

The Partai Komunis Indonesia



On May 23rd, 1920, the Semarang Social Democratic Movement founded the *Perserikatan Komunis di India*, or *P.K.I.*

Immediately the *P.K.I.* began pushing labour and agrarian unrest more effectively than the *Sarekat Islam*. In December 1920, the *P.K.I.* joined the *Komintern*. In July and August, Sneevliet had already represented the party at

the Second Congress of the *Komintern*, during which the international communist movement had expressed itself against the Pan-Islam movement in strong terms: "Pan-Islamic and identical movements that aim at combining the struggle for freedom against European and American imperialism with the strengthening of the power of the Khans, the wealthy landowner, the Mullahs, and so on, must be opposed."¹



Hendrik Sneevliet

The *Komintern* did express support for "revolutionary national-bourgeois liberation movements." at home.² The *Sarekat Islam* did represent Pan Islamic ideas, but it was also a national liberation movement, and many communists in Indonesia found themselves in a difficult position in relation with the *Sarekat Islam*. In general the communists in the *Sarekat Islam* left the movement, thus creating a suspicion that they were anti-religion. As a result, the communists were viewed with hostility by the traditional Javanese society, as represented by the *Sarekat Islam* and the *Muhammadiyah*. When the *P.K.I.* grew stronger, several clashes took place between them and Muslims during party meetings.

The *P.K.I.* was a confused movement with great disorder within the party ranks. Local branches often followed independent policies based on regional differences.³ Lack of contact between the branches was further brought about by continuous harassment of the Colonial Government. The party leadership itself was split into three factions.

1. the émigré leadership in Singapore
2. the Central Committee in Batavia
3. the Revolutionary Council

¹ Vlekke, p. 357.

² Brackman, p. 11. Blumberger makes the statement that the difference between the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* and the *Sarekat Islam* was one of "internationalism" vs "nationalism". (p.70). This is a highly simplistic viewpoint. Both the *P.K.I.* and the *Sarekat Islam* at times, appealed to nationalist and internationalist ideas. In general, Blumberger emphasised the *P.K.I.*'s alleged connections with International Communism. This was the official government point of view. Communism should be rooted out because it was "alien" to the native people. Although, there were important differences between the *P.K.I.* and the *Sarekat Islam*, which sometimes led to violence, this did not mean that the radical movement was split into a communist and an Islamic faction. That this was not so is shown by the fact that after 1921, the *Partai Nasionalis Indonesia* was able to borrow and combine into its programme, both communist and Islamic ideologies.

³ Benda, p. xxiii.

Each group had conflicting aims, which came to a head during the rebellion of 1926-27.⁴ The membership of the party consisted of two "concentric circles". First an inner circle of city workers, individuals with some education and some understanding of communist concepts. This inner circle, however, was too small to form a viable party by itself. It was the outer circle of "people's unions" or *Sarekat Ratjak* in the rural areas that gave the communist party its mass support. Unfortunately the aims of the two circles had often little in common. Whereas the inner circle understood some of the long-term goals and aims of communism, the rural masses were only interested in immediate action and results.⁵ As the party needed the mass support to stay alive and achieve its objectives, it had to produce tangibly results quickly. The inability of the masses to perceive that "fulfilment lay far in the future" and the subsequent pressure on the party élite to produce results, was disastrous for the *P.K.I.*⁶

The break within the *Sarekat Islam* in 1921 had increased the problems facing the *P.K.I.* The party, of course, welcomed break-away *Sarekat Islam* members and had actually formed the *Sarekat Ratjak* out of the rural *Sarekat Islam* branches. But by branching out further into the rural districts and fomenting unrest there, the party also inherited the problems of the *Sarekat Islam*. A conference held, in 1928 in Jogjakarta, tried to find a solution to these problems. Several programmes were put forward. First, one sponsored by the Central Committee which advocated to give up efforts to maintain the outer circle and to concentrate on the urban proletarian core. The supporters of this idea claimed that only in this way could the party hope to survive government persecution.⁷ However, opponents stated that the urban core was too small and too weak to rely on. They pointed out that the urban sponsored strikes had failed badly. They proposed to seek support from all sides and try to overthrow the government before it could crush the party. Many, however, considered this too risky and dangerous. Eventually a compromise was reached. The *Sarekat Ratjak* would be allowed to die slowly while the inner circle would absorb all reliable members of the outer circle. At the same time it was agreed upon to plan for revolution in the not too far future. Like so many compromises this one too created more dissent than unity, and the party was narrowing its base while preparing for revolution.⁸

Ideologically the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* had problems as well. The *P.K.I.* operated in a colonial environment, and as a result the party had difficulties in developing a coherent socialist programme along Marxist lines because there was a strong tendency among the membership to think along nationalist, rather than proletarian class lines. This problem was worsened by the fact that, although the *P.K.I.* was connected with the international communist movement, it got little support from Moscow, and members were little motivated to identify with international communist principles. Stalin regarded the Indonesian communist party as a typical example of "leftist deviation in a colonial communist

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*, p. xxiv.

