

# Sukarno and the Nature of Indonesian Political Society

## A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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THE names Indonesia and the Republic of Indonesia have been in our political vocabulary for only three decades. When they were first proclaimed to the world in 1945, there were violently opposed interpretations of what they betokened. The Indonesian nationalists declared that a new state had been born, with a flag, a government, a territory embracing the islands of the former Dutch East Indies, a national identity, and a place in the hearts of 70 million people. They demanded that the Republic of Indonesia be treated as other states and its sovereign equality accepted by the world. At the other extreme, outraged Dutch politicians and officials, who claimed to know 'the Indies' well, dismissed it as 'a puny form of words'; 'a handful of men who called themselves the "Indonesian Republic"'.<sup>1</sup> They possessed a radio transmitter, but nothing else that suggested statehood. Only Dutch colonial institutions, these conservative voices argued, had united a variety of peoples with their own diverse but traditional political and religious loyalties.

Inevitably it was the first of these views which eventually prevailed in the West. Yet this polarity continued to be reflected in most of the scholarly writing about Indonesia. Should Indonesia be approached through its modern political aspirations, or through its rich and varied cultural tradition? American political science discovered Indonesia after the war and tended to take the first of these courses. Dutch orientalist and anthropologists, who had for long had the scholarly field almost to themselves, tended to represent the second. Even if we limit ourselves to the major work in English, we can see a similar ongoing debate as the slowly growing body of western specialists seeks explanations for the constantly changing orientation of Indonesian politics.

The emphasis on the future found its first home in Cornell University, and its most influential prophet in George McT. Kahin. He did much of his research at the capital of the Republic in 1948-49, just before the final Dutch attempt to crush it by force. He shared the hopes of many of

its revolutionary young leaders that Indonesia could develop into a modern constitutional democracy, functioning in a similar way to the parliamentary democracies of Europe and North America which had great prestige in Indonesian eyes. His book, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1952) was a masterpiece of committed scholarship, whose greatest single service was in taking the Indonesian Republic seriously in its own terms. By hindsight, however, it is easy to see that Kahin played down the influence of the military, of communism, of religion, and of traditional loyalties and behaviour patterns, in presenting his case. Many of the later generation of interpreters of modern Indonesia — Feith, Lev, McVey, Benda, Maryanov, Anderson — were his students.

In Holland too there were scholars sympathetic to the Indonesian revolution, but as part of a much older Dutch debate between Left and Right. They were more concerned than the Americans with the revolutionary effect colonialism and capitalism had already had upon Indonesian society, and their optimism had more to do with the changing class structure they perceived in Indonesia than with the viability of western parliamentary institutions in themselves. W. F. Wertheim's *Indonesian Society in Transition* (The Hague, Van Hoeve, 1956) is an excellent product of what has been called the 'Amsterdam school' — though only partially dealing with post-war developments.

As Indonesia gradually abandoned its pluralistic parliamentary constitution in the late 1950s, and its economy stagnated, the confidence in Indonesia's future was harder to maintain. The democratic socialists admired by Cornell and Amsterdam alike were excluded by forces less compatible with western hopes. The declining optimism of this first group of academic writers is manifest in two excellent Cornell studies, covering at first hand and in brilliant detail the politics of 1950–57 and 1957–59 respectively: Herbert Feith's *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*, and Dan Lev's *The Transition to Guided Democracy*.<sup>2</sup> The detached and detailed analysis of these two monographs does not completely conceal regret for the steady decline of most of the forces dedicated to economic rationality, social reform and critical public debate.

As the trends towards economic stagnation and ideological conformity continued in the 1960s, the school which had hoped for the most from the young Indonesian Republic tended to be the most disappointed. A very few, exemplified primarily by Guy Pauker,<sup>3</sup> turned their attention to the army as the remaining force with the capacity to drive Indonesia towards the goal of a modern state. A much larger group have lost interest in Indonesia, altered their perspective to take account of the strength of tradition, or pinned their remaining hopes of fundamental modernization to an agrarian revolution and communism.

