Administrative competition in the Indonesian revolution: the dual government of Jakarta, 1945-1947

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The revolution of 1945–1949 was Indonesia's first propaganda war. While fighting and negotiating with each other, the Indonesian Republic and the Dutch were both acutely aware that their activities were under scrutiny from a sizeable international and domestic audience. This audience was interested to some degree in the moral aspects of the conflict, and the official information services of both sides put a good deal of effort into convincing the world of the moral superiority of their opponents. Even more important to most observers, however, was the question of who would win, for few would wish to be too closely associated with a loser, however victorious. Given the subjective nature of the two contestants at the start of the conflict, the outcome of the revolution was not always easy to predict. Accordingly, each side conducted a propaganda campaign to convince the world in general and the Indonesian people in particular, often in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary, that its own cause would win.

This propaganda effort to establish and retain credibility ranks as a major element in both the revolutionary strategy of the Republic and the counter-revolutionary strategy of the Dutch. It was not confined to the enthusiastic mobilising of the Republikanerjongens and the Departemen Penanaman but rather included a wide range of activities, statements and policies designed to demonstrate which way the tide of fortune was flowing. The strategy was most effective and most important in regions where both sides were actively competing for control. The Dutch, for instance, won a major propaganda victory in West Java in January 1948 with the signing of
In the confused days after the Japanese surrender, Dutch officials in the internment camps organised to establish an interim government which was to be a direct successor to the Netherlands Indies government deposed in 1942 and which was to be headed by H.J. Spil, former deputy chairman of the Council of the Indies and third in the line of succession after the Governor-General and his deputy, both of whom were out of the country. These efforts, however, were hamstrung by Allied instructions that all Europeans should remain in the camps and should continue to recognize the formal responsibility of the Japanese for administration, law and order. In Jakarta itself, the difficulty of establishing a municipal government was compounded by the illness of the pre-war mayor, Dr. Voorhoeve, and by the fact that his deputy, Dr. A. Th. Beggaard, was under a cloud after accusations that he had collaborated with the Japanese during the occupation. The arrival, however, of Allied troops and of the energetic Lieutenant Governor-General of the Netherlands Indies, Dr. E.J. van Hook, in October 1945 enabled the Dutch to press ahead with creating their own municipal administration and by February 1946 a "Kantoor voor Gemeentiale Zaken" (Office of Municipal Affairs) had been established in central Jakarta with a rehabilitated Beggaard as acting mayor.

During the first months of the revolution, the dominant political issue in Jakarta, however, was not administration but law and order. Each side attempted to shore up its own shaky international credentials by presenting itself as the party of law and order, while portraying its opponents as criminals and troublemakers. There being no common ground between these points of view, Jakarta descended in October and November into the distinctly lawless and disorderly build-up period in which the functioning of the administration was seriously handicapped by street violence and by accompanying sense of terror on both sides. It was not until late December 1945, when the British resolved the law and order issue for the time being by taking military control of the city, that the issue of administration began to emerge as significant.

This was also a consequence of a broad change in the character of the revolution. As the revolution disappointed those who expected a

The Dutch were somewhat slower to establish a rival municipal
Rapid resolution of the conflict and showed signs of dragging on and on, planning for survival became important and both sides sought to build an administrative infrastructure which could help to sustain their war efforts. More important, however, both sides were under heavy pressure to produce results. The surrender of the Netherlands Indies forces in 1942 and the inability of the Dutch to supply enough trained troops to recover the colony in 1945 without outside help cast doubt on the credentials of van Hook's government, just as the Republic's beginnings under Netherlands auspices and its apparent inability to exercise firm authority in the territories it claimed to control made it a distinctly uninspirng candidate for international recognition. To establish its credentials as a legitimate government both in the eyes of its claimed subjects and in the eyes of the international community, each side had to demonstrate that it was indeed not just an effective government but a more effective government than its rival.

Van Hook, for his part, had little doubt that the Dutch would sweep the field in administrative competence. If war on one had been the basis of Dutch rule in Indonesia, administrative excellence had been its other, at least in the twentieth century following the adoption of the Ethical Policy. When van Hook appealed to the British in October 1945, 'if the Sukarno government were capable of tolerably running the country, one might say that it should be left to do so,' he was not even considering the possibility that this might be the case. 'In our honest opinion,' he went on, 'it is true; its survival would spell utter ruin.' His attitude also reflected a somewhat crude disregard for the political commitment behind the nationalist struggle.