⁶ *ibid.* See also the chapter called "Deviation", in which Benda discusses in some detail the development of the Jogjakarta Conference.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. xxv.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. xxvii.

movement".⁹ The policy of the *Komintern* in Asia was influenced by the situation in China rather than what was happening in Indonesia or even the rest of South-East Asia. The *P.K.I.* Central Committee interpreted *Komintern* policy in Asia to suit its own purposes.¹⁰ Tan Malakka, who knew the *Komintern* attitude toward Asia, warned from Bangkok against policies which "would waste the resources of international communism in useless revolutionary attempts."¹¹ He feared disaster and felt that the party should "avoid a defeat which would paralyse our organisation for a long time to come."¹² He realised that mass support was essential and that a *Putch* by leaders divorced from mass membership would only lead to failure.¹³



Tan Malakka

On the eve of the revolutionary action against the Colonial Government there were several opinions within the *P.K.I.* First, the émigré leadership in Singapore, which, although it favoured revolution, was waiting for approval from Moscow. Second, the Central Committee in Batavia, which, influenced by Tan Malakka, was dead against rebellion, considering such action suicidal and declaring itself independent from Singapore.¹⁴ Third, the Revolutionary Council, which rejected both the authority of Singapore and Batavia and organised for immediate revolution.¹⁵

The policy of the Revolutionary Council carried the day and in November 1926, rebellions broke out in Bantam on Java and in the Minangkabau on Sumatra. The decision to revolt showed all the elements against which Lenin had warned so often. It was taken from weakness, at a moment when communist power and discipline was low and declining.¹⁶ It is therefore not surprising that the rebellion failed and was easily put down by government troops.

What is more important than the failure, is the character of the rebellions, because it reveals how little communist ideology lay at its roots. Benda's investigation into the communist uprisings of 1926-27 brings out surprising elements.¹⁷ In the first place, the Bantam region on Java and the Minangkabau region on Sumatra were not only, by Indonesian standards, fairly wealthy, they were also relatively

⁹ *ibid*, p. xxvii.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. xxviii-xxx.

¹¹ Vlekke, p. 369. From a speech given during a secret meeting in the temple ruins of Prambanan on Java.

¹² Benda, p. l-i.

¹³ Kahin, p. 62. Quoting Tan Malakka. *Massa Actie* (Mass Action), p. 45-50, 56, and 61. Tan Malakka's movement in Bangkok in 1927 was called *Pari* (Partai Republik Indonesia)

¹⁴ Benda, p. xxiii. Justus van der Kroef. *The Communist Party of Indonesia*, p. 15-16. This work deals mainly with the *P.K.I.* after 1945.

¹⁵ Benda, p. xxiii.

¹⁶ *ibid*.

¹⁷ Benda, *passim*

thinly populated and were generally free of Western plantations. Private ownership of land was common and peasants produced cash-crops. Taxation had not risen with the accumulation of wealth and the regions had improved and were not poverty stricken.

Secondly, both Bantam and the Minangkabau had given the Colonial Government lots of trouble in the past. The Bantam peasant was more individualistic and more traditional Islamic than the rest of the Javanese population. The strong community ties which hampered the peasants on the rest of Java, were much less strong than in the Bantam region. The Minangkabau population was Muslim too, but here the conflict was between traditional *adat*-chiefs of a closed matriarchal society and a new reformist Islam movement of Western educated younger members of the élite.¹⁸

The causes of rebellion in Bantam and Minangkabau were therefore, not the result of Marxist ideology spread among an eager and oppressed population, poverty stricken and landless. Tenancy, population pressure or urban proletarianism were absent. It was not despair, but hope and frustration that triggered the rebellions in Bantam and Minangkabau. The communists made use of discontent by promising everything to everybody.¹⁹ These were not rebellions based on class conflict, but on discontent within agrarian communities dislocated by the introduction of a money-economy and other characteristics of Western enterprise, which tended to break down traditional communal ties.²⁰ The rebellions were regional and had strong local nationalist overtones. The slogan of the rebellion was *Kemerdekaan* (Freedom) rather than *Indonesia Merdeka* (Free Indonesia).²¹ The rebellions were fought to affirm individual and personal freedom and goals, rather than class aims.

The rebellions were disastrous for the **P.K.I.** The government used the uprising to destroy the communist movement once and for all, as it dreaded communism more than anything else in the colony. Forty-five hundred communists were imprisoned and one thousand were exiled to the political concentration camp in Boven-Digul in the swamps of West-Irian (New Guinea)²² The government had been aware of the division within the party and hoped that by expelling the party leaders it could disorganise the *P.K.I.* to such an extent that it would disappear rather than go underground. It was not disappointed as the *P.K.I.* ceased to function as a political organisation, until, under rather different circumstances, it re-appeared after 1945. The rebellions also showed that the *P.K.I.* had not been very selective in its supporters. Instead of developing a real cadre, it had gathered a heterogeneous following whose only common characteristic was



**Raden Darsono Notosudirdjo
(1893-1976) and his son**

¹⁸ Benda, p.xix-xxii

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. xxi

²⁰ *ibid*, p.xiii

²¹ *ibid*, p. xxi

²² Mintz, p. 71. Forty-five hundred communist were imprisoned, while one thousand were exiled to Boven-Digoel.

bitter discontent with the colonial status quo.²³ The party suffered also from the same ailment that had plagued the *Sarekat Islam*, and which would frustrate other radical movements in Indonesia later as well. The leadership had shown itself too far removed from the Indonesian masses. For instance, both the chairman Samaoen and his vice-chairman Raden Darsono belonged to the lesser Javanese nobility, while Tan Malakka was the son of a high native official in West Sumatra.²⁴



PKI meeting in Batavia (Jakarta), 1925

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²³ McVey. *Rise*, p. xiii.

²⁴ van der Kroef, p. 12. One should not over-emphasise the significance of the communist uprising. It was, as shown, merely a symptom of a much wider development that included agrarian unrest as a result of the introduction of Western plantation industries and the general weakening colonial ties throughout Asia. (Benda, p. xiii)