
Few figures loom larger in the history of militant Islamism in Indonesia than Sekarmaji Marjam Kartosuwiryo (1905-1962). Kartosuwiryo was a leader in the proudly anti-colonial Sarekat Islam party who, in the aftermath of the Dutch re-invasion of West Java in 1947-1948, established the Darul Islam (DI) movement. Disappointed with what they regarded as Republican acquiescence to Dutch demands, on 7 August 1949 Kartosuwiryo and his comrades upped the ante, establishing the Islamic State of Indonesia (Negara Islam Indonesia, NII). Although Masyumi, the leading Muslim party in government at the time, struggled desperately to devise a non-violent solution, NII militias soon clashed with the fledgling Republic’s armed forces in West Java. In late 1950, Kartosuwiryo rebuffed efforts by Prime Minister Muhammad Natsir to reach an accord, because, as Chiara Formichi explains in this timely study, ‘Kartosuwirjyo was committed to defending the “sacred right” . . . of the Islamic ummah to live in an Islamic state’ (p. 155).

The conflict dragged on until Kartosuwiryo’s capture and, after an accelerated trial, execution in 1962. Over the next decades, Kartosuwiryo was denounced by Pancasila nationalists as a traitor. Muslim activists portrayed him as a dedicated religious nationalist led astray by the chaos of the post-colonial period. The Darul Islam underground, and the Jemaah Islamiyah network that emerged from its ranks in the 1990s, lionized Kartosuwiryo as a principled fighter in the jihad to establish God’s law in Indonesia.

Chiara Formichi’s *Islam and the making of the Nation* is based on a substantial revision of a Ph.D. submitted in 2009 to the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. In an effort to present a ‘balanced account’ (p. 12) of the man, the book draws on an impressive array of materials, including archival reports, Kartosuwiryo’s writings, and studies of the DI published from the 1950s to the 2000s. The author explains that her book also aims ‘to bring religion back into the analysis of Darul Islam, taking Islam not just as a means for rallying popular support . . ., but rather as the ideological foundation of Kartosuwiryo’s activities’ (p. 6).

Following a preface that outlines the book’s content and aims, Chapter 1 describes the origins and early growth of the Indonesian nationalist movement.
Kartosuwiryo, Formichi reminds us, was no provincial Muslim scholar, but ‘a product of the Indies’ Dutch schooling and society’ (p. 17), and someone who ‘substantially interacted’ with the luminaries of the Muslim wing of the nationalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s. This chapter demonstrates that Muslim nationalism did not so much decline in the 1920s (as many previous histories suggest), but entered a new phase of ‘laying out the platform for an independent state of Indonesia based on Islamic precepts’ (p. 24). Formally untrained in the Islamic sciences, the focus of Kartosuwiryo’s writings at this time shifted from socioeconomic grievances to Islamic nationalism and shari’a law. The freedom for which Indonesian nationalists called, Kartosuwiryo wrote, is not important for its own sake, but only to allow the implementation of shari’a. This theme was to figure prominently in Kartosuwiryo’s appeals in years to come.

Chapter 2 follows Kartosuwiryo’s career from the first days of the Great Depression to the end of the Japanese era. Dissenting from mainline nationalist strategies, the Sarekat Islam pursued a policy of non-cooperation with the Dutch. The movement compared its strategy to the Prophet Muhammad’s migration (hijrah) from Mecca to Medina, thereby signaling that it was really a step on the road to the establishment of an Islamic state. The Japanese occupation of Java intensified competition between Muslim and non-confessional nationalists, projecting nation-wide organizations into an increasingly politicized countryside.

A lynchpin in the book’s historical narrative, Chapter 3 examines the years from 1945 to 1947. Masyumi enjoyed broad support among the Muslim public, and from his perch as party secretary Kartosuwiryo pressed for a deeper Islamization of party policies, albeit at this point still within the framework of parliamentary politics. However, no tactic in this period was certain or secure. The Dutch invasion of Java in July 1947 ‘transformed the Priangan into a theatre for total warfare and would push Kartosuwiryo to abandon formal politics’ (p. 89). His aim now was social revolution—but not of the secular socialist or nationalist variety, but through implementation of shari’a, first at the individual level, then in society, and finally in and through the state.

Chapter 4 highlights the efforts of Kartosuwiryo and the DI to yank the Islamic state forward from theoretical ideal to political reality, in the period from 1947 to 1949. The DI evolved quickly in this period, from a defensive unit willing to cooperate with the Republican Army, to growing conflict