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Colonial Comrades: Indonesian and Dutch Communists in the 1920s

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In the early morning hours of Saturday 12 November 1926, Labuan, a small town on Java’s west coast, woke in alarm to an attack on the residence of a Javanese local official. Several hundred men, some with firearms and others with knives and cutlasses, had captured the local official and his family. They forced him to the house of his superior, the wedono, or subdistrict head, chasing and killing several policemen along the way. A shoot-out ensued at the wedono’s office that left the wedono, more policemen and a Dutch railway supervisor dead. That same evening, armed bands took to the streets of the colonial capital Batavia, some 100 kilometres from Labuan. They attacked the main prison in the north of the city and captured the telephone exchange, effectively cutting off communications.

The attacks created fear among the Dutch and the urban middle classes as they were organised under the banner of the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI – Communist Party of Indonesia). Troops from the colonial army and the constabulary were deployed immediately, and, without much ado, were able to put down the revolt and restore order in most places within a few hours. After a few days everything in West Java was ‘back to normal’. While similar uprisings flared up in two or three other districts of Java, the rest of the colony remained unaffected.

What the PKI had planned as a major revolution was in retrospect not much more than a series of local disturbances that hardly threatened the colonial power. Rather, it provided it with a good reason to crush communism altogether in the colony. On 17 November, all leading PKI members who had not yet fled the country were arrested; some days later many ordinary members were captured as well. By the end of the year, 13,000 communists had been taken into custody. As it was impossible to give them all a proper trial, a few ringleaders were executed and the majority of the prisoners released a few months later. However, after another short-lived communist revolt broke out in West Sumatra in January 1927, the Governor-General exiled 1,400 so-called diehards to a remote corner of the Indonesian archipelago. The location chosen was Boven Digoel, situated in the most eastern district of New Guinea, near the border with the Australian administered part of that island.

The news of the uprising took the Dutch comrades at the Amsterdam headquarters of the Communistische Partij Holland (CPH – Netherlands Communist Party), completely by surprise. Nevertheless, the party released a statement on 16 November, that the revolt was not a ‘communist plot’ but ‘a provocation by the colonial authorities who want to destroy communism in the colony.’ It was the Party’s ‘colonial experts’, communists who had worked in Indonesia before, who inspired this statement. However, within a few days, on 20 November, the Moscow-based Communist International or Comintern, advised by
Indonesian communists who had found refuge in the Soviet Union, issued a manifesto that “welcomed the revolutionary struggle of the peoples of Indonesia, and pledged its total support”. Furthermore, it incited the workers of the world “to do everything in your power to support them in their struggle”. Such divergent reactions to what Indonesian communists were trying to achieve laid bare some of the tensions that existed between the comrades in the mother country and those in the colony; tensions that go back to the early days of the PKI.

From the start, the Indonesian communist movement had a double ancestry. Part of its roots lay in the Sarekat Islam (Islamic Union) that was founded in 1911. The Sarekat Islam rapidly had mass following, claiming membership of nearly two million in 1918. By 1920 however, it had disintegrated into several competing factions, one of which became the left-wing organisation the ‘Red Sarekat Islam’, and later becoming the Sarekat Rakyat (People’s Union). The rest of the Indonesian communist movement’s roots lay in the Indies Social-Democratic Association (ISDV) that was founded in 1914 by Dutch radical socialists working in the colony.

The ISDV, originally a debating club, quickly developed into a Marxist party, particularly after the successful Russian Revolution. It was based in the Central Java capital of Semarang, the ‘Red City’ where most radical trade unions had their headquarters. Its leadership consisted of Dutch railway employees such as Sneevliet and Baars; former military personnel such as Bergsma and Brandsteder; but mostly of primary and secondary school teachers. A number of Indonesians joined them. Like the Dutch members, the Indonesian members were also mainly railway employees such as Semaun, and school teachers like Tan Malaka, Musso; with a number of journalists like Alimin, Darsono, and Dengah. All the Indonesian members were well educated and in general from middle-class or aristocratic backgrounds.

