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The Indonesian Marxist Tradition

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THE INDONESIAN MARXIST TRADITION

*Robert Cribb*

Marxism has a longer tradition of formal organisation in Indonesia than in any other country discussed in this book. The first Marxist association in the Netherlands Indies was established in 1914, three years before the October Revolution in Russia; the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) was founded in 1920, the first communist party in Asia outside the borders of former Tsarist Russia. This seniority, together with sheer physical distance from the centres of Marxist authority, enabled Indonesian Marxists to develop a distinctive indigenous application of Marxism-Leninism to the circumstances in their country.

Indonesian Marxists, however, have been persistently unable to carry out a successful Marxist-Leninist revolution. During three separate periods, 1920-6, 1945-8, and 1951-65, the party operated in an environment of relative political freedom, drawing wide popular support. Each period of legality ended, however, with the party's implication or involvement in an ill-prepared and wholly unsuccessful uprising. On each occasion, government repression following the uprising has effectively removed the PKI from the Indonesian political arena. The party has now been illegal since 1966 and the only sign of its activity is the odd government warning against the 'latent danger' it presents. An underground party almost certainly exists, but its efforts must be devoted largely to survival rather than revolution. The party's few attempts to engage in protracted guerrilla warfare on the Chinese or Vietnamese model have been entirely unsuccessful.

The present low ebb of Marxism in Indonesia, and the fact
that surviving members of the party outside Indonesia are dependent for the most part on the financial support of the Eastern European or Chinese Communist parties, has encouraged a general tendency to see the PKI's indigenous Marxist interpretation of Indonesian society as mistaken and ultimately responsible for the party's eclipse. It is probably more accurate, however, to regard this indigenous interpretation as responsible rather for the party's temporary political successes in a society which, despite certain resemblances to the societies of China and Indochina, does not permit the uncritical application of any externally derived interpretation of the thought of Marx.

The attrition in PKI ranks brought about by repression and by the longevity of the party has led to a number of changes in leadership over the years. The party moreover has been wracked from time to time at critical junctures in Indonesian history by serious disputes over tactics. Nonetheless there is a continuity in Indonesian Marxist thought which constitutes a distinctive Indonesian tradition in the application of Marx's thought to Indonesian conditions. The PKI's interpretation of Marxist-Leninist thought has enabled it to survive extended periods of repression, without the territorial base enjoyed by the Chinese and Vietnamese communists, and to blossom when conditions were favourable, coming within striking distance of power. If, by botanical analogy, Vietnamese communism is the product of a graft, Indonesian communism is a desert plant which survives hostile wind and sun by staying underground until the right climatic opportunity enables it to shoot forth and spread with great rapidity. This pattern of survival and efflorescence was made possible by the emphasis which the party placed on the preservation and spread of Marxist-Leninist ideas rather than on direct revolutionary action. This aspect of Indonesian Marxism is the basis of persistent allegations, especially since 1965, that the PKI was revisionist. As will be argued below, however, the PKI was never a social democratic party in the European sense; nor for that matter was it an Asian representative of Eurocommunism, despite its striking parallels with the Italian communist party. With its attention to the importance of ideas, it more closely resembles the emphasis of recent Western Marxism on subverting the ideological hegemony of the capitalist system as a prerequisite for revolution. ¹ Even that parallel, however, is not exact; the party's willingness to work within the framework of

the Indonesian state reflected rather its interpretation of the role of that state as a vehicle for the ultimate victory of the proletariat.

The proletariat, of course, occupied the central role in Indonesian Marxist theory. 'The Indonesian revolution will not succeed unless it is under the leadership of the Indonesian proletariat', wrote D.N. Aidit, the PKI's foremost leader of the 1950's and early 60's. ² As in other largely agrarian societies of East and Southeast Asia, however, the Indonesian proletariat has never been more than a small proportion of the total population. Aidit estimated in 1958 that the proletariat numbered twenty million people, one quarter of the population, but this figure included workers in a wide range of occupations, from plantation labourers to workers in craft industries, together with their families. The modern industrial proletariat in a strict sense he estimated to be well under one per cent of the population. ³

Marxists seeking to make revolution in these societies have accordingly sought to identify the allies on whom the proletariat may call in its struggle for power. The Dutch Marxists who in 1914 founded the ISDV (Indies Social Democratic Association), the Marxist organisation which preceded the PKI, were amongst the first to recognise that a key ally in the struggle was the peasantry and that the bourgeois nationalist parties were the means by which the peasantry could be first reached and then recruited. Members of the ISDV infiltrated the first mass nationalist organisation in Indonesia, the Sarekat Islam, from about 1916 and were successful in taking over many of its local branches. This practical experience was carried by the ISDV's founder, Henk Sneevliet, to the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920, where it became a major basis for Lenin's 'Theses on the National and Colonial Questions'. ⁴

