Voluntary participation, state involvement: Indonesian propaganda in the struggle for maintaining independence, 1945-1949

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CONCLUSION
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Propaganda: Top-Down Political Communication?

This thesis discusses the political propaganda of an emerging state; the Republic of Indonesia, during its struggle for independence. In the traditional view, rulers employ political propaganda as an instrument of political mobilization and action. Indeed, states are the owners of infrastructures, capital, and skilled personnel, which are necessary to effectively disseminate their messages and in the end placate the targeted audiences. The examples of liberal-democratic states, like the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as authoritarian states like Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the Communist Soviet Union, during the first half of the twentieth century were the source of a wide-spread assumption that only a well-established state is capable of large-scale propaganda activities while controlling major communication institutions and mass-media. In the classic view, state-run propaganda depends strongly on control from above and on censorship, which implies one-way communication between the state and its subjects.

The Indonesian case, however, shows that the classic view of top-down management of political opinions as a central and guiding force in a process of nation-state building overlooks the participation of, and interaction with, private citizens or “ordinary people”: those not officially working for or connected to the state apparatus. The case of the newly-proclaimed Indonesian Republic and its efforts to build a new independent nation-state during a time of revolution shows the importance of involving civil society in political propaganda. This study begins with the question of how such an emerging political entity has been able to develop a propaganda apparatus from scratch and engage in propaganda practices to support the struggle by reaching
out to its own people and the outside world. Propaganda is thus examined within the interactive process of nation-and-state building.

When only studying the Republic’s official propaganda institutions during the military conflict with the Netherlands, and the Republic’s attempts to control the print media and radio broadcasting, one could easily infer that these propaganda activities fit the classic top-down view. However, when considering the role of actual actors, issues, and the various media used in political propaganda aimed at forging a new independent nation-state, a different picture, or historical reality, emerges. As I explained, the role of actors operating “outside” the state’s apparatus in claiming and achieving independence from the Netherlands was crucial. This socially heterogeneous group encompassed professional newspapermen, radio broadcasters, students, Islamic teachers, former political exiles, foreigners who supported the Republic, artists, and members of paramilitary groups.

Owing to its ethnic and religious diversity, and to a profusion of groups with equally diverse political interests, revolutionary Indonesia was in many respects a plural society. As a state in the making, its government was unable, as opposed to merely unwilling, to monopolize both violence and political propaganda. Although attempts were made, the Republic’s government simply could not control or censor non-state actors’ voices and propagandistic actions. These actors thus had room to maneuver and they actually took advantage of it. The government was keen to demonstrate this flexibility as part of promoting its democratic stand, ironically itself a form of state propaganda. The Republic faced real limitations. The Japanese military administration had exhausted the human and economic resources in occupied Indonesia. A state-endorsed propaganda infrastructure to spread the word of the new Republic domestically and internationally was simply absent. As few professional propagandists were at hand, nationalist journalists and others working outside the government took up the difficult task
themselves in the early stages of the revolution. They often did so without adequate financial and technical means. It is in this context that popular support materialized from revolutionaries like Bung Tomo who established his Radio Pemberontakan (Rebellion Radio) in Surabaya; from Indonesian students in the Netherlands, Egypt and Saudi Arabia; and from former political convicts in Australia. They turned into self-made propagandists for the newly-proclaimed Republic of Indonesia, often with contradictory political agendas operating relatively autonomously.

The Autonomy of Non-State Actors

The autonomy of non-state actors in propaganda-related activities may be one of the surprising outcomes of this study; it can only be understood properly when one takes into consideration the history and structure of the Indonesian nationalist movement since the 1920’s. Many revolutionaries had their roots in the emancipation movement that initially aimed to remedy social inequality and injustice, and which by the 1930’s had turned into a nationalist movement demanding independence. Among these people were journalists, radio broadcasters, novelists, painters, and poets who had been vocal, often in print, about political freedom and independence. As such, when the revolution started they were not entirely newcomers to nationalist propaganda activities. In fact, they were accustomed to using various types of media to spread pro-independence propaganda. Some had worked under the Japanese military administration, including in the field of Japanese propaganda.

