

The Remnants of the Japanese Occupation of Modern Indonesia

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ALEXANDER VINCENT BECK, AUG 30 2015

When Showa Japan invaded the East Indies in 1942 rebellious groups began to compete for the goodwill of the new colonial masters. In the course of these events, remaining Europeans were either killed or sent as forced labour into Japanese concentration camps[1]. “Those who had welcomed the Japanese as liberators were often quickly discouraged”[2]. The occupying power brutally quelled resistance since its ultimate aim was to incorporate the East Indies into the ‘Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere’ – a Japanese dominated Imperial order[3]. Nonetheless, in their attempts to mobilize the population for World War II the Japanese gave Indonesia’s Nationalist and Islamic organizations political opportunities they had been denied by their old colonial masters[4]. And when the Showa leaders finally realized that they could no longer win the Pacific War, they began to actively prepare a selected national elite for Indonesia’s independence[5]. The aim of such policy was to frustrate the reconquest of the allied powers so that when the Dutch returned to Indonesia in 1945 their old colonial order no longer existed[6]. Instead, Sukarno’s armed independence movement was ready to challenge Dutch presence in the archipelago. After four years of guerilla warfare the Nationalist movement finally succeeded in ending more than 300 years of Dutch colonial presence in the East Indies.

Among historians there is a consensus that the Japanese occupation was a turning point and decisive factor in the history of Indonesia paving the way for independence[7]. Ever since the Ethical Policy’s education program provided a native elite with the intellectual weapons to articulate resistance against the Dutch, the premises for Indonesian Nationalism were laid[8]. However, given “the success that the Dutch had in suppressing the small nationalist movement in Indonesia”[9], it is unlikely that Indonesian Nationalism would ever have grown into a political force capable of both unifying the multi-ethnic population and challenging Dutch military power, if the Japanese had not intervened and provided the Nationalists with, first, a platform to spread their ideas; and second, military training and weapons for their war of independence[10]. In assessing the impact of the Japanese occupation the main question at issue is whether social conflicts in post-independent Indonesia were to a greater or lesser extent the product of Japanese occupation policy[11], or rather the result of Dutch colonialism[12]. This essay is going to address the debate by identifying the ramifications of the Japanese occupation on the Indonesian archipelago. During the course of this study it will be demonstrated that whereas the Dutch had ‘divided and ruled’ their colony, Japanese occupation policy stimulated Indonesian revolt. All in all, it will therefore be argued that Japan’s occupation policy had a unifying effect on Indonesian society. However, the Nationalist movement cultivated by Showa Japan predisposed the country to an ‘authoritarian’, ‘militaristic’ and ‘Javanese dominated political culture’ that has proved to be an ongoing source of conflict in Indonesia.

Japanese occupation policy had two priorities: firstly, to wipe out Western influence; and secondly, to exploit Indonesia’s economic and human resources for the Japanese war effort[13]. This was achieved through the establishment of the most oppressive and devastating regime in Indonesian history[14]. A deadly combination of forced labour, deprivation, food shortages, and day-to-day terror by the military police made the Japanese occupation the only period in the 20th century in which the overall population of the East Indies declined[15].

The archipelago was divided into three regions, and each was governed according to its economic and strategical importance[16]. Since Java was considered on the one hand the most culturally and politically advanced, but on the

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other the least economically and strategically significant area – “its main resource being people”[17] – it was not governed as repressively as outer areas under the navy’s control. The eastern islands at the periphery of the archipelago, such as the Mollucas, were on the front line of military activity and subject to a much greater exploitation of economic and human resources[18]. Military destruction and the decline of important agricultural sectors and industries would further intensify the pre-existing, disparate socio-economic development of Java and the periphery islands in the turbulent years following independence.

Another factor to keep in mind is that Japanese occupation policy stimulated nationalism in Java, and to a lesser extent in Sumatra, more than on the outer islands[19]. Part of the reason for this divergence is, firstly, that the periphery islands were considered to be culturally primitive[20]; secondly, it was not planned that in case of a victorious conquest of Asia these areas should become part of a nominal independent Indonesian colony. Rather, they would become an official Japanese province serving as a buffer zone to defend the borders of their Imperial order[21]. Thus, the Japanese had little interest in unifying the population of these areas under the banner of a shared Indonesian identity[22]. In Java, on the other hand, the Japanese collaborated with a selected native elite that after having been oppressed under the Dutch was now increasingly given a platform to articulate their nationalist ideas[23]. At the end of World War II, this Javanese elite surrounding Sukarno had been prepared by the Japanese to combat Dutch presence and eventually come to dominate the victorious Republican forces during the wars of independence[24]. Sukarno’s Pancasila – a political philosophy combining socialism, nationalism and monotheism – was declared to be the official ideological foundation of the Indonesian state[25]. This sort of secular-oriented political framework was developed to reconcile conflicting priorities between the country’s Muslim majority population, Nationalists, Communists and various religious minority groups. However, due to the centralist nature of the political system, the political process in post-independent Indonesia has since largely been dominated by Javanese elites[26]. Japanese occupation policy thus enhanced the pre-existing “greater political sophistication of Java over other areas”[27], thereby fostering the emergence of a Javanese dominated political order. For the same reason, Pancasila failed to establish a strong bond of identification with the central governments in many of the outer islands[28].