The Indonesian Marxists who succeeded to control of the ISDV, however, and who subsequently formed the PKI, cast class alliance in a rather different light. The first chairman of the PKI, Semaun, was one of the pioneers of communist infiltration of the Sarekat Islam and was a close associate of Sneevliet. Yet his report to the First Congress of the Toilers of the East in Irikutsk in 1921 made no mention of this as a strategy. In fact it made very little reference to class or class structure in Indonesian society at all, but rather provided the following analysis of Indonesia's condition:
...from 1908...a powerful upsurge of European imperialism had revolutionized the masses. The development of capitalism in Europe, overproduction, and a surplus of goods caused the capitalists to seek salvation in the colonies. The Netherlands Indies had been conquered three hundred years before, and since that time had suffered under the yoke of European rule; but the consequences of an imperialist policy only made themselves felt since 1900, that is, since the time the country was opened to international capital.... The year 1900 saw great changes: the growth of capitalism had brought the exploitation of the natives and with this their proletarianization.  

This analysis, arguing that colonialism had proletarianised Indonesian society, goes some way beyond Lenin’s argument that colonial exploitation had enabled European capitalists to embourgeoisie important sections of the European working class. For while Lenin maintained that the success of the national revolution in the colonies was an important element in the success of the proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist countries of the West, he had insisted that the proletarian revolution in the West was in turn necessary to bring socialism to the East. Semaun’s argument that Indonesians had been proletarianised meant that proletarian revolution could take place in Indonesia itself and implied that it could take place independent of proletarian revolution in the West. While Semaun’s analysis did not deny the possibility of cooperation with other proletarianised colonial people in Asia, it clearly foreshadowed the theoretical and practical self-sufficiency which characterised the PKI through much of its history.

In arguing that Indonesians were proletarianised by colonialism, Semaun was asserting that colonialism oppressed all Indonesians in the same way. While he recognised the existence of different classes in Indonesian society, and could not fail to be aware that the massive unevenness of historical development in Indonesia had led to the existence side by side of primitive communism, slavery, feudalism and late capitalism, he argued that the cooperation between classes in the anti-colonial struggle was not simply a tactical and temporary alliance but rather was based on a longterm identity of interest. Semaun in fact made no reference to class conflict within Indonesian society. He mentioned ‘native landowners’, but described them as ‘acting, where possible, on behalf of the native rural population’. Later Marxist theorists in Indonesia modified this analysis considerably, identifying feudal landowners and the compradore bourgeoisie as indigenous class enemies of the proletariat, alongside its foreign, capitalist-imperialist enemies, but they retained the emphasis on the identical nature of these enemies for all Indonesians. ‘The Indonesian proletariat’, wrote Aidit, ‘is exploited by three forms of brutal exploitation, that is, imperialism, capitalism and feudalism’.  

The suggestion that a proletariat could be oppressed by feudalism reflects a general theme in Indonesian Marxism that human history has been telescoped in Indonesia so that a single revolution, led by the proletariat, could take place, simultaneously combining, embodying and bypassing the normal succession of historical stages outlined by orthodox Marxism. Semaun suggested that while colonialism had brought parts of Indonesia to the stage of mature capitalism, much of the colony remained in a state of primitive communism.

The peasantry comprised about 95% of the population; the Netherlands Indies was and to a significant degree still is a country of primitive communism. The land belonged to the community, which at an assembly apportioned it among its members for a set length of time, at the end of which period it was redistributed.... The ‘open rural assembly’ represented in its way a primitive soviet and embodied the highest administrative and legislative power of the village.  

At the meeting at which the PKI formally decided to join the Comintern in 1920, the party explicitly demurred at the Comintern resolution calling for the redistribution of land, not on the grounds that the party should avoid antagonising potential allies, but on the grounds that there was no large scale land-holding in Indonesia. In fact this analysis of rural society in Indonesia reflected a romantic idealisation of village life rather than any knowledge of rural conditions, and it was not until the early 1950's that Indonesian Marxists undertook the detailed rural research which enabled them to recognise the strength of feudalism, especially in rural Java. Nonetheless, the strategic unity of
the proletarian and other revolutions remained a fundamental principle of Indonesian Marxism. 10

