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The Victory of the Republic

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The events which brought the Indonesian struggle for independence to fulfillment can be viewed in two lights. They constituted a struggle between European colonialism and Asian nationalism fought out on the battlefield, at the negotiating table, and in the hearts of men. But they also constituted the climax of a revolution, such as France had experienced after 1879, Russia after 1917, or Vietnam in step with Indonesia from 1945. Once a revolution breaks the domination of the past it tends to move steadily further to the left as it seeks a new source of legitimacy and legality in something mysteriously known as the sovereignty of the people (*kedaulatan rakyat*). Each setback suffered by the leadership tends to produce new leaders better in touch with the radical demands from below, until at last one group is able to suppress its rivals and establish a new equilibrium in the name of the people.

The Indonesian revolution is crucial in both respects. It showed for the first time that a determined European colonial power could be forced out of Asia by a mixture of military and diplomatic pressure. It also created, through revolution, a new political system. The definition of that system continued to move to the left until 1948, when it shifted sharply back to the center.

The Dutch attack of 20 July 1947 on the areas surrounding their seven urban enclaves in Java and Sumatra failed completely to overturn the republican government as Van Mook had hoped it would. All it did

was bite off the most lucrative parts of republican territory—the plantation areas of West Java and East Sumatra and the oil installations near Palembang—as well as the areas adjacent to Surabaya, Semarang, and Padang. Economically this strengthened the Dutch and weakened the republic, but economic pressure seldom stops a revolution. If anything, the growing hardship in the remaining republican-held areas of Java and Sumatra, overcrowded with refugees, lacking resources, and blockaded from external trade, increased radical demands for total popular resistance against the Dutch. Moreover the outbreak of open warfare between Dutch and Indonesians shocked a war-weary world, which would henceforth insist through the newborn United Nations that the conflict must not be resolved by force.

Every republican government was obliged to try to retain international sympathy by meeting the Dutch halfway in negotiations, even though this compromised the popular demand for 100% *merdeka*. The United Nations-inspired negotiations which led to the Renville Agreement of January 1948 were particularly painful, since the republic had to acknowledge de facto the seizure of territory in the Dutch aggression of 1947. Even though the concession was essential, the prime minister who made it had to pay the price for it in popularity, just as Syahrir had had to for earlier concessions.

This prime minister was Amir Syarifuddin, who tried to be at once a Marxist and a Christian, a democrat and a communist, a nationalist and an internationalist. He led the most leftist government Indonesia has ever had, with 10 of the 34 ministers, including Amir himself, later declaring themselves to have been communists. Renville provided an opportunity for PNI and Masyumi to withdraw their support for him as premier, and for Sukarno then to name Hatta to form a “Presidential” Cabinet with no Marxist representatives, no longer responsible like previous cabinets to the KNIP (Parliament) where the Sayap Kiri (Left Wing) was dominant. The parties of the Sayap Kiri thereby lost their leadership of the revolution, including the key ministries of defense and interior, which they had hitherto controlled. In this major turning point it was Amir the Marxist who appeared the naive believer in parliamentary legality, outmaneuvered by the realpolitik of Sukarno and Hatta.

The Marxist parties, now calling themselves Front Demokrasi Rakyat, or Peoples’ Democratic Front (FDR), tried to make up in popular support what they had lost in power, by developing a more radical

economic and social program than the revolution had yet seen. They now opposed any compromise with the Dutch, encouraged strikes for better conditions, notably at Delanggu and Cepu, and pressed for nationalization of enterprises and distribution of land, especially *bengkok* (land assigned to village officials), to the landless. Meanwhile the army was also becoming polarized between supporters and opponents of the government’s plans to demobilize unruly and poorly-armed units, especially those sympathetic to the opposition. Internal conflict between Left and Right, and between rival military units, was accentuated when the FDR leaders, demoralized by their loss of power, accepted the radical policy which Musso brought from Moscow in August 1948. The FDR parties merged into a larger and more aggressive PKI.