These activists claimed political space, primarily during the beginning of the revolution when the ability of the central Republican government to exercise its authority was still very weak. They were able to take over media facilities and use them to spread their own political agendas, in some cases even undermining the central
Republican government’s policies. The revolutionary leader Bung Tomo in Surabaya, for instance, propagated the use of violence against the British and Dutch foreigners rather than diplomacy—while the central authorities preferred negotiation under the circumstances. The Republican leadership held that the Republic should prioritize seeking international acceptance and legitimacy as a sovereign state which obeyed the rule of law and endorsed peace. Non-state actors claimed independence but often expressed that they were not necessarily supporting the Republican leadership. These contrasting views between state and non-state actors often led to tension and, in a few cases, even to conflict.

The Republican authorities pursued a pragmatic policy with regard to propaganda. They allowed non-state propagandists freedom of speech, asserting that dissenting opinions were permitted. Despite this, it in fact attempted to regulate the flow of information through censorship of the print media and radio broadcasting. To this end, two state propaganda agencies were established, the Information Body of the provisional Republican government and later the Ministry of Information. The official viewpoint held that these institutions did not exercise complete preventive and repressive censorship, but ‘guided’ non-state actors in their propaganda activities. However, this simply appeared to be a euphemism for censorship and also a way of downplaying the role assumed by non-state actors in spreading propaganda. Non-state actors, on the other hand, defended themselves against the state’s increasing domination of speech and political propaganda. It was not uncommon for newspaper editors to openly criticize the Republic’s propaganda agencies, and there actually was little the authorities could do to stop such criticism and dissenting opinions.

In an outright authoritarian state, the issue of control is central. Studies on political propaganda typically start with an assumption of total state control over the media, which obtains particularly for authoritarian regimes. In Nazi Germany, for instance, under the
pretext of ‘Protection of the State and the Nation’, hundreds of socialist and communist newspapers were taken over by Hitler’s minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels. He described the press as a ‘piano’ and the state as the ‘piano player’.¹ In the case of Indonesia, the evidence shows that it remains doubtful whether the Republican authorities were interested in establishing total control of the press. It would be unwise to lose the benefits of the engagement of non-state actors in nationalist propaganda activities, which were considered to be important in gaining popular support for the Republic’s case.

Attempts at press censorship aimed at standardizing political messages occurred, but it became clear that such measures were applied half-heartedly. It was, for example, easy for the independent print press to complain bitterly about the Ministry of Information’s sluggishness without fear of penalty. In their editorials, the press frequently expressed the view that independence should also mean freedom from state intervention and domination over journalists’ works. A press release by Minister of Information Amir Sjarifodin indicated that the government, instead of suppressing such dissident views, was prepared to accept them, at least in part. Amir ensured that his ministry would not apply total censorship like that adopted by two previous politically repressive regimes, the Dutch and the Japanese. What the government wanted, according to Amir, was ‘state-led freedom’.

Main Issues in Indonesian Political Propaganda

I identified five recurring main themes in Indonesian propaganda during the struggle for independence. The first is the issue of the Republican leaders’ collaboration with the Japanese military administration. The second is the justification of violence. The

third is how to counter centrifugal forces throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The fourth is the role of regionalism, and the final theme is the issue of ethnic minorities.

At the outset of the revolution the Republic faced the problem of overcoming the image presented to the world of a product of collaboration with a fascist Japanese regime and a mere Japanese puppet state. The Dutch in particular were keen to emphasize the collaboration issue in order to undermine the Republic’s legitimacy. Republican leaders acknowledged that they had worked with the Japanese, yet they framed this cooperation as an effort to liberate the people, not as a matter of pro-Japanese conviction or self-interest. They stressed that independence was the overall aspiration of Indonesian people. The Republican leaders viewed three years of Japanese occupation as a minor, intermediary period when compared to four decades of the Indonesian nationalist movement. President Soekarno himself made a point of recalling 19th century anti-Dutch rebellions as indications of the Indonesian people’s long-standing desire for freedom. Pro-Republic voices thus refuted Dutch charges of collaboration and justified the existence of the Republic.