Since colonialism, according to Semaun, was the prime proletarianising force in Indonesia, it followed that the national revolution against colonialism would be the vehicle for proletarian victory. Indonesian Marxists did not generally argue for a two-stage revolution, for a bourgeois nationalist phase to be followed by a socialist phase. Rather, they argued that, since the two revolutions were one, they had to be achieved together. In the 1950's, therefore, when the national revolution appeared to many observers to be over, leaving power in the hands of the bourgeois nationalists, PKI theorists argued that the national revolution against imperialism had in fact not yet been won, that Indonesia remained de facto a colonial country. As evidence they pointed to the Netherlands-Indonesian Union imposed on the Indonesian Republic in the negotiations which ended the national revolution in 1949, and to the Dutch retention of West New Guinea (now Irian Jaya), which all Indonesian nationalists regarded as an integral part of the national territory. Although they regarded the Indonesian state as being at least partly controlled by colonial and neo-colonial interests, the Indonesian Marxists argued that the state could be freed from this burden not only by revolutionary action from below, but also by action initiated within the state apparatus itself. The twin issues of the Union and Irian Jaya played an important role in PKI campaigns in the 1950's. It was the logic of this position and the fact that the Indonesian Republic under Sukarno did in fact succeed in ridding itself of both the Union and Dutch rule in Irian, as well as of Dutch domination of the economy, which led Aidit to articulate his theory of the dual nature of the state. This theory was simply that the state had both a pro-people aspect and an anti-people aspect.

The task of the party was to bring about the dominance of the pro-people aspect.

This element in Indonesian Marxism has caused some discomfort amongst foreign Marxists sympathetic to the PKI. Morton, for instance, referring to the 'ingenuity and flexibility' of the Indonesian communists and to their 'hardheaded political judgement' in a political situation in the early 1950's whose prospects for the PKI were 'dismal', avoids addressing the ideological implications of the PKI's political programme. 12 For, although the nature of the state is still a matter of widespread debate amongst Marxists, Aidit's formulation appears to stray far beyond the orthodox Marxist instrumentalist assessment of the state as a tool which one class uses to oppress another class. 13 While it is true, however, that the dual nature theory of the state was not publicly articulated as such until 1963, it reflected an ambivalent attitude to the state which was deeply rooted in the history of the PKI and of Marxism within the Indonesian nationalist movement.

From the earliest years of nationalist organisation, Marxism had been a major intellectual influence within the movement. There had been no Indonesian state before the Dutch established their empire in the archipelago. Whereas Vietnam and China, like Japan and Korea, had long traditions of statehood and cultural identity which underpinned their respective patriotisms, Indonesia was a creation of Dutch colonial rule. Although bourgeois nationalists energetically created a nationalist mythology of statehood and cultural identity, 14 the revitalisation of traditional Indonesian political forms was too unspecific a goal to form a significant part of the nationalist critique of colonial rule; Indonesia could have no Phan Boi Chao, no Meiji Emperor. The Marxist critique of colonialism, by contrast, was not only powerful but unambiguously modern, and it was consequently influential in nationalist thinking and discussion far beyond the confines of the PKI. Indonesia's first prime minister, Sutan Syahrir, for instance, argued an essentially Marxist analysis of Indonesian society which identified feudalism and international capitalism as the twin enemies of the Indonesian people. 15 Only Islam offered a comparably influential critique of colonialism, and during the 1910's and 20's there was even a briefly influential Islamic Communist stream of thought whose leaders argued that the principles of Islam and Communism were essentially the same.
One leader of this stream of Islamic liberation theology, for instance, suggested:

The righteous teacher, our Lord the Prophet Mohammad, was the man who removed all inequality between the sexes, did away with the difference between ruler and subject, between rank and class. And all these changes were brought about by the Socialist par excellence, by our Prophet Mohammad. 16

Tan Malaka, the PKI’s most prominent theorist in the 1920’s, also consistently rejected the Comintern’s hostility to Pan-Islamism, arguing that Islam, like nationalism, represented a force which could be used to mobilise the oppressed peoples of Asia. Even after overt Islamic Communism disappeared as an intellectual force, Marxist categories of analysis continued to influence the thought of Muslim politicians such as Mohammad Hatta, Indonesia’s first vice-president, who laid considerable stress, for instance, on the condemnation of capitalism by both Islam and Marxism. 17

