



The Colonial Rulers

After a short period of individual trading, the Dutch merchants organised themselves in 1612 into the *Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie* (United East-India Companies), or V.O.C.They ousted the Portuguese, and established various strongholds throughout the archipelago, of which Batavia, on the island of Java, was the most important, and from which the V.O.C. gradually extended its controls. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was the policy of the directors of the V.O.C. to spend as little as possible on maintenance, defence, or punitive expeditions, so that it could achieve maximum profits and pay high dividends to its shareholders in the mother country. To safeguard its markets the V.O.C. preferred to rule through local princes.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the V.O.C. , like so many other monopoly enterprises of that period, saw its costs rising, while revenues, as a result of competition from interlopers, gradually declined. In 1792, the Dutch Government took over the V.O.C. with all its debts. Shortly after 1792, Holland came under French domination. The British regarded Indonesia as enemy territory and established themselves in the colony. Under the governorship of Sir Stamford Raffles they continued the reform policies already introduced under the Governor Daendels, who had represented the new republican Dutch government after 1795!. In 1815, as part of the Vienna Congress settlement, Indonesia was returned to Holland. The Dutch continued the process of establishing closer governmental controls over the colony. In 1830 this political control was complemented by the *Cultuurstelsel* (Cultivation System), an economic system by which the government took direct control over the development of colonial agriculture, and demanded that each native use one-fifth of his land for the cultivation of products designated by the Colonial Government. If this was not possible the natives were required to work sixty-six days for the government. The European market determined which products were to be cultivated, usually coffee, sugar, or indigo.



Governor Daendels



Eduard Douwes Dekker

At the end of the nineteenth century this oppressive cultivating system was gradually abandoned. This was the result of many protests by ex-colonial administrators or ordinary visitors to Indonesia who reported on the terrible abuses of the system in books or the press. The most effective protest was made by Eduard Douwes Dekker, a fired colonial administrator, who in a book called *Max Havelaar* described in detail the suppression of the native population by the colonial administration.

But, although the colonial rulers had tightened their controls over the local population, it had not abandoned the policy of maintaining the traditional society. It continued to support the *pryayi*, ruled "indirectly" through the aristocracy, using the peoples' own value system as laid down in the traditional system of the *adat*.

The new attitude of the Colonial Government at the beginning of this century was therefore not only formed by the protests at home against the oppression of the native colony.¹ At no time did the new policy, which came to be known as the *Etische Politiek* (Ethical Policy), constitute a break with the past. It only tried to do away with the most obvious abuses, while at the same time making the colony more *open* to the new capitalist entrepreneurs. The government talked about the setting up of a so-called *protective barrier* between the native farmers and the Western entrepreneur, but as shown earlier, the government ultimately always supported the capitalists. As a result the policies of the Colonial Government aimed at reform remained ambiguous. As Hadji Agus Salim wrote: "reforming concepts, magnificently constructed in the minds of the noble Dutchman, (are) at implementation deformed into a caricature of themselves under the influence of selfishness, as a result of the natural instinct of preservation of those groups, which in the mother-country, under changing political constellations, control the political relationships (between Holland and Indonesia) sometimes with more, sometimes with less benevolence, groups which in character have remained the same throughout times, from the monopolistic East-India Company, through forced cultivation, and free labour, till today."²



Hadji Agus Salim

With the introduction of the *Etische Politiek*, the system of indirect rule was coming to an end, and now the local population came face to face with the colonial administrator or the European entrepreneur. He soon realised who his real exploiters were and as a result became more militant.

¹ Many authors discuss this development in Indonesia. For instance, McVey. *Indonesia*, Van Niel, p. 291, and Pluvier, p. 5-7.

² Salim, p. 58-59.



Volksraad (Peoples Council)

In response to this rising militancy, which was also motivated by events elsewhere in Asia, and in response to socialist agitation in the mother country, generated by the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, the Dutch Government was willing to make some concessions after 1917. In 1918, an advisory council or *Volksraad* (Peoples Council) was established. It was partially elected, partially appointed. Half of the seats went to Indonesians, of which several were appointed by the government. Although the government did appoint members of several nationalist parties, the recipients were often discredited by being appointed.³

Instead of lessening agitation, the *Volksraad* actually stiffened nationalist sentiments because any effort to achieve genuine progress through it was frustrated. Either the European and Indo-European elements, who together formed a majority, voted against bills advocating improvements, or the colonial administration ignored the advice given.

Regardless of the *Volksraad*, the colonial Government remained oppressive. There was a separation between *Herrenvolk* and natives, based on confusing race theories, while at the same time the government did recognise Eurasians as being legally equal to Europeans.⁴ As the economy was concentrated in the hands of a few and the government closely tied-in, the result was a type of *corporate state* based on a capitalist system of exploitation. The Governor-General ruled through *Governor-in-Council* acts. There was no real internal policy making and the principle of *trias politica* was never recognised.⁵ Instead, the Colonial Government employed another trinity: the General Prosecutor, the *Perintah Alus* (Secret Police), and *Boven-Digul*, a political concentration camp in the swamps of New Guinea. Fascism was popular among the Dutch in Indonesia and in the thirties the

³ The *Volksraad* consisted of forty-eight members of which only twenty were native Indonesians. Five of which were appointed by the government and the rest by local councils. The native members mainly represented native civil servants and bourgeoisie. (Rutgers, p. 147).