Ten ships from Australia with food and clothing, and the whole population of Java will turn out to unload them - and the revolution will be over.

Indeed, there were few fields aside from administration where the governments on either side could establish their credentials. Military victories were implausible. While there might have been a time early in the revolution when determined Indonesian action could have prevented Allied landings in the coastal cities of Java, the opportunity was long gone and military action offered no more than the opportunity to maintain spirit and to keep up pressure on the Allies at a significant cost in men and material. On the Dutch side, too, it continued to be said that swift and determined action immediately after the Japanese surrender might have tipped the Republican movement in the bad. But that moment was also gone and although the more military-minded of the Dutch chafed under the restrictions placed on their activity by the British in order to prevent clashes and although they looked forward to the day when they would be able to make a clean sweep of the Republic, most of them recognized that effective large-scale military action could not yet be undertaken.

Nor was policy innovation an option realistically open to either side. The politicians of the Republic were chained already in a conflicting web of demands from institutions and political and social forces within the Republic and from a range of external interests. With radical nationalist groups such as the Partai Pribumi demanding extensive social and economic reforms while Britain was making it quietly clear that the Republic would retain its chance of international recognition only if it maintained a 'reasonable' stance on the question of foreign ownership, the Republic's leaders found it often safer to talk in generalities and ambiguities rather than specifics. Similarly van Hook was heavily constrained in his freedom to make policy by his constitutional dependence on the Netherlands and by the fact that he too had to cope with demands from both the domestic and the local Dutch communities before he could attempt to accommodate Indonesian points of view. Under the circumstances, administration could hardly be neutral, but it offered a terrain on which the two sides could compete without immediately compromising themselves.

In Jakarta itself, administration took on a further significance because of the city's ambiguous political status. It was the declared capital of both the Netherlands Indies and the Indonesian Republic, yet both sides had limited their coverage claim to the city by acknowledging the broad legality of the Allied occupation of the city. Uncooperative they might be with the Allies from time to time
but neither could afford to reject the formal authority of the British occupation forces, and therefore jockeying for de facto authority at the local level became as important as the jockeying for de jure recognition at the international level. Each side wished to establish possession of Jakarta as a legal point in favour of its claim when the British ultimately departed. The British for their part could not intervene decisively to favour one side over the other. Their sympathy lay generally with the Dutch, but this sympathy was qualified by a widely-held belief that Dutch subtlety and political acumen in dealing with the nationalists had been thoroughly blunted by the bitterness of the occupation and that, given the opportunity, they would entangle the British in a costly and futile colonial war. Sympathy for the Republic was much scarcer amongst the British, but they were aware that the Republican leaders were frustrated in restraining the more militant nationalists from attacking the British to an even greater extent than was already the case, and that therefore studiously avoided appearing to intervene in Jakarta administrative politics to favour the Dutch.

The framework for administrative competition in Jakarta, however, was itself the creation of the British. As early as October 1945, they had formed joint British-Indonesian martial law committees in Jakarta to oversee such matters as railways, roads, transport, public works and food supply.6 With the British seizure of the city in December 1945, all these public services together with the police, the telephone exchange and other public utilities came formally under British control. A British officer, Brigadier F.J. Mitchell, headed the administration as commander of what was called Sub Area 554, under him were various administrative sub-committees which in turn supervised parallel Dutch and Indonesian hierarchies with identical and therefore often competitive, duties in each of the various services - water supply, electricity, roads, and public works.7 The physical barriers to effective administration were severe. The water supply in Jakarta, for instance, had fallen into a bad state of disrepair after neglect and damage during the war. Repairs were made extremely difficult by the fact that no maps of the water pipe network which served Jakarta had survived the war, apart from a single map showing the main pipes. Moreover, since the pre-war network had been constructed with German materials, it was impossible to obtain spare parts. Nor could water rates be charged, for almost all water meters had disappeared during the war. The telephone service, faced with similar difficulties, issued a plaintive request in the local press for subscribers to send in their names, addresses and telephone numbers.8

