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Nation: Making Indonesia

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INDONESIA BEYOND SUHARTO

Polity
Economy
Society
Transition

Donald K. Emmerson, Editor

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Chapter 1

Nation: Making Indonesia

Robert Cribb

A glance at a map might seem to be enough to suggest the improbability of Indonesia. With more than 13,000 islands, stretching west-to-east for more than 5,000 kilometers across three time zones, Indonesia is the world’s largest archipelagic state. One might expect to find in such a vast assemblage at least several countries. Instead there is but one, the Republic of Indonesia. This chapter tries to explain why.

Surprise at the survival of one Indonesia, on the other hand, lies in the eye of the map’s beholder. For the country’s first president, Sukarno, the unity of Indonesia was not anomalous; it was foreordained. He liked to say that by looking at a map even a child could see how natural the physical integrity of the Republic was. In accounting for the making of Indonesia, this chapter will emphasize the strength of this claim—the power of national unity as an idea.

In Indonesia, citizenship and ethnicity coexist. Most of the more than 200 million people who call themselves Indonesians also identify with one of their country’s more than 200 ethnic groups. These groups range in size from the Javanese, roughly 100 million strong, who live on the politically focal island of Java, to tiny, disappearing language communities on the islands of eastern Indonesia beyond Sulawesi (or Celebes). The intertwining with and separation of these local identities from the idea of a united Indonesia is a major part of the story of how the nation-state was made. It is appropriate, therefore, to begin with the ancient peopling of the archipelago.

The vast majority of today’s Indonesians are the descendants of Austronesian migrants to the islands, who began moving southward from what is now Taiwan about 5,500 years ago. They traveled in sturdy outrigger canoes, and their migration took them not only to the Philippines and the Indonesian archipelago, but
also out into the Pacific, where they became the ancestors of the modern Polynesians, and across the Indian Ocean to Madagascar, whose people are still predominantly Austronesian in ancestry.

The Austronesians were not conquerors. For the most part, they settled on empty islands and uninhabited coasts. Their impact was weakest, therefore, in those parts of the Indonesian archipelago where human settlement was already established. On the island of New Guinea and on neighboring islands to the west, such as Timor, Melanesian peoples had been living for millennia. Their ancestors probably had arrived in the region 50,000–60,000 years earlier and their ways of life had changed with the changing climate (see Maps 1 and 2).

Seventeen thousand years ago, during the last ice age, when sea levels were as much as 200 meters lower than they are today, what is now western Indonesia was a subcontinental plain probably covered with dry forest well suited to hunting societies. At that time the Melanesians probably were evenly spread over much of what would eventually become Indonesia. By the time the Austronesians arrived, however, sea levels had risen, creating an archipelago, and a wetter climate had allowed tropical rain forest to displace the existing dry forest, especially on the large western islands of Java, Sumatra, and Borneo. Rain forest was a less tractable environment for hunters, so the centers of Melanesian population shifted to the east. By about 7000 B.C., 1 a millennium or so prior to the Austronesians’ arrival, Melanesians in the highlands of New Guinea had begun to cultivate taro and other root crops, which allowed much greater population density than before. In terms of their ancestry, therefore, the peoples of the Indonesian archipelago form an uneven continuum from Austronesian predominance in the west to Melanesian preponderance in the east, with zones of transition between.

Today in Indonesia, people of predominately Austronesian origin still can be distinguished from their Melanesian co-citizens. Concentrated on the easternmost islands, the Melanesians have dark skin and curly hair, and their languages differ from those of the vastly more numerous, lighter-skinned, and straight-haired Indonesians of Austronesian descent. These differences, between Java and the western islands on the one hand and the islands of Timor and New Guinea on the other, have persisted as an element in the political conflicts that marked the recent histories of the provinces of Irian Jaya and East Timor (see Map 3).

Trade and Politics

The Austronesian communities appear to have been generally small, with chiefs or datu who drew their authority from the direct consent of the community as a whole, both men and women. There seems to have been no aristocracy; indi-

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1. “B.C.,” “A.D.,” and “the Christian era” are used in this chapter for convenience alone, without reference to the actual historical importance of Christianity.
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vidual leaders apparently rose and fell on the strength of their own skills and
prestige. Technological and cultural innovations such as metalworking spread
rapidly once they reached the Austronesian world, suggesting that these commu-
nities were in regular contact with each other, but there was no overarching
Austronesian polity.

Around A.D. 100 an extensive trade in spices and tropical forest products be-
gan to develop. Austronesian traders in large outrigger vessels carried tree prod-
ucts such as camphor, benzoin, pine resins (used in medicines, incense, and
perfumery), and gold to the ports of India and southern China to be exchanged
for cloth, porcelain, and metalwork. Cinnamon and other spices were taken di-
rectly across the Indian Ocean to the eastern coast of Africa and passed on through
Egypt to the markets of the Roman Empire.

In the wake of long-distance trade, larger political units arose. Trading wealth
overthrew the balance of power within the small Austronesian settlements. Datu
who could bring the new commerce under their authority soon became far more
wealthy and powerful than the other members of their communities. Trade cre-
ated a compelling incentive to form larger political units that could more closely
control the selling of products from a single region.

The Austronesian communities of the archipelago were in trading contact with
both India and China, but without exception they turned to India for political
models to deal with the new situation. Whereas Chinese political ideology of-
fered allegiance to a single emperor and a powerful administrative bureau-
cracy, Hindu-Buddhist cosmology afforded each ruler the status of a reincarnated
god and a strong but flexible hierarchy that fitted much more easily the dispersed
and fluid politics of the Austronesian world. Thus "datu" invited brahmins and other
Indian religious experts to help them establish courts and acquire the trappings
and rituals of Indian kingship.

Archaeological remains suggest the sudden appearance of a multitude of such
political units in western Indonesia during the first centuries of the Christian era.
Most of these polities counted for little, but two regions developed into signifi-
cant centers of power. First was the Melaka (also Malacca) Strait between Sumatra
and the Malay Peninsula (see Map 1). By the seventh century, the kingdom of
Srivijaya had become a trading outlet for the rich hinterland of southern Sumatra
and a major naval power controlling the strait and the surrounding waters. Tradi-
vessels seeking a port of call came, willingly or not, to the main port of
Srivijaya, close to the site of the modern city of Palembang (shown on Map 1).
Although Sanskrit was used in the Srivijaya court, the language of the kingdom
was Malay. One of Srivijaya’s most important legacies was the consolidation of
a broad Malay-speaking zone on both sides of the Melaka Strait.

The other power center to emerge at about this time was central Java, where a
series of kingdoms developed on the fertile rice-growing plain of Kedu. From
Sumatra to Maluku (the Moluccas), rice from Java fed port cities that had grown
beyond the agricultural resources of their hinterlands. The cultivation of rice in
wet paddy-fields (sawah) sustained the greatest concentration of population in the archipelago and allowed Javanese rulers to build Indonesia’s most spectacular ancient monuments. The Buddhist temple of Borobudur, erected and intricately carved over sixty years during the seventh and eighth centuries using more than a million blocks of volcanic rock, is both a masterpiece of Javanese art and a measure of the power of Javanese rulers to mobilize their subjects. In the tenth century the center of Javanese civilization moved to eastern Java, perhaps as a result of disease or volcanic catastrophe. But the island retained its preeminence in population and civilization, and Javanese became the most spoken language of maritime Southeast Asia.

Srivijaya on Sumatra and its rivals on Java were warlike states. They raided each other and attempted to establish spheres of influence beyond their Malay and Javanese heartlands. Javanese forces were even engaged briefly in Cambodia. None of these polities was able to conquer the rest; their political control outside the heartlands was always tenuous. Even within these kingdoms the authority of rulers was far from evenly felt. Hindu-Buddhist cosmology gave the monarch unassailable authority as the divine incarnation and representative of divinity, but political realities in the Indonesian world made his position much less eminent or secure. The authority of a ruler was, in practice, negotiated and renegotiated with powerful regional leaders. The position of rulers in Srivijaya rested on a carefully constructed balance between chieftains in the interior, merchants and officials in the capital, and the leaders of semi-piratical “people of the sea” (orang laut) who formed the core of the Srivijayan navy. A king on Java had to keep looking over his shoulder at regional warlords (bupati) who formed a potential nucleus for revolt.

The cultural authority of Srivijaya and the Javanese states, on the other hand, stretched well beyond their spheres of political influence. Sumatra and Java were twin pinnacles of political power and cultural achievement in an archipelago where power and refinement were highly valued. Many of the peoples of Southeast Asia became accustomed to looking beyond their immediate political horizons to such “exemplary centers,” as they have been called: glittering and attractive foci of power, wealth, and civilization. This respect for the cultural power of greater states transcended without canceling the individual claims of local rulers to divine status. In the archipelago, for example, god-kings could offer tribute from time to time to Chinese emperors without conceding the political subordi-

nation that Chinese authorities tried to read into such actions. Centuries later, in parallel fashion, Indonesian nationalists could admire the modernity of Japan or the West without being any less committed to their own country’s identity and independence.

The archipelago’s politics in premodern times were thus diverse but patterned. The islands sustained a multitude of local politics of widely varying size and character—some of them clearly states, some of them semi-autonomous tribunates, some of them no more than statelets, and some of them stateless societies such as the Batak of northern Sumatra. But there was at the same time a strong sense of a larger world, involving centers inside and outside the archipelago, centers whose key feature was not their military strength but their civilization—

their power to represent and deliver higher and more attractive levels of meaning and livelihood to the islands’ peoples.

Competing Exemplary Centers

Between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries this political order came under new strains. The volume and value of trade expanded, as clove, nutmeg, pepper, fragrant aloeswood and sandalwood, bezoar stones, and trepang joined the older staples of camphor and benzoin in the marketplace.1 More and more of the archipelago was drawn in one way or another into the global economy, including the previously isolated east that now gained fame as the Spice Islands. New cities arose, especially in northern Sumatra and along the north coast of Java, and increasing numbers of foreign traders came to visit them. It was a time of economic and cultural quickening when merchant aristocracies, often known simply as orang kaya, or “rich people,” became increasingly influential in urban politics.

By the thirteenth century a new religion, Islam, had taken firm root in the archipelago, having come in over the trade routes. Merchants were particularly receptive to Islam, with its straightforward message of human equality before God and its usefully explicit rules regarding commerce. One can imagine such itinerant converts feeling uncomfortable with the conventions of Hindu-Buddhist royal absolutism and attracted by a faith whose Allah stayed with them wherever they went, unlike the local gods and spirits of older beliefs.

