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REVIEW ESSAYS

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Bob Hering, *Soekarno; Founding father of Indonesia 1901-1945*.
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90.6718.191.9. Price: EUR 30.00 (paperback).

*Mahatma Persatoean*¹. That was the name Soekarno gave himself back in 1926. Mahatma, the Great Soul; so already he saw himself as the great inspiring force needed to achieve his ideal of an independent and united Indonesian state. But he used the concept *persatoean*, united, cooperating out of free will, and not *kesatoean*, a uniformity imposed from above.

He was 25 years old then and had just written his masterpiece, *Nationalisme, Islamisme dan Marxisme*. In this article he developed the vision that the new political forces of Indonesia, inspired by the three major types of *Weltanschauung* which they embodied, should cooperate to create a *jembatan mas*, a 'golden bridge', to *Merdeka*, Freedom, beyond which – *di seberang jembatan mas* – the independent nation-state of Indonesia would give meaning to that freedom. In Soekarno's vision this meant realizing social justice; the long-expected coming of the Ratu Adil, the Just King, was equated with the coming of this justice. Independence, then, was not only a political but also an economic goal, and democracy was to be a socio-economic as well as a political phenomenon.

Later, in another equally famous text, his speech of 1 June 1945, Sukarno elaborated on this when he laid out the philosophical basis of the independent nation-state of Indonesia, the Panca Sila. On the basis of these two texts, and given the fact that on 17 August 1945, together with Hatta, Soekarno had proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Indonesia, president John F. Kennedy welcomed Soekarno to the United States in 1961 by introducing him to the public as the 'Washington and Jefferson of Indonesia'. What a long way Dutch public opinion still has to go by comparison, given the fact that even in 1999 a biography entitled *Soekarno; Dutch subject* was published in Dutch by Lambert Giebels: *Soekarno; Nederlandsch onderdaan; Biografie 1901-*

¹ This essay is based on a speech held at the KITLV in Leiden on 28 October 2002, on the occasion of the Dutch presentation of the book under review.

1950 (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker).

When Bob Hering's *Soekarno; Founding father of Indonesia 1901-1945* was presented at the Indonesian Embassy in The Hague (legally on Indonesian soil, in accordance with the author's wishes), this point was given full attention in two speeches. Joesoef Isak, a well-known Indonesian journalist and publisher, expressed the wish that Hering's biography be published in Dutch in a paperback edition, enabling the Dutch public itself to correct the mistaken image which Soekarno in his view still has (partly due to the above-mentioned biography by Giebels) in the Netherlands. Isak listed a number of specific 'misconceptions', including the assumption that Soekarno collaborated wholeheartedly with the fascist Japanese regime. Professor Han Bing Siong, secondly, pointed out in his speech that whereas in the Netherlands, and in that very same Dutch biography too, Soekarno is portrayed as a coward, there is much evidence to the contrary. For example, extensive personal research by Han Bing Siong into the 'incident' (also mentioned by Hering in his final chapter) of 28 October 1945, when according to Dutch sources Soekarno did not dare to leave his plane at Surabaya because of a hail of *pemuda* bullets, indicates that this version of events can be entirely refuted.²

Now, fortunately, we have in *Soekarno; Founding father of Indonesia* a biography written and published in the Netherlands (albeit not in the Dutch language) which will cause any open-minded reader to endorse J.F. Kennedy's words. In this review essay, however, I want to discuss Bob Hering's *magnum opus* mainly in relation to the meaning which Soekarno has for present-day Indonesia rather than for the Dutch. Now that the nation-state of Indonesia has been *di seberang jembatan mas* for fully 57 years, what has become of the visions which 'Bung Karno' once had for it?

It is worth admitting at the outset that my answer to that question will not be a sanguine one. But let me also express my strong conviction that if Soekarno's vision of social justice in the Indonesian archipelago is ever to be realized, then a deep understanding of Soekarno's ideas, as published in many thousands of pages of text last year at the centenary of his birth, will be a necessity, and that a thorough and critical biography of the man himself is of the utmost importance when studying those many articles and speeches. This first, excellent, well-documented, and very detailed volume of Bob Hering's projected two-part biography seems to meet that demand. Its greatest value for present-day Indonesia, in my view, stems from the fact that in it the author deliberately places much emphasis on Soekarno's writings and speeches, which are carefully analysed in the political and

² See Han Bing Siong, 2000, 'Sukarno-Hatta versus the *pemuda* in the first months after the surrender of Japan (August-November 1945)', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 156:233-73.

social context of their particular era. Also instructive, especially for a Dutch readership, is Hering's conscious interaction in the text with other Soekarno biographies including *Soekarno; Nederlandsch onderdaan*, the ideas in which he contests partly on the basis of numerous Indonesian-language sources which Giebels did not use. A further merit of *Soekarno; Founding father of Indonesia* is that (despite, one might almost say, its title) it locates Soekarno's thought within a wider Indonesian intellectual tradition to which he was far from being the only contributor. It is precisely the kind of critical discourse which existed among Indonesian intellectuals before the Second World War which is urgently needed in contemporary Indonesia.