The most important synthesiser of nationalism and communism was Sukarno, who subsequently became first president of the Indonesian Republic. Sukarno freely used and adapted Marxist ideas in his own thought. He attributed Indonesia’s ills to capitalism as manifested in colonialism, but he considered the result of this to be the impoverishment of the Indonesian people rather than their proletarianisation. Similarly, he turned the PKI’s idea of a revolution which encompassed different historical stages into one which merely encompassed different ideological and social groups: the nationalists who fought foreign rule, the Muslims who fought the infidel and the muraen 18 who fought their exploiters and oppressors. His 1926 essay, Nationalism, Islam and Marxism, was a passionate assertion that the traditional antagonisms between the three ideologies did not apply in the Indonesian case and that supporters of all three could work together for a national independence which would simultaneously fulfil the aims of all three. 19 In the 1950’s and 60’s this proposition was expressed in the formula NASAKOM (Nationalism, Religion, Communism) which gave to Marxism official sanction while ensuring at the same time that it remained only one element amongst three in the official pantheon. Sukarno’s ideas were also echoed in a variety of forms by a wide range of non-communist politicians on the left, notably those from the Murba (Proletarian) Party and the left wing of the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI) under Ali Sastroamijoyo. Murba in particular argued that there were no serious class divisions within Indonesia and that the primary contradiction lay between Indonesia and the capitalist, imperialist West.

The strength of such quasi-Marxist ideas in the intellectual make-up of Indonesian bourgeois nationalism reached a peak under Sukarno’s Guided Democracy (1959-65), when the PKI rose to become the largest communist party outside the communist world. It led Indonesian Marxists towards the conclusion that the national movement, and later the national state, might be captured by Marxism through peaceful means and, having been captured ideologically, would naturally admit Marxists to positions of power. In the 1920’s and 1950’s, the party fought major battles over ideological issues, seeking to make a Marxist view of the world the natural and orthodox way of thinking for the Indonesian people. In this the PKI was probably influenced by deeply rooted ideas in traditional Javanese political thought on the nature of power. There is in classical Javanese cosmology a close relationship between knowledge and power, connected ultimately perhaps to Buddhist and Hindu ideas of enlightenment and transcendent knowledge. 20 If the concepts and intellectual structure can be perfected, it is felt, then power will flow as a matter of course. Ruth McVey has pointed out the influence of this world view in the composition of Aidit’s Indonesian Society and the Indonesian Revolution, the PKI’s chief text on the Indonesian revolution during the eleven years following the fifth party congress in 1954. The text is flat and plain, remarkably free of the rhetoric and traditional imagery one finds in Chinese Marxist writings and in the contemporary political language of Sukarno. In this very spurning of traditional forms, however, the party was working within a traditional belief that control of new ideas leads to power. This, argues McVey, was one of Marxism’s major attractions:

…it was not so much its radical anti-imperialism or its call for social justice (though it was certainly these things too) as it was its promise that by associating and thinking in a new way one could gain strength and become, in the end,
invincible... It provided [cadres] with a charter as a counter-elite, a basis on which they could top the post-revolutionary establishment's claims to cultural and social superiority and ultimately the right to rule. 21

A major tool in the PKI's battle to inculcate a socialist way of thinking in a state which was not yet wholly in progressive hands was the party's cultural affiliate, Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, Institute for People's Culture) founded in 1950. Lekra acted on one level as a sponsor of artists and writers, defending their professional interests as a kind of cultural trade union, as well as organizing cultural exchange programmes with communist countries. Its principal function, however, was to transform the terms of artistic discourse in Indonesia into terms compatible with Marxism.

...Lekra gives active support to everything that is new and progressive. Lekra actively assists in the demolition of the remains of colonial 'culture' which has left a part of our people in dark ignorance, with feelings of inferiority and with weakness of character. Lekra accepts our ancestral heritage critically and studies carefully all its aspects... and thus creatively endeavors to further the great tradition of our history and our nation, directing it toward a new culture which is rational and scientific... In short, in repudiating the antihuman, antisocial character of the culture that is not-of-the-people, in repudiating the violations of truth and beauty, Lekra helps shape a new society capable of self-advancement, a society developing its individuality which is both multifaceted and harmonious. 22

Reflecting the party's dualist approach to the state, Lekra distinguished between Art for the People and Art for Art's sake, the latter being regarded as dangerously reactionary, and it waged a protracted campaign in universities, the press and cultural circles against art and literature which it considered to be dangerous to the broad programme for creating the new communist human being in Indonesia by means of ideas. In the 1940's Tan Malaka, although then no longer a member of the PKI, expressed a similar need for creating first a new way of thinking based on what he termed Madilog (materialism, dialectics, logic). 23