With so vast a range of tasks to be carried out, the political issue came to be not who was entitled to carry them out but who was capable of doing so. In the earliest months of the revolution each of the rival municipal administrations had been fully occupied in caring for its own people in a kind of informal apartheid. The Dutch had been pre-occupied with the monumental task of rehabilitating the former interned, and they developed an elaborate support system with distribution of free clothing and food to the interned and advance payment on future salaries to those employed by the government.9 Even when the Kantoor voor Gemeentezaken was established in early 1946, it initially confined itself almost wholly to European affairs, just as the Balai Agung worked almost exclusively for the Indonesian inhabitants of Jakarta.

As the political implications of administration became clearer, however, each side realized the advantage of establishing themselves in the administrative structure at as many levels and in as many fields as possible. Doing this depended above all else on being able to supply competent personnel for administration and it was in this field in particular that the administrative contest took place. The Balai Agung was initially at a considerable advantage. It had largely inherited an already functioning municipal administration from the Japanese. The top most positions in this administration had been in Japanese hands but there was a large reservoir of competent Indonesian bureaucrats occupying the next rank of administrative posts, and the Republic obtained the allegiance of almost all of these. In the early weeks after the Allied landings, by contrast, the Dutch had been unable to recover the allegiance of more than a handful of capable Indonesians10, and the estrangement and sometimes intimidation, which
those few suffered from other Indonesians effectively discouraged any further defections. There were also difficulties for the Dutch in using their own people, for the years of internment under the Japanese had left many pre-war officials dead or incapacitated. Many others needed a period of recuperation before they could resume their posts. The British, moreover, fearful that the large scale appearance of Dutch officials would prompt greater Indonesian resistance, forebade the landing of NICA (Netherlands Indies Civil Administration) personnel for several weeks. Even after the ban was lifted and both NICA and pre-war officials began to arrive there were problems caused by tension between the NICA personnel, relatively well-paid, well-supplied and generally lacking Indonesian experience, and the impoverished former internment who were just discovering that the colonial government had no immediate intention of paying them the three and a half years of back-pay to which they were entitled from the occupation.

The first sign of Dutch recovery was in the control of buildings. Virtually all government and former European commercial and residential buildings in Jakarta had been requisitioned by nationalists in the early weeks of the revolution with the raising up of the words “MILLER REKIBUL INDONESIA” (“Property of the Republic of Indonesia”). In late 1945, however, and in the first months of 1946 this process was rapidly reversed as the Dutch and British took charge of unoccupied or under-occupied buildings. Only on rare occasions were Republican officials actually evicted, for many buildings had been vacated by their former occupants in the general withdrawal of Republican government departments to Central Java in late 1945 and early 1946, but the repossessions gave the Republic a distinctly lower profile in the city.

It was in the most technical services such as electricity and water supply that the Balai Agung first felt seriously the competition of the Dutch. Virtually no technical training had taken place under the Japanese, and as the occupation had given the Indonesians no real advantage over the Dutch. True Dutch technicians began to play an increasingly important role in the running of the major public utilities, and since all was being done in the name of administrative rationality the Balai Agung could not object.

The greatest problem for the Balai Agung in the administrative context was in keeping its capable personnel in Jakarta. Not only most of the central government departments but also many of the Balai Agung’s own employees abandoned the city for Central Java. Jakarta was a dangerous city for Republicans: Ambonese troops of the irregular Battalion X roamed the streets intimidating those who displayed their Republican affiliations in the form of lapel badges or other insignia. Even regular Dutch and British troops were widely believed to be harassing Republicans, often with physical violence.

The central government’s withdrawal, moreover, gave civil servants in Jakarta the unaccustomed sensation of being in an outpost, separated by a long train journey and a not always reliable telephone service from the centre of power. To any capable and ambitious Republican official it became increasingly clear not only that Central Java was the place to be but that Jakarta, and the contact with the Dutch that was an unavoidable part of working in the city, was more likely to ruin a career than to promote it. There were many, too, who found such contact distasteful, regardless of the possible affect on their careers. Each time, therefore, that the Dutch extended their influence into a new aspect of administration, their arrival was accompanied by a flood of desertions by the Indonesian staff which repeated exhortations to stay by the Balai Agung could not stem.