⁴ Mintz, p. 68-

⁵ Henri J.H. Alers. *Om een Roode of Groene Merdeka*. (A Red or Green Merdeka), p. 30. The title of the book refers to the struggle between the Islamic movements (green) and the communists organisations (red) over who was going to be the major force in the fight for freedom (merdeka). In a not always clear analysis, the author claims that green represented the authoritative, legalistic principles of religious law. In such a system directives are given from *above*. *Above* represents the traditional élite, while *below* are the masses. On the other hand *red* represents the sociological or realistic law principles. Law in this sense is the people's consciousness of law. Whereas international communism, according to Alers, adhered to the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The *Partai Komunis Indonesia*, however, never adhered to an élitist concept, and was therefore a true *red* party. The argument of the Dutch government was, of course, that the Indonesian people were not *ready* for self-government. Dr. J.A. Verdoorn in his book *De Zending en het Indonesisch Nationalisme*. (Mission and Indonesian Nationalism), p. 10, points out that "it is not the, judged by Western criteria, ultimate readiness of the colonial population that forms the necessary condition for political independence. Political independence of the population forms the necessary condition for the activation of native forces. It is symptomatic for the political attitude in Holland, that such a statement, made shortly after the Second World War, was still considered by many to be very radical.

Nationaal Socialistische Beweging, NSB, (National Socialist Movement), the Dutch branch of the Nazi organisation, had many supporters in the colony.

Education catered to the élite only. Indonesians could attend High School if they could speak Dutch and if they could afford the high fees. The result was that only the sons and daughters of wealthy Indonesians received any education beyond elementary school. The Dutch schools ignored, or downplayed, the importance of the Indonesian culture. As late as 1940, ninety-three percent of the population was illiterate and in that same year 240 Indonesians, out of a population of seventy million, graduated from High School. Only 630 Indonesians were enrolled in universities.⁶

Indonesia under Dutch rule was a police state. Terror was kept in check because ultimately there was always the Parliament in Holland, which although it failed to carry out its democratic responsibilities toward the Indonesian people, at least did not tolerate a terror regime. It failed, however, dismally in democratising the Colonial Government. Until World War II, there were no local ministers, only directors of departments, appointed or dismissed by the Governor-General at will. The Governor-General was appointed by the Colonial Minister in the mother country, and the Colonial Minister was most of the time a member of the conservative alliance in the Dutch Parliament.⁷

The relationships between the Europeans and the Indonesians worsened after World War I. Before, Dutchmen and other Europeans came to Indonesia for relatively long periods of time. Many Europeans in Indonesia before World War I, were born and educated in Indonesia. They understood the local population to a certain degree and often spoke the local tongue. As the ties with the mother country weakened, these people began to identify more and more with the Indonesian society. Between 1920 and 1930, however, there was a great influx of Dutchmen who did not settle for long periods but who only came to the colony to serve their term, make money, get their pensions, and return home. These *trekkers* as they were called, were not interested in colonial politics, but simply demanded from the government that it keep Indonesia safe for them and their jobs and suppress all political activity that might endanger European enterprises.⁸ They understood little of the aspirations of the local population. As entrepreneurs they wanted the Colonial Government to expand the infrastructure and raise taxes to pay for it, and nationalist or other agitation was not to interfere with that. They claimed that the infrastructure benefited the local population as well and that the Indonesian

⁶ Mintz, p. 69.

⁷ Alers, p. 31-35; de Kadt-, p. 29.

⁸ Bernard H.M. Vlekke.- Nusantara, *A History of Indonesia*, p. 376. Those Europeans who settled in the colony for a long period, or who were born in Indonesia, were called *blijvers* (*stayers*). These *blijvers* were politically represented by the Catholic Party, the Democratic Liberal Party, the Social Democratic Party, and the Netherlands-Indies Free Protestant Union, closely reflecting the political divisions in Holland. Some 100.000 Europeans and Indo-Europeans were thus organised. Most of these people wanted independence within a union with Holland. After 1930, with a return to more conservative politics by the Colonial Government, these groupings lost much of their influence and a polarisation took place between strictly conservative, often fascistic organisations, such as the *Vaderlandsche Club* (Club of Patriots), and more liberal-minded Europeans, represented by the *Stuw* (from the Dutch verb *stuwen*, to push)

radicals were therefore working against the interests of their own people.⁹ The *trekkers* were blatantly racist and followed a strict colour-line, which in turn stiffened Indonesian opposition.¹⁰

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⁹ Vlekke, p. 365.

¹⁰ de Kadt, passim pp. 25-33. McVey. *Indonesia*, Van Niel, p. 297. The racist elements formed *De Vaderlandsche Club*, of which Zentgraaff, the editor of the conservative newspaper *Javabode*, was the most influential member.