The opposite tendency to approach Indonesia through its cultural traditions rather than its political aspirations was naturally stronger in Holland (and Europe generally) than in America and Australia; and

stronger among anthropologists, students of literature and historians than among political scientists. If the hope of political modernization was strongest at Cornell, Amsterdam, and Monash Universities (to take the three countries where Indonesian studies have most flourished), the opposite emphasis was cultivated at Yale, Leiden, and both ANU<sup>4</sup> and Sydney. The two tendencies gradually intersected and engaged each other in a debate about the nature of the modern Indonesian polity.

The two approaches were brought within hailing distance of each other by a tiny group of students of Indonesian society and culture who also addressed an American audience. Justus van der Kroef was one particularly prolific mediator of Dutch scholarship, using it to show some of the continuities in Indonesian political behaviour.<sup>5</sup> Still more important was the brilliant description of Javanese society presented by Clifford Geertz — in particular his emphasis on the cultural gulf between *santri* (strict Muslim) and *abangan* (Javanistic) Javanese.<sup>6</sup> It was however Harry Benda, significantly a scholar with some pre-war experience in Indonesia, who brought the debate to a head with his review of Feith's *Decline of Constitutional Democracy* in 1964.<sup>7</sup> He here expressed the growing sense that Feith was 'presenting highly sophisticated and persuasive answers to an intrinsically mistaken, or irrelevant, question. . . . — perhaps best caricatured by the adage "What's wrong with Indonesia?"'<sup>8</sup> The assumption underlying much American study of Indonesia, he complained, was that the 'natural' course of Indonesian development should have been 'not only into a wealthy and just nation state, but also into a bourgeois democracy'.<sup>9</sup> Once Dutch colonialism was no longer available as the cause of its failure to do so, scholarship was being misdirected into a search for other factors.

Benda's attack did not go unchallenged<sup>10</sup> but it certainly encouraged a trend to interpret modern Indonesian politics in terms of what were held to be 'traditional' norms. Among the most distinguished works of this type was Bernhard Dahm's *Sukarno and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence*, appropriately introduced to English readers by Benda.<sup>11</sup> Dahm for the first time interpreted Sukarno's thought in terms of the traditional values of the Javanese *wayang* theatre. The suppression of the radical/revolutionary element in Indonesian nationalism since 1966 has encouraged more ambitious attempts by Ann Ruth Wilner<sup>12</sup> and Allen Sievers<sup>13</sup> to portray the Republic as a direct heir to the pre-colonial state of Mataram, with the survival of many of its values. The most persuasive recent attempt to define these values as they relate to modern politics is undoubtedly Benedict Anderson's 'The idea of power in Javanese culture'.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of the dichotomy with which we began, it is possible to argue that American political science (and particularly Cornell, where Anderson has succeeded to Kahin's role in matters Indonesian) has moved full circle. Increasingly it represents the tendency to see Indonesia (sometimes simplified to Java) as culturally unique and traditionally defined, while the opposite corner of the ring has become deserted by all but a few

development economists arguing that Indonesia *does* respond to normal economic stimuli.

Because it boils down to the inescapable ingredients of continuity and change, this debate will continue, with flashes of insight being offered by both sides to it. Each tendency has dangers for one who genuinely seeks to understand or interpret Indonesia. To underestimate the capacity of Indonesia to undergo rapid change or to see its politics as predetermined by its culture, is perhaps even more dangerous than to assume that Indonesians behave like ourselves. The best safeguard against falling into either of these simplifications is to allow Indonesians to speak for themselves. Fortunately there is an increasing body of political writing in English translation which can be put before students, and most of it is easier to read than the work of western commentators. The most representative collection of political manifestos is in the volume *Indonesian Political Thinking, 1945–1965*.<sup>15</sup> Several fine Indonesian novels in translation also give an excellent picture of the conflict between continuity and change as it affected Indonesians. Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *A Heap of Ashes*<sup>16</sup> is a collection of stories from the 1940s and '50s; Mochtar Lubis' *Road with no end* and *Twilight in Djakarta*<sup>17</sup> are set during the revolution and the early 1950s, respectively. Achdiat's *Atheis*<sup>18</sup> depicts a similar conflict situation in the time of the Japanese occupation.