Traders of Indonesian origin had once dominated commerce in the archipelago. Now, however, Chinese, Japanese, Arabs, and Indians, among other nationalities, became more prominent. For the first time, too, powers outside Southeast Asia began to take a sustained political interest in the region. Before 1400 the archipelago

1. Watson Andaya, “Political De- se,” in Nicholas Tarling, ed., The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Indonesia,” Far Eastern Quarterly 9 (1980), pp. 11–19; and Robert E. Wright, 3. Highly valued at the time as an antidote to poison, bezoar stones are formed by the accretion of a kind of tannin around a nucleus of wood or bark in the stomach of an animal such as monkey. Trepang are worm-like sea creatures related to starfish; boiled, dried, and smoked, they were prized, especially by the Chinese, as an ingredient in soup.
had been attacked by such forces only twice: In the eleventh century men from the Chola Kingdom in southern India ventured across the Bay of Bengal to raid Srivijaya. Late in the thirteenth century the Mongols dispatched an army to Java to assert their right to exact tribute from the eastern Javanese kingdom of Singosari—a right the Mongols believed they had acquired from the Chinese.

The Chola attack sent Srivijaya into an abrupt decline. Srivijaya’s economic role and cultural standing were taken up first by neighboring Jambi and, in the fifteenth century, by Melaka (or Malacca), on the peninsular coast of the strait of the same name. Melaka’s authority as an exemplary center survived its ruler’s conversion to Islam and the Melaka sultanate came to define much of the high culture of Indonesian Islam. The Mongol raid achieved little more than a dynastic succession from Singosari to the kingdom of Majapahit. But Majapahit would come to be regarded as the greatest of the early Javanese states.

Beginning early in the fifteenth century the archipelago’s political entities were more subject to intrusion from the outside world. In 1405 the Chinese emperor sent the first of seven naval expeditions into maritime Southeast Asia and beyond in an effort to affirm Chinese hegemony over this increasingly wealthy region. The Chinese expeditions ceased after 1433, but Chinese traders remained.

In 1511 the Portuguese captured Melaka, Srivijaya’s successor, adding to the Southeast Asian political mix a new European element that would in time become decisive for Indonesia. An intermittent and protracted European conquest of the archipelago ensued. The process would be completed only in the early twentieth century, but its most consequential events took place early on. The fall of Melaka in particular dealt a crucial blow to the Melaka Strait as an exemplary center of political-cum-cultural authority. Melaka declined rapidly under Portuguese rule, but the Portuguese were strong enough to prevent any indigenous rivalry from donning the mantle of Srivijaya. The northern Sumatran state of Aceh (pronounced “Aceh”) and the remnants of the Melaka royal court in Johor (in present-day Malaysia) became significant local powers, but neither ever approached the standing of Melaka in its pre-Portuguese heyday.

In 1610, a century following the Portuguese seizure of Melaka, the Dutch established a permanent presence in the archipelago by opening a trading post on the northwestern coast of Java. That outpost, Batavia, would eventually become the capital of the Netherlands Indies. Still later the city would be renamed Jakarta and declared the capital of the Republic of Indonesia (see Map 1).

In the course of the seventeenth century the political authority of Java as an exemplary center was destroyed. The dominant power on Java when the Dutch arrived was the recently emerged Muslim kingdom of Mataram, based in the center of the island. Mataram, however, quickly came into conflict with the Dutch traders’ agency, the United East Indies Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or VOC). Deftly using military force and diplomatic maneuver, the Dutch were able by mid-century to reduce Mataram to client status. Mataram survived for another century until it was partitioned at Dutch hands in 1755, but
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its ability to provide a model for the rest of the archipelago was gone. Nor did the
Dutch allow a new indigenous polity to emerge. Their control of the sea gave
them sway over trade and the main sources of revenue for state-building.

Batavia became a major metropolis, a center of trade and administration, and
the Dutch were able to establish enough hegemony over the archipelago to keep
their European rivals out. (The Portuguese colony on the eastern half of the small
island of Timor was an exception.) But the dour, practical merchants of the VOC
had no interest in turning Batavia into an exemplary center of cultural display or
in using their own business to spread European learning and civilization. For the
part, in fact, the VOC was indifferent if not hostile to proposals to spread
Western learning, language, and religion among its subjects.

Initially, therefore, the West as a new exemplary center held relatively little
appeal for the peoples of the archipelago. One of the few indigenous leaders to
see Western civilization in a clearly positive light was Karaeng Pattimulang,
chief minister of the southern Sulawesi state of Gowa from 1639 to 1654. He
learned five European languages, collected European books, maps, and globes,
and had European works on gunnery translated into the local language to im-
prove his army’s skills.

Pattimulang’s interest in the West was doubly unusual as he was a Muslim.
For most leaders in the islands at the time, Islam offered a more attractive ex-
emplary center than did the West. The Ottoman Empire was at the height of its
powers, and direct trading communication between the archipelago and the Ar-
abian peninsula had become an important conduit for Muslim traders and mis-
sionaries who actively proselytized on behalf of their religion. The late sixteenth
century had been a golden age of Islamic learning in Southeast Asia, with Mecca,
Cairo, and Istanbul the most important external points of reference. Neither the
Portuguese nor the Dutch could compete with Islam for broad cultural appeal.

Growing Dutch Dominance

Colonial historians writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended
to treat the arrival of Europeans as the start of a new era in Southeast Asian
history. Mid-to-late twentieth-century scholars have reacted against such
Eurocentrism” by pointing out the relative insignificance of the European pre-
ence before the nineteenth century and the concomitant “autonomy” of indig-
enous societies.4 As noted above, the conquest of the archipelago was gradual.

4. An influential example of “Eurocentrism” was Bernard H.M. Vlekke, Nusantra: A
History of the East Indian Archipelago (London: Benn, 1977). Arguments for “Indonesia-
centric” approaches were made, for example, by John R.W. Smail, “On the Possibility of
an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia,” Journal of Southeast Asian History,
2:2 (1961), pp. 72–102; and J.C. van Leur, “A History of the Netherlands East Indies:
Three Reviews,” in Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic
Many regions experienced colonial rule for no more than a few decades. The early loss of Melaka and Java did, however, remove from maritime Southeast Asia not just its most powerful states but its foci of political and cultural authority. No such magnetic centers would be restored within the archipelago until the rise of the idea of Indonesia in the early twentieth century.

The slow expansion of Dutch colonial rule over the Indonesian archipelago was driven by a changing tangle of motives and imperatives. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the Dutch were mainly interested in the spice trade to Europe. Their territorial conquests accordingly were confined to the areas of spice production and a few strategically located fortresses. As the century progressed, however, trade between Asian ports grew into an increasingly important source of Dutch income, and the VOC's ability to enforce a monopoly over commerce between specific ports, and in particular commodities, became the basis of its profits. Later still, the Dutch gradually shifted their economic presence inland as they involved themselves in growing high-volume plantation crops such as sugar and coffee, and much later tobacco, tea, rubber and palm oil, for processing, sale, and resale in markets around the world. In the twentieth century, petroleum, too, became an important export.

Pieced together over three centuries, the administrative structure of the Netherlands Indies was a baroque monument to complexity in which successive attempts at reform never entirely succeeded in removing the vestiges of earlier structures. At the core of the Indies administration stood a relatively straightforward administrative hierarchy headed by a governor general and a Council of the Indies and staffed by a few hundred European men appointed for their general administrative skills. In each region of the colony this European hierarchy interacted variously with one or more indigenous political institutions. In many places, especially outside Java, the local polities thus enmeshed were so-called native states—once independent entities that, by treaty or conquest, had fallen under Dutch control.

In managing the affairs of their own subjects, the rulers of most of these states enjoyed a fairly high degree of autonomy, so long as they did not attract the attention of the colonial authorities by hindering European economic interests, railing with foreign powers, or unduly afflicting their own people. Elsewhere, in what were called regions of 'direct' rule, the Dutch used local hierarchies of officials drawn whenever possible from indigenous aristocracies. On Java these officials were the bupati, the former regional lords of Mataram; their counterparts on other islands were known by a variety of titles. These officials were somewhat more closely supervised than their counterparts in the native states, but they were allowed and even encouraged to use the rituals and regalia of traditional royalty to secure the loyalty and obedience of their subjects.

The authority of these quasi-traditional rulers extended only over indigenous peoples. Europeans, wherever they traveled in the archipelago, came under the direct authority of the central administration. Other Asians, mainly Chinese, were admirant (lieten) commensurate with their status in the Dutch colonial empire. On this subject the Dutch attempted to the Java, strategic Comp part of Butavally I called their nineteenth century workers.

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extending only over indigenous archipelago, came under the rule of Asian, mainly Chinese, were administered separately again: The colonial government appointed locally prominent Chinese as civilian officials with military titles such as major, kapitan, and luitenants and gave them responsibility for administering the affairs of their own communities. Still different regulations governed the position of Christian Indonesians.

The VOC formula for profit was simple: Buy cheap and sell dear. In applying this strategy to Maluku the Company tightly monopolized the production of spices, to the extent of launching raids to destroy spice trees not under VOC control. On Java, where most of the coffee and sugar plantations came to be established, the strategy involved forcing peasants to tend and harvest crops on behalf of the Company for little or no remuneration. Although slaves provided an important part of the labor force in the seventeenth century, especially in the vicinity of Batavia, the VOC for the most part preferred to place legal obligations on nominally free peasants. During the first half of the nineteenth century, under the so-called Cultivation System, communal tax obligations tied Javanese peasants to their villages and set them to work for the colonial government. In the late nineteenth century in Sumatra, a system of "penal sanctions" enabled private plantation owners to use criminal law to enforce employment contracts with plantation workers.

On the other hand, from about the middle of the eighteenth century, liberal ideas of labor management began to exercise some influence in colonial policy. Especially after the VOC collapsed into bankruptcy at the end of the century and the colony was taken over by the Dutch government, the colonial administration tried to build an element of incentive into its production strategies by allowing peasants and laborers to profit from working on colonial projects. Whether these measures were of any real consequence to either peasants or wage laborers has been a matter of scholarly debate. Controversial, too, is the thesis of "agricultural involution" advanced by Clifford Geertz that the Cultivation System led to the lasting impoverishment of the Javanese peasantry by locking its members into increasingly elaborate value-sharing structures that made economic development based on value-accumulation virtually impossible.