The colonial government kept a close watch on these radikalinskis who propagated a Russian-style revolution, and who changed ISDV’s name in 1920 to Perserikatan Kommunist di Hindia, (later becoming the PKI, the Partai Komunis Indonesia). The Dutch members of the party were gradually expelled from the colony by government order: Sneevliet and Baars were among the first. By 1923 the last Dutch activists had been expelled from the Indies and sent home to the Netherlands. However, their junior PKI colleagues took over and embarked on a more radical course by starting strikes among railway personnel and sugar factory workers. They also prepared for a head-on confrontation with the government.

Most exiles found political refuge in the CPH. As ‘colonial experts’ they formed a strong pressure group in the Netherlands, sending instructions and advice to their Indonesian comrades. They were in a strong position to do so as the Dutch party was assigned as the main channel through which the Comintern, communicated with the Indies – and through which Russian funds could be transferred to support the PKI. Such dependence by the PKI upon their former ‘mentors’ – as the old ISDV members called themselves – as well as the latter’s committed but condescending attitude in discussing PKI strategy, caused an endless series of conflicts between the former comrades-in-arms.
Semaun and Darsono were also expelled from the Indies in 1923, and had settled in Moscow. They worked at the Comintern headquarters, and from there often criticised the behaviour of the CPH colonial experts. While Sneevliet and Bergsma urged the PKI to cooperate with Indonesian nationalists to form a broad popular anti-colonial front, the PKI itself was heading in a far more radical direction, attacking the nationalists for being too easy-going vis-à-vis the colonial government. The PKI leadership was convinced that for the Dutch, their movement was only an appendage to the CPH and that the CPH did next to nothing to support their Asian comrades. Semaun in particular wrote bitterly about Sneevliet’s interference in what he considered to be Indonesia’s own affairs. He bore an even greater grudge against Brandsteder:

“This Dutch comrade, who is so full of ruling-race-superior-fancy worked only among Dutch navy men and soldiers in Indonesia, does not speak Malay, and looked with disdain upon the brown masses, the very stupid coolie class.”

and he ended his report to the Comintern by asking:

“... to keep every sectarian Dutch comrade away from the ranks of Indonesian revolutionaries.”

Darsono, always more diplomatic in his statements, was nonetheless similarly abrasive in his comments upon Dutch paternalism. He reported:

“The very fact that the leadership of the Party was [from 1923 onwards] in the hands of native comrades still further raised the prestige of the Party in the eyes of the masses, for we must not forget that in a colonial country like Indonesia, the masses are somewhat prejudiced against the Dutch comrades.”

The PKI followed its own course, not listening anymore to the avuncular recommendations of their Dutch mentors. Its rapid success in gaining a large following in West and Central Java strengthened the self-confidence of the leaders to go for revolutionary action. They did this by first organising strikes – which mainly failed – and later by underground actions and preparation for a revolt. But, as we have seen, the uprising was ill-planned, ill-prepared, and ill-informed. Colonial intelligence agencies already knew who the leaders of the revolution were, had cracked the secret party code, and had even been informed about the date of the revolt. The government was thus able to act immediately and eliminated the communist threat.

The failed revolution was disastrous for the PKI. In 1927 the party was dead, or at least in a coma for decades to come. Its leaders had either fled the country or were together with the party’s cadres, ‘rotting away’ in the malaria infested jungle of Boven-Digoel. Little was heard from them until after Indonesia’s declaration of Independence in 1945. Some of the most prominent Indonesian representatives at the Comintern office, such as Semaun, Darsono and Tan Malaka, never returned to the PKI, but took their own political course.

There were similar developments on the Dutch side. Several of the colonial experts in the CPH, including Sneevliet, Baars and Brandsteder, who had criticised the PKI and who, after the failed revolt blamed the PKI for not taking their advice, left the party in the late 1920s.

Apparently, it was only after the first generation of ISDV leaders had left the stage, that relations between Dutch and Indonesian comrades could be decolonised.

A note on sources: This paper is primarily based on the work of Ruth McVey (The Rise of Indonesian Communism [1965], from which most quotations are taken); Jeanne Mintz (Mohammed, Marx and Marhaen: The Roots of Indonesian Socialism [1965]); Gerrit Voerman, De meridiaan van Moskou. De CPN en de Communistische Internationale, 1919-1931 [2001].