On the periphery of the archipelago the Japanese generally adopted a more repressive attitude towards political factions, and it was not until the the Japanese leaders had acknowledged their defeat that “they decided to let the revolutionary surge roll on in the hopes of frustrating an Allied reconquest”[29]. Since Japan’s priority was to be victorious on the battlefield, it was simply more practical to rely on the experienced native administration of the Dutch colonial state to administer their occupied land[30]. However, one exemption of this rule was Ambon – an area that, due to its history and large Christian population, was suspected to be pro-Dutch[31]. In Ambon, members of Sarekat Ambon were appointed to the most senior positions within the administration[32]. Thus:

“The Nationalists whom the Dutch had had little difficulties in controlling and excluding from positions of power and influence in their own society, had been placed by the Japanese in control of their former opponents, the favoured sons of the Dutch.”[33]

Furthermore, the Christian Ambonese soldiers – who had formed the backbone of the colonial army, and many of whom had formed a close identification with the Dutch – were no longer trusted and often ended up suffering a miserable fate in Japanese concentration camps[34]. This was a change of symbolic significance since it was precisely the image of being ‘Black Dutchmen’ that made the Christian Ambonese unpopular in the eyes of other Indonesians[35]. While Ambonese Muslims, many of whom had established close links with the Japanese occupation regime, supported the Republican forces during the war of independence, the Ambonese Christians, after having been oppressed by Showa Japan, were the last to disband their bond with the Dutch[36]. Consequently, the group’s loyalty to the Indonesian national cause was questioned and, accordingly, Ambonese Christians were excluded from positions of power and influence. Largely because of this marginalization, an armed Christian rebellion emerged in 1950 demanding independence from the central government[37]. In fact, the armed struggle for independence by Mollucan Christians continued to destabilize the area until 1963[38].

Nevertheless, Japanese occupation policy had a unifying effect on Indonesian society. This is because the Japanese departed from the Dutch practice of oppressing Nationalist and Islamic movements in the most populated areas of Java and Sumatra. While the indigenous administration of the Dutch was largely maintained, the Japanese

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attempted to mobilize political factions for their propaganda and war efforts[39]. Contrary to what has been claimed by Piekar and Benda in the 1940s and 1950s[40], the political exploitation of these groups was not driven by a motivation to 'divide and rule' the Indonesian population. According to Anthony Read, an evaluation of available Japanese primary sources does not indicate that the military felt seriously threatened by any Indonesian faction[41] – except for the rebellious Ambonese Christians[42]. In fact, the cultivation of Nationalist and Islamic groups by Showa Japan “was motivated not by a need for balance but by the greater utility of the two latter groups in mobilizing the population whether for labor service, military recruits, and anti-Allied displays”[43].

Given that before the invasion there had been limited social relations between the traditional native elites and Nationalist and Islamic parties, Japanese occupation policy cannot be held solely responsible for all the destabilizing divisions that have plagued Indonesian society since independence[44]. It is true that by providing military training to members of the Islamic PUSA party, including Kartusiwirjo – who would later emerge as leader of the Darul Islam movement – the Japanese made possible the emergence of a destabilizing Islamist insurgency[45]. Yet it is also true that by incorporating “all available sources of leadership into various administrative, advisory, and propaganda bodies, where they had to some extent to work together”[46], Japanese occupation policy helped to overcome many divisions that had plagued Indonesian society since colonial times. This is largely because the Dutch had ‘divided and ruled’ their colony under the pretext of tolerating native customary law and traditions: firstly, by providing distinct systems of jurisprudence for different racial groups – “Indonesians, Europeans, Chinese and other ‘foreign Orientals’ – each of which was subject mainly to the law of Europeans, the law for Indonesians, or a combination of the two, plus special provisions”[47]; and secondly, by providing two different kinds of education – one designed for the privileged native elites and emphasizing the teaching of Western culture, and one that was taught in “the local languages and emphasized basic literacy skills”[48]. The Japanese, on the other hand, put an end to this discriminative practice, which was consistent with their ultimate aim to transform parts of Indonesia into a semi-independent colony[49]. Accordingly, it was in the interest of Showa Japan to unify the population in these areas under the banner of an anti-Western and Pan-Asian Nationalism. The idea was to achieve this through the introduction of an egalitarian judiciary and education system that applied to all, irrespective of their ethnic and religious background[50].