What is not controversial is that in the nineteenth century the living standards


of a great many indigenous people in the Indies declined. As population density grew and employment opportunities failed to keep pace, famine became more and more common, especially on Java. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the evidence of declining welfare was compelling enough to prompt the Dutch to announce a new “ethical” approach to colonial policy. Palliative measures such as improved health care at the village level were introduced, along with longer-term programs to raise agricultural production and even to encourage industrial development.

These programs had only a limited material impact. They took time to plan and they cost money. They were largely abandoned at the start of the Great Depression of the 1930s, which badly damaged the Dutch economy. But the “Ethical Policy,” as it was called, was significant as the first concerted effort by a European government to address what would later be described as the underdevelopment of the Third World. The policy also illustrated a developmentalist or welfare-promoting conception of modernity for Indonesia that would later attract some nationalist leaders.

The Dutch faced resistance to their rule from time to time in virtually every part of their colonial empire. Sometimes this resistance was aimed at remedying specific grievances or reversing unwanted colonial actions. Local elites fought to recover power lost to the Dutch; peasants fought to be relieved of harsh overseers or unreasonable regulations. Much of such opposition, however, took place within the broad and related ideological frameworks of Islam and messianism. The most tenacious rejections of Dutch rule, in areas such as Banjarmasin in southern Borneo and in Aceh, were led by Muslims unwilling to submit to an infidel state. The most destructive uprising occurred in the Java War of 1825–30 in which at least 200,000 people died. The Javanese insurgents were led by a charismatic Muslim prince, Diponegoro. His followers believed he had been commanded by Allah to conquer the island and create a new Javanese empire.

The effectiveness of Islamic and messianic movements was limited by the difficulties they faced in projecting themselves and their beliefs as plausible alternatives to Western power and culture. In the nineteenth century Islam was at a low ebb in world affairs. The Ottoman Empire was in terminal decline. Muslim societies throughout the world faced defeat and domination at the hands of the Christian West. Muslims might well decide that life under Christian rule was intolerable, but nowhere could an Islamic society point to itself as a shining example of civilized achievement.

Galvanized by precisely this issue, Islamic reformers tried to purify their religion: to rid Islam of what they saw as medieval accretions in order to make it again a basis for greatness. Reformism became a major intellectual and political force in the Muslim world in the nineteenth century. But the reformers’ agenda was by no means dominant; other Muslims contested their diagnosis and their proposed treatment. As for messianism, Diponegoro’s project and the many much smaller-scale instances of millenarian resistance that peppered the nineteenth
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and early twentieth centuries on Java simply did not acknowledge, and thus could
not learn from, the technological advantages of the West or the social changes
that colonialism had already wrought in the archipelago.

Modernity and the Idea of Indonesia

The technological prowess and cultural and intellectual virtuosity of the West
attracted admirers and imitators in nineteenth-century Asia. In the still independ-
ent states of the mainland, a string of capable reformers arose with plans to
transform their societies according to a Western model. In Southeast Asia, the
reformism of the Siamese kings Mongkut (r. 1851–68) and Chulalongkorn (r.
1868–1910) most strikingly illustrated this vision of modernity.

In the Indonesian archipelago the impulse to copy if not catch up with the
exemplary West was felt weakly and late, for two main reasons. First, acceler-
ated modernization relied on a strong, autonomous, and well-funded state. Many
of the modernizing movements on the mainland foundered because they could
summon neither the political authority nor the finances to implement their vi-
sions. In the archipelago there were no independent states with the wherewithal
for serious reform.

Second, in the nineteenth century the Netherlands Indies was something of an
international backwater. The hub of the trade in goods moving through Southeast
Asia was not Batavia but British-held Singapore. Holland was no longer a great
power, militarily, economically, or culturally. Language barriers and the reluc-
tance of the Dutch to spread Western education severely limited their subjects’
access to the world of European ideas.

Only in the late nineteenth century did this situation begin to undergo signif-
icate change. The growing complexity of administration required the Dutch au-
thorities to recruit increasing numbers of indigenous people into the middle levels
of the colonial civil service, and that meant educating a small pool of young
Indonesians from whom such officials could be recruited. At the same time the
colonial administration began to hear the siren call of a mission civilisatrice. An
important part of the ideology of late European imperialism, this was the idea
that Europeans had a duty to impart to those whom they ruled the supposed
blessings of Western civilization. The resulting expansion of European-language
education opened a hole in the colonial edifice through which Western ideas
could be transmitted to and diffused among large numbers of people in the archi-
pelago. These changes made the first two decades of the twentieth century an
intellectually lively time of learning and questioning in the archipelago.

Central to this ferment was the question: How could the Indies become mod-
ern? Those who answered were distributed across a wide spectrum of opinion.
Some accepted the notion of a Dutch civilizing mission and envisaged a kind of
apprenticeship in which the people of the Indies would gradually become more
responsible for their own affairs as they mastered Western civilization one step at
a time. Others took inspiration from Marxism with its promise of liberation for oppressed peoples in the name of an eventual socialist order that would be even more modern and progressive than the existing capitalist one. In the eyes of still others the best chance for modernity lay in Islamic reform: reanchoring the great Muslim majority in the basic, eternal, and thus necessarily ever-up-to-date values of the Qur'an (or Koran).

Increasingly among the indigenous population, this diversity of views and projects was tempered by agreement, first, that ending colonial rule was the most important step the Indies could take to become more modern. Second, that the transition to modernity should nevertheless occur inside, and thus acknowledge, the territorial frame that colonialism itself had created.

The first two decades of the twentieth century saw the breakup, temporarily or permanently, of the Austrian, Ottoman, Russian, and Chinese empires. Against this Eurasian backdrop of nationalism and revolution, the national movement in the Indies became committed to the idea of independence for an Indonesian nation-state encompassing the entire territory of the Netherlands Indies and all of its indigenous ethnic groups. This outcome was not foreordained. It was one thing to break the Netherlands Indies into its unequal components—the small Netherlands and the huge Indies. But why stop there? Why not finish the anticolonial project by dismantling the Indies itself in the name of smaller, regional nationalisms?

But if the pan-archipelagic colonial state was a problem for Indonesian nationalists, it presented a far greater opportunity as well. In the Indies the early twentieth century was a time of socioeconomic management. Colonial authorities made unprecedented intrusions into the daily lives of ordinary people. In the space of a few decades the rather backward colonial state of the nineteenth century was transformed into a touted model of supposedly scientific colonialism, exemplified most notably by the development programs of the Ethical Policy. As already explained, the Great Depression undercut the policy’s ambition, but not before it had become clear that the twentieth-century Indies state could deliver modernity to its subjects—in principle, to all of them—if only it had the will and wherewithal to do so.

The increasing numbers of Indonesians who worked within that state grew confident not only that they could manage it as well as the Dutch had in a technical sense, but that they could supply the missing political will. As for wherewithal, the Indonesians grew convinced as well of their ability to exploit the islands’ abundant natural resources for the good of the entire indigenous population of the Indies—a frame therefore worth retaining. Thus was the Dutch-made, archipelago-wide apparatus of government reconceived as a means of lifting all Indonesians toward better and more meaningful lives. And thus did the idea of Indonesia begin to acquire the connotations of an exemplary center in the legacy if not the image of Melaka and Majapahit.

The framework of the Indies was also attractive because the Dutch had delib-
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early sought to exclude Indonesians from it. During the decades when Western
education was at last opening up the modern world to Indonesians, the colonial
authorities were refining a system of racial-legal classification in the colony
intended to limit indigenous participation in the facilities of modernity. The ear-
ier distinctions between Europeans, non-indigenous Asians (mainly Chinese),
and the indigenous subjects of local rulers were eventually systematized into a
classification of all residents of the Indies as Europeans, “foreign orientals” (mainly
Chinese), or “natives.” To each of these groups the authorities assigned distinc-
tive legal rights and responsibilities.

There were anomalies and loopholes: For example, the growing power of
Meiji Japan persuaded the Dutch to grant to Japanese residents of the Indies a
status equivalent to that of the Europeans. A Chinese or even a “native” who met
certain criteria for being European—Western language and dress, monogamous
marriage, and the like—could acquire equivalent-to-European status for a small
fee. The laws also gave some protection to the indigenous population, notably by
banning the purchase of land by non-indigenes.

But the system implemented discrimination: “Natives” received lower sala-
ries within the colonial administration, could expect unequal treatment by the
police, and faced restricted access to public facilities ranging from schools to
swimming pools. The system’s codifications were a standing affront to modern
Indonesians who correctly saw that racial discrimination could not be ended
unless colonialism itself were done away with.

Another reason why the archipelago-wide idea of Indonesia could stand for
the promise of modernity was that Dutch colonial policies had largely disabled
less inclusive alternatives based on regional ethnic identities. The Dutch had
preserved the rulers of native states and employed the bupati in part because they
believed that the traditional authority of these elites would make colonial domi-
nation less obstructive and more palatable. In this context the main indigenous
ruling elites in the archipelago did best by not being modern. In Java especially,
the coopted aristocracy sponsored an elaboration of traditional culture and phi-
losophy that emphasized the refinement of esoteric, sometimes mystical, skills
rather than mastery of the material world through science, technology, and mod-
ern administration.

Its close association with modernity gave the idea of Indonesia a special rela-
tionship with the many ethnic identities across the archipelago. The national idea
was not a composite projection of advanced versions of each regional culture;
the name “Indonesia” labeled the potential that all Indonesians had to become
modern. At the same time, being Indonesian did not mean ceasing to be Javanese
or Acehnese or Manadonese; it meant augmenting one’s ethnic self with partici-
pation in the modern world. The nearest analogy is perhaps the self-confidence
with which the United States took on for itself an identity as exemplar of moder-
nity, admitting people from many ethnicities and allowing them to acculturate at
their own pace, confident in the eventual solvent power of the American nation
running "from sea to shining sea"—or, in the Indonesian phrase, "from Sabang to Merauke.""

The national movement in Indonesia, therefore, was two things at once: a movement of individuals who saw themselves and their future as trans-ethnically Indonesian, and a coalition of ethnic or regional groups prepared to fit into the national frame. Some of the largest mass organizations of the first half of the twentieth century were explicitly ethnoregional, but did not advocate secession. In West Java, for example, the Sundanese Association (Paguyuban Pasundan) aimed to revitalize Sundanese culture and restore prosperity to the Sundanese people. Yet it never confronted the national movement with demands for a political future separate from the rest of Indonesia.