The PKI's interpretation of the state as partly pro-people effectively closed it off from the path of armed revolution which brought its Chinese, Vietnamese and Kampuchean counterparts to power, although Aidit's writings are ambiguous on the question of whether revolutionary violence can be avoided in the long term. The only national revolt which the party unambiguously launched, namely the risings of 1926 and 1927, had the character of a putsch rather than a prolonged people's war. The role of the PKI leadership in planning the 1948 Madiun rising and the 1965 coup is much debated. The party's leader in 1948 was Musso, one of the leaders of the 1926-7 risings, and he talked openly of a 'Gottwald Plan' to seize power in a bloodless coup along the lines of the communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, 24 while in 1965 there was at least a wide public presumption that the party was planning a pre-emptive strike against the army leadership in a bid for greater political power. On the other hand there is also evidence that both events were at least in part the work of groups hostile to the PKI who wished to implicate it in an act of revolt. Whatever the facts of either matter, those affairs, too, were attempts to seize power by a swift strike at the centre of authority rather than by guerrilla war. In the aftermath of the 1965 coup, remnants of the party did commence a guerrilla struggle in the Blitar area in East Java, and this strategy was justified in a document known as the Otokritik (Self-criticism), which purports to be a post-coup evaluation and condemnation of the philosophies and strategies of the Aidit years produced by Indonesian Marxist revolutionaries still active in Indonesia. 25 Specifically, the document criticises the party for adopting the two aspects theory of the state, which it sees as the Soviet-style revisionism of the 'peaceful road' to socialism, and it calls for armed revolution in the countryside, based on a worker-peasant alliance under the leadership of the proletariat. The guerrilla struggle in East Java appears in fact to have ended by the early 1970's. This may, however, reflect not a change in strategy but simply military defeat and the fact that the geopolitical realities of Indonesia make revolution on the models of mainland Asia unlikely to succeed. The fact that Indonesia is an archipelago immeasurably complicates lines of supply and prevents the use of outlying regions as a base area for a march on the capital, while the main island of Java, the only region geographically suited to prolonged guerrilla warfare, happens to be
strongly Muslim and in recent times unsympathetic to communism.

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It is this general repudiation of armed revolution as the
technique for achieving the victory of the proletariat which has
opened the PKI to charges of modern revisionism. Whether In-
donesian Marxism lies wholly within the orthodox Marxist tradi-
tion may indeed be legitimately debated; it should be clear, how-
ever, that its analysis was not a variety of the so-called modern
revisionism of Tito, or Khurshchev or the Eurocommunists, for
it was not through the formal institutions of the bourgeois state
that the PKI hoped and expected to march to power. Rather, the
state itself could be transformed by the creation of pro-people
institutions, such as a new parliament or new cabinets with
different social bases, to replace the old anti-people institutions
which previously dominated it. The accession to positions of
power of communists such as Amir Syarifuddin, who became
first defence minister and then prime minister of the Republic
during the early years of the revolution, might appear to refute
this generalisation, and Amir is known personally to have been
an admirer of Tito. Nonetheless Amir’s rise to power appears to
have been an unexpected fruit of his refusal to collaborate with
Japanese fascism and even he appears to have attached limited
significance to holding office, for he resigned from power in
1948 after a parliamentary vote of no confidence, without having
explored all the possible avenues for retaining office. The propos-
ition that the PKI should seek power by parliamentary means
was then decisively defeated in the power struggle between Tan
Ling Djie, who briefly led the party from the Madiun affair to
1951, and Aidit who succeeded him. 26

Although the role of the party in Indonesian Marxist analy-
sis was not as leader of an armed revolution, the anti-people as-
pect of the state made the party an essential strategic element in
the struggle, as reservoir and disseminator of Marxist ideas and
understanding. From the earliest times, Marxists in Indonesia
faced government harassment, and they became acutely aware of
their vulnerability to repression, especially in the aftermath of
the razzias or round-ups which followed the abortive 1926-7
uprisings. Tan Malaka, one of the party’s chief theoreticians,
who had split with the PKI leadership over his opposition to the
risings, organised a new party, called Pari (Partai Republik In-
donesia), which almost immediately became a clandestine organ-
isation. Its members flitted in and out of the Netherlands Indies,
concentrating on propaganda, recruitment and above all survival
by means of a tight cell structure which enabled the party to sur-
vive vigorous Dutch repression for at least ten years after the
1926-7 risings. Although the party’s constitution of 1927 pro-
vided for a democratic centralist structure, its committees never
met and it was held together principally by the force of the ideas
it transmitted. 27

