Political Islam in changing times
Sarekat Islam and Masyumi under the Dutch and Japanese occupations (1930-1945)

Djadi, berdiri di luar, bukan berdiam diri!!
(So, we stand outside, we are not staying silent!!)¹

The same forces that had ensured economic growth and prosperity in the 1920s were, a decade later, pulling the Indies down the road towards stagnation. The Great Depression that hit the West inevitably reached the colonies, stalling exports of manufactured goods and crop production. Schools were producing thousands of unemployable graduates, and trained clerks were forced to take up menial jobs, while older employees were fired to make room for younger (cheaper) workers. Nonetheless, in urban Java real wages increased, socio-economic conditions were no worse than usual and the general economic distress did not stir political discontent, much to the surprise of colonial authorities and nationalist leaders alike.²

The 1930s were characterized by the further fragmentation of the nationalist movement, which experienced external pressure from the heavy-handed colonial authorities, as well as internal pressure from the movement’s own inability to find solid common ground for a unified front. For Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia, this decade marked its isolation from mainstream politics, as the party pulled out of PPPKI’s ‘brown front’,³ rejected any form of cooperation with the Dutch and, under Kartosuwiryo’s guidance, became increasingly concerned with Islamic politics.

Sarekat Islam’s commitment to non-cooperation is often considered an earthquake second in damage only to the split

¹ Kartosuwiryo, Sikap hidjrah PSII, 1936.
³ Soekarno had begun to refer to a ‘brown front’ in late 1927, in opposition to Dutch talks of establishing a blank front (white front) under the leadership of the hardliner H.C. Zentgraff; see Hering, Soekarno: Founding father, pp. 134-4.
between the ‘red’ and ‘white’ wings that occurred in 1923, as membership dropped, leaders were expelled and splinter parties mushroomed.

Yet, as anticipated by the changes in the party statutes in December 1929, the 1930s should also be seen as a time when the religious soul of the party gained prominence, ‘freed’ as it was both from the controlling hand of Tjokroaminoto, who died in 1934, and from diplomatic efforts to establish a common strategy with the secularists. Even as Japan took over Java and Sumatra in 1942, effectuating major changes in the independence movement, the two groups were to remain separated, each with its own ideological and strategic concerns.

KARTOSUWIRYO: A RISING STAR?

In January 1930 the Dutch authorities welcomed Kartosuwiryo’s disappearance from the pages of Fadjar Asia, praising the editorial board for ‘coming to its senses’ and realizing the threat presented by his ‘fanatical’ and ‘intense’ articles. The Overzicht also voiced its disapproval of the party’s choice to keep Kartosuwiryo within the leadership cadres. Kartosuwiryo had only been appointed in mid November 1929, as Agoes Salim had embarked for Geneva to attend the International Labour Conference meeting in December, but the brevity of his appointment was not tied to his ideas, as the Dutch had instead assumed.

Kartosuwiryo continued to hold tight his position in the party; if anything, the immediate future saw his influence on shaping PSI policies increase. This holds true for the period between the 1930 Yogyakarta Congress, when the non-cooperation hijrah policy became central to the party, and 1936, when the party’s sturdy commitment to this approach led to the deterioration of relations between Kartosuwiryo and Agoes Salim, a rift that ultimately resulted in the fragmentation of the leadership.

It is likely that Kartosuwiryo’s withdrawal from the editorial board was related to Salim’s return to Batavia and to his own bad health, rather than to changing winds in the party. Fadjar Asia advertised Kartosuwiryo’s presence at a PSI-Jakarta meeting on 5-6 January 1930, mentioning that he had participated ‘although he has now [9 January] retreated to the mountains near Malan-

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4 Algemeen overzicht, January 1930.
5 Hadji A. Salim, ‘Ma’loemat’, Fadjar Asia, 14 November 1929.