Minorities in Sulawesi
Minahasa and Toraja

Even more strongly than in the Moluccas, Toraja or Batakland, Protestantism had become part of the ethnic character of the Minahasa. This was probably the reason why we see here the reverse picture of the situation on Flores during the Japanese occupation. The Protestant Japanese minister Rev Shusho Miyahara was nominated head of the Office for Religious Affairs and secretary to the Governor of Sulawesi after his arrival in March 1942. Miyahara had been a missionary, working with the Salvation Army in Indonesia between 1927 and 1934. He had continued his work from 1936 on in Surabaya where he established a Japanese Congregation. In 1939 he was sent back to Japan by the Dutch administration on suspicion of espionage. In imitation of the policy in Japan, where in 1941 all Protestant churches were persuaded to enter one united church, he started regional Councils of Churches, one for North and Central Sulawesi, others for South Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and the Moluccas. Membership was obligatory for all Protestant churches in these regions, including Pentecostals, Adventists and others. The Catholic Church (also recognised by Japan as part of an international body with a government of its own, the Vatican), was also included in this more or less ecumenical programme, that was later supervised by another Japanese Protestant minister, Hamazaki. After the war this top-down ecumenical effort collapsed and the Indonesian Council of Churches, established in 1950 after regional councils were (again) established from 1947, did not directly find its inspiration in this Japanese directive. The teacher Hendrik Tinangon was instructed by the Japanese administration to represent the Catholics, together with two others, N. Runtu and A. Tene. Tinangon was successful in obstructing the Catholic participation in the enforced union of churches. In February 1944 two Minahasan diocesan priests, the brothers Simon and Wenceslas Lengkong, arrived in Minahasa, after finishing their studies in Yogyakarta and ordination by bishop Soegijapranata. On 3 December 1944 the Japanese priest Franciscus Nakagawa joined the two indigenous priests. In the memory of the Minahasan Catholics he was a true and exceptional priest.1

Sulawesi can be seen as part of northeast Indonesia. Differing from southeast Indonesia, it was not the revolution of 1965–66 that brought a political landslide. In South Sulawesi it was the Darul Islam rebellion of Kahar Muzakkar who in the 1950s joined troops who refused to be demobilised. From 1952 he openly led a guerrilla war for an Islamic government in South Sulawesi. Only in the late 1950s could the central government control the region outside the major towns, but Kahar Muzakkar himself was killed only in February 1965. On 19 August 1954 the MSC priest Joos Jötten was kidnapped by Darul Islam troops, together with the German medical doctor in Palu, Georg Uhrmann, while they were on their way to Donggala in Torajaland. They were liberated on 13 May 1955. An even longer detention in the south was that of CICM priest Harry Versteden between 1953 and 1961, as will be mentioned below. Until the early 1960s the whole island lived in a politically insecure condition.

In the northern region a rebellion against the central government of Jakarta started in 1957 and lasted until 1961, with Minahasa as a centre. This PRRI or Permesta rebellion was not religiously motivated but the rich plantation areas of Minahasa and East Sumatra joined together against the high taxes and corrupt and inefficient government of Jakarta. In fact this rebellion took the character of a civil war and divided many villages and towns. Also within the churches there were supporters of the rebellion as well as supporters of the central government. The insecure situation caused, besides a division of society and many casualties, a sad decline in prosperity. After mid-1965 the region experienced political and economic stability and slow but steady growth. The economic crisis of 1997 (krismon) did not hit the export oriented economy of Minahasa, because coffee prices rose. Minahasa was also not directly impacted by the inter-religious conflicts of the period 1999–2002 but in the central regions of Sulawesi, especially in Poso, and also on the southwest coast of Palu, there were numerous incidents and, again, a long period of insecurity.

As in most other regions of Indonesia, Catholics remained loyal to their faith and continued some kind of spiritual life under leadership of catechists and teachers during the Japanese administration. The foreign missionaries who had been in detentions camps for three and a half years needed time to recover. Bishop W. Panis’ health was broken and he returned to Europe. In March 1947 he was replaced by Bishop Nico Verhoeven, who lead the restoration of the structure of the colonial missionary strategy in Minahasa, based on the educational institutions that were again subsidised by the Dutch, starting from April 1946.

On 1 August 1948 Bishop Nico Verhoeven issued a document of seven pages, directed towards the clergy but with all kind of regulations for the laity as well.