Caught between Three Fires: The Javanese Pangulu under the Dutch Colonial Administration (1882-1942)

As a high government institution in the Islamic kingdoms in Java, the pangulu had been in existence since the founding of the kingdom of Demak in the early sixteenth century. Together with two other top executive offices, those of the patih (chief minister) and the adipati (military commander), it was but one level below the sultan and was headed by a pangulu (chief religious leader). The general duties of the pangulu were guiding the kingdom’s subjects in observing Islamic Law (Syariat Islam) and overseeing religious administration, from the level of the palace to that of the villages. For this reason, this administrative hierarchy was central to that of the civil government. Specifically, the office of the pangulu administered law and justice, which when it was founded, covered both religious and secular legal matters.

When the Dutch came to Java in 1595, the office of the pangulu was founded to deal with the Islamic territories of the Javanese state. It became the primary interface between the Islamic states and the indigenous communities under their authority. The VOC then slowly began to establish its control over Java until the end of the eighteenth century when the entire island fell under its authority. Early on in the establishment of its control in Batavia, the VOC took the necessary steps to connect the territory to European law. This initially failed, because the people of that area already had their own system of law which they generally obeyed. Yet, working through local rulers, the VOC was gradually able to impose its laws. It succeeded primarily in those areas of law that were the basis of their power, such as marriage, civil law, which could easily be divorced from the administration of Islamic Law. Those aspects of law that could not be separated from Islamic Law continued to be administered in the customary way. It was for this reason that the institution of the pangulu continued to exist and to be a focus of the application of the Islamic Law. Until its demise in the last year of the eighteenth century, the VOC considered the pangulu to be the primary native legal officials. The pangulu were, therefore, included as advisors to the general council for native affairs established by the VOC to carry out administration of religious affairs. This immediately indicated a lessening of the authority of the local people. They lost control of an institution that until then had been a factor in maintaining their power. The pangulu themselves now felt their position had changed “between three fires” (tussen dri vuur). The first “fire” was God, to whom they owed their spiritual allegiance. The second “fire” was the colonial power, the entity that now gave them the authority to exercise administration of religious affairs. The third “fire” was the people, whom they had to serve. These three sides differed not only in character, but also in aspiration. This study does not discuss the first “fire” as this is a difficult matter to identify, both because of its personal character and because there could be social variation. Even so, it is fully realized that this “fire” was a motivating as well as a controlling force over the behaviour of the pangulu.

In the relationship between the rulers and the people, the role played by the pangulu and the religious officials beneath them was obviously that of mediation. Javanese and Muslims’ Muslim radicalism during the nineteenth century forced the colonial government to be on its guard at all times against the possible rise of anti-colonial fervor.

Owing to this mediating role, the various pangulu and their subordinate religious officials became the target of the expression of feelings of disappointment during the early decades of the twentieth century, when Islamic socio-political movements began to emerge. Their leadership position grew weak, because they were considered to have become “lackeys of unbelievers.” The critique from the movements not only challenged the mediating function they performed, it also questioned their competence in acting as pangulu and the way in which they collected money. Competition for leadership between formal religious leaders (the pangulu and their subordinate religious officials) and the informal ones (udinah, alama and kiai; religious teachers and elders) had indeed long existed, but the rise of informal popular leaders through modern organizations, seriously marginalized the position of the pangulu and the religious officials. The low level of competence of the pangulu, which the colonial government also recognized as a problem, not only caused new movements to aspire to raising their quality, but also led to a revision in the position of the Raad Agama under the colonial administration. This disappointment felt by the modern Islamic movement reached its peak when the movement attempted to establish a Raad Ulama (Council of Ulama/religious teachers), as a challenge to the Raad Agama, at the end of the second decade of the twentieth century. Other large Islamic organizations, such as the Muhammadiyah (founded in 1912) and the Nahdatul Ulama (founded in 1926) were also critical of the pangulu’s position.

How did the pangulu and their subordinate officials feel about this crisis? Evidently, as far as the efforts to improve the competence of the pangulu and the Raad Agama were concerned, they fully supported it. Simply put, the various pangulu themselves felt that the colonial government had not made them or the Raad Agama a legitimate part of the governmental apparatus; the pangulu, being religious judges, were not paid by the government, so they bore the costs of running their own offices. On the one hand, the pangulu were pushed to try to obtain funds for salaries and the operation of the Court to sustain their role. On the other hand, it pushed the pangulu to support attempts by Islamic organizations to promote the interests of the Muslim people. There were indeed pangulu who were against, for example, the Sarekat Islam (Muslim Union/the most revolutionary association of Muslims) but many of them and their subordinates were involved in the Sarekat Islam’s activities, of which they approved and even led. This was true especially of efforts to promote the development of the Islamic community, which were carried out by Islamic organizations using a cultural approach, such as the Muhammadiyah. This organization, which had originated among the Ulama (headquarters of religious officials) of Yogyakarta, was among those that received broad support from the pangulu, as they observed the possibilities not only as they could against the suspicions of the colonial government. There were indeed several points on which the interests of the pangulu and those of the Islamic movements differed. This was not surprising because, whatever the case was, the pangulu were religious leaders who also felt responsible for the existence, care, development, and progress of Islam and its adherents. This involved, for example, opposing the efforts to propagate Christianity in the community. Nevertheless, these two groups were able to present a united front when confronted with government regulations contrary to the interests of Islam, as happened in 1937, when the colonial government transferred authority over Islamic inheritance matters from the Religious Courts to the civil courts (Sb. 1937/116).

The change in the function of the pangulu as a result of the incorporation of the Religious Courts in 1882 demanded a sharpening of their skills in matters of modern colonial administration. Recruitment to the office of pangulu and to the Raad Agama became selective, even if this was not as stringent as might have been required. Fulfilling the skills requirements by aspiring pangulu was indeed difficult. Although the government made demands for certain skills, it did nothing by way of creating schools or programmes to train candidates for their role; candidates were responsible for their own training. Stimulated by the need to fulfill the government’s criteria on administrative skills, as well as the knowledge that would be needed to run a modern religious administration, the pangulu began to support the founding of madrasah (Islamic schools) in various parts of the Javanese kingdom. In 1905 the madrasah Matbahul Islam in Surakarta was started as a result of the efforts of the pangulu, under the patronage of the Sultan. This was the only madrasah of “western” school to be established. The teaching of Islam using modern methods was then created in the areas of the kauman areas of several other cities in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. The rise of madrasah, which at first aimed to fulfill the need for new religious officials and religious officials who could run a modern religious administration, went on to develop into a modern religious educational institution throughout Java and Madura.

The disappointment of those in the movement with the pangulu, and the instability of the Raad Agama, did eventually stimulate efforts by the colonial government to improve the Raad Agama. This was the establishment of a commission to reform the Raad Agama 1952, and later by its reorganization in 1953. The pangulu in turn tried to create unity among themselves and the subordinate religious officials by forming an association. An initial attempt to set up an association of pangulu and religious officials was made in 1919, however, this only took concrete form in 1937, after the above-mentioned regulation had been promulgated. This association, called