

The *Sarekat Islam*



The *Sarekat Islam* was founded in 1911 by Hadji Omar Said Tjokroaminoto. With Hadji Agus Salim, Tjokroaminoto remained the leading figure of the movement throughout its existence. As their religious titles indicate, both men were devout Muslims and the ideology of the *Sarekat Islam* was firmly based on the teachings of Islam in the Modernist tradition.

The original name of the movement was *Sarekat Dagang Islam*, or Islamic Trade Union, which reflects the non-political beginnings of the organisation. Originally it had been a movement of *batik* entrepreneurs from East and Central Java, with the aim to protect their batik trade against Chinese interlopers.¹ This type of organisation was not confined to East and Central Java. In the same year of the founding of the *Sarekat Dagang Islam*, Raden Mass Tirtoadisoerjo had founded the *Sarekat Dagang Islamyah* in Batavia and Buitenzorg (Bogor) in West Java. Both organisations derived their militancy from a combination of Islamic mysticism, local traditions, and commercial activity.²

The earlier mentioned concept of *Ratu-Adil* was prominent in the *Sarekat Islam* where Tjokroaminoto was regarded by many of his followers as the *saviour prince*.³



Children in the fourth class of a *Kweek-school* (teachers' training school) in Probolinggo, East Java, in 1913.



Sarekat Ra'yat School in Semarang, Central Java, 1917. *Sarekat Ra'yat* (The People's Union) was a radical offshoot of *Sarekat Islam* and the young Indonesian trade union movement. Education and organisation strengthened the nationalist movement.

The *Sarekat Islam* soon became more than an organisation of batik traders and developed rapidly into a more general political movement, supported by discontented rural masses, the purist *Santri*, or strict Muslim sects, but also by the *Abangan* groupings on Java, whose Islamic faith was mixed with pre-Islam beliefs, and who were religiously opposed to the *Santri*. To this can be added the support of some of the lesser nobility or *priyayi*, some of whom were traditionalists and opposed to Western modernisation, while some of them advocated modernisation in the Islamic modernist tradition of the *priyayi* party *Budi Utomo*. The *Sarekat Islam* was thus a rather heterogeneous organisation.⁴

Although the *Sarekat Islam* claimed that it was not a politi-

¹ Blumberger, p. 55; McVey. *Indonesia*, Van Niel, p, 294.; Vlekke, p. 350.

² Blumberger, p. 56.

³ McVey. *Indonesia*, Van Niel, p. 294; Dahm, p. 12-16.

⁴ McVey. *Indonesia*, Van Niel, p. 294; Dahm, p. 12-16.

cal organisation, it is not surprising that few accepted such a statement from a movement that not only agitated against Chinese entrepreneurs, but was also opposed to Christian missionaries and the Colonial Government.⁵ The first Congress of the *Sarekat Islam* in 1913 declared that it rejected all forms of anti-government activities. But this was more inspired by the fear of government retaliation than by conviction. In a speech Tjokroaminoto declared: "We are loyal toward the Government; we are satisfied with the Dutch Government; it is not true that we want to fight; he who says so or thinks so, is not sane, we don't want to fight, a thousand times, NO! The *Sarekat Islam* is not a political party; it is not a party that wants revolution, as many think."⁶

But the Colonial Government found that difficult to accept and was afraid of the *Sarekat Islam*, regardless of its professions of peace. Snouck Hurgronje warned the government not to follow a negative attitude toward the *Sarekat Islam* but to allow it to develop peacefully as a legitimate movement of awakening Javanese self esteem.⁷ But the conservatives in the Colonial Government ignored that advice and refused legal recognition of the movement because it feared that a mass movement might get out of hand, even if its leaders professed to be sincere in their pro-Dutch attitude. By a government decree of June 30th, 1913, it only recognised the local branches of the *Sarekat Islam* as independent units, refusing recognition of the movement as a national organisation.⁸