The second main theme I identified within Republican propaganda concerns the justification of violence. In contrast to most nationalist accounts of the Indonesian revolution, which suggest that widespread calls for violence against foreign aggressors had appeared since the very beginning of the revolution, I argue that in the early months of the Revolution, Indonesian propaganda, in an effort to appeal to arriving Allied troops, heavily emphasized the need for a peaceful transfer of authority after the Japanese surrender. The Republic believed that this strategy was in line with the Allies, who had promoted the war against the Japanese as a war to establish world peace. The Republic expressed the view that the present times were an age of peace, and as a consequence,
maintaining peace and order in Indonesia was in line with the purposes for creating a new post-war world order.

This emphasis on peace lasted until October, 1945, when the endorsement of violence publicly appeared as a response to increasingly common skirmishes between armed Indonesians and retreating Japanese troops, and subsequently with Allied and Dutch forces. The Republican propaganda, which had initially portrayed the Allies as potential supporters of Indonesia, now labeled them foreign aggressors. Reasons to fight the British were not limited to their order to disarm Indonesian fighters, but, more crucially, linked to the general threat of supporting the restoration of Dutch colonialism. Such mobilizing of support for independence was carried out through a variety of media like newspapers, radio broadcasts, loudspeakers in the streets, and direct speeches. In these actions, both Indonesian and English were used.

The propaganda most all-out for the use of violence targeted the Dutch. As soon as the Dutch started to press by military means for a restoration of their rule, the Republic used all media available: in addition to newspapers and radio it also employed posters, pamphlets, booklets, graffiti, postcards, paintings and caricatures. The Dutch were portrayed as threatening the Indonesian government, the Indonesian people (nationalist activists as well as weaponless ordinary people), and ultimately Indonesian independence. The propaganda explained that three hundred years of Dutch presence in Indonesia had been inherently violent. Moreover, now they seemed to be stepping up the violence, following in the footsteps of the Nazi atrocities they had recently experienced. Whereas such voices extensively exposed Dutch violence against Indonesians, atrocities committed by Indonesians against Indonesians and cases of Indonesian aggression against Dutch civilians was deliberately ignored: these obviously did not comply with the grand narrative of anti-Dutch struggle.

A third main theme in political propaganda was the problem of centrifugal forces. These problems had been extant since the beginning
of the struggle for independence, and prominently appeared in the Dutch-initiated foundation of ‘federal states’ as well as in the 1948 communist Madiun rebellion. The Republican leadership rejected the concept of federalism as a way of reordering Indonesian society and granting a certain degree of political autonomy to Indonesians as an alternative to a unitary Republic. In the course of the struggle and the negotiations for a settlement with the Dutch, however, the Republic was prepared to consider a Federal State as a political entity. While doing so, the Republic’s representatives urged participants of the so-called ‘Federal conferences’ to rebuff federalism. The Republic formulated and spread anti-federalist propaganda without which the Dutch would possibly have obtained much more support from native rulers and minority groups. Republican leaders thus confronted such forces with the need to make a clear choice. Vice-President Hatta delegitimized the Federal State conferences by pointing at the heavy pressure the Dutch put on the attendees. Pro-Republic leaders from East-Indonesia were instructed to convince the public that these conferences were initiated by the Dutch in order to lead the attendants astray. The pro-Republic press also reported negatively about these meetings and deliberately ignored the fact that numerous local rulers agreed with federalism.

During their August 1948 uprising at Madiun, the Communists, under Muso, incessantly trumpeted the failures of the Republican government, including its negotiation policy with the Dutch, the exclusion of the communists from the government, and their attitude toward the Soviet Union. Soekarno warned the Indonesian people in a radio address that the main aim of the Communists was to take over national leadership. The communist propaganda was countered by the Republican government through posters and pamphlets circulated primarily by the Ministry of Information. The pro-Republican press, via their embedded reporters, supported the Republic’s troops in their fight against the communists. Such communist leaders as Muso
and Amir Sjarifoedin (the latter until recently in the forefront of the Republican propaganda), were now portrayed as ‘foreign agents’ and ‘sellers of the nation’ who were working to overthrow the legitimate government by violent means.