Concomitantly, the elimination of Dutch influence and the mobilization of the population for the Japanese war effort demanded the systematic indoctrination of Indonesians throughout the archipelago[51]. Although this constant propaganda failed to convince Indonesians of the apparent superiority of Japanese culture, it did, however, intensify anti-Western and nationalistic attitudes, which in the process helped unify Indonesians in their commitment to independence[52]. Patriotic flag ceremonies and military rituals were introduced into schools. Western languages were banned and there were some unsuccessful efforts to promote Japanese among the population[53]. Ultimately, though, Malay “became the major linguistic vehicle for propaganda and its status as the national language was thereby enhanced”.[54] The unifying factor of this move was significant given that there are over 20 different languages spoken within the archipelago. Indeed, it was only after Japanese occupation that Malay was declared the national language and subsequently widely adopted by Indonesians[55]. Finally, the Japanese replaced the euro-centric educational focus of the Dutch with one that emphasized East Indies culture, arts and music, thereby contributing to the development of a common sense of identity[56]. The sum of these changes proves that without Japan’s intervention Indonesian Nationalism would have never emerged as a mass movement.

Nevertheless, the kind of Nationalism promoted by Showa Japan was one that predisposed Indonesia to an authoritarian and militaristic political culture[57] – a trend that has been further reinforced by a high level of diversity and conflicting interests, which in turn entail the need for increased repression by the central government in order to maintain the appearance of superficial harmony. One of the reasons for such authoritarian tendencies can be ascribed to the propaganda of Showa Japan: emphasizing values such as self-sacrifice and obedience only perpetuated a pre-existing tendency within Asian societies to prioritize commitment to the community over individual freedoms[58]. And most importantly, by providing arms and military training to large segments of the population, the Japanese contributed to Indonesia’s militarization[59]. Since the war for Indonesia’s independence was one on which military and political aims converged, the roles of political and military leaders were from the very beginning indistinguishable[60]. As a consequence, the army did not restrict itself to political neutrality in the years following the National revolution. By pointing out the sacrifices that it made for the sake of Indonesia’s independence, the military

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demanded it play an active political role in the Indonesian state[61]. Accordingly, Indonesia's army leaders have always assumed a privileged role for themselves which has enabled them to intervene into politics whenever their grip on power became threatened[62]. As long as Sukarno was able to balance the power between the army and its main political rival – the Indonesian Communist party – the stability of the Guided Democracy system could be maintained. However, in the 1960s, when Sukarno allied himself more closely with the PKI, “the struggle for power became eventually too much for the system to bear”[63]. After leading army officials were murdered in 1965 by what was claimed to be a PKI plot, a brutal political cleansing campaign was launched, during which an estimated half-million suspected Communist sympathizers were murdered[64]. The dramatic events of 1965-66 thus unleashed the worst excesses of the kind of militarism that had been cultivated during the Japanese occupation. Eventually, the left-leaning and politically weakened Sukarno was forced to cede power to General Suharto – who would govern the country for the next 30 years as an authoritarian despot.

All things considered, Japanese occupation policy tended to unify Indonesians and, accordingly, helped to solve many of the divisions that Dutch colonialism had fostered[65]. Given the cultural diversity of the archipelago it is thus unlikely that present-day Indonesia would have ever come into existence without the intervention of the Japanese. Yet, the kind of Nationalism that the Japanese stimulated was one whose basic terms were dictated by a selected Javanese elite who then more or less forcefully imposed them on the rest of the country – leaving the population on the periphery islands with few alternatives other than to accept Javanese dominance, or become marginalized like the Ambonese Christians. What unified most Indonesians during the war of independence was not a common cultural identity, but widespread opposition to a Dutch colonial state that was considered worse than Sukarno's centralistic political order. For this reason, the central government failed to win the hearts and minds of many Indonesians in the outer islands, meaning that the stability of the system could only be achieved through the same authoritarian and militaristic political culture which Showa Japan had promoted.

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