Unity as Necessity

For the national movement, the idea of unity quickly acquired crucial symbolic value. It meant, first of all, that none of the indigenous ethnic groups of the archipelago was to be excluded from the idea of Indonesia in the way that the Dutch had kept "natives" from participating fully in the Netherlands Indies. Unity was also appealing because the national movement saw that its main strength lay in numbers. Having come to realize that Holland was a relatively minor power in world affairs, Indonesians had to explain a conundrum: How could such a small country have come to dominate so vast an archipelago? Part of the solution was to attribute to the Dutch a strategy of "divide and rule," and from this it followed that unity must be a top priority of the national movement to end colonialism.

The emphasis on unity had major consequences for the ideology of the national movement. The need to rally disparate identities made it difficult for nationalist leaders to make any pronouncement on specifics—just what sort of modernity an independent Indonesia ought to have. The constituents of the Indonesian state-to-be were diverse not only ethnically but also religiously. Some 90 percent of Indonesians were Muslim, but there were strong Christian communities among, for example, the Batak regions of Sumatra in the archipelago's far west. Just east of Java, the Balinese were almost all Hindu. Farther east, Christians in substantial number could be found among the Ambonese, Minahasans, Timorese, and Florences (see Maps 2 and 4).

Even Indonesians who considered themselves Muslim displayed enormous variation in religious practice. Many Javanese, for instance, followed an Islam that had incorporated Hindu-Buddhist and other pre-Islamic beliefs, while Muslims in some other regions prided themselves on following an orthodoxy associ-
Indonesian phrase, “from Sabang to Deli,” was two things at once: a description of their future as trans-ethnically diverse groups prepared to fit into the muzakirat (meetings) of the first half of the 20th century, but did not advocate secession. The former Pasundan society (PAGuyuban Pasundan) stood in the way of the Sundaese, who had a long tradition of demands for political representation with demands for a politically-recognized state.

Quickly acquired crucial symbolic indigenous ethnic groups of the archipelago, for the national movement in the way that the Dutch saw it. The main strength lay in the fact that it was an ethnic group with a relatively minor power in central Java. How could such a smallipelago? Part of the solution was the rule, and from this it followed that the movement to end colonialism was a natural one.

National identities made it difficult for nation-specific identities to coexist. The constituents of the national identity were strong Christian communities on Sumatra, and Muslim communities to the east, Chris-tian and Muslim communities, Minahasa, and Aceh.

Aceh and Merauke in southeastern New Guinea (now Irian Jaya). According to the Middle East. A national movement aiming to exclude all of these communities, therefore, could not take Islam as its substantive guiding principle.

Just as important, class issues in different regions varied greatly. The polarized plantation society of northern Sumatra had little in common with the communities of independent smallholders in southern Sumatra. The accomplished Minangkabau traders of western Sumatra shared little of the worldview of Javanese peasants. With their high levels of out-migration, economic backwaters such as Ambon and Timor were unlike the social environment in East Kalimantan, where a developing oil industry attracted growing numbers of immigrants. A broadly Marxist analysis of class contradictions could make powerful sense in parts of Java yet hold little appeal for Indonesians in more entrepreneurial regions.

Any section of the national movement that pressed a too-specific understanding of Indonesia’s national identity and modern future faced the risk of splitting the anticolonial coalition and endangering its numerical advantage over the Dutch. In 1920–21 the hazards of division were brought home to many of the movement’s leaders by a bitter falling out between Marxists and Muslims inside one of the leading national organizations, the Islamic Association (Sarekat Islam). There was also a danger that excluding any portion of the archipelago from the national movement might drive that part to declare its own independence or negotiate a separate autonomy based on cooperation with the Dutch.

The seriousness of this risk should not be underestimated. Neither the relative ethnic homogeneity of their populations nor their traditions of political unity could save China and Vietnam from being partitioned in the mid-twentieth century. Great-power rivalry abetted these civil wars, to be sure, internal differences played major contributing roles: in both cases national unity fell victim to the alienation of certain social elements by the radicalism of a key section of the national movement. In retrospect, in the Indies, appealing to unity as an anticolonial goal without specifying the kind of postcolonial society that would be used to achieve it was a way of trying to avoid such an outcome.

Accordingly, the central principles of the Indonesian national movement, when they were finally defined at a national youth congress in 1928, were simple: one country, one people, one language. Ideological or cultural conformity to a particular vision of Indonesia was not required. Nor, in 1928, was the “one language” concept, Indonesian, associated with the ambitions of any particular ethnic group. Bahasa Indonesia, the Indonesian language, had evolved from the Malay language of the Melaka Strait region. But the latter language had been expanded into a lingua franca for trade across the archipelago and then used and popularized by the Dutch as the Indies’ main indigenous language. No longer the property of a single ethnicity or region, bahasa Indonesia became a widespread, practical, neutral, and therefore unifying medium.

Because of the need for unity, preeminence in the national movement went to those personalities who could articulate a message that included all and antagonized none. The most important of these figures was Sukarno. Trained as an
engineer in the city of Bandung south of Batavia, captivated by the wealth of ideas that Western learning opened to him, Sukarno distinguished himself from his peers in the national movement by excelling as an orator and an ideologist. Characteristically, in his most important early essay, *Nationalisme, Islamisme dan Marxisme*, first published in 1926, he emphasized not how these three philosophical systems differed but what they had in common. His purpose was to blend nationalism, Islam, and Marxism into a single though multi-stranded national ideology for modern Indonesia. The eclecticism thus envisaged by Sukarno would subsume ideological, cultural, and religious divisions under a sole rubric: Indonesia, united and free.

But it was easier to imagine Indonesian freedom than achieve it. In the 1920s and 1930s the nationalists tried in various ways to unseat the Dutch. Nothing worked. Sarekat Islam tried popular confrontation, even sharpening it with some small-scale terrorism, but was easily checked by the authorities. The Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, or PKI) tried armed revolution in 1926–27, but was quickly suppressed. Sukarno advocated mass mobilization and withholding cooperation from the Dutch, but he was soon arrested and condemned to internal exile. So were two of his nationalist colleagues, Mohammad Hatta and Sutan Sjahrir, who had sought to begin the long-term task of constructing a revolutionary cadre party. More moderate nationalists could become members of the People’s Council, or Volksraad, a semirepresentative parliament with limited powers that the Dutch had established in 1916. But this was a more or less coopted venue. In the 1920s, and through most of the 1930s, Indonesian nationalists had few good options.

Global conditions, however, had begun to favor the nationalist project. By the 1930s the tide of world affairs had begun to turn against colonialism. The Americans had promised independence to the Philippines, while the British policy of devolving power to elected Indian representatives in their Indian colony pointed clearly toward future self-rule.

Indonesia’s passage to independence was more turbulent. By 1941 there were at last signs that the Dutch were beginning to take seriously the Indonesian thirst for freedom. But by then the Netherlands had fallen under German occupation. The Dutch had no political will to do more than promise a serious look at reform some time in the future. Early in 1942, anxious to secure oil supplies from Sumatra and Borneo for their war effort elsewhere in Asia, Japanese forces seized the Indies.

The occupation shattered the power and authority of the Dutch in the archipelago. Once Japanese military preeminence was clear, the colonial administration...
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rion decided not to take a stand. Merely ten days elapsed between the landing of

Japanese forces on Java and the surrender of the Dutch. The decision may have

been wise from a humanitarian point of view, but it made the Dutch appear to

have abandoned their colony to Asian invaders with virtually no resistance. Dur-

ing the occupation, moreover, the Japanese treated the Europeans with contempt.

Heeded into detention camps, the Dutch suffered arduous and demeaning condi-

The comfortable assumptions of European superiority and dominance that

had prevailed before the war could never be restored.

The ruination of their myth of prowess did not stop the Dutch from attempting

to reestablish authority over the islands in the wake of Japan’s defeat in 1945.

But the manner and timing of that defeat opened a unique chance for Indonesia’s

nationalists to thwart recolonization. The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima

and Nagasaki led the Japanese to surrender on 15 August 1945 while their forces

were still in control of much of the archipelago. Some weeks elapsed before the

Dutch and the other Allies against Japan were in a position to bring more than

token military forces to recoup the islands. The Indonesian nationalist leaders

Sukarno and Hatta used this window of opportunity to proclaim their country’s

independence in Jakarta (formerly Batavia) on 17 August. A day later the two

men were named president and vice president, respectively, of the newly formed

government of the Republic of Indonesia.

In a remarkable display of political agility, Sukarno would manage to keep his

presidency intact through the turbulent early decades of independence. For twenty-

three years, until General Suharto fully replaced him in 1968, Sukarno remained,

at least in name, president of: (a) the original, unitary Republic (1945–49); (b) its

ill-fated federal successor state (1949–50); (c) the original state revived, but with a

different constitution (1950–59); and (d) the fully restored original Republic

(1959–68) that Indonesia still is today.

This future could hardly be foreseen by Indonesian nationalists in late Au-

 gust 1945. But they knew they were living in a time of change and opportu-

nity. Sukarno’s first government faced a political climate that had been

transformed by these and a half years of Japanese occupation. The Dutch au-

thorities had prized peace and order in the colony. But the Japanese had taken

a more dynamic view, seeking to engage their new subjects in the war effort

by involving them in a series of mass organizations. Indonesians had been

encouraged to believe that they were an integral part of a movement of Asian

peoples fighting for liberation from Western imperialism. For the first time

since the imposition of colonial rule in the Indies, a government had publicly

courted its subjects, showered them with slogans, and galvanized them to po-

itical ends. Those ends were driven by Japan’s wartime needs, not by an In-

donesian desire for freedom. Nevertheless, especially among younger

Indonesian nationalists, heady political mobilization fired by accumulated

grievances against colonialism created a mighty conviction that Indonesians

had not only the right but also the power to make their own future.
Meanwhile the potential for disunity and conflict within nationalist ranks had risen precipitously. The movement before 1945 had been a coalition of ethnic and ideological groups whose leaders had read into the idea of Indonesia differing conceptions of modernity. As argued above, to preserve unity during the struggle for freedom, the hard task of reconciling these diverse views had been kept in the background as much as possible. But now that independence had been declared, decisions on basic political structures and basic government policy had to be taken—at a time when the number of voices demanding a say in such decisions had never been greater.