The fourth main theme in Republican propaganda was the issue of regionalism and ethnic minorities. Regionalism, or, to be precise, political decentralization, had been acknowledged and propagated since the birth of the Republic. Shortly after proclamation of independence, central Republican authorities divided the former Dutch East Indies into provinces in which they appointed their own governors. These steps were framed as proof that all regions across the Indonesian archipelago shared the aspiration of independence as embodied by the Republic. Additionally, this provided a practical solution for the difficulties in direct communication between Jakarta and the outer regions. Each province was given administrative autonomy, but the central government tried to exercise political control by means of establishing provincial government institutions. Local initiative was encouraged, but the overall principle was that the central Republican government would direct the struggle for independence.

When in 1946 the Dutch held conferences to grant territorial self-rule to native rulers and minority groups in Sumatra, Borneo and East Indonesia, the Republican government decided to reject regionalism and instead called for one unified nation state. This shift resulted partly from the Republic’s increasing confidence in consolidating its territories. At the same time, by stressing the need for national unity, the Republican campaign engaged in countering what it saw as disintegrating movements, including internal opposition and the Dutch attempt to dominate the administration of East Indonesia, where the Republic’s influence was weak. Central in Republican propaganda was the notion that Dutch-promoted regionalism, in the form of federal states remaining under the Dutch Queen, put the whole idea of independence in jeopardy. Regionalism was viewed as
a disaster, whereas the unitary state was presented as the bastion of independence from foreign interference.

Another problematic issue was that of the ethnic diversity and minorities. Indonesians of foreign descent (like Chinese, Arabs, Indians and Eurasians) constituted most of the minorities in Indonesia’s big cities. Racial segregation policies imposed by the colonial rulers had stimulated tensions between different ethnic groups. Particularly Chinese and Eurasians were violently targeted by Indonesian militias.

Republican authorities were aware of the need for support from the minorities in their anti-Dutch struggle. Their propaganda stressed the government’s purpose of equal treatment for all societal groups. This included broadening the meaning of ‘Indonesian citizenship’ (which concept not only included indigenous Indonesians, but also those of foreign descent aspiring to be Indonesian citizens), offering security guarantees for the minorities, and exposing the injustices of the racial policy pursued during the colonial past. Most of the minorities addressed were considered vulnerable to Dutch propaganda: the Chinese, Christian Ambonese and Menadonese, as well as the Eurasians. The Republican propaganda considered other minorities, such as the Arab and Indian descendants, to be less problematic, and directed less attention to these groups.

Media and Audiences

Republican propaganda used a variety of media to reach diverse audiences. In addition to mainstream media like newspapers and radio, alternative media such as graffiti, posters, booklets, pamphlets, and postcards were widely used. Compared to newspapers, the posters, booklets and pamphlets were cheaper and required fewer scarce resources such as paper. It was easier to appeal to people’s patriotic emotions by using brief messages and images than by relying
on multiple pages of text, which could dilute people’s attention. Booklets were used to explain topics requiring lengthier explanation. Such more elaborate publications were usually aimed at opinion-makers such as newspaper editors, journalists, and the more literate and politically sophisticated Indonesians. Posters and pamphlets were very straightforward and radical in the language and drawings used, rendering them easily understood and therefore suitable for less-well-educated people. Much of the Republican propaganda encouraging the use of violence, for instance, was in the form of posters.

Different languages were used for different audiences. Most of the propaganda was written in Indonesian, but Dutch was also used to approach the Dutch and Eurasian communities and Dutch troops and officials. English was of no less importance. Slogans in English quoting American concepts of freedom and self-government were drawn on the walls of urban buildings, tramways, and other public spaces. Initially these were aimed at welcoming the Allied soldiers, who were expected to disarm the Japanese, with the idea of immediately familiarizing them with the goal of independence. Dialectical languages such as Javanese, Sundanese and Madurese were also used to explain national-level issues in locally-known languages and rhetoric.

In the propaganda of secular states, the importance of the religious factor generally tends to be downplayed as much as possible as a potential source of division. The Nazi’s propaganda, for instance, deliberately excluded Christianity in the rhetoric since religious bonds were seen as challenging the national unity envisioned by the regime. On the other hand, Stalinist propaganda during the Second World War invoked the role of the Orthodox Church in fostering the resilience of the Russian people. In Indonesia, where Islam, the religion embraced by the majority, was not adopted as a state ideology, religious sentiment was nevertheless addressed on some occasions. The references to Islam in the numerous speeches by
Republican leaders like Soekarno and Hatta were minimal except when such speeches were delivered in commemoration of Islamic holidays. This was apparently to accommodate groups other than Muslims. Nationalist propaganda with an Islamic undertone was mostly articulated by leaders from an Islamic background, such as members of Masyumi Party and Islamic teachers (kyai) who had direct access to the Muslim masses.

