agency

In December 2003, the House of Representatives passed an anti-corruption law. It stipulates that the government should establish KPK as “a state agency that will perform its duties and authority independently, free from any and all influences.” The media closely covered the selection process.

President Megawati Soekarnoputri inducted the first KPK commissioners in December 2003, including Hardjapamungkas and Ruki. Hardjapamungkas and his colleagues learned from Hong Kong’s Independent Commission against Corruption and Singapore’s Corrupt Practice Investigation Bureau. They built small and separated interrogation rooms, as their Hong Kong peers had, to prevent outsiders from listening to the interrogations. Video cameras were installed in KPK’s interrogation rooms to discourage detainees from changing their stories in written testimonies.

Initially, banks refused to turn over information to KPK about accounts held by those under investigation. But, Indonesia’s Supreme Court issued a go-ahead verdict that forced banks to cooperate with KPK. Ruki, himself a retired policeman, asked his former colleagues to send their best detectives to join KPK. KPK also purchased modern telephone tapping equipment. Sometimes KPK also brought along television crews when raiding a suspect.

Since December 2004, KPK has arrested and sent to prisons dozens of powerful politicians. Mamat saw how the KPK operations netted government ministers, a national police chief, a Central Bank governor, the Judicial Commission member, governors, government prosecutors, and regents.

Their work attracted international donations. The governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Japan, Sweden, the United States and others have supported KPK. Its international aid increased from 28.5 billion rupiah (US\$3 million) in 2005 to 97.1 billion rupiah (US\$10.3 million) in 2007. Its staff increased from 188 in 2004 to 451 in 2007.

A citizen contributes

Four years on, Ruki and his colleagues ended their terms. Hardjapamungkas, Mamat’s boss, also decided not to remain a commissioner. But, Mamat fell in love with his boss’ work. “I told my boss I decided to stay on at KPK,” he said.

He became a KPK driver. Now his job is to drive an iron-barred minivan, picking up detainees every morning, taking them from police prisons to KPK office, for questioning, or to the Corruption Court, for their trial sessions. In the afternoon, Mamat delivers the detainees' lunch boxes and drives them back to the prisons in the evening.

"My passengers are special. They are people with power, really big power," he smiled.

Mamat is one of three KPK's "operation drivers." Indriana, Mamat's supervisor, told me he supervises 25 drivers but only three are entrusted to drive the detainees. Sometimes "operation drivers" have to be involved in "secret operations" — raiding a suspect, usually, at night.

Some are critical of KPK's selection process for investigations. KPK rarely investigates politicians close to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Vice President Jusuf Kalla. KPK only arrested those related to Yudhoyono's predecessor, Megawati Soekarnoputri. Kalla himself is a businessman embroiled in some controversies. Adnan Husodo, of Indonesian Corruption Watch, pointed out that KPK declines to question Aulia Pohan, a Central Bank director allegedly involved in corruption. Yudhoyono's son is married to Pohan's daughter.

When talking to me in the KPK parking lot, Mamat spoke in a better-late-than-never fashion, "It is true that the suspects are mostly, but not all, not related to the president. We can't fight them all. At least, KPK is trying to have a breakthrough."

