Miners, managers and the state: A socio-political history of the Ombilin coal-mines, West Sumatra, 1892-1996

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Preface

“What would you like to have for lunch, miss? Soup (soto), vegetable salad (pecel or gado-gado)? You will enjoy it”. This is the way I was greeted by the owner of the foodstall at the market of Sawahlunto. This happened one day when Mohammad Sobari and I were doing research on Minangkabau entrepreneurship in the village of Silungkang in August 1992. I did not respond to her kind offer immediately. On the other hand, curious to know where she came from, my first reaction was to ask her: “How long have you been living here?” She answered surprisingly: “My family have been here since the time my grandfather worked here as a contract labourer. There used to be a lot of contract and convict labourers here, from Java, Sunda, Makassar, and Madura. I think this is little Indonesia here”.

This brief chat reminded me of the experiences of the Javanese contract labourers on East Sumatran plantations that were studied by Jan Breman. His book has been a source of inspiration and has stimulated me to re-examine labour control through the use of physical violence imposed by the state in the case of the Ombilin coal-mines. The result of my study is to be found in this book.

This book would not have been written without the help of many persons and agencies. First of all, I feel deeply indebted to my supervisor, Heather A. Sutherland. To her I offer my special thanks for the inspiring way in which she counselled and guided me throughout my research. It was she who introduced me to the new academic environment, and imbued me with worthwhile ideas. Thanks to her I have gained the self-confidence to accomplish the arduous task of amassing rare and valuable sources of information about mining during the Old Order regime I had set myself. Henk Schulte Nordholt as my co-promotor has guided my footsteps and given me many detailed and valuable suggestions about the contents of my book. To me he is more than academic supervisor, he is also a practical counsellor. Unfortunately, I was not in a position to follow his advice that it would be a good idea to join him in going into the underground mine, when he visited Sawahlunto in 1996. I also owe to his family many thanks for their unfailing hospitality.

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This research has been partly based on the results of interviews with former directors, overseers, foremen, local bureaucrats, leaders of political parties, trade unions,
socio-cultural associations, and last but not least with the former miners and their families in the Netherlands and in Indonesia. The interviews reflect their perceptions, attitudes, and interpretations of their daily experience. In order to gain an insight into the work rhythm of the miners, I participated in their daily life in the mines and in the barracks. This book is dedicated to all of them.

My mother, Zubaidah Djamari, my brother and sister, Helmi Tanjung and Diah, have had a great share in stimulating me in my studies. Unfortunately, my father has passed away and could no longer witness the fruits of my study. Finally, I am grateful to my husband, Erman Aminullah, who has put up with my absence from home for a number of years. Without his sacrifices I would not have been in a position to accomplish my thesis.

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This research has been partly based on the results of interviews with former Islamic leaders, overseas Indonesian leaders, leaders of political parties, trade unions,