



THE RISE OF
INDONESIAN
COMMUNISM

RUTH T. McVEY

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To 102 West Avenue
Bhinneka Tunggal Ika

Preface

THE formative years of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) are of interest both for scholars concerned with modern Indonesia and for students of international Communism. One of the first political groupings in Indonesia, the PKI reflected in its early period many characteristics of a movement bridging the gap from traditional to modern concepts of political organization and goals. As such, it exhibited openly many traits that today are muted but nonetheless strong in Indonesian politics, and a study of the nature of its early appeal contributes greatly to our ability to appreciate its position as the most popular Indonesian political party today. At the same time, the early PKI contributed by both its actions and its ideas to the evolving Indonesian independence movement, and neither the growth of that movement nor the colonial government's response to it can be fully comprehended without an understanding of the Communists' role. The importance of the PKI in the international Communist movement stems chiefly from the fact that it was one of the very few Asian Communist parties to develop something of a mass following in the early years of the Comintern. It therefore provides a point of comparison for the evolution of Comintern policy in China, the chief arena of the Third International's activity in underdeveloped Asia. This is particularly relevant in that the bloc-within strategy, the culmination of the Comintern's China policy in the period 1920-1927, was first evolved in Indonesia, and this prior Indonesian experience was then consciously applied in China; in Indonesia, however, as the author of the present book demonstrates, application of this strategy had a very different outcome.

Most studies of Communist parties tend to concentrate either on their role on the indigenous stage or on their participation in international Communist affairs. However, to provide a balanced view of the PKI's development, Miss McVey has given her attention

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to both aspects of its early existence, and in doing so she has demonstrated the interplay of domestic and international factors in determining the party's growth. She is unusually well equipped to consider Indonesian Communism in both lights, having received her academic training first in Harvard University's Soviet Area Program, where her work was primarily concerned with the development of Comintern colonial policy, and then in the Department of Government and the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University, where her doctoral work centered on Indonesian government and politics. Miss McVey has been studying Indonesian Communism since 1953, and in her present position as Research Associate in the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project is carrying this research forward. The present volume, conceived as the first part of a general history of the PKI, is the product of research in five countries and as many languages. It draws not only upon extensive interviews but also upon a mass of material hitherto largely unexplored. On the basis of these data, Miss McVey provides a solid documentation of events and presents an account and analysis of the party's internal workings that goes beyond, I believe, any other study of Communism in Asia.

GEORGE MCT. KAHIN

Ithaca

July 9, 1965

Introduction

THE Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) has attracted considerable attention in recent years because it is the largest such organization outside the Sino-Soviet bloc and the most powerful political party in its country. This notoriety is of recent vintage, but the PKI itself is not: it can claim to be the oldest major Indonesian party and the first Communist movement to be established in Asia beyond the borders of the former Russian Empire. It began as a Marxist socialist organization, founded in the Netherlands Indies a few months before the outbreak of World War I. By the time of the Soviet seizure of power in Russia it had been divested of its non-Bolshevik elements, and early in 1920 it officially took the title Communist. This volume—the first in what is planned as a general history of the Indonesian Communist movement—concerns the PKI's development from its birth in 1914 to its temporary eclipse in 1927 after a disastrous revolutionary attempt.

This period has not previously been investigated by historians of international Communism. The double language barrier of Indonesian and Dutch has combined with the PKI's peripheral position as an object of Comintern interest to preserve its obscurity. The principal studies dealing with the development of Indonesian Communism during the colonial period were sponsored directly or indirectly by the Netherlands Indies government in the wake of the 1926–1927 rebellion and are limited in both their objectives and their point of view. Indeed, Indonesian political development in the colonial part of the twentieth century is, as a whole, still relatively unexplored territory; in the past decade several important scholarly investigations have appeared that add considerably to our understanding of the period, but much more needs to be done before our grasp of it can be considered in any way satisfactory.

As an active participant both in the Comintern's Asian activities

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and in the evolving Indonesian independence movement, the early PKI contributed to two historical streams. Its major importance as part of the world Communist movement is that it was the only Communist party other than the Chinese in the "colonial and semi-colonial" Far East that both possessed legality and played a significant role in the political life of its country; and it was the only one to do so in a European-governed possession. The PKI's relations with the Communist International were therefore rather different from those of its illegal or politically impotent counterparts elsewhere in the colonial world. They were more intimate, in that the PKI was able to maintain active and meaningful relations with the Comintern, and also more strained, in that, as a movement that had achieved political significance by its own efforts, the Indonesian party had its own vested interests and its own concepts of the proper path to power. Physical distance added to the complexity of the relationship, for, having no direct access to the Indies and no means of imposing its opinion on the party, the Comintern was forced to deal with the PKI through the Dutch Communists and the highly opinionated Indonesian party representatives abroad. Under these circumstances the lines of communication knotted into a political entanglement, the snarled skeins of which were spun of national, factional, and personal differences within the Communist leaderships concerned.