Much the same applied to the network of activists who re-
ained loyal to the PKI and who were reassembled by Musso in
1936 into the so-called ‘illegal PKI’. This party survived the clos-
ing years of Dutch rule and the even greater repression of the
Japanese occupation by employing a cell structure similar to that
of the Pari and by passing from one leader to another,
sometimes just a few steps ahead of the Japanese secret police, a
mandate to direct party activity. 28 Even when the party could
operate legally once more after the declaration of independence
in 1945, it chose to form only a relatively small open party and
to disperse its members amongst a variety of left wing parties.
The most notable of these was the ostensibly socialist Amir Syar-
ifuddin, who as defence minister and later prime minister
reached a position of greater power than any Indonesian commu-
nist before or since. 29 Reliable information on the fifties and af-
er is difficult to obtain, since clandestine activity by its very na-
ture was not discussed openly except by the PKI’s opponents,
who persistently alleged that the party maintained an illegal or-
organisation for the purpose of launching a revolutionary putsch. 30
The correct degree of clandestinity was certainly discussed exten-
sively in the party in the early 1950’s, with Tan Ling Djie becom-
ing the straw man in a debate with his successor over the merit
of maintaining working class parties other than the PKI. 31
Although Aidit argued on this occasion that the working class
was sufficiently politically conscious and the party’s political op-
opponents sufficiently weak to permit an open campaign by the
party, the perennial threat of repression by hostile sections of the
armed forces meant that the situation in Indonesia was far from
being so favourable that the PKI leaders were likely to consider
totally abandoning the clandestine organisation which was their
guarantee of the party’s long-term survival.
The debate over Tan Ling Djie-ism was conducted within
the broad PKI assumption that the primary role of the party was
as a reservoir and vessel for Marxist ideas rather than as a simple tool for revolutionary action. At issue in the debate was the question of how favourable conditions were in Indonesia for a florescence of the party; the victory of the optimists around Aidit opened the way for a vast expansion in PKI membership which took the party to an eventual membership of around three million. Party membership under such circumstances became the first rather than the final step in the development of commitment to Marxist ideas, and the party became a giant educational institution, not only for society but for its own members, running innumerable training and theoretical courses, maintaining a wide network of party schools, and even establishing a college for advanced theoretical study, the Aliacham Academy.

This emphasis on education had, in turn, major implications for the relationship of the party to the proletariat and of the proletariat to the rest of society. In selecting cadres and leaders the PKI characteristically emphasised commitment to Marxism over class origin. 'An ex-feudalist or ex-bourgeois', argued Soerjono, a junior party cadre during the revolution, 'who sides with the people's struggle is far better than a "proletarian" who bourgeoises himself.' 32 Indeed one of the persistent features of the PKI was its domination by individuals who were not proletarian in their class background, but rather came from petty bourgeois families. 33 The effect of this was to blur in practice the normally strict and careful categorisation of classes characteristic of Marxist thought. It was based theoretically, however, on the argument that the class nature of the mass of the party membership was more important than that of its leadership, because the party functioned primarily as a tool for raising consciousness.

While affirming the importance of Marxist ideology as a tool in the struggle, the PKI nonetheless recognised the class base of the anti-people aspect of the state and the need for an explicitly cross-class alliance to combat it. Although Semaun had made no reference in his 1921 report to a strategy of class alliance, it was the practical experience of the PKI in its dealings with Sarekat Islam which underpinned Sneevliet's 'bloc within' strategy. Under this strategy, small, weak Asian communist parties were urged to infiltrate larger mass nationalist parties in order to win over their mass following in the long term and to displace their bourgeois nationalist leadership. 34 The terms of this cross-class alliance varied from period to period, but it remained a national united front in conception, that is an alliance of Indonesian social groups with long term identical interests. An exception to this generalisation may be the illegal PKI of the late 1930's and 1940's, which appears from the limited evidence available to have closely followed the Dimitrov anti-fascist populist front doctrine which contributed significantly to Amir Syarifuddin's somewhat unexpected rise to power during the early revolution. 35

It was under Aidit that the nature of this class alliance was most clearly spelt out in terms of a national united front. Aidit attributed this formulation to Musso, who had returned to Indonesia again in 1948 to take charge of the party shortly before the Madjani Affair and had set out the idea of a national front in a pamphlet entitled A New Road for the Indonesian Republic. 36 The details of Aidit's united national front, however, bear the strong imprint of Mao Zedong's concept of the four-class alliance. Aidit expressed the PKI doctrine as follows:

The revolutionary forces in Indonesia are composed of all classes and groups suffering from imperialist and feudal oppression. They are the proletariat (the working class), the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie and other democrats. They must be united in an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal national united front based on the worker-peasant alliance and led by the working class. 37

In practice, as Mortimer has pointed out, Mao's four-class alliance could not easily be applied to Indonesia, for the categories of petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie bore no clear resemblance to existing socio-economic groups in Indonesia; the petty bourgeoisie included for instance both doctors and impoverished fishermen. Nor did the categories of feudal landowner and comprador bourgeoisie adequately encompass the forces opposed to the PKI, for they omitted the entrenched civil bureaucracy and the largely anti-communist army. The party was later to classify these separately as 'bureaucratic capitalists'. In fact the PKI identified the components of its national united front by their political attitudes rather than by their social class, as indeed is implied by the term 'other democrats' in Aidit's
statement above. The PKI’s distinction between its supposed ally, the national bourgeoisie, and its opponents the comprador bourgeoisie and the feudal landowners was based on the hostility of the latter to the party, irrespective of their landholdings or ties with Western imperialism.