Looking back on the past three decades, one remarkable Indonesian success has proved the initial sceptics wrong. Indonesia has remained united, and has developed a genuine national culture and language matched by few if any post-colonial countries of comparable diversity. Conflict within this culture has been profound, but no contestant has challenged the position of the Indonesian language, the unitary constitution, or the symbols of national struggle which emerged from the revolution of 1945–50.

The contest between 'democrats' and 'authoritarians', 'modernisers' and 'traditionalists', or in Feith's terms 'problem-solvers' and 'solidarity-makers', which so concerned western observers in the 1950s, was never the main issue to Indonesians. Seen from this distance, there were four major forces which developed a mass base and a sense of national destiny during the revolution — the Muslims, the communists, Sukarno, and the army. None of them was inherently dedicated to parliamentary democracy or the multi-party system, though on the whole it was in the interests of the first two to defend political parties, and of Sukarno and the army to oppose them. Since the Muslims and the communists were incapable of working together there could never be a concerted defence of the party system. That was, in any case, a subordinate issue in the contest for power between these four central forces. Sukarno died in 1970 and the communists were ruthlessly suppressed in 1966, but their heirs cannot be ignored in the ongoing configuration of power in Indonesia.

Each of these four forces has received some attention in English-language writing, though of uneven accessibility. The most systematic

treatments of Islam are by Benda for the period before 1945,<sup>19</sup> and by B. J. Boland for the period thereafter.<sup>20</sup> The rise of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and its policy under Aidit have been the subject of many detailed monographs. The most readable — Brackman's *Indonesian Communism* and Palmier's *Communists in Indonesia*<sup>21</sup> — both adopt an unsympathetic tone towards the party, and thereby fail to convey convincingly the reasons for its strength. Donald Hindley and Rex Mortimer have provided two objective, scholarly, and detailed studies, but only of the period 1950–1965.<sup>22</sup> Some of the polemical writing of the PKI leader, D. N. Aidit, is also available in English.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the power it wielded within Indonesian political life even before General Suharto's assumption of the Presidency, the army has not proved equally attractive to scholars. Most of the studies devoted to its role and ethos are only of article length — whether championing it like Pauker, chronicling its rise to supreme power like McVey and Britten,<sup>24</sup> or defensively asserting that it exists and therefore merits objective attention, like Sundhausen and Hoadley.<sup>25</sup> The most satisfactory treatment of the post-1966 army in readily accessible form is that in Peter Polomka's *Indonesia Since Sukarno* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971). Fortunately it is possible for the English reader to obtain some idea of the mentality of Indonesia's military leaders through their own writing. Generals Nasution and Simatupang<sup>26</sup> were the most articulate of the western-educated men who led the army in the 1950s, while the aims of the post-1966 army leadership can be glimpsed through General Ali Moertopo.<sup>27</sup> These writings constantly lead one back to the revolution of 1945–50 as the source of the army officers' sense of mission to direct the nation's affairs.

There is a risk of exaggerating the importance of Sukarno in equating him with the three broad socio-political forces discussed above. Yet he was far more successful than was the nationalist party (PNI) in identifying himself with national unity, national struggle, and national greatness. The nationalist party failed to develop any organisational strength remotely comparable to that of the communists. The strident nationalist spirit of struggle against the external enemy — again rooted in the revolutionary experience of 1945–50 — was most successfully channelled by Sukarno himself, through his oratory, his manoeuvring for the central position between the other three forces, and his hold on the Presidency — which he was able to turn from the figurehead role of 1946 (and again in the 1950 Constitution) to almost total control of foreign policy and ideology in 1959–65.