Three Meanings of Modernity

Inside the anticolonial movement, nationalists of diverse ethnoregional and ideological stripes had coalesced around two convictions: that an Indonesian national state could deliver modernity, and that Dutch rule blocked this aspiration. The resulting coalition spanned over a dozen major ethnic identities and, broadly speaking, three main outlooks: Marxist, Muslim, and developmentalist. Marxist nationalists argued that modernity and prosperity would come to Indonesians only if the economic system were radically overhauled. In particular, Indonesia’s subordination to the global economy had to be overturned. Foreign-owned enterprises, which had been the source of such wealth to the West, had to be seized by and for the Indonesian people.

What mattered for Muslim nationalists was that fundamental aspects of the relationships of individuals with Allah, and with each other under Allah, be correctly understood and carried out. Only by deepening its Islamic character could Indonesian society bolster political with moral independence from the West. Because an Islamic modernity presupposed the operation of Islamic laws, the launching of an independent state created an opportunity for Muslim leaders to demand the official enforcement of religious duties for the vast majority of Indonesians who were already Muslim in name—and could now become fully Muslim in practice as well.

Adherents of the third ideology in the nationalist coalition may be described as developmentalists. They largely accepted the conception of modernity embodied in the Ethical Policy that the Dutch had pursued. From this standpoint the priority lay in expanding and improving education, infrastructure, and investment so that Indonesians could reduce, as quickly as and as far as possible, the gap between their living standards and those of the West. The colonial state would be renamed Indonesia, staffed by Indonesians, and redeployed on behalf of Indonesian betterment, but the developmentalists saw no need substantially to change its basic structures.

After independence had been proclaimed in 1945, two factors worked to preserve the modi vivendi among these three constructions of modernity. First, Sukarno continued his efforts to compress and bind Marxism, Islam, and development before the Pancasila National ideology became official.

A second conclusion was that Indonesia could not become a modern nation state, as the Dutch had left in 1945, without a clear idea of what it would become. In the mid-1950s, the new constitution established (on Benteng and Dutch model) a sphere for the appointment of ministers and for representation of the assembly.

These periods found that Indonesia pronounced the fact that development gave a character develop and make it prepare with giving to Muslims archipelago embrace of class.

The Indonesian strongly documented controversy those in therefore constitutions to comply.

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ifficult within nationalist ranks had been a coalition of ethnic diversity blocked this aspiration. The coherent national character could only be overthrown. Foreign-controlled wealth to the West, had to that fundamental aspects of the a sult's independence was in the process of Islamic character could independence from the West. The application of Islamic laws, the potential for Muslim leaders to govern now became fully Muslim-must coalition may be described as a conception of modernity emerging. From this standpoint the development of infrastructure, and investment, as far as possible, the gap was. The colonial state would be deployed on behalf of Indonesia need substantially to change. In 1945, two factors worked to preclude modernization. First, Marxism, Islam, and developmentism into an intellectual whole. In a speech delivered shortly before he declared Indonesia's independence, Sukarno outlined what he called the Pancasila, or Five Principles. These generally are summarized as: Belief in God, Nationalism, Humanitarianism, Democracy, and Social Justice. Because all Indonesians subscribed to its elements, asserted Sukarno, Pancasila could and should become a common doctrine underlying and unifying the new nation-state.

A second and more important factor working to dampen or postpone ideological conflict was the rapid realization that declaring independence on paper was one thing, winning it quite another. The Dutch immediately made clear their intention to reestablish their presence on the islands. When Allied troops landed in the eastern Javanese port city of Surabaya in November 1945, they created a potential foothold for the Dutch return. Heavy fighting broke out between British-Indian and Indonesian nationalist forces. Obliged to retreat into the countryside, the Indonesians began a guerrilla war. (The Battle of Surabaya is still celebrated in Indonesia as Heroes' Day.) By early 1946 Allied troops were firmly established in the seven main cities of Java and Sumatra, while most of Kalimantan (on Borneo), Sulawesi, and the islands of eastern Indonesia were fully restored to Dutch rule.

These events temporarily sustained the need to downplay ideological differences for the sake of the common struggle for national freedom. Nevertheless, pronouncing Indonesia independent had abruptly highlighted the uncomfortable fact that the new country could not be simultaneously Marxist, Islamic, and developmentalist—except perhaps in the mind of Sukarno. Marxism and Islam gave contradictory answers to the basic question of God's existence. If the developmentists hoped Western capitalists would invest in Indonesia to help make it modern, Marxists opposed capitalism and championed socialism. Compared with the developmentists, Muslim nationalists were less complacent about giving infidel foreigners a stake in the economy. Unlike the secular Marxists, Muslims were more religiously oriented, grounding the economic structure of the archipelago's racially Chinese minority, almost none of whose members had embraced the majority faith of their adopted country. Divergent understandings of class and the need for class struggle further divided the three groups.

The ideological crisis was immediate. It emerged in 1945 during the drafting of Indonesia's new constitution, even before independence was announced, when strongly Muslim leaders sought to create a special place for Islam in the new document. An outright proclamation of Indonesia as an Islamic state was too controversial to be realistic. The Christian minorities would have objected and those in eastern Indonesia might have been tempted to secede. Muslim leaders therefore fell back on what they considered a more feasible request. Let the constitution merely affirm, they argued, that Indonesia's Muslims were obliged to comply with Islamic law.

After an emotional debate in the committee charged with drafting the new charter, this seemingly reasonable request was rejected. For even the reduced
language—a mere seven words—implied that the full power of the state could be used to enforce orthodoxy for all Muslims, including those, especially numerous on Java, whose beliefs and practices could be said to ignore, if not violate, Qur’anic law.

Demographically, Muslims were a huge majority in the new country. But politically, Islamists were a minority both within that majority and among the new state’s founders. Nor did the idea of officially implementing Islam reassure non-Muslims, who saw it as an invitation to use the state to transform the archipelago’s statistically Muslim majority into a formidable and, from their standpoint, dangerous political force. The defeat of the Islamists’ project and the consequently non-Islamic character of the new state, in turn, profoundly disappointed the more self-consciously Muslim segment of Indonesian society.

Also soon thwarted were the plans of radical and mainly secular Indonesians to make social transformation a priority of Indonesia’s national revolution against the Dutch. The Marxist Tan Malaka argued that thoroughgoing social changes were needed if the mass of Indonesians was to be given a stake in the fight for freedom from the Dutch. By instigating a social revolution inside the national one would, he believed, win such fervent support from formerly exploited Indonesians as to doom the designs of the returning Dutch.

But Indonesia’s first prime minister, Sjahrit, disagreed. In his opinion, pursuing such radical goals would undercut a republic already too weak to confront the Allies who had so recently won a global war. At least for the time being, Indonesia would have to set aside the hope of social transformation and defend its very survival by constructively engaging the West. Indonesians needed the West; they could not go it alone; they could not reject Western investment and still hope to become modern. For Sjahrit, pragmatic cooperation within a Western-dominated economic order would benefit Indonesians more than radical idealism or revolutionary confrontation.

Whatever the merits of transformation versus adaptation as alternative paths to modernity, Tan Malaka the Marxist activist soon found himself outmaneuvered by Sjahrit the prime minister. Early in 1946 Sjahrit had him jailed. Under Sukarno, Sjahrit’s developmentalist ideology would first be tried, then discredited and rejected. But elements of it would return to inspire the economic policies of the “New Order” under Indonesia’s second president, Suharto, as recounted by Anne Booth in her chapter in this book.

Identity and Revolution

These setbacks for the Islam and Marxist projects within Indonesian nationalism were at least partly a result of the determination of the just-declared republic’s leaders not to endanger the ethno-regional coalition. Indonesia’s Christian and Hindu communities were concentrated in certain ethnic communities, typically on islands outside Java. In 1945 most of the drafters of the new constitution
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54 feared that any kind of special recognition for Islam would leave these commu-
nities in a second-class status that might encourage them to think of becoming
independent states in their own right.

Ethnoregional arguments against Tan Malaka’s program were even stronger.
His radical proposals might have consolidated Republican authority on Java and
Sumatra, where colonial exploitation had gone the farthest toward creating class
inequalities and grievances. But by this same token his ideas offered little pros-
pect of recovering the other islands, where traditional elites and Dutch influence
were still relatively strong.

These arguments made sense, and the fears of disintegration they relied on
were real. In retrospect, however, it seems clear that even those regions least
mobilized by the Indonesian revolution could not offer more than parochial alter-
atives to the archipelago-wide state that the Republic was, from the begin-
ing, intended to be. The fact that the government in Jakarta had very little effective
authority in the early months of the revolution actually may have facilitated the
expression of regional loyalty to the Republic. Within each region, local leaders
were free to shape the revolution as they chose, settling local scores and chang-
ing the local political landscape, while all the time professing utmost loyalty to
the center.

Strikingly, there was no pressure at all in 1945 to acknowledge Indonesia’s eth-
nic diversity by creating a federal system. Ethnicity had been compartmentalized as
“tradition”—a valued part of every Indonesian’s identity but not something that
required protected status in the unitary modern polity of Indonesia. Ethnoregional
identities were strong enough to warrant sensitivity; their importance had helped to
undercut the viability of Marxist and Muslim visions of modernity. But regional
cultures remained points of local and not national reference.

The imposing size of the one ethnic group large enough to have aspired to
hegemony, the Javanese, may in fact have helped to restrain its nationalist lead-
er from doing so. The Javanese leaders of the Republic were committed to an
archipelago-wide unity as a matter of nationalist principle. But they also understood
that no other regional culture had a better chance to shape the character of a
unified Indonesian state. In this sense, it was the Javanese and not the “outer
islanders” who had the most to lose from secession.

The priority on preserving unity within Republican ranks could not prevent
efforts to try out Tan Malaka’s more radical vision of modernity. A wave of
social revolution swept virtually the whole length of Sumatra and Java in late
1945 and early 1946. But Republican leaders such as Sukarno were not radicalized
by these events. Class consciousness did not oust national unity as the basis for
the Republic. The social forces involved in the uprisings in 1945–46 in Indone-
sia were too diverse—not only communists, but also Muslim groups, labor unions,
bandits, militias, young intellectuals, progressive aristocrats—and the mix varied
from region to region. They thought of themselves, in any case, not as oppos-
ing the Republic but implementing it.
The ethnoregional coalition sustaining the Republic was first put at risk only later in the revolution. By early 1946, the Dutch authorities had given up as unrealistic the idea of resurrecting the Netherlands Indies and begun to accept, however reluctantly, the probability of some kind of Indonesian autonomy. Their main concern was to ensure that their eventual Indonesian successors would not be unduly hostile to Dutch interests. But to ensure this they insisted on exercising more authority during and over the process of succession than most Indonesians were willing to accept.