The four-class alliance, therefore, functioned less as a guide to practical action than as a simple public affirmation of the PKI’s acceptance of what was at the time of 1954 party congress the accepted model for communist victory in Asian countries. There was indeed much in the party’s theory and practice which is difficult to reconcile with the four-class alliance as it is commonly understood. Although the PKI controlled Indonesia’s main trade union organisation, SOBSI, the PKI had within its original programme virtually no demands which directly addressed the interests of the proletariat. Those interests, the PKI argued, would be met by the ultimate socialist victory, not by direct action. Even the nature of that ultimate socialist victory was couched in the vague terms.

In the countryside, too, the PKI pursued a programme which was scarcely realistic in terms of the four-class alliance. Aidit had introduced for the first time a serious consideration of the peasantry as a major element in PKI strategy, to the point of saying that ‘the agrarian revolution is the essence of the people’s democratic revolution in Indonesia’. The party, however, chose the redistribution of land as its principal programme in rural areas. While this was clearly of interest to the peasants, there was simply not enough land in most areas on Java for redistribution to make a significant contribution to solving problems of rural production. Moreover, while there were significant differences in wealth in rural society, these differences were small by the standards of many Asian countries and they were blurred further by the existence of an intricate and subtle gradation of wealth and social status within the village. Polarisation was under way, but it fell far short of a clear division between an exploited peasant class and an oppressive landlord class. When the PKI, therefore, applied its criterion of sympathy or antipathy to the communist cause to rural Javanese society, it tended to coincide with a pre-existing division in society which was cultural rather than social. The PKI became identified with the abangan cultural stream within Javanese society, that is those whose belief, while nominally Muslim, is in fact a blend of Sufism, Hinduism and native Javanese mysticism, as opposed to the more orthodox Muslim santri. The party accepted as members abangan landlords and petty bureaucrats who saw it as an opportunity to fight long standing battles with the santri rather than to wage class war. Inconsistent as such activity may be with a strictly interpreted four-class alliance, it is eminently consistent with a programme of attracting people into the orbit of the party in order to educate them and to establish Marxism as a natural way of viewing the world within broad sections of society.

The discontinuity between the four-class alliance, with its Maoist overtones, and the actual theory and practice of the PKI is consistent with the party’s tradition of independence in its foreign relations. While recognising the international dimension of the struggle against imperialism, Indonesian Marxists have generally placed little emphasis either practically or theoretically on proletarian internationalism. Independence, even defiance, of the Comintern was a characteristic of the PKI in the 1920’s. On joining the Comintern in 1920, the PKI executive stated:

As has previously been explained, we have followed the Communist tactic here before there existed 'orders from Moscow' concerning it. We therefore need change nothing following our affiliation as far as our tactics or method of struggle are concerned.

Tan Malaka, although he had been Comintern representative in Southeast Asia in the early 1920’s, shared this view, arguing that the Pari could best ensure the survival of the Indonesian people’s movement ‘by relying in the first place on our own strength, and secondly, by marching independently but on a parallel course with the international proletarian movement.’

This lack of enthusiasm for the Comintern was based both on the theoretical self-sufficiency of the Indonesian revolution which derived from the thesis that Indonesians had been proletarianised by colonialism, and at times on more practical considerations. During the national revolution, in particular, PKI leaders wished to avoid provoking American intervention on the side of the Dutch and they sought accordingly to minimise their already meagre public connections with the Soviet Union. This pessimism concerning the power of the PKI’s imperialist enemies was associated, like pessimism over indigenous opponents, with
Tan Ling Djie, and it was modified somewhat by the Aidit leadership of the party, which felt confident, for instance, in attacking the United States as an imperialist power. Nonetheless, the party under Aidit, while it drew on ideas and terminology from other Marxist parties, insisted that it alone could undertake the task of ‘welding the truths of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of the Indonesian revolution itself.’ Aidit in particular argued that there was an important distinction to be made between the universal laws of Marxism, which were accessible to Marxists everywhere, and the particular laws which applied in individual countries and which could be grasped only by Marxists working under local conditions. Thus the party, for instance, stayed largely aloof in the Sino-Soviet split, though it established an important tactical alliance with the Chinese in the later Guided Democracy period.