We are particularly well-served with English language sources on Sukarno. His own very readable memoirs, related at the height of his power to Cindy Adams for a foreign audience,<sup>28</sup> convey more of his arrogance and self-indulgence than of his charm and political skill. A pungent antidote is available in the memoir of Abu Hanifah,<sup>29</sup> a very westernized Islamic politician outraged by the self-aggrandizement of the Cindy Adams book.

Of the secondary literature the most useful is John Legge, *Sukarno* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972). In a book admirably complete and detailed, Legge also succeeds in raising the broader problems of interpretation of Sukarno's role in a balanced fashion. Bernhard Dahm's work, cited above, gives a fascinating interpretation of Sukarno's early thinking, while C. L. M. Penders<sup>30</sup> adopts more frequently the tone of Abu Hanifah and others of Sukarno's critics. There is a large and still growing body of writing on the relations between Sukarno, the communists and the military in the 1965 coup, which was aimed against anti-communist high military officers but ended with the destruction of the communist party. The books of Hughes and Dake<sup>31</sup> give most attention to the enigmatic role of Sukarno himself in these events, while others regard the army or the communists as providing the key to its understanding.

Sukarno died in 1970, four years after the destruction of the communist party had deprived him of the ability to manoeuvre between it and the army, bringing about his overthrow. Of the four forces discussed above the army appears to remain in uncontested command of the field. The Muslims once again play a role that has been intermittently theirs for over a century — as the most obvious focus of popular opposition and disaffection. Yet military and Islamic leaders themselves would be among the first to point out that radical nationalism and the alienation of the rural poor remain factors to be reckoned with. The turbulent history of Indonesia since 1945 has welded a geographical expression into a national entity, but it has not finally resolved the contest as to where that nation will go.

ANTHONY REID

*Australian National University*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> P. S. Gerbrandy, *Indonesia*, London, Hutchinson, 1950, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Feith, *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1962. Daniel Lev, *The Transition to Guided Democracy: Indonesian Politics 1957-59*, Ithaca, Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1966. The disappointment of many Dutch socialists is more overtly manifested in such books as J. F. Goedhart, *Een Revolutie op Drift* [A drifting revolution], Amsterdam, van Oorschot, 1953, and Sol Tas, *Indonesia: The Underdeveloped Freedom*, trans. D. S. Jordan, Indianapolis/New York, Pegasus, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Guy C. Pauker, 'The Role of the Military in Indonesia', in J. J. Johnson, ed. *The Military in Underdeveloped Areas*, Princeton, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Although many schools compete at my own University (Australian National University, ANU), its place in this debate is suggested by Benda's acknowledgement, in *Continuity and Change* (cited below), p. 165n., that his onslaught was stimulated by a 1959 review by A. H. Johns.

<sup>5</sup> e.g. J. M. van der Kroef, *Indonesia in the Modern World*, 2 vols., Bandung, Masa Baru, 1953/4; *Indonesian Social Evolution. Some Psychological Considerations*, Amsterdam, Van der Peet, 1958; 'Javanese Messianic Expectations: Their origin and cultural

context' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, I (1959), 299–323; 'The Colonial Deviation in Indonesian History', *East and West*, VII (1956), 251–61.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press, 1960; *The Social History of an Indonesian Town*, Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 1965. Even Geertz has been accused by some of pursuing into the past a misguided quest for the entrepreneurial spirit of the West, particularly in his *Agricultural Involvement*, University of California Press, 1963, and *Peddlers and Princes*, Chicago University Press, 1963.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Benda, 'Democracy in Indonesia', *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXIII (1964), 449–56; reprinted in *Continuity and Change in Southeast Asia: Collected Journal Articles of Harry J. Benda*, New Haven, Yale Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph 18, 1972.

<sup>8</sup> *Continuity and Change*, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Feith, 'History, theory and the Study of Indonesian Politics: a reply to Harry J. Benda', *Journal of Asian Studies* (JAS) XXIV, 2 (1965), 305–12.

<sup>11</sup> Bernhard Dahm, *Sukarno and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence*, Trans. by Mary F. Somers Heidhues; Foreword by Harry J. Benda, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 1966.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Ruth Wilner, 'The Neotraditional Accommodation to Political Independence: the Case of Indonesia', in Lucian Pye, ed., *Cases in Comparative Politics: Asia*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1970, pp. 242–306.