Negotiations between the two sides began early in 1946. Two agreements were achieved—one in 1947 in a resort town in western Java, the other a year later aboard the USS Renville, which the United States had provided as a neutral venue. But the terms of these documents were quickly violated.

Mistrust abounded on both sides. The Dutch feared that the Republicans would sign any agreement merely to win a recognition of sovereignty, and then use that asset to radical ends contrary to the agreement’s provisions. The Republicans too feared perfidy: that the Dutch would use any transitional period to purge the national movement and set up a puppet state. The negotiations were constantly blighted on both sides by suspicion, bad faith, and military action.

Between Federalism and Radicalism

By 1948 the Dutch had gained control of extensive territory on Java and Sumatra, in addition to what they held elsewhere in the archipelago. Unwilling to transfer authority to an independent, archipelago-wide Republic, the Dutch began to develop an alternative successor to the Indies by erecting a framework of federated states on its outer islands.

At first the Dutch had seen these federal states as a politically conservative counterweight to Republican radicals on Java—and also as a way of easing the reunification of the archipelago following its administrative division under Japan’s occupation. During the course of the revolution, however, Dutch opinion shifted toward the idea of actually fragmenting the Indies. During 1948 the Dutch seriously considered granting independence to a federal state that would exclude a nationalist Republic and would be reduced to parts of Java and Sumatra, and toed with encouraging separatist movements in West Java, Ambon, and the Minahasa area of northern Sulawesi. Not coincidentally, the Ambonese and Minahassans were (and remain) largely Protestant populations.

The Dutch experiment with promoting ethnic separatism was remarkably unsuccessful. The idea of Indonesia continued to hold the same promise of modernity in 1948 that it had two decades earlier. Most Indonesians were not attracted by the prospect of living in a small but ethnically homogeneous state with neither the cultural appeal of a new exemplary center nor the material resources to deliver modernity. By the end of 1948, moreover, fears that the Republic would fall into the hands of radicals on Java had abated.
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This is not to underestimate the turbulence of Republican politics. Sjahir’s poli
cies of accommodation with the Dutch had proven deeply unpopular. In 1946–47
governments led by him fell three times over concessions that he wanted to make to
secure Dutch recognition. In July 1947 a Dutch “police action” against the Republic
dealt a further blow to the case for accommodation. On Java the Dutch attack shrank
Republican territory down to a few narrow and crowded zones.

Tensions rose further, not only between Dutch and Indonesians, but even among
the latter. With the Republic in increasingly dire economic straits, its prime min-
ister at the time—Mohammad Hatta, who had declared Indonesian independence
with Sukarno in 1945—took austerity measures, dismissing many government
employees and demobilizing segments of the Republican armed forces. More
radical elements were prime targets of these measures. Clashes broke out be-
tween centrists and leftists within the Republic.

In this worsening atmosphere in September 1948 in the city of Madiun in
eastern Java, leaders of the Indonesian Communist Party unilaterally declared
their own government. Amid brutalities on both sides, progovernment army units
suppressed the coup, and for the time being the PKI ceased to be a significant
force in Indonesian politics.

In the 1950s the Party would make a stunning comeback. Later still, apologists
of Suharto’s regime would cite the “treachery” of the PKI in Madiun as an
omen of a supposedly communist plot to murder army leaders in Jakarta in 1965—
killings that Suharto would use to justify destroying the party. But seen from
Madiun at the end of 1948, the defeat of the PKI, far from presaging a reinvigo
ration of communism, not to mention its later destruction, gave the lie to Dutch
accusations that Sukarno was leading the Republic radically leftist.

When the Dutch attempted to eliminate the Republic once and for all by launch-
ing another “police action” against it at the close of 1948, they were surprised by
the nearly universal condemnation that their action received from the ostensibly
conservative leaders they had tried to coopt into a federal framework. Nor were
the Dutch prepared for the effectiveness of Republican guerrilla resistance to
their assault. Politically and militarily at a loss, and under pressure from the
United States to forestall a communist recovery by reaching a quick settlement
with more moderate Indonesian nationalists, the Dutch agreed to forego the pe
riod of transition to independence that they had previously demanded. In De-
ceember 1949 they transferred their sovereignty to an Indonesian state: a Republic of
the United States of Indonesia (Republik Indonesia Serikat, or RIS).

Republik Indonesia Serikat was a federal state, in keeping with Dutch desires.
But by far its most popular and hence potentially most powerful constituent unit
was the unitary Republic of Indonesia. The territory of that Republic had been
truncated and its sovereignty caged within a federal frame. But it was still pow-
efully legitimated by its origin in the pan-Indonesian nation-state that Sukarno
and Hatta had declared in 1945.

In 1950 the Dutch flirtation with ethnic politics did stimulate a short-lived but
serious secessionist movement among Christian Ambonese, a group traditionally favorable to Holland. Indonesian authorities were able to suppress the resulting Republic of the South Moluccas, but the attempted breakaway showed how far the centrifugal force of ethnicity mixed with region and religion could go. By far the more enduring consequence of the Dutch experiment with federalism, however, was the stigmatizing of that concept by association with foreign intrigue to divide the country the better to rule it.

The federal RIS lasted less than a year. Under nationalist pressure, all but one of its constituents dissolved themselves, finally leaving the original unitary Republic as the only member of the federation. This anomalous situation ended on 17 August 1950, when Sukarno, who was president of both the Republic and the RIS, formally abolished the latter. Similar to the original 1945 constitution, the charter of the now reenlarged Republic called for a unitary state. But whereas the earlier document had allowed for power to be concentrated in the hands of the executive, the later one provided for parliamentary democracy.

To people in the regions of Indonesia, the failure and tarnishing of federalism and secession in 1948–50 made these options even less attractive than they had been at the start of the revolution. Meanwhile, a Dutch effort to prevent the western half of New Guinea from becoming part of the Republic triggered a nationalist reaction that expressed and reinforced the popularity of the vision of a single, exemplary Indonesia stretching “from Sabang to Merauke.”

Western New Guinea had been part of the Netherlands Indies. But the Dutch had refused to permit the territory’s incorporation into the federal RIS, so when the Republic replaced the RIS and took over its borders, western New Guinea remained beyond Indonesian reach. Nor would the Dutch then relinquish their New Guinean colony to independent Indonesia.

The position of Netherlands New Guinea was slightly different in international law because it had never been fully occupied by the Japanese; Merauke had remained under Dutch rule throughout World War II. Reserves of gold, copper, and oil made the territory economically attractive, but its remote location and lack of infrastructure made it costly to administer. In retaining western New Guinea the Dutch government was driven, in any case, far less by the legal niceties or the material prospects than by a desire to salvage its national pride by not appearing to have surrendered all of the Indies to Indonesian nationalists.

Important, too, was the Dutch conviction that among all of the archipelago’s peoples, the Melanesians of western New Guinea were the most distinctive, the least advanced, and thus the most vulnerable to “Javanese imperialism” in the guise of Indonesian nationalism. The Melanesian peoples of western New Guinea, many of them Christian and most of the rest animist, were ethnically and religiously distinct from the Muslim Austronesian majority of Indonesians to the west. The solution in Dutch eyes was to prevent their Melanesian charges from falling prey to Jakarta while preparing them for an eventual separate independence.

Indonesians excoriated this Dutch policy. Many of them read it as evidence
that Holland had not given up its “divide and rule” designs on Indonesia. Would the Dutch use their fallback position in western New Guinea as a base from which to try to reconquer the archipelago? Dutch insistence that Melanesians could not be Indonesians contradicted a basic understanding of the national movement: That “Indonesia” was not an ethnic category at all but an exemplary project to achieve modernity through unity. To exclude Melanesians from Indonesia was as racist, in this Indonesian view, as the then-current “White Australia” policy against Asian immigration.

Dutch sympathy for preserving indigenous Melanesian culture in western New Guinea—re-labeled West Irian by Sukarno—disturbed Indonesians all the more. Seen from Jakarta, this sympathy appeared to signal not sensitivity toward these New Guineans—in Indonesian parlance, Irianese—but an insidiously neocolonial desire to immobilize them in a kind of massive open-air museum and thus deprive them of the chance for modernity they would have had inside Indonesia. The Dutch could not compete with the promise of modernity-within-Indonesia; they had no workable alternative model to offer. Even regional leaders who might have turned their backs on Java and, in effect, faced West concluded that secession would not deliver the modernity they desired.

Nothing demonstrates the strength of this conclusion more than the fact that Indonesian unity survived the enormous disappointments of independence. Regional rebellions would occur, as this chapter will show. But their aim was not to shatter the national idea. Rather their leaders wished to rescue the implementation of that idea from centralizing forces on Java that appeared to be exploiting the regions materially while moving the country dangerously to the left.

**Disappointment and Mistrust**

Indonesia’s promise of material modernity—welfare—for its people was not fulfilled in the decades following independence. There were many reasons why. Roads, buildings, and ports available to the new Republic, for example, had suffered a decade of damage and neglect under wartime occupation and ensuing revolution—infrastructure already worn down by the depression of the 1930s. Yet popular expectations were high. So much hope had been pinned on the removal of the Dutch, as if freedom were a panacea, that it was hard to avoid disappointment when it became clear just how much had to be done and how difficult the task would be.

The heritage of a colonial economy, moreover, severely constrained the Republic’s leaders. Indonesia still depended, as the Indies had, on the export of primary produce from plantations. How could an equitable kind of modernity be delivered to plantation laborers, smallholders, and peasants while keeping them at work in enclaves outside the urban areas, in forms of agriculture rather than industry, given the association of modernity with cities and manufactures? With local capital still scarce, how could the country free itself of the priorities of foreign traders and investors?
Indonesia’s polycentric politics under a democratic constitution also made economic planning difficult. Of the seventeen parties and groups represented in the parliament of the Republic in 1951, for example, the largest held only one-fifth of the seats. In the 1950s all governments had to be coalitions pieced together in laborious negotiations between factional leaders—and vulnerable to collapse over contentious issues. The political authority of such governments was also diminished by the fact that none of the members of these parliaments had undergone popular election: The legislative branch was a motley hybrid, its members drawn from the generally unelected assemblies of the original Republic and the various Dutch-sponsored federal states. This was not a political environment in which hard decisions could readily be made.