The elements of Indonesian Marxist theory which centre on the national united front and the four class alliance lie comfortably in the broader application of Marxism to Asian conditions as developed by Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh and others. Indonesian Marxism, however, departed from this broad consensus in ignoring protracted armed struggle as a means by which the local communist party might eventually achieve power. This departure has traditionally been regarded by observers as a realistic and intelligent, though ultimately disastrous, tactical response to the political situation in which the party found itself in the 1950’s. Neither Mortimer, sympathetic to the PKI, nor van der Kroef, definitely unsympathetic to it, regarded this eschewal of armed revolution as having any great theoretical significance. A much smaller number of observers have treated this aspect of PKI policy as central to party theory, but they have done so largely in order to portray the party as revisionist in the Khrushchev manner and in order to use the party’s demise as a stick with which to beat revisionism.

In the context of the longer term history of Indonesian Marxism, however, the PKI’s abstention from violent revolution in the 1950’s and early 60’s was neither simply tactical nor an expression of revisionism. On the contrary, it reflected a long tradition within the party which derived ultimately from the proposition that history need not follow the strict chronological succession of historical stages outlined by orthodox Marxism; in particular, that two or more stages could and did exist within the one society. From this proposition, Indonesian Marxists could argue during the colonial period for an identity of interest between the proletariat and the nationalist movement. After the achievement of formal independence, then, they could consider Indonesian society to be not only semi-feudal and semi-colonial but also partly people’s democratic, by virtue of the increasing ideological hegemony of Marxist thought within the state. It is this partial shift of the arena of struggle from the barricades to the world of ideas which represents the most significant contribution of Indonesians to the application of Marxism to Asia.

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 61.
6. Ibid., p. 51.
10. Aidit, Indonesian Society and the Indonesian Revolution, p. 53.
13. For an example, strongly condemning Aidit on these grounds, see John Gerassi, Towards Revolution, Volume I, China, India, Asia, the Middle East, Africa (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1971), pp. 157-8.
14. See especially the writings of Muhammad Yamin, for example his Gadjah Mada, Pahlawan Persatuan Nusantara (Gadjah Mada, Hero of the Unity of the Archipelago) (APA, Jakarta, 1953), which portrayed the prime minister of a fourteenth century Javanese kingdom as a forerunner of Indonesian nationalism.
15. This argument is developed more extensively in Ruth T. McVey, ‘The Enchantment of the Revolution, History and Action in an Indonesian Communist Text’, in Anthony Reid and David Marr (eds.), Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia (Heinemann, Singapore, 1979), pp. 344-6. For Syahrir’s analysis, see Sultan Syahrir, Our Struggle (Cornell University Modern Indonesia Project, Ithaca, N.Y., 1968), pp. 24-8. For an example of this penetration of Marxist categories and terminology into everyday nationalist usage, see Mas Marco
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Aidit, D.N., The Indonesian Revolution and the Immediate Tasks of the Communist Party of Indonesia (Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1965). One of the works in which Aidit articulates most clearly his concept of the two aspects of the state. It is of course ironical that this work was published in Peking for international distribution while the philosophy it expounded was to be bitterly condemned by the Chinese only two years later.

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CONCLUSION: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE OF MARXISM-LENINISM IN ASIA

Nick Knight and Colin Mackerras

In the Introduction to this volume, we suggested the irony that a European system of thought which emphasised the role of the industrial proletariat in social change should have exercised such a dramatic political impact in the agrarian peasant-based societies of East and South East Asia. The irony becomes less apparent, however, when it is realised that European Marxism underwent a series of interpretations and reinterpretations to adapt its themes and ideas to a different social environment and changing world. Of these interpretations, the most important was Lenin's. Working within the general framework of the theory mapped out by Marx, Lenin supplied Marxism with a corpus of political strategies and organisational principles directly relevant to the task of waging revolution and seizing political power; and through his theory of imperialism, Lenin updated Marx's ideas on capitalism to explain its monopoly phase in which the struggle for colonies was the central feature. The Leninist interpretation of Marxism thus contained vital ideological ingredients of appeal to the activist temper of Asian revolutionaries, and provided a theory of revolution and social change directly relevant to pre-capitalist and colonial societies. Consequently, Asian Marxists from the 1920s onwards have generally claimed adherence to Marxism in its Leninist guise. They have not been just Marxists, but Marxist-Leninists.

While Leninism has become the orthodox form of Marxism for many Asian Marxists, there have been some important theoretical and practical departures from the theories and policies of Lenin. In other words, the process of the interpretation of Marx-