Meanwhile I have also been able to read the prologue to the second volume. As a result I must say my expectations are high, and I would like to express my wish that Bob Hering may retain the strength to finish this life's work. I do, nevertheless, foresee a number of pitfalls. In his prologue to Volume 2, Hering correctly points out that for four decades, from 1926 until 1965, Soekarno left his mark on the history of Indonesia. And nobody doubts that without Soekarno the *jembatan mas*, the golden bridge of freedom, would not have been crossed in 1945. But what about the 20 years after 1945? In what way did they contribute to the realization of social justice? And how are those 20 years imprinted in the collective memory of Indonesian society?

A good opportunity to find an answer to that question is provided by the festivities surrounding Soekarno's hundredth birthday. A road show, as it is called in present-day Indonesia, of exhibitions and seminars toured the entire country for months. Everywhere there appeared to be huge public interest and great hunger for information about a man who had acquired mythical proportions in the national imagination. Soekarno, in the words of Niniek Karim, now exists in 'hyper-reality' – half human, half god.³ The Balinese say he symbolizes the *titisan Visnu*, the blessing rains of the God Visnu. But such adoration of a virtually mythical figure surely in no way contributes to a critical analysis of Bung Karno's thoughts and vision, nor to the question of what those thoughts and that vision can still mean to the present, deep crisis of the Indonesian nation-state.

Last year I was able to witness parts of the Soekarno centenary celebrations. What struck me most was that young people, including students, only knew about Bung Karno from hearsay. Among other things I participated in an interactive radio programme which enabled youngsters from Manado, Makassar, and Yogyakarta to put forward remarks and questions on the subject of Soekarno. Despite the fact that a large number of publications about

³ Niniek L. Karim, 2001, 'Soekarno di wilayah "hyperreal"', in: St. Sularto (ed.), *Dialog dengan sejarah; Soekarno seratus tahun*, pp. 402-13. Jakarta: Kompas.

Bung Karno had already been published in 2001, including the crucial complete reprint of all his writings and speeches, the young people's remarks and questions turned out to be deplorably shallow.

The seven-volume series containing Soekarno's collected writings is entitled *Seri Pemikiran Bung Karno*. There is also a separate publication, *Tjamkan Pantjasila; Bung Karno, penggali Pancasila dan penyambung lidah rakyat Indonesia* [Study the Panca Sila; Bung Karno, designer of the Panca Sila and voice of the Indonesian people]. Although I was told that these books were selling like hot cakes, based on my many contacts with students in Indonesia I genuinely wonder how many have actually read Soekarno's writings, let alone really taken them to heart. Indeed, for an indication of the confusion surrounding those writings we need only look at the way in which Bung Karno's five children, each one now with a political party or group of his or her own, each claim and interpret part of the political and ideological heritage of their father, the founding father, *Mahatma Persatoean*. Such a thing, of course, is possible only because that heritage is not deeply rooted in society as a whole.

There is no doubt that the New Order is in large measure to blame for this. At the beginning of the Soeharto period there was a deliberate campaign of de-Soekarno-ization of Indonesian history. Subsequently, from among the people and as an expression of protest against the New Order regime, Soekarno's portrait appeared again in public; but then as a mythical hero, without any substance and disconnected from his ideas and vision. During Soeharto's New Order the Panca Sila, in Soekarno's view the binding force in the struggle for independence, had become an ideological straitjacket, and consequently it was thrown on the dumping-ground of history in 1998 together with Soeharto himself after he had been forced to make way for Habibie. But will Indonesia be able to exist as a nation-state without that golden formula once designed by Soekarno? And what needs to happen before views like those expressed by Soekarno in his writings once again receive sufficient support from opinion-makers within Indonesian society?

An initiative that I think could be of interest in this context is the publication by the daily newspaper *Kompas*, in June last year, of 31 Soekarno-related essays by intellectuals, journalists, and artists. The special issue had a circulation of many hundreds of thousands and copies sold fast; a subsequent edition in book form was also reprinted a number of times. Entitled *Dialog dengan sejarah: Soekarno seratus tahun* [Dialogue with history: a Soekarno centenary] and edited by St. Sularto, it attempts in a critical way to define Soekarno's place in the history of Indonesia and his meaning for that history and for the future of his country. I am very impressed by the quality of most of the contributions, and convinced that a critical biography covering the period 1945-1965 will not only accentuate, but possibly in large part also answer, the many questions put forward in *Kompas* – questions and answers

that are so badly needed now in the public debate in Indonesia. Bob Hering, in the first part of his biography, has shown how this can be done. For instance, by extensively examining the contents and background of Bung Karno's correspondence (from his exile in Ende on the isle of Flores) with Ahmad Hassan, the leader of Persatoean Islam in Bandung, Hering clarifies and at the same time provides insight into Bung Karno's vision on Islam. One can only hope that the same vision may now play a part in the discussion within Islam throughout the world, but especially in Indonesia where such a discussion has become an absolute necessity after the Bali terrorist bombing of 12 October 2002. In his letters to Hassan Bung Karno points out the need for historical insight, especially within Islamic education. Among the great sins of the New Order one can mention that under Soeharto Indonesia as a nation-state was detached from its own history, and that in the field of inter-religious relations mouths were silenced, creating a situation in which supporters of different religious movements in the country today seem unable to understand one another.