Economic management was also hampered by uncertainty over how to treat Indonesia’s ethnic-Chinese minority. They had been settled for centuries in certain parts of Indonesia. Many of them had married locally and their descendants had merged without trace into indigenous society. However, where Chinese settlers were most numerous—especially in places to which they had migrated in large numbers as laborers—they had formed their own lasting communities.

Many of these communities had adopted major elements of local culture such as language, cuisine, or dress. By the twentieth century many such descendants were identifiable as Chinese only by their names and their Confucian, Buddhist, or Christian—that is, non-Muslim—culture. In contrast, more recent arrivals tended to be more “Chinese” in their lifeways and to maintain stronger connections with China. This link to what they tended to see as a superior culture, together with the Dutch practice of separating them from the “natives” for purposes of law and administration, helped to preserve the distinctiveness of the Chinese minority. Economic inequality reinforced these differences as ethnic Chinese came to dominate middle-level retail trade and money lending in many parts of the archipelago, especially on Java. In this process the Chinese minority became the focus of great resentment among less affluent Indonesians, especially Muslims. And that resentment, in turn, made many Indonesians of more or less “Chinese” descent more inclined to consider themselves a community apart, thus augmenting the exclusiveness for which self-described “indigenous” Indonesians had blamed them in the first place.9

Most important from a nationalist standpoint, the idea of Indonesia never held the promise of modernity among ethnic Chinese that it did for non-Chinese Indonesians. The government of Indonesia had unilaterally granted Chinese citizenship to all Indonesian Chinese, whether they wanted it or not. Their notions of modernity were

9. In this context, the term “indigenous” refers not to place of birth but to an ethnic background perceived by most Indonesians as distinct from “Chinese.” Used here sparingly and for convenience alone, these categories are not fully exclusive. Many people of “Chinese” descent consider themselves to be, and therefore subjectively are, every bit as “indigenous” as their “non-Chinese” compatriots.
The political stalemate, while it made economic management difficult, had initially positive consequences for national unity. In the divided parliaments of the early 1950s no one among the contending ideologies within Indonesian nationalism could hope to dominate, and thus alienate, the others. The largest party was the Consultative Assembly of Indonesian Muslims (Majelis Syuro Muslimin Indonesia, or Masyumi). Masyumi's modernists wanted economic development and a greater role for Islam in public life. In the cabinets of the period, however, their ministers had to work alongside ministers from other parties and backgrounds, including representatives from Christian and secular nationalist parties and traditionalist Muslims suspicious of Masyumi's modernist interpretation of Islamic principles. Similarly, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), rehabilitated under the leadership of D.N. Aidit after the Madiun debacle, had a significant political presence but no hope at all of forming a coalition through which to implement its ideas. The colonial-era truce between ideologies, partially disrupted during the revolution, was now largely restored, not by the discipline of a common struggle toward shared goals but by the polycentrism of the political system.

The only major movement to stay outside these parliamentary arrangements was the House of Islam (Darul Islam, or DI). Its strength in the regions made it appear secessionist, but its aspirations at any rate were pan-Indonesian. The movement had emerged in West Java in 1948 out of Islamic dissatisfaction with the Republic's concessions to the Dutch. Darul Islam's leader, S.M. Kartosuwirjo, argued that Islamic principles could never be achieved within the compromised independence for Indonesia that Sukarno and Hatta were trying to negotiate.
In 1949 DI declared an Islamic State of Indonesia. During the early 1950s the movement spread from West Java to South Kalimantan, South Sulawesi, and Aceh, with smaller manifestations in other regions. These rebellions were eventually defeated by military action. Yet DI did not seek modernity through secession as such. While advocating an uncompromisingly Islamic future and criticizing what they saw as the unprincipled eclecticism of Sukarno and the craven diplomacy of Hatta, DI’s leaders nevertheless projected their ambitions onto a national Indonesian canvas. In contesting its too-secular content, they reaffirmed the Republic’s value as a frame.

The greatest strain on Indonesian unity came not in the early 1950s but later, in reaction to political changes at the center that began in 1955. In September of that year, for the first time since independence had been declared a decade before, Indonesians went to the polls to choose a national parliament. The result shifted the balances of regional and ideological power somewhat toward Java and the left, respectively—a prospective realignment unwelcome to anticommunists on the outer islands.

Four parties dominated the newly elected parliament: the reformist-Muslim Masyumi; the secular-nationalist Indonesian National Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia, or PNI); the rural-conservative Revival of Islamic Scholars (Nahdlatul Ulama, or NU); and the communist PKI. Of these four, only the anticomunist Masyumi drew a large part of its vote from the islands outside Java. Compared with Masyumi, the others relied proportionally much more for their support on Javanese.

The coalition government that resulted from the 1955 election was led by a Javanese, Ali Sastroamidjojo of the PNI. The nature of his support base in parliament enabled him to favor the interests of Java, notably by overvaluing Indonesia’s currency, the rupiah. With perhaps three-fifths of Indonesians living on Java and most of the country’s exportable resources located on the outer islands, overvaluing the rupiah appeared discriminatory: Imported goods became cheaper for consumers, who were disproportionately on Java, while the country’s main exports, disproportionately located off Java, became costlier and therefore less competitive on world markets.

The 1955 election also shifted politics to the left. The communist party won 16.4 percent or one-sixth of the vote. The new premier, Ali Sastroamidjojo, came from the influential left wing of the PNI. The Catholic and Protestant parties were anti-Marxist. But their combined vote did not even reach five percent, and the small size of the Christian minority limited their potential to expand.

The PKI meanwhile made clear its desire to grow. Foreshadowing later trends in Western European communism, PKI leaders argued that they could come to power in Indonesia using democratic means. By appealing to Javanese peasants in particular, the party earned over 27 percent of the vote in the regional elections held on Java in mid-1957. Had that result been repeated or bettered in the next national election, due in 1959, no ruling coalition could have been formed.
ia. During the early 1950s the nationalist, South Sulawesi, and East Java, were the only areas that remained loyal to Sukarno and the anti-communist rebellion. These rebellions were even more threatening to Sukarno’s modernization through secular Islam. The Islamic future and criticizing Sukarno and the craven developments had their ambitions onto a national content, they reaffirmed in the early 1950s but later, they were declared a decade after independence. The result were somewhat toward Java’s unwell, or one might say, the anti-communist movement: the reformist-Muslim Party (Partai Nasional Islam) and Islamic Scholars (Nahdlatul Ulama) were outside Java. Compared to the 1955 election, which was won by a coalition of parties led by the Indonesian National Party (PNI) and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI), the new election saw a much less significant number of votes outside Java, and therefore less competitive.

The communist party won the 1955 election, marking their return to power. But President Sukarno also defeated them politically, and he did so not by defending Indonesia’s experiment with electoral democracy but by attacking it. Knowing that the elections had been prompted by resentment and suspicion accompanying the breakdown of the former ideological balance, President Sukarno intervened in the name of harmony and against divisive proceduralism. He denounced the party system for encouraging strife and “fifty percent plus one” elections for allowing a bare majority to dictate to a large minority.

Gradually Sukarno unveiled an alternative model that he called “Guided Democracy.” He tried to legitimate the new format as a reincarnation of supposedly ancient Indonesian ways of making decisions. These ways, he contended, gave a say to all in the community and did not permit the views of any minority
to be overridden. But Sukarno did not rely on the weight of tradition to animate his new system. He placed himself squarely at the heart of “Guided Democracy” as the conciliator of competing views—the indispensable guide who would make it work.

In effect, Sukarno offered a return to an equilibrium that would, this time, be stable—a guarantee that no ideology would prevail in Indonesia as long as he was there to balance it against other ideologies. In 1957 Sukarno prepared for this concentration of power by declaring martial law throughout the country. He appointed as prime minister a capable nonparty politician, Djuanda Kartawidjaja, and freed him from responsibility to the fractious and Java-dominated parliament.

Finally, on 5 July 1959—Sukarno cut the Gordian knot of ideological confrontation. Preempting the constituent assembly that had been elected in 1955 to draft a fresh constitution for the country, he unilaterally replaced the parliamentary-democratic constitution of 1950 with the strong-executive document of 1945 as the blueprint of the Republic. The assembly had become deadlocked over a variation of the same question that had sown such controversy among the new state’s founders in 1945: Should the sovereign state of Indonesia be based upon Islam or Pancasila? Sukarno dissolved the assembly and answered the question himself: The Republic would rest on Pancasila, including respect for Islam. But it would not be an Islamic state.

From Guided to Pancasila Democracy

Sukarno’s measures resolved the regional crisis of 1957–59, but they set Indonesia on the path to political disaster. The fundamental contradiction between Marxism, Islam, and developmentalism was not resolved. The truce between them now depended not on a common national project, overthrowing Dutch rule, but on the balancing act of a single man. No sooner was Sukarno’s Guided Democracy in place than a new question loomed: What would happen when, sooner or later, Sukarno departed the scene?

Sukarno tried to submerge ideological differences in a single national belief. He called it Nasakom—from nasionalisme, agama (religion), and kommunisme. If Sukarno could persuade Indonesians that Nasakom entailed more than a truce among ongoing enemies, then it would survive even his own mortality. As Guided Democracy evolved, therefore, Indonesians who engaged in public discourse found themselves increasingly obliged to use the vocabulary of Nasakom and related acronyms evoking unity and struggle.

But such controls on expression, instead of convincing people, raised the level of political uncertainty and anxiety. Muslims and Christians, officers and civilians, communists and anticommunists all used Sukarno’s vocabulary, as required, but to say different things. The more opaque political language became, the less sure one could be that an ideological equilibrium in fact existed and was being maintained—in short, that Guided Democracy was working as Sukarno had prom-
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ised it would. To many observers, inside and outside Indonesia, the PKI appeared to be poised on the threshold of power. But to others, the communists appeared to be deluding themselves with rhetorical incantations and ignoring the real threat posed by the anticommunist leadership of the army. Meanwhile, the economy began to give way under the combined weight of official neglect, statism, and ineffectiveness, and that too heightened the atmosphere of crisis.