In Yogyakarta and Solo the powerful Siliwangi Division gave the government a stronger position, but in the Madiun area Pesindo forces of the Left were stronger. When the PKI acted first to strengthen its position in Madiun, local conflicts erupted into a savage civil war. In successfully crushing this so-called Madiun Rebellion of September 1948, the republican government achieved three important aims: it eliminated the rival leadership, ending the movement of the revolution to the left; it created the beginnings of unity in the army (TNI), at least in Java; and it demonstrated to the United States, the key force in the United Nations, that moderate nationalists (rather than colonialists) were the best guarantee against communism.

The reputation of the republican government in the United States was therefore highest when it was most needed: 19 December 1948, at the moment of the second Police Action. Dutch paratroops attacked all the remaining republican cities, capturing Sukarno, Hatta, and most of the cabinet in Yogyakarta. Once again, this Dutch aggression arose out of despair with other methods of defeating the republic, and ended up hurting the Dutch much more than the republic. The attack was a clear challenge to the authority of the United Nations. The United States immediately suspended Marshall Plan aid to Holland. Moreover Indonesians of various kinds—Left and Right, republicans and federalists, military and civilian—could unite against this outrage. The cabinets of Negara Indonesia Timur (NIT) and Pasundan, the two largest of the Dutch-created federal states, resigned in protest at the Dutch action.

The so-called *zaman gerilya* (guerrilla period) lasted until 6 July 1949, when the Dutch admitted the failure of their military venture by restoring the imprisoned republican leaders to power in Yogyakarta. In

this period republican forces discovered that the Dutch superiority in weaponry and training was no longer effective, since guerrillas could attack them from rural bases almost anywhere. For the military this period also became a model for military-civilian relations. With the leading civilians in Dutch hands, the army led the popular resistance, receiving warm support from villagers in the form of food and hospitality.

Many guerrilla fighters did not find it easy to accept that after 6 July 1949 leadership passed back to civilians and the struggle moved to the conference table. To stop the revolution would be even harder than to start it. In many parts of Java, Sumatra, and Sulawesi guerrilla units refused to disarm, claiming that the cause for which they fought had not yet been realized. Calling themselves Darul Islam, some of them continued their struggle for another fifteen years.

Even if the revolution had not quite achieved unity by 1950, it had exalted the ideal of unity as a sacred goal. Paradoxically it was the Dutch, who had governed the Netherlands East Indies as a centralized state, who tried to use a very decentralized federal system as the basis for retaining influence in post war Indonesia. In each of the areas they controlled after the 1947 military action the Dutch fostered autonomous *negara* with their own cabinets and representative assemblies attempting to represent all ethnic interests. In practice, however, these structures were held together by the steel frame of the colonial army and bureaucracy. By contrast, what united the republic was not structures but ideals. Especially at the beginning of the revolution, Yogyakarta had hardly any means to control the spontaneous movements for *Indonesia merdeka* all over the archipelago. Yet even the unruly *pejuang* (fighters) of Sumatra, Sulawesi, Banten, or Surakarta agreed that the ideal of unity must be defended against the divisiveness of Dutch-inspired federalism.

The compromise negotiated at the Round Table Conference in The Hague between August and November 1949 was for the independent federal Indonesia (Republik Indonesia Serikat) already foreshadowed at Linggajati. But for many this was only acceptable as a stepping stone to the unitary republic proclaimed in 1945. Once sovereignty was transferred by the Dutch on 1 January 1950, the federal states one by one began to merge into the Yogyakarta republic.

On 17 August 1950 Indonesia became in fact the unitary independent republic which had been proclaimed five years earlier, and

dreamed about for half a century. The sense of common identity forged in that revolutionary struggle had been extraordinary. If we compare the subsequent history of Indonesia with that of India or Indochina it becomes clear what a remarkable achievement in five short years that sense of unity was. The thousands of islands, dozens of ethnic groups and languages, several major religions and ideologies of Indonesia would henceforth be united in a bond that was sealed not only by words and institutions, but by common sacrifice. *Satu tanah air, satu bangsa, satu bahasa.*