The Balai Agung’s problems were exacerbated by its chronic lack of finance. For obvious reasons it could not collect municipal taxes from the better-off Dutch community, and it failed even to persuade the British to pay it at national rates for the water it used. It received a small but useful income from local taxes – market taxes, for instance – and from the fish ponds it owned along the northern coastline of the city, but it obtained a significant part of its income from a series of direct grants from the central government in Yogjakarta. The frequency and volume of these grants, however, tended to diminish as the Republic’s own financial state became increasingly parlous in the course of 1946, and it became more and more difficult for the Balai Agung to pay its staff. The financial difficulties affected the Balai Agung even in fields such as education, which were not under the supervision of the British
sponsored committees and where the Balai Agung was not in direct
competition with the Dutch. It had made, for instance, determined
efforts to open and maintain a network of Republican primary and
secondary schools in Jakarta, which taught a conventional curriculum
in an atmosphere conducive to nationalist spirit. It proved
difficult, however, to persuade teachers to stay in the city when the
Balai Agung could not even guarantee to meet their needs for daily
life. As early as January 1946, the amount of rice needed to feed a
family of six for a month was more than the monthly salary of any
Republican official in the city. This situation held throughout the
revolution except for a very brief period in late 1946 when the then
newly issued Republican currency (ORI) soared for a week or so to an
exchange rate which made Republican officials suddenly and
unaccustomedly wealthy.

Discontent amongst the Balai Agung's officials was exacerbated by
a growing feeling that their efforts and sacrifices were not
appreciated in the interior. Struggling civil servants in Jakarta for
instance resented such activities as a fund-raising Melam Semiti
Brother (Evening to Buy a Bonfire) held in Tenggakarta in April 1946.
It seemed to them to typify the preference of nationalists safe in the
interior for grand but empty gestures which ignored the struggle in
Jakarta. The sense of isolation amongst Republicans in Jakarta was
further strengthened by the hostility of public opinion in the
interior towards those who remained in the city. Officials who flew to
Tenggakarta naturally needed to justify their presence on grounds
such as wanting to serve the Republic better, or not being able to
stand the colonial atmosphere of Jakarta, and, in the absence of those
who did stay in the occupied city, their version became generally
accepted.

The Balai Agung was best able to hold out in fields where the
links with the Republic gave it an advantage over the Dutch. This was
above all in food supply. Patrols by the Republic's regular and
irregular armed forces on the demarcation line east of occupied
Jakarta presented a major barrier to the import of rice from the
fertile Karawang region. The purpose of this blockade was to place

political and economic pressure on the Dutch in Jakarta, if necessary
at the expense of Indonesian inhabitants of the city. Although the
Balai Agung was viewed with some suspicion by more militant groups;
it's Republican credentials were sufficiently persuasive to allow it to
organize a significant flow of rice across the demarcation line,
thereby not only establishing its administrative pre-eminence in at
least one field but also earning for itself a valuable income.

The financial benefits which were the strength of the Balai Agung's
rice operation, however, were also its fatal weakness. By
September 1946 it was widely believed that corruption was rampant
amongst the officials coordinating the rice trade. The writer, Idrus,
published a short story 'Keluhan orang di Jakarta' ('Complaints of
the people of Jakarta'), openly attacking Republican officials who somehow
obtained large sums of money although their official incomes were
tiny. The nationalist newspaper Harjo printed a cartoon showing a
blurred Republican official smoking a cigar while being pushed up a
steep hill by an enraged beak rider frequently and somberly
panic-stricken reorganizations of the rice business in late 1946
failed to make any visible impression on the problem and only the fact
that the Balai Agung had lost much of its control of the rice trade by
about November 1946 saved it from being further embroiled in such
politically damaging revelations.

