

Events surrounding Altantuya murder too incredible to ignore, says Al Jazeera journalist
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By Julia Yeow

Embattled Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak has been forced to face an almost-decade old controversy when an Al Jazeera investigative documentary on murdered Mongolian woman Altantuya Shaariibuu exhumed alleged connections between Najib, the victim and the man who was convicted of the crime.

In the 25-minute long programme, journalist Mary Ann Jolley leads viewers through the once highly controversial and entangled Altantuya saga which was rife with elements of sex, financial scandal, violence and conspiracy.

Altantuya was murdered in October 2006 and the body was blown up with military-grade explosives. Investigations later revealed that the former translator was in an affair with Najib's political adviser Abdul Razak Baginda.

Razak Baginda was charged with abetting in her murder, but was later acquitted.

The Al Jazeera documentary questions whether the two men eventually convicted of Altantuya's murder – Sirul Azhar Umar and Azilah Hadri – were the "fall guys" for others, citing alleged text messages sent by Sirul suggesting a high-level cover up.

Jolley, an Australian citizen, said her team took several months of investigation and background work to produce the video which aired early Friday.

"I first became interested in pursuing the story when Sirul was arrested by Interpol in Australia," Jolley told The Malaysian Insider in an email interview late yesterday.

"It seemed incredible that someone charged with murder – a capital offence – was able to flee the country, let alone to a country where it's illegal to extradite someone facing the execution," she said.

"When his acquittal was appealed by the prosecution, why wasn't he held in custody or at the very least, why wasn't his passport revoked?"

"And then, of course, the fact that no motive was ever established and that in the closing days of the first trial, Sirul wept and begged the judge not to sentence him to death, describing himself as a 'black sheep' that has been sacrificed to protect other people.

"(These) made me want to investigate the case further."

Jolley was deported by Malaysian authorities on June 14 even though she had not been charged with any crime and was not given any reasons for her deportation, she

said.

"I was told I had broken no laws, but that I was on a 'bad' list."

"I have reported stories from what are often referred to as the most repressive regimes in the world – North Korea, Zimbabwe, Saudi Arabia and Gaddafi's Libya – and have never been deported for my work as a journalist before."

Below are excerpts from Jolley's full email interview with TMI:

TMI: How long did it take for you and your team to work on this story? When did you start?

MAJ: Our investigation took a number of months throughout the year.

TMI: What prompted you to pursue this story now, at this time, almost 10 years after her death?

MAJ: I first became interested in pursuing the story when Sirul was arrested by Interpol in Australia. It seemed incredible that someone charged with murder – a capital offence – was able to flee the country, let alone to a country where it's illegal to extradite someone facing the execution.

When his acquittal was appealed by the prosecution, why wasn't he held in custody or at the very least, why wasn't his passport revoked? And then, of course, the fact that no motive was ever established and that in the closing days of the first trial Sirul wept and begged the judge not to sentence him to death, describing himself as a "black sheep who has been sacrificed to protect other people", made me want to investigate the case further.

TMI: Regarding claims by Sirul's relative in Australia, what is your response to criticism from certain parties that it was all hearsay?

MAJ: It is the relative's account of what Sirul told him and the story makes that very clear. I had contact with the relative over several months and his account never changed. It's important to note that Razak Baginda was acquitted without ever having to present a defence, he declined to participate in the programme and he didn't deny Sirul's relative's account when we put it to him.

TMI: Why do you think you were barred from re-entering Malaysia? Did any of the customs officers say anything to you while escorting you out?

MAJ: I was told I had broken no laws, but that I was on a "bad" list.

A number of the immigration officers said to me my deportation was unprecedented and repeatedly apologised for the actions of their government.

I have reported stories from what are often referred to as the most repressive

regimes in the world – North Korea, Zimbabwe, Saudi Arabia and Gaddafi's Libya – and have never been deported for my work as a journalist before. – September 12, 2015.

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