In this context a profound study of Bung Karno's 1926 work *Nationalisme, Islamisme dan Marxisme*, which he wrote at the age of just 25, is still valuable. The way in which he then called for unity – *persatoean* – of the main large politico-ideological and cultural-religious movements of his time is still relevant. Not in order to create a kind of watered-down syncretism, as Bernhard Dahm in his culturological biography *Sukarno and the struggle for Indonesian independence* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969) seems to suggest, but because Bung Karno's analysis combines a deep sense of appreciation for 'being different' with an even deeper conviction that based on that tolerance, rigorous cooperation in pursuit of a common goal is possible. Then that goal was the *jembatan mas* to freedom; now, beyond the golden bridge, it is my strong conviction that social justice can only be realized when it is based on an understanding of the need for *persatoean* equal to Soekarno's. According to Bung Karno himself in 1958, all he did after 1926 was further elaborate on that original theme of *persatoean*.⁴

This is not, of course, to deny that as a guiding principle in politics, unity can be dangerous. One of the initiators of the abovementioned *Kompas* volume, the critical Indonesian intellectual Dr Daniel Dhakidae, argues that it was because of Soekarno's 'obsession' with *persatoean*, and possibly also his 'sense of destiny', that in 1959 he made the mistake of listening to General Nasution and giving the Indonesian armed forces (TNI), as a 'socio-political and functional force', a formal place within his scheme for maintaining the

⁴ H. Amin Arjoso (ed.), 2001, *Tjamkan Pantjasila* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pada Bangsaaku), p. 65.

⁵ In this context it is interesting to note that the former general T.B. Simatupang, who resigned from active duty in 1953 out of discontent with Soekarno's handling of the 17 October

unity of the nation.⁵ In the same volume the historian Taufik Abdullah quotes a fascinating remark by Hatta to the effect that by issuing the decree providing the armed forces with a place in the political arena, Soekarno became the opposite of Goethe's Mephistopheles, the evil spirit who brought about good. Soekarno, the good spirit, *Mahatma Persatoean*, brought about evil: the bloody fratricide of the mid-1960s, which can only be described in the language of an epic play like the *Mahabharata*. Philosopher and theologian Frans Magnis-Suseno, for his part, examines Soekarno's important 1933 work *Mentjapai Indonesia Merdeka* and argues that for Bung Karno *persatoean* was above all a romantic concept, which made it quite unsuited for resolving the bitter political conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s.

Now, in the twenty-first century, a new generation of Indonesians will have to rediscover the long road to democracy. In the new Indonesian 'dialogue with history', it will be necessary among other things to critically re-analyse Soekarno's relationship with the Armed Forces and the role which the TNI played, and still plays, in politics. In this way the military themselves may become aware that their own interpretation of their part in 57 years of independence is one-sided to say the least, and on many points simply untruthful. They and their allies exchanged Soekarno's *persatoean* for *kesatoean*, uniformity, and transformed the national slogan, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, Unity in Diversity, into a chafing straitjacket. It is from their ideological and political clutches that from Aceh to Papua, all kinds of communities are now trying to free themselves. To the many political forces within Islam, meanwhile, Bung Karno's views as laid down in his letters from Endeh can be a source of inspiration and a guide to how the Muslim majority within the Indonesian nation-state can become an ally of, rather than a threat to, the country's many minority groups.

A thorough and critical biography, especially one which covers the period of Soekarno's presidency, can certainly help to prevent present and future generations of intellectuals and politicians from repeating Bung Karno's mistakes of naive romanticism and populism. To conclude, I would again like to express my wish that Bob Hering, with the loyal support of his wife Netty, may retain the strength to finish the second volume of his Soekarno biography to the same high standards set by the first.

1952 Affair', was among those who, in the heyday of the New Order, participated in the commemorative volume *80 tahun Bung Karno* edited by Aristides Katoppo and published in Jakarta by Sinar Harapan in 1981. In his profound and critical but also admiring contribution to this book, Simatupang pointed out that in 1926 Bung Karno had given no attention to the military as a political factor. This, he suggested, might help explain the innocence with which the president incorporated the armed forces into the structure of Guided Democracy alongside (or rather, in opposition to) the Indonesian Communist Party.

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