This gradual exclusion of the Balai Agung from the rice trade was
doubtedly a consequence of the fact that professional traders from
Jakarta's business community had managed by this stage to set up their
own clandestine links with rice suppliers across the demarcation line
thereby easing the Balai Agung out of the market. It was also a
result of an intensification of the blockade around Jakarta by the
nationalist armed forces in a hostile political response to the
Republic's intransigence of the Linggarjati Agreement in November 1946.
More broadly, however, it reflected a decline in the importance of the
Balai Agung in broader Republican strategy. Whereas in early 1946
Jakarta had been at the front line of resistance to Dutch
administrative, and military expansion and was a major showcase of
Republican achievements, by the latter part of the year it had
accumulated a record of performance which, although representing much
rapidly became clear, moreover, that the provision for the restoration of the occupied territories would not be carried out at once but would rather depend on the implementation of the broader settlement of the dispute which had been outlined in the agreement. In disputes areas in the interpretation of Linggajati and the entire settlement process ground to a halt, it became clear that restoration of Republican authority in Jakarta would certainly not take place.

Despite its shortcomings, the Linggajati Agreement provided the British with the opportunity to withdraw more or less honourably from their commitments in Indonesia, including their involvement in the still functioning joint administrative committees in Jakarta. This in turn presented the Dutch with yet another opportunity to expand their administrative authority, for although a new Joint Civil Affairs Committee was formed with Sutoyo and the new Dutch municipal head, Mr. J.R. Voshaar, as alternating chairman, and although similar arrangements were not in place in each of the smaller committees, the executive positions vacated by the British went invariably to Dutch officials. The departure of the British, moreover, released the Dutch from a major constraint on their further expansion. Increasingly the Kantoor voor Gemeentewet was governed by reference to or consideration of the Balai Agung. While the Balai Agung had floundered in a sea of troubles mostly out of its own making, the Kantoor voor Gemeentewet had been quietly going from strength to strength. It worked at improving roads and repairing buildings, it established an expanding network of bus routes as a system of public transport which was safer and politically more acceptable for Europeans than the Republican tram lines. Like the Balai Agung, it lacked its own reliable sources of income, but it received extensive financial support from the central Netherlands Indies government and thus was able not only to carry out its programme effectively but to recruit increasing numbers of Indonesians as its employees. By mid-1946, it had established an administrative structure as far as possible intact; by the time the British left it had its own lurch, and it was ready to place its appointees at even lower levels in the hierarchy.

The Balai Agung endeavored to resist this creeping Dutch expansion, but there was little it could do except attempt to support
those who went on strike when Dutch officials appeared to take over their offices or departments. Having seen the results of past cooperation it became increasingly uncooperative with the Kantoor voor Gemeenteraken, attempting once more to set up a system of administrative apartheid, though it lacked the resources to do so effectively. As the new Republican currency lost value in rapid inflation, life in the shrinking circle of Bali Agung officials in Jakarta became increasingly difficult. Furniture and clothes were sold to make ends meet and the officials frequently lived and ate communally to husband their resources. Survivors of the period recall it as a time of great solidarity, but it was no glorious struggle, for the steady slide into penury was overshadowed by the turn of events at the national level, where from May 1947 it became increasingly obvious that war would break out once more between the Republic and the Dutch. It was equally clear as tensions mounted that the only thing saving the Bali Agung from immediate removal by the Dutch was the fact that they had far larger operations on their minds. Those operations were launched late on the evening of 20th July 1947, a few hours before the first big military push of the so-called First Police Action, with a series of Dutch raids in Jakarta in which Bowrige and his senior colleagues as well as other Republican representatives were arrested and Republican buildings were destroyed. Jakarta was in Dutch hands.

Jakarta's experience of double government was a part of the shadow war fought between the Indonesian Republic and the Netherlands Indies during the first year of the Indonesian revolution. During this period, not only did neither side believe itself strong enough to impose its will on the other, but each was weak enough to recognize the possibility of its own extinction. Both made powerful efforts, therefore, to recruit the support, or at least to avert the hostility, of powerful third parties, most notably Great Britain whose responsibilities as a senior Ally had involved it in Indonesian affairs. Appealing to Britain, however, meant appealing on some basis other than claims of constitutional legality and political legitimacy; first law and order and later administrative competence were recruited as issues within which the two contestants could compete with each other on terrain where neither was likely to lose entirely, while at

the same time appealing to the international community on ostensibly non-ideological grounds. By the second half of 1946, however, both sides felt strong enough to meet at the negotiating table and ultimately to prepare for war. The contest for administrative pre-eminence in Jakarta gradually became irrelevant to the broader struggle.