The *Sarekat Islam* was founded on Muslim principles, but the leadership tried to combine Islamic traditionalism with European ideologies, such as liberalism, and later socialism. In doing so it tried to appeal to the rural masses and priyayi class as well as to modern radicals. This dualism combined within the party ideologies and groupings which were in many aspects incompatible. As a result there was from the beginning a tug of war within the *Sarekat Islam* between the moderate, often traditional leadership, and the militants from the Semarang branch, which had close connections with the Marxist-socialists in that city. Specially the members of the *Indische Sociaal Democratische Vereeniging* tried to push



The first *Sarekat Islam* congress held in Solo (Surakarta) in 1913. On the podium sits the Pangeran Ngabei, a prince of the royal house of Solo.

the *Sarekat Islam* more to the left, through competition with the *Sarekat Islam*, and by the activities of its members within. This radicalisation of the party was also the result of events outside of Indonesia, notably World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. Although Brackman claims that the dual membership in the Semarang *I.S.D.V.* and the *Sarekat Islam* created a *transition belt* between revolutionary Marxism of the West and the Indonesian *masses*, the influence of Marxist ideology on the

⁵ Vlekke, p. 351; McVey. *Indonesia*, Van Niel, p. 294; Blumberger, p. 60.

⁶ Vlekke, p. 351; McVey. *Indonesia*, Van Niel, p. 294; Blumberger, p. 60.

⁷ Snouck Hurgronje, Vol. III, p. 2008-2009.

⁸ Blumberger, p. 61-62. The executive of the *Sarekat Islam* regarded this as a divide and rule tactic. In a weak doctoral thesis called *Idenburg en de Sarekat Islam* (Idenburg and the Sarekat, F.L. Rutgers claims that the recognition of the local branches of the *Sarekat Islam* by the government showed a willingness to cooperate with the national movement. He forgets to mention that such recognition was not extended to the national organization. Rutgers' thesis was published in 1939, and shows that even in academic circles in the Netherlands, the nationalist movement was not given much credit.

rural population was only remote, because the allegiance of the masses to the *Sarekat Islam* was much more based on traditional mysticism and the *Ratu-Adil* idea, than on European ideology, which few peasants understood even vaguely.⁹

While the *Sarekat Islam* had rejected all anti-Dutch activities in 1913, by 1916 it already demanded some form of self government, be it still through cooperation with the government for the welfare of the Indies, so as "to arrive through gradual and lawful means at self-government, or at least participation in government" The slogan was "together with the government, to support the government." The aim: "evolution under the protection of the Dutch flag."¹⁰ In 1917, the speeches at the annual Congress of the party had become more radical. Blumberger claims that this was the unfortunate result of the infiltration of the "Red Semarang Bastion of Samaoen."¹¹ At this Congress the question of conscription was debated and the *Sarekat Islam* declared that if conscription was to be introduced some form of self government would have to be granted. This demand was very reminiscent of what the Congress Party was doing in India.¹² But whereas the British Government in India at least conceded that it would be necessary to involve Indians "in every branch of the administration" and talked about "the gradual development of self-governing institutions" and "the progressive realisation of responsible government in India",¹³ the Dutch Colonial Government introduced the *Volksraad* (Peoples' Council) which had only advisory powers. The *Sarekat Islam* still advocated parliamentary action, but Abdual Moeis, one of the more radical leaders, also stated that if parliamentary action would not be successful and if the party would continue to run into "bastions of arbitrariness and oppression", the leadership of the *Sarekat Islam* "would know how to sacrifice itself for the nation and the people".¹⁴ The relationship between the *Sarekat Islam* and the *Volksraad* was discussed during the 1917 Congress. The Semarang branch of the party pointed out that as the *Volksraad* was only an advisory body without any real power, the party should refuse to cooperate, as the *Volksraad* was only a puppet-show. On the other hand the leadership of the *Sarekat Islam* advocated participation to show interest in government affairs and to display a willingness to cooperate. By the time the *Volksraad* was established only a few members of the *Sarekat Islam* joined it. Hadji Agus Salim was the most important Indonesian member and he became the main critic of the Colonial Government.¹⁵

During the 1917 Congress the attitude of the *Sarekat Islam* toward the capitalist system was also discussed. The origins of the party as an organisation of small businessmen showed itself clearly and the leadership of the party was not willing to denounce capitalism as such. It proposed to differentiate

⁹ A.C. Brackman. *Indonesian Communism*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Blumberger, p. 63; Vlekke, p. 354.

