



The Meaning of Nationalism

It is necessary in an analysis of political activism in Indonesia between 1910 and 1930 to establish a definition of nationalism in the context of Indonesian society. It is not easy to distil one from the historiography of this period. Dutch historians before 1940, often regarded all so-called nationalist movements as fringe organisations, out to undermine law and order, and consequently these Dutchmen were unwilling to give Indonesian nationalism much credence.¹ Several of them regarded Indonesian nationalism as being inspired and even controlled by international communism.² Some historians regarded early nationalist movements in Indonesia as strictly bourgeois, with ideologies which were not in the interest of Indonesian independence, because they were ultimately based on the acceptance of a capitalist structure.

Furthermore there is the problem of separating so-called *modern* nationalism from so-called *traditional* resistance against the Colonial Government.³ Could the nationalist movement in Indonesia be compared with nationalism in Europe or was the social, economic, and cultural climate so different in Indonesia that comparisons are not very fruitful. Nationalism in Europe was the doctrine of a rising,

¹ J.Th. Petrus Blumberger. *De Nationalistische Beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië*. (The Nationalist Movement in the Netherlands-Indies) The author writes on page 15: "The excesses of the last years (1926-1930) have shown sufficiently that vigilance by the government in the interest of the population, should not weaken. It is not so much the promotion of the political idea of national liberty by itself that caused the rebellious movements, but the constant agitation against government authority, which is the character of modern propaganda methods."

² Blumberger is an example of this attitude as well.

³ Traditionally revolts of the Indonesian peasantry had crystallised around the Muslim *Ulama*. What made the new movements different was the Western education of the new leaders. Although the *Ulama*, even in 1920, could not be ignored, it was no longer a prime factor, as the movements tended to be, if perhaps not nation-wide, at least supra-regional. (Benda, p. xv) Outside of Java, conditions were different. Before 1927 most nationalism in Indonesia was provincial nationalism. Even the *Sarekat Islam*, although it did include members from other islands, was mainly a Javanese organisation. On the other islands, nationalism was often supported by the local feudal élite and was based on traditional adat concepts, and cannot, therefore, be really considered to be "modern" nationalism. Soedjatkomo, Chapter XX. J.M. Romein. "The Significance of the Comparative Approach in Asian Historiography.", p. 331. Professor Romein is a Marxist historian and tends to view the struggle for independence in Asia in terms of class struggle. But from the outset, the intermingling of bourgeois and proletarian aspects of the independence struggle were intricate, because it was hard to separate a rebellion against poverty and misery from one against foreign domination per se, when the colonial power is the source of poverty and misery as well as of political domination.

often already economically strong, bourgeoisie which wanted the political control to go with their economic strength. In the Indonesia during the period under discussion, nationalism was a movement of resistance of a small élite, be it supported by large segments of the population, against a foreign ruler rather than a native ruling caste. Furthermore, in Indonesia, nationalism was not the struggle against a worn-out feudal structure which hindered economic development, but a struggle against a well organised capitalistic and imperialistic policy of the same groups which in Europe had been so successful in achieving power through its nationalist ideology.

Bearing these important differences in mind, I have tried to avoid the term *nationalism* and instead have used the term *political activism*, except in those movements, such as the *Partai Nasionalis Indonesia*, for which nationalism was an end in itself. The term political activism is more correct because it simply describes the political and social actions of groups, whose aims were often quite different from each other, and whose ideologies could be based on Marxist, Capitalist, or Islamic principles of social justice. Even what Indonesians themselves regarded as nationalism differed from group to group. There was a great difference between the nationalism of the westernised *priyayi* and that of the middle class traders in the Sarekat-Islam.

Several of the political movements in Indonesia were organised by Dutchmen. Even though the membership came from within the Indonesian society, the leadership had, in general, little use for Indonesian nationalism. Other groups, although using a terminology borrowed from European nationalism, actually relied for their mass support upon the traditional mysticism in the Ratu-Adil tradition of the Javanese society.

As a consequence the concept of nationalism was never formulated clearly by any of the radical movements. The main differences between the various progressive movements did not lie in their nationalist aims but in the tactics they used in winning and organising the masses. There were essentially two kinds of organisations. Those which advocated co-operation with the Colonial Government and those who did not. The latter claimed that, as nothing could be expected of the Colonial Government, co-operation would only strengthen foreign rule. Those in favour of co-operation claimed that, because the government did not tolerate blatant nationalism, nothing would be achieved by deliberately antagonising the government.⁴

The Colonial Government regarded all noncooperative movements as destructive and regarded members of such groups as disloyal citizens and extremists. But it would be unfair to classify those who did advocate co-operation as weak hearted elements trying to avoid sacrifice. Those advocating co-operation often wanted independence just as strongly as the others. Perhaps, those willing to work together with the Dutch were naive, but the destruction of the non-co-operative movement by the government after 1928 showed that such organisations could not claim any success either.

© PETER LOWENSTEYN, 2005

⁴ Pluvier, p. 10. The noncooperative movement took over the Tilak slogan "self-reliance not mendicancy". See *Gedenkboek Indonesische Vereeniging* (Commemoration Book Indonesian Association), 1923, p. 52.