The most extreme development of the program of alliance with revolutionary nationalism, which the Comintern followed from 1920 to 1927, was the so-called bloc within, whereby a Communist party's members entered a nationalist mass movement and worked to capture it from inside. The strategy was followed in two countries, Indonesia and China. The result in China has been widely discussed by both Communist and non-Communist historians, for this was the program that culminated disastrously in the defeat of the Communists by Chiang Kai-shek in 1927. The Indonesian bloc within has never really been considered as an aspect of international Communist policy, but it was in Indonesia that the strategy first developed and it was fitted to political conditions there and not in China. The course of the Indonesian bloc within—unfolding in this case without effective interference by the Comintern—offers parallels and contrasts to the Chinese experience that may be useful in evaluating that still warmly debated episode in the history of Communist strategy.

Though the PKI was never a large party in the colonial period, its

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place in the Indonesian politics of its day was out of all proportion to its numerical size. In 1924 the party itself had barely one thousand members, but at the same time it had by common concession the greatest popular following of all the Indonesian political groupings. Its relations with the other elements in the Indonesian opposition were of long-standing if scarcely harmonious intimacy; the nature of these connections and the attitudes of the non-Communist leaders toward the PKI as an ally, rival, and source of ideas are of interest because they reflected the organizational and ideological leanings of the Indonesian political elite—leanings which, in several important respects, are similar to those of the country's leadership in the period since independence. The PKI's relations were not confined to the elite, however; much the same as the party today, it had no special appeal for the well-educated but drew its cadres from the ranks of those who found themselves socially, economically, and psychologically on the border between Indonesia's traditional and modern worlds. Though its core was urban, lower-class, and ethnically Javanese, it extended its appeal to Outer Islanders, merchants, the religiously orthodox, members of the lesser aristocracy, and wealthier peasants, in addition to and in some places even in exclusion of the more familiar sources of Communist support. Frankly playing upon popular messianic traditions, it thus gathered a heterogeneous following whose only common characteristic was bitter discontent at the colonial status quo. In accomplishing this, the party sowed the seeds of its own destruction, demonstrating the danger of relying too much on the anarchist element which is a part of Communism's appeal: the price of the PKI's popularity was the promise of revolution, and in the end it found itself leading a rebellion its leaders knew could not succeed.

The PKI's early career spanned a fateful period in the development of Dutch colonial policy, for the outcome of which the party itself was in good measure responsible. At the beginning of the century the Ethical Policy, which stressed the promotion of Indonesian social, economic, and political progress, became the guiding philosophy of Indies government. The last aim was always the policy's weakest, and with the rise of an Indonesian political opposition it was increasingly questioned by Ethicism's numerous foes. The history of the era in which Indonesian Communism first developed is one of bitter conflict between those who were convinced that only a

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sympathetic approach to Indonesian political movements would ensure the healthy development of the colony and those who feared political freedom was a Pandora's box, the opening of which would result in revolution. It was a losing battle for the Ethici; scholars disagree on just when the tide turned against them, but the final blow their cause received is clear: it was the Communist rebellion of 1926-1927, which ended Dutch efforts to compromise with the Indonesian opposition and so left the Indonesian parties no real middle road between revolution and disengagement from the problem of achieving independence.

There is reason enough, then, to undertake a study of the early PKI. The problem, however, is how to go about it. Anyone attempting to deal with the history of a Communist movement outside the USSR must decide whether to consider the party primarily as a component of a world movement or to view it as a part of the domestic political scene. In some cases the nature of the available materials or the course of the party's history makes the choice a fairly simple one; in the case of the early PKI, however, the problem is vexing. Both its international and its domestic connections were important to the party's development; at the same time, the history of the PKI provides useful material for understanding both the Indonesian independence movement and the colonial policy of the Comintern. My initial intention, having come to the PKI by way of an interest in the history of Communism, was to focus chiefly on the party's character as a component of the Comintern and to deal with the domestic scene only as a background for its relations with the Third International. I found, however, that the closeness of the party's ties to its local environment, when combined with the fact that these surroundings have not yet been adequately studied, forced me either to gloss over problems that were of cardinal importance for the party's attitude toward the world movement or to devote as much attention to its domestic as to its international setting. The result is a work that views the party in both environments and is directed at students of Indonesian as well as Communist history. This has meant that I have included some information which, though doubtless familiar to one group of readers, is needed by the other and that I have discussed some problems that are germane to one set of interests but not to both. I have tried to weave my account closely enough so that this does not irritate the reader; so far as I have not succeeded in

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this, I hope the advantage of having both sides of the Communist coin presented in one work will outweigh the stylistic drawbacks.