¹¹ Blumberger, p. 64. The Semarang branch claimed that the executive of the *Sarekat Islam* followed a colourless political course.

¹² Percival Spear. *A History of India*, p. 131-133.

¹³ *ibid*, p. 185.

¹⁴ Blumberger, p. 65.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 66 Salim, *passim*.

between two forms of capitalism: "sinful" and "rightful". Sinful capitalism would be foreign capitalism, whereas rightful capitalism would be native Indonesian capitalism.¹⁶



The Sarekat Islam represents an emancipatory movement for nationalist ideals.

After 1917, the *Sarekat Islam* became openly critical of the government. Membership had now risen to 800.000 and the party thought itself strong enough to follow a more radical policy. Labour and peasant organisations controlled by the *Sarekat Islam* were fomenting unrest on Java. But this radicalisation of the party was not to the liking of the original founders of the movement. When it became obvious to the entrepreneurs and merchants that they were losing control of the party, many of them left, and as a result, the left-wing grew in strength. This in turn alienated more of the moderates. The rural masses were becoming disillusioned as

well when it became obvious that the party could not fulfil the promises it had made. The result was a decline among the more traditional representatives of the rural areas, thus even more strengthening the influence of the Semarang-radicals.¹⁷

By 1918, the party demanded immediate action to alleviate the plight of the masses of labourers and refused to cooperate any longer with the *Volksraad*.¹⁸ The conditions on the plantations and in transportation might have given the Sarekat Islam an opportunity for real political action. Through Soerjopranoto, the party controlled the *Personeel Fabriek Bond* (Union of Factory Workers).¹⁹ But in its support of the trade unions and its strike actions, the leadership of the *Sarekat Islam*, which was still in the hands of the charismatic but conservative Tjokroaminoto and Agus Salim, was too cautious and used terms such as "moral violence" or "passive resistance" rather than "socialism" or "revolution".²⁰ This attitude is very similar to that of Gandhi in India during the same time. Gandhi too took alarm when the movement he had started, developed into a genuine mass revolt and claimed that he had committed "a blunder of Himalayan dimensions which had enabled ill-disposed persons, not true passive resisters at all, to perpetrate disorders."²¹

¹⁶ Vlekke, p. 355; Blumberger, p. 68. Sinful capitalism; for instance, the sugar industry should be reduced and the production of rice for local consumption should be improved to alleviate shortage. In 1919, the *Sarekat Islam* instigated actions throughout Java. On the island of Celebes, some officials were murdered. Blumberger, who was much opposed to the actions of the nationalists, blames the *Sarekat Islam* for the agitation.

¹⁷ McVey. *Rise*, p. 83-84; Vlekke, p. 351.

¹⁸ Vlekke, p. 356.

¹⁹ *ibid.* The central committee looked for contact with the unions to prevent isolation by the Colonial Government. The fourth national congress in 1919, realized the necessity to broaden the front. Blumberger claims that the *Sarekat Islam* had been "humiliated" by "silent public opinion" and had to look for support in leftists circles. (p.70).

²⁰ Vlekke, p. 357; Rutgers, p. 148.

²¹ Martin Deming Lewis, ed. *Gandhi, Maker of Modern India*. From Rajani Palme Dutt. *India Today* (Bombay, 1949) p. 29.