The most apparent use of an Islamic vocabulary was directed toward the Arab World in the search for international support. Indonesian propagandists in the Perkoempoelan Kemerdakaan Indonesia (PKI) incorporated aspects of Islam, in addition to shared nationalist sentiments, while comparing the anti-Dutch struggle in Indonesia to the anti-British struggle in the Arab World. They pointed at the religious brotherhood between Indonesian and Arab Muslims, the role of Indonesian Islamic heroes in fighting Dutch colonialism, and the need to help 70 million Muslims in Indonesia suffering under the Dutch and the British. From these issues we can learn how this particular propaganda tried to apply an Islamic veneer to Indonesian nationalism as a tool for opposing Western colonialism and its threat to Islam.

Indonesian propaganda approached various audiences, both in Indonesia and abroad. In Indonesia, despite the fact that much Republican propaganda was addressed to what the Republican political leaders viewed as rakjat Indonesia (the Indonesian people), this propaganda was in fact specifically tailored to each societal group considered essential to the Republic. Each group was approached differently, pointing out the Dutch savagery and stressing shared terminology and ideas which the target groups were supposed to share with the Republic. Among these were ethnic minorities (Chinese, Ambonese and Menadonese), professionals (civil servants, media professionals), the youth (both male and female), and opposition groups. Participation of non-government actors in such propaganda
efforts was essential. Propaganda by social insiders ensured that the
issues involved were relevant and appealing to the target audience.

Political propaganda beyond national boundaries is typically
characterized by collaboration between state officials and supportive
foreigners in pinpointing common interests and enemies. Thus,
German state institutions such as the Foreign Ministry, the Propaganda
Ministry and the SS Main Office had, by employing pro-Nazi Arab
political refugees in Berlin, engaged in efforts to induce the Arab world
to fight the Jews.  

In the case of the Indonesian republic, however,
a serious lack of financial sources and personnel, and an inadequate
diplomatic and propaganda infrastructure, hampered efforts to
gain international recognition as a sovereign state. This dissertation
shows that pro-Republic elements abroad managed to conduct pro-
Republican propaganda, and, given the restraints upon them, did so
rather successfully and autonomously. Such propaganda activities,
including those addressing financial support and the provision of media
and media professionals, were not instigated or coordinated by the
Republican government in Jakarta or by Republican representatives
abroad. In fact, the latter were largely absent.

Pro-Republic propaganda abroad was conducted independently
by nationalist Indonesians living in foreign countries. They brought
their views of the Dutch-Indonesian conflict onto the international
stage with the purpose of rallying foreign support for independence.
These activists adapted the Indonesian independence struggle to the
local sociopolitical contexts so as to enhance appeal and sympathy
with locals who had little knowledge of Indonesia and its colonizer.
In Egypt, for example, Indonesia’s anti-Dutch struggle was compared
to the Egyptians’ anti-British fight. Indonesian nationalists in the
Netherlands hoped to take advantage of the mood of liberation from

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Nazi Germany to frame Indonesia’s struggle for freedom as part of the liberation of the Netherlands. Rising anti-colonialism sentiments in Australia were exploited to draw support from Australians. In general, Indonesian pro-Republican propagandists frequently cited the postwar search for perpetual peace and political freedom in order to foster international solidarity with their own anti-colonial struggle.

To conclude, the new state’s propaganda was not a top-down process, in which a decision was taken and action was controlled by authorities. It was a dynamic interaction, which a) involved the agency of many different individuals and organizations outside the formal state structure, b) in several cases developed initiatives before the state did and thus contributed to political agenda-setting, c) displayed a degree of pluralism in terms of background and purposes, d) as a process, helped to activate a sense of citizenship in a newly emerging state, and e) helped to position that state in an emerging new world order.