<sup>13</sup> Allen M. Sievers, *The Mystical World of Indonesia. Culture and Economic Development in Conflict*, John Hopkins University Press, 1974.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, 'The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture', in Claire Holt, ed., *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1972, pp. 1–69.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Feith and Lance Castles, eds., *Indonesian Political Thinking, 1945–1965*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1970.

<sup>16</sup> Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *A Heap of Ashes*, trans. H. Aveling, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1975.

<sup>17</sup> Mochtar Lubis, *Road with no end*, trans. A. H. Johns, London, Hutchinson, 1965; *Twilight in Djakarta*, trans. C. Holt, New York, Vanguard Press, 1963.

<sup>18</sup> Achdiat K. Mihadja, *Atheis*, trans. R. J. Maguire from 1949 original, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1972.

<sup>19</sup> Harry J. Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation*, The Hague, Van Hoeve, 1958.

<sup>20</sup> B. J. Boland, *The Struggle of Islam in Modern Indonesia*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1971.

<sup>21</sup> Arnold C. Brackman, *Indonesian Communism: A History*, New York, Praeger, 1963. Leslie Palmier, *Communists in Indonesia; Power Pursued in Vain*, Garden City, N.Y., Anchor/Doubleday, 1973.

<sup>22</sup> Donald Hindley, *The Communist Party of Indonesia, 1951–1963*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1964. Rex Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno: Ideology and Politics, 1959–1965*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1974.

<sup>23</sup> D. N. Aidit, *Indonesian Society and the Indonesian Revolution*, Jakarta, Pamburuan, 1958; *Problems of the Indonesian Revolution*, Jakarta, Pamburuan, 1963.

<sup>24</sup> For Pauker see n. 3 above. Ruth McVey, 'The post-revolutionary transformation of the Indonesian Army', *Indonesia*, XI (April 1971) and XIII (April 1972). Peter Britten, 'The Indonesian Army: "Stabiliser and Dynamiser"', in Rex Mortimer, ed., *Showcase State: The Illusion of Indonesia's 'Accelerated Modernisation'*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1973, pp. 83–98.

<sup>25</sup> Ulf Sundhausen, 'The Military in Research on Indonesian Politics', *JAS*, XXXII, 2 (1972), 355–65; and 'The Fashioning of Unity in the Indonesian Army', *Asia Quarterly*, II (1971), 181–212. J. Stephen Hoadley, *Soldiers and Politics in Southeast Asia: civil-military relations in comparative perspective*, Cambridge, Mass., Schenkman, 1975.

<sup>26</sup> Abdul Harris Nasution, *Fundamentals of Guerrilla Warfare*, English translation of 1953 original, Singapore, Donald Moore Books, 1965. T. B. Simatupang, *Report from Banaran: Experiences during the people's war*, Trans. by Benedict Anderson and Elizabeth Graves of 1960 original, Ithaca, Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1972.

<sup>27</sup> Ali Moertopo, *Some Basic Thoughts on the Acceleration and Modernization of 25 Years Development*, Jakarta, 1973.

<sup>28</sup> *Sukarno: An Autobiography, as told by Cindy Adams*, Hong Kong, Gunung Agung, 1966.

<sup>29</sup> Abu Hanifah, *Tales of a Revolution*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1972.

<sup>30</sup> C. L. M. Penders, *The Life and Times of Sukarno*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1974.

<sup>31</sup> John Hughes, *The End of Sukarno. A coup that misfired: A purge that ran wild*, London, Angus & Robertson, 1968. Antonie C. A. Dake, *In the spirit of the Red Banteng: Indonesian communists between Moscow and Peking*, The Hague, Mouton, 1973. On the other hand Benedict Anderson and Ruth McVey, *A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965 Coup in Indonesia*, Ithaca, Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1971, places primary emphasis on manoeuvres within the army.

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