The Semarang branch of the *Sarekat Islam* was not satisfied with moral resistance and tried to have the party endorse a revolutionary trade-union movement.²² But the leadership did not respond and did not go beyond asking for a labour code, a minimum wage, abolition of women and child labour, a maximum work contract, which meant abolition of the coolie system, and an old-age pension. And even that was the result of pressure of the revolutionary socialist faction in the party.²³ This unwillingness of the leadership of the *Sarekat Islam* to support real militant action was motivated both by their conservative political outlook and by the conviction that the party would not be able to stand up against government retaliation.²⁴ That this was not unfounded was shown in 1919, when increased political activity by the party brought on swift police action. In this respect the *Sarekat Islam* was in a much more difficult position than Gandhi's *swaraj* movement, which had the support of far greater numbers and could count on a much larger middle class as a source of leadership.

In 1920 the *Partai Komunis* had been founded and the *Sarekat Islam* not only had to fight the communists within the party, but outside as well. It also had to fight the Islamic modernists of the newly organised *Muhammadiyah*, who claimed that the *Sarekat Islam* ignored too many Islamic issues. Thirdly it had to fight the *secular* nationalists who claimed that the *Sarekat Islam* was not working hard enough for independence and purely nationalist issues.²⁵

Tjokroaminoto became hesitant under these attacks, but finally decided on a more radical course, mainly to preserve unity in the party.²⁶ In 1920, the Congress explained for the first time, the relationship between the colony and the mother country in terms of marxist-historical materialism.

Marxist doctrines were accepted in general, with the statement that this did not imply cooperation with foreign socialist organisations.²⁷ But this did not help the party to win mass support. The rural areas understood little of Marxism and continued to rely on traditional bonds. The left-wing of the party did not lessen the pressure either. To the contrary they saw the more radical direction as a sign of weakening in the moderate leadership of the party. The executive of the party now decided to take a stand against the communists. A motion by Hadji Agus Salim, presented during the 1921 Congress, stating



The Surabaya Chapter of *Sarekat Islam* c. 1915. Joint meeting of *Sarekat Islam* and *ISDV* (Indies Social Democratic Union) in Surabaya, 1916.

²² Vlekke, p. 356.

²³ Vlekke, p. 356.

²⁴ Lewis, p. 23-43.

²⁵ Vlekke, p. 353. The *Muhammadiyah* movement had been founded by Kjahi Haji Ahmad Dahlan in 1912. It was an Islamic reform movement in the Modernist tradition and sought to change social rules according to "the commands of the four schools of Islamic law", rather than "by an attempt to conform directly to the original rules of the Koran." It tried to abolish many of, what it considered to be superstitious customs, and tried also to loosen the bands of tradition. The organisation was mainly non-political and concentrated on benevolent work such as clinics, schools, etc. Its support came mainly from the urban Muslims. (McVey. *Indonesia*, Van Niel, p. 295).

²⁶ McVey. *Rise*, p. 37.

²⁷ Vlekke, p. 358.

that members could not belong to more than one party, was accepted. In turn, the communists accused the leadership of supporting capitalist concepts and promoting Pan Islam ideas. Hadji Agus Salim defended the executive by stating that the Prophet had followed Marxist ideas long before Marx.²⁸ He also rejected the interpretation of the Marxist Sam Koperberg, that "the international religious fraternity of Islam would be in conflict with the political element of national Indonesian unity."²⁹ He stated that the concepts of Islam were rather a prerequisite than a hindrance to national unity and that recognition of the international fraternity of Islam would lead to the creation of togetherness in the own, often divided, national sphere.³⁰ It is of interest to point out that the break between the two major groups in the *Sarekat Islam* occurred when Tjokroaminoto was in jail, and could not use his charismatic image to keep the party together. Agus Salim came from Sumatra and for him unity was less important than harmony within the movement.³¹

The split in the *Sarekat Islam*, is considered by many historians as a turning point in the radical movement in Indonesia. Traditional and Western ideologies were no longer going to be combined in one movement, but were to be represented separately.