In late 1965 the teetering structure of Guided Democracy finally collapsed. In the predawn hours of 1 October, units from Sukarno’s presidential guard kid-

napped and killed six senior anticommunist generals, seized state radio and tele-

communications facilities, and announced the formation of a Revolutionary Council with full power to safeguard Sukarno and maintain the integrity of Guided Democracy. A smaller takeover occurred in Central Java involving units of the Diponegoro Division. Ostensibly led by the palace guard’s commander, one Lieutenant Colonel Untung, the conspirators said they had acted to destroy a plot that army commanders were planning against Sukarno. Circumstantial evidence linked the conspiracy to the PKI.

Many questions still surround what happened that night and, still more elu-

sively, why. Few observers believe that Untung and his soldiers acted entirely on their own initiative. The plotters may, according to various versions, have been prompted or directed by the PKI, by Sukarno, or even by the general who took charge of the army and suppressed the ostensible coup—Suharto himself. Suharto’s own judgment was unambiguous. For him and the other surviving generals, the PKI had masterminded the conspiracy and murdered their colleagues. That charge served powerfully to justify the anticommunist New Order that Suharto and his supporters would proceed to put in place.10

Whoever was or was not responsible for it, the conspiracy abruptly ended the play acting of Guided Democracy and precipitated a sweeping crackdown on the left. With army encouragement, Muslim and other vigilantes took to the villages and massacred perhaps half a million real or accused communists; another million and a half were arrested and kept in military prison camps for periods ranging from weeks to years. The PKI was banned and Marxism was expunged from the state ideology.

Without communism to balance against Islam and developmentalism, Sukarno’s position, too, was fatally weakened. General Suharto slowly but methodically edged him from power. In March 1966, under duress, Sukarno gave emergency authority to Suharto to restore order. A year later a Provisional People’s

10. In the eyes of Benedict R. O’G. Anderson and Ruth T. McVey, writing with Frederick P. Bunnell shortly after the event, the PKI was an unwitting victim of guilt by association with an intramilitary conspiracy. Articulating the New Order’s version of events, Nugroho Notosusanto and Ismail Saleh blamed the PKI. W.F. Wertheim tried to implicate Suharto. See, respectively, A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965, Coup in Indonesia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Modern Indonesia Project, 1971 [written 1965–66]); The
Consultative Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat Sementara, or MPRS), its members not elected but its role provided for in the 1945 constitution, stripped Sukarno of his powers, leaving him president in title alone and making Suharto acting president in his stead. In March 1968 when his New Order was already fully under way, the anticommunist general finally was named president of Indonesia. Politically outmaneuvered and marginalized, his movements severely restricted by the new authorities, Sukarno died in 1970.

What path to modernity was left for Indonesia to follow? Having destroyed the PKI and banned Marxism, Suharto and his fellow generals had precluded a Marxist future for the archipelago. And although they welcomed the anticommunist piety of Islam under the first principle of Pancasila—Belief in God—they also ruled out an Islamic state. Instead they drove Indonesians down the third road to modernity: developmentalism.

The new president, his army colleagues, and the civilian technocrats who advised them did not consider their commitment to economic growth a matter of ideology. They thought of themselves as rational pragmatists trying to end once and for all the country’s irrational fascination with ideology. Reviewing the history of strife between communists on the left and Islamists on the right of the political spectrum, they came to the view that ideologies tapped into primitive, dangerous impulses that led inevitably to social conflict and should not be allowed to distract the Indonesian people from the unity that was necessary if they were ever to acquire modernity. They defined modernity not as a utopian outcome but incrementally in a practical sense: stabilizing prices, repairing physical infrastructure, making agriculture more productive, encouraging industry, expanding employment, improving education, and raising per capita income.

To ensure that ideological conflicts would not again betray the developmental promise of modernity, Suharto built on the ruins of Guided Democracy an authoritarian “Pancasila Democracy” with the armed forces at its core. He equipped the new system with the forms of political competition and participation, so that people would feel a sense of engagement with the developmental mission of the state. National legislative elections would be held in 1971, 1977, and every five years thereafter. But these and other channels—parties, courts, media—would be constrained and, if necessary, repressed to prevent the system from being led by anyone except Suharto, or in any direction other than the developmentalist one that he wanted Indonesia to follow.

A repertoire of such methods kept the New Order anticommunist, anti-Islamist, and committed to development, or pembangunan—the leitmotif of the regimen.

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1 Rakyat Sementara, or MPRS), the 1945 constitution, stripped title alone and making Suharto in his New Order was already was named president of Indone- d, his movements severely re- 970.

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The Indonesians who took them over expected that the solvent power of the Indonesian national idea would work as effectively in these new regions as it had elsewhere in the archipelago. This was not the case. Irianese mainly, and East Timorese wholly, were bystanders during the crucial years of common struggle against the Dutch. They found it difficult to identify with an Indonesian state born from an experience that did not significantly involve them. Especially for the East Timorese, who never were part of the Netherlands Indies, Indonesia was and remains an alien, imposed idea.

Indonesian policy in these regions was also part of the problem: Substantial regi- nal development budgets could not compensate for brutality, cultural insensitivity, and the expropriation of natural resources by Indonesians, especially those who differed doubly from the local population in being Javanese and Muslim.

Finally, the international environment changed in ways that did not make
incorporation easier. Indonesia had become independent at a time when it was widely believed that only large states could deliver prosperity to their people. Small independent countries created by breaking up one larger colony would suffer diseconomies of scale, including a scarcity of trained local experts. The point of the anticloneal struggles of the post–World War II period typically was to end Western rule while retaining intact the boundaries Westerners had drawn. It was a time when the rights of ethnic groups to self-determination within such postcolonial states were not given a high priority.

In subsequent decades, however, a number of small states proved their viability, including Brunei and Singapore in Southeast Asia. In 1991 the Soviet Union broke up into its constituent republics, many of them defined along ethnic or religious lines. No longer constrained by the strategic imperatives of the Cold War, the governments of the United States and other democratic countries felt freer to advance a global agenda for human rights, including the right to self-determination for culturally distinct regions oppressed or mistreated by central authorities inside sovereign states.

For people seeking their own road to modernity in small places such as East Timor, or ones as sparsely peopled as Irian Jaya, a vast and unitary state such as Indonesia became an increasingly less attractive vehicle to ride. Meanwhile, the rise of Islamic consciousness in many countries, including Indonesia, strained relations with adherents of other faiths, including the Christians who form majorities within East Timor and Irian Jaya but are vastly outnumbered by Indonesia’s Muslims. Generally rising incomes gave Indonesians a stake in the country. But as the New Order aged, juxtapositions of rich and poor created new economic grievances with a potential to exacerbate ethno-regional ones.

This context suggests that Indonesia may have caught the boat of multiethnic and trans-religious nationalism none too soon. Another few decades and the archipelagic polity that was the Indies might have fractured along its ethno-local and religious fault lines into several or more independent countries.

The Unmaking of Indonesia?

The tumultuous events of 1996–98 that badly damaged the Indonesian economy and obliged Suharto to resign his presidency are described elsewhere in this book. Suffice it here to note the hope of many Indonesians, that this transition will yield a successfully democratic “Indonesia beyond Suharto.” Such an outcome, were it to occur, could also imply decentralization, conceivably to the point of allowing peoples on the periphery of the archipelago to choose their own futures: full independence, continued incorporation, or something in between.

Does this mean that Indonesia, having been made, will now be unmade? If the people of East Timor are allowed to exercise their right to self-determination, and if they choose to secede, will their decision provoke a general rush to the exits?

The Indonesian revolution began in 1945, more than half a century ago. Yet
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one ought not underestimate the power of the national idea that motivated it.
That idea, whose fortunes this chapter has recounted, was to build an integral state within ex-Dutch boundaries—boundaries that never encompassed East Timor. For Sukarno and his fellow nationalists, the modernity of the Indonesian state necessitated unity: one people in one country speaking one language, to paraphrase the youth oath of 1928 and the song written for it, “Great Indonesia,” which became and remains the national anthem. For Suharto and his fellow generals and technocrats, the modernity of an already unified Indonesia required development, or pembangunan: the New Order’s promise of a better life to Indonesians. The successes of these struggles—first the making, then the betterment of Indonesia—made the country’s dismemberment hard to imagine.
Nor has the sudden reversal of material progress in 1998 assured the disintegration of Indonesia. Democracy held pride of place in neither Sukarno’s nor Suharto’s conception of the modern. But on the threshold of the twenty-first century, more and more Indonesians have begun to wonder whether the time has come to redefine the modern yet again: to make their country, already unified and (until 1998) developing, truly democratic. Far from dismantling Indonesia, such a process, if it takes place, could satisfy the growing desire of Indonesians for a greater say in public life. And that could cement the unity of the republic and facilitate its further development—once the economy begins to recover, as eventually it must.
Nevertheless, it may be fitting to end this chapter on a historically derived note of skepticism that the mere removal of Suharto will assure political liberalization. The failure of electoral democracy in the 1950s and its association with civil strife will continue to be read by antidemocrats, especially within the armed forces, as reasons not to experiment with it again. If violence and disorder spread over the course of a prolonged recession, the economically vital ethnic-Chinese component of what—in historical perspective—is still a rather small middle class could be frightened into withholding needed capital and skills. The partly anti-Chinese riots that took more than 1,000 lives in Jakarta in May 1998 are a case in point.
And even if the movement for reform does manage to introduce democratic procedures, they could worsen the prospect for national unity. If they are again seen as facilitating a polarization of political life between the center and the regions, or between Islamist and competing visions of Indonesia’s future. As argued above, the historical experiences of the weakest links in the national chain, Irian Jaya and East Timor, were either peripheral or external to the evolution and the revolution of Dutch-demarcated Indonesia, making these places relatively indifferent to the national idea. And compared with “the generation of 1945” for whom the revolution was a defining experience, future generations will be able to live the lesson of unity as a founding imperative only vicariously from books.
Ultimately, however, not one of these intimations of autocracy or disunity will be realized without the force of political events behind it. The future of Indonesia cannot be known. If the disintegrations of Pakistan in 1971 and the
Soviet Union in 1991 are any guide, it would seem that a large, multicultural country is especially likely to come apart under the stress of rapid and basic political change. To be sure, compared with these examples, the idea of Indonesia has broader and deeper historical roots. But history can carry the observer only so far toward a sense of how likely—or unlikely—future changes may be. Accordingly, the next few chapters will seek the shape of “Indonesia beyond Suharto” not in the farther past, but in the New Order and how it worked.