The paucity of studies concerning the period in which the PKI arose made limitation of the subject difficult, but it provided a clear choice in another matter. Although treatments based on conceptual frameworks are often more stimulating than chronological accounts, it seemed to me that at this stage the latter approach would be more useful, as it would provide an easily accessible record of events. The fact that the work is devoted to analysis and suggestion as much as to annals led me to the same conclusion. Communism, nationalism, and colonialism are subjects on which few people agree, and I felt the reader would accordingly be best served by an account that provided enough detail, arranged in a chronological—and thus undirected—framework, to enable him to interpret the events for himself. Since I am dealing with the PKI on several levels, I have not always been able to adhere to a presentation through time—I have deviated from it most notably in describing the party's communications with the Comintern and in discussing its organization and social sources of support—but this has remained the basic structure of the study.

Similar reasons prompted me to document my account closely. There are a number of points at which my version of events differs from that given in other histories, and heavy documentation is necessary if this is not to become just one more divergent source from which the bewildered reader must choose. Furthermore, although a comparatively rich amount of primary sources and contemporary accounts of the early PKI exist, not all the story could be pieced together from these, and it seemed to me important that the reader be able to check how close a source was to the event it described. Finally, the fact that an account is firsthand by no means guarantees its accuracy. A high degree of personal and partisan feeling colored the writings and statements of participants in the events described here; even government intelligence reports classified for internal use and dealing with matters observed firsthand were often heavily slanted by their compiler's prejudice against or in favor of Indonesian political activity. Neither the Indies Dutch nor the Indonesian-language press was noted for checking stories before printing them; the major Indonesian papers, for that matter, functioned more as journals of debate than of record and were not overly concerned with recounting

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events. In consequence, widely differing presentations of facts—let alone motives—appear in contemporary sources on the events in which the PKI was involved. One way to judge whether an event did or did not take place as described in a firsthand account is to trace the survival of the account in subsequent writings—particularly those of the side injured by that version. I have supplied later references in addition to contemporary ones wherever it was possible to do so, in the many cases where the firsthand sources might be considered skewed by bias.

In an important sense, the sharp disagreement of contemporary sources on the early PKI is all to the good. It has not been necessary for me to rely to any great extent on the analytical techniques of what has become popularly known as *Kremlinology*: no lacquer of monolithic unity hid the splinters of debate in the early phase of the Indonesian party. Not only was intraparty disagreement on major issues aired publicly, but the Indies Communist press was decentralized, with regional journals reflecting the thinking and the popular approach of the provincial party leaders who ran them. Moreover, until about 1924 the PKI was closely tied to the other components of the Indonesian national movement; it was not a closed group, and its various non-Communist observers were relatively well aware of what was going on within it. They themselves might be highly prejudiced in their views, but there was no firm division into pro- and anti-Communist in Indonesian politics of the period; consequently, we find contemporary outside accounts of the party's activities reflecting a wide range of approaches to the subject and a correspondingly rich store of analysis.

Differences in attitude toward the emergence of Indonesian nationalism similarly lent variety to the interpretations appearing in government reports. Moreover, certain Dutch officials and scholars associated with the Indies government added to their private libraries the classified documents, intelligence and police reports, and accounts by local administrators to which they were given access. Thus materials dealing with a broad spectrum of the party's activities, which might otherwise have been lost or hidden away in archives, were available to me; and I am grateful to the Indonesian government for granting me permission to use them. The existence of such materials, along with those of government-sponsored sociological investigations into the two major areas of rebellion, a few important bits of party

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correspondence, advice and criticisms—some very outspoken—by the PKI's advisers abroad, and the oral accounts of surviving party leaders of the period made it possible to consider the PKI on many levels and from many angles. The result is that, in spite of the span of years that separates the early PKI from a present-day observer, the nature of the party in its first stage of development is in some ways more visible than its present personality. I hope that this volume contributes to revealing that character and, in consequence, aids in our understanding a formative period in the development both of Indonesian politics and of Asian Communism.