To win support among the masses, the *Sarekat Islam* as well as the *Partai Komunis Indonesia*, tried to broaden their bases. The *Sarekat Islam* tried to this by returning to a more traditional Islamic approach to political activism, whereas the communists opted for a social and political revolution. The *Sarekat Islam* tried to organise new youth and women's movements, but because both its school system and the important school fund had come under communist control after the split, the central organisation of the party found it difficult to counter-act the more aggressive communist party. On the whole the new concept of "socialism on an Islamic basis" did not catch-on with the rural masses.³² The party also tried to form an Indonesian All Muslim League, and a first All Islam Congress was held in 1922. A second Congress took place in 1921, but by that time it was dominated by the Muhammadiyah.³³ In 1922 the *Sarekat Islam* also joined the *Radical Concentration*, but as the leadership of that union of radical movements remained in the hands of Dutch Marxists, the leadership of the *Sarekat Islam* quickly lost interest. The party was also unable to profit from the failure of the railroad and tramway strike in 1923, even though the communists suffered severely.

Government policy prevented the *Sarekat Islam* from succeeding outside of Java. But even without government interference it would have been difficult to spread the party to the other islands of Indonesia. Local conservatism and the resistance of local nationalism to Javanese dominance would have made any success of the *Sarekat Islam* unlikely.³⁴

²⁸ *ibid*, p. 359.

²⁹ Salim, p. 96.

³⁰ *ibid*.

³¹ Dahm, p. 33.

³² Blumberger, p. 75. The concept of "socialism on an Islamic basis" brought the *Sarekat Islam* in conflict with the *Muhammadiyah*.

³³ Blumberger, p. 82.

³⁴ Blumberger, p. 80-81.

Although the *Sarekat Islam* had tried to bridge the gap between modern political ideology and traditional society, it was in the end not successful. It had tried to unite the people through the Modernist Islamic concepts, but even that had been too alien for the very traditional rural masses on Java. Only the feudal tradition of *Ratu-Adil* guaranteed the party a mass following.³⁵ The *Ratu-Adil* was preached in the villages. The leadership of the movement tried to make the new doctrine of socialism “approachable” by connecting it to the *Ratu-Adil* concept. In 1921, Tjokroaminoto declared: “we wait a new messenger of God, the successor of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, who will drive all evil desires from the hearts of men. This is the messenger called *Ratu-Adil*. All of us, whatever our religion, await him. But this *Ratu-Adil* will not appear in human form; rather he will appear in the form of Socialism. It is to this that the *Sarekat Islam* looks forward.”³⁶

But the appeal to mystical relationships failed too when the party did not produce its saviour prince in whatever form. Most of the active left wing joined the P.K.I., while others later joined the *Partai Nasional Indonesia*. Those who felt that the party had drifted away from its Islamic base, joined the *Muhammadiyah*, while the conservative rural *santri* groupings founded the orthodox Islamic movement *Nahdatul Ulama*.

The *Sarekat Islam* failed because it had not been able to develop an ideology. The party was unable to translate the *Ratu-Adil* concept into a modern social ideology which would have enabled the Javanese peasant to make the transition from his traditional village into a capitalist dominated economy. This was not entirely the fault of the leadership. Government actions certainly formed a great hindrance to the politicising of the rural masses, but the party could have done more with the mass support it had, had it been willing to follow a more radical political course. Failing to do so, the party remained stuck in the dilemma of what to do with a movement it had created by appealing to traditional values.

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³⁵ Dahm, p. 17-19. Quoting Professor Hazen, who was then Advisor for Native Affairs. Also quoting *Handelingen Volksraad* (Proceedings People's Council). Second Session 1918/1919), p. 201. According to Dahm,(p. 14-16) the *Sarekat Islam* grew as follows:

Date	Membership	Description
April 1912	4.500	the batik monopoly period
Dec. 1912	93.000	the batik monopoly period
April 1913	150.000	
April 1914	366.913	
April 1915	319.251	
June 1916	273.377	communist involvement
Oct. 1917	268.355	communist involvement
Oct. 1918	389.410	communist involvement

Dahm claims that the batik monopoly issue could not account for this rapid increase.

³⁶ Dahm, p. 20.