

The Indonesian Communist Party

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(1497 words in text)

Asia's first communist party was *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI). It was formed in 1920 by social democrats who also worked within Indonesia's first modern mass based nationalist movement, *Sarekat Islam*, to thus broaden their social base beyond trade unions and unite as many as possible against 'semi-feudalism' and colonialism. Their foremost leader, Sneevliet (Maring), brought the strategy to Comintern's second congress, got it adopted and spread it to the new Chinese party as well. Subsequently, however, the Chinese applied instead Stalin's idea of close co-operation with the Kuomintang and were massacred in Shanghai; and the Indonesians failed to take over the mass movement and got lost in splits and abortive revolts in western Java (1925-1926) and Sumatra (1927).

The PKI did not regain significance until the forties, when Leftist youth groups took part in fighting the Japanese, in forming the new Republic, and in resisting the thereafter-returning Dutch. While non-Stalinist communists (under Tan Malaka) linked up with radical nationalists, the mainstream tried Moscow's anti-fascist popular front and managed to get a few followers into government. As this cabinet lost out to a conservative coalition in 1948 and the cold war began, the communists (led by Musso) opted however for a hard line with the party at the helm. Subsequently the PKI was threatened in its stronghold in Solo (Central Java) and the members in nearby Madiun staged a revolt that enabled the government to crack down on communism in general.

Two years later four young leaders – Aidit (chairman), Lukman, Njoto and Sudisman – gained control of the run down party. Having failed to resume the politics of confrontation and being forced underground, the leaders reappraised the situation and decided on a more careful strategy that preceded the international recommendations.

The PKI retained the hard-line of leading popular fronts ‘from below’ but also recalled Lenin’s critique of Left wing communism by adding a united front ‘from above’ with progressive bourgeois-nationalists. These were identified based on their position with regard to anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. They included the nationalists behind President Sukarno, and their friends in the armed forces and pragmatic Muslim groups – as against pro-Western socialists, Muslims, and their allies within the army.

The PKI’s new strategy began to bear fruit quite soon. The nationalists accepted the PKI as an ally and provided basic protection. The party’s front organisations grew quickly. Nationalist governments supported by the PKI gained the upper hand. Indonesia played a significant role in the Third World (later Non-Aligned) movement initiated at the Bandung conference. The pro-Western anti-communists began to be politically isolated and did not live up to expectations in the 1955 elections. The PKI, on the contrary, became the fourth largest party and made dramatic additional gains in the partial 1957 local elections. These advances were primarily in Java-Bali with favourable cultural identities, but the PKI also had strongholds on the ‘outer islands’ and it was Indonesia’s only modern party with a genuine programme and class base.

Theoretically, however, there were two problems. First, that the relevance of ‘anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism’ were never analysed critically in the Indonesian context but taken for granted. Second, that the politically selected allies were automatically

upgraded to the so-called national bourgeoisie – the members of which, in accordance with Stalin's and Mao's determinism, simply must favour land reform and an independent economy.

These problems gained real importance in the mid-fifties. The attempts to build a national economy through import substitution were undermined by rent seeking; and Java was pitted against the outer islands, which relied more on export of colonial products. The regional opposition turned into a rebellion that related to the cold war as well as Sukarno's vision of the Third World movement.

Sukarno countered this by calling for national unity and nationalisation of foreign companies in face of the Dutch refusal to give up the last part of its colony, West New Guinea, and American support for the regional rebels.

The PKI was enthusiastic. The new trend even fitted into Moscow's new ideas of national democracies and 'non-capitalism'. But Sukarno did not only rely on the PKI and his usual allies among nationalists and pragmatic Muslims. He also linked up with the central military command to curb the regional rebellion. In return, the military took over most of the nationalised companies, gained influence within the bureaucracy and contained the PKI. Moreover, liberal parliamentary democracy was curbed in favour of so-called guided democracy.

The PKI's support of these measures was possibly the turning point. On the one hand, the PKI gained sustained protection and more followers and influence, including land reform in principle and anti-imperialism in reality. By the early-sixties the party was the largest outside the Soviet Union and China with 2-3 million members and 15-20 million organised sympathisers, next to one sixth of Indonesia's entire population at the time. On

the other hand, it lost the support of most intellectuals, it lost the democracy that had served its expansion so well, and it lost the chances to launch class based struggle among workers and peasants. For instance, an attempt in 1960 at union based critique of workers' poor standard of living and the increasing corruption had to be called back in face of outright repression by the police and the armed forces.

There was no organised opposition in the party, but the innovative way in which the leadership tried to solve the problems was clearly inspired by Beijing: to launch class struggle within the framework of Sukarno's anti-imperialism.

First, the increasingly powerful military and their associates within state and business were categorised (with Mao) as 'bureaucratic capitalists' who rested with world capitalism and Western imperialism. Logically, it would thus be possible to disclose their true character and undermine their powers by radicalising Sukarno's campaigns, including by nationalising more companies, demanding good patriotic management and confronting the British and Americans. However, while such campaigns proved feasible, the strategy neither threatened the fundamental positions and interests of the enemies nor allowed the workers to unleash their capacity. The 'bureaucratic capitalists' were rather able to use state and nationalism to boost their primitive accumulation of capital.

Second, the poor implementation of anti-feudal policies was explained in terms of unchallenged landlords who would be possible to fight by launching popular campaigns among the peasants and rural poor for consistent implementation of Sukarno's land reform. Again, the campaigns proved quite feasible but the outcome was disappointing. Serious infightings among the peasants and inability to isolate big landlords forced the PKI to call off the offensive. The control of land was obviously not organised in such an

easily noticeably and concentrated form as that perceived of in the land reform legislation but also by various indirect methods.

In brief, while the PKI seemed to be quite powerful, it was in reality dependent on the protection of Sukarno and unable to make use of its popular mass base. Hence, it must have been rational for the leadership to rather resort to elitist manoeuvres when rumours were spread by mid-1965 that Sukarno had fallen ill and that generals were planning a coup but that lower ranking officers were preparing counter measures.

On the 30 September, the dissident officers tried to arrest the generals. Some PKI-related activists were also engaged and a few top-leaders were informed – but otherwise the communist movement knew nothing. As the actions failed, General Suharto (who had not been targeted but possibly informed) sidetracked his superiors and gained control of the situation. The details are still disputed. Many actors with different scenarios were involved.

Suharto ‘restored unity’ within the armed forces by putting the blame on the communists. A massive propaganda-campaign with fabricated lies portrayed the communists as a major threat against law and order and peace and security. The message was that Indonesia had to be cleansed from such evil elements. The West supported the campaign while the Soviet Union was passive and China did little. Suharto formed a special command for ‘the restoration of security and order’ and used his own strategic reserve as a spearhead for the arresting, torturing and killing of perceived and real communists. Quite frequently the troops mainly instigated, authorised and directed various local militias, vigilantes and militant activists in political and religious youth organisations to do the job. Nobody knows how many people were arrested, tortured and

killed. The usual estimate of the number of killed is between 0,5 and 1 million people. The PKI was unable to put up any significant resistance. The movement was eliminated, repression was sustained for decades and Indonesia has yet to come to terms with its history of political violence.

Competing factions of surviving middle ranked leaders have tried to retain at least formally the PKI, initially for instance with the support of the Chinese. But they have neither been able to produce intellectually convincing analysis of the experiences and challenges, nor initiate significant activity on the ground. Other perspectives, movements and groups are in the forefront of the reinvention of radical popular action and political representation in Indonesia.

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