Since the research for this study took place over a number of years, a great many individuals and institutions contributed to its realization. I am particularly indebted to George McT. Kahin, of Cornell University, without whose encouragement and painstaking guidance the work would never have reached completion. I should further like to express my thanks to Mario Einaudi and Knight Biggerstaff, also of Cornell, who advised my study of Marxist ideology and Asian revolutionary history, and to Merle Fainsod, of Harvard, who guided me to the study of Comintern colonial strategy. In the Netherlands, Professors W. F. Wertheim and G. F. Pijper were generous with their time and advice; B. Coster made available to me the surviving set of *Het Vrije Woord*, which he once edited, and A. van Marle and James S Holmes made the vital contribution of first suggesting that I study the Indonesian Communist movement. In Indonesia I should particularly like to thank Semaun, Darsono, the late Alimin, and Djama-luddin Tamin—all of whom were extremely patient and frank in answering my endless questions about the movement they once led—as well as Mansur Bogok, who was most helpful in introducing me to these and later leaders of Indonesia's revolutionary left. Finally, I wish to express my very great gratitude to those who were with me as graduate students in the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University; their companionship made study a pleasure, and their ideas and criticisms did much to discipline my work and broaden its approach.

The major part of my research was done in the following libraries, the staffs of which were most helpful to me: in the United States, the university libraries at Cornell and Harvard, New York Public Library, and Hoover Memorial Library at Stanford; in the Netherlands, the libraries of the Royal Tropical Institute, the International

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Institute for Social History, the Royal Library, the Documentation Bureau for Overseas Law, the Ministry for Overseas Territories, and the Royal Institute for Linguistics, Geography, and Ethnography; in England, the British Library for Political and Social Sciences and the library of the Royal Institute for International Affairs; in the USSR, the Lenin Library in Moscow and the libraries of the Institute of Asian Peoples in Moscow and Leningrad; and in Indonesia, the library of the Museum at Djakarta. My study in them was made possible by Cornell University, its Southeast Asia Program, and the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, which supported various phases of my research at Cornell and in the Netherlands as well as my visits to England and the USSR; by the Ford Foundation, which granted me fellowships for work in the Netherlands, Indonesia, and the United States; by the Russian Research Center, a fellowship from which supported my work at Harvard; and by the Fels Foundation, which made possible the writing of the study. Needless to say, none of them is in any way responsible for the views presented in the book.

Most introductions end in a flurry of technicalities, and this one is no exception: I shall close with a note on spelling. Both the Indonesian and the Dutch orthographies were revised after the period dealt with in this volume. The names of people and organizations existing both then and now are thus spelled differently at different times. Recent works in Indonesian and Dutch referring to the earlier period generally use the new rather than the original spelling of names. Because the present spelling is more akin to actual pronunciation, I have chosen to use it except in the titles of publications. The only significant change in Indonesian spelling is the substitution of *u* for the Dutch-derived *oe*. In Dutch, the major changes have been the dropping of doubled vowels and the *ch* in *sch* wherever their presence did not affect pronunciation.

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I

Communists, Socialists, and the Colonies

ONE of the major tasks assigned the Comintern by its founders was to create a role for Communism in that act of the Asian revolutionary drama which was played out between the two world wars. In part, this concern for revolution in the East was a product of Russian proximity to the major Asian countries and the Soviet Union's consequent desire to influence events in those lands. The International's interest did not stop with Russia's neighbors, however, for its efforts in Asia were only one part of an attempt to make a place for Communism in underdeveloped areas all over the world:

The East—this is not only the oppressed Asian world. The East is the whole colonial world, the world of the oppressed peoples not only of Asia, but also of Africa and South America: in a word, all that world on whose exploitation rests the might of capitalist society in Europe and the United States.¹

This belief that the colonies played a vital role in shoring up the capitalist system was not part of the original Marxian system: the tradition in which the European revolutionary socialists were raised not only tended to ignore the colonial problem in general but also went so far as to deny that the Communists had a part to play in the backward areas of the world. The destruction of capitalism through socialist revolution absorbed the attention of the movement's founders; and this, they held, could only take place in highly industrialized Western Europe, where a massive proletarian class groaned under the rule of the bourgeoisie.² Other societies would be consumed in the spreading holocaust, but their populations would provide neither the spark nor the fuel for it.

The colonial question was thus peripheral in Marxian thought, and it was not until some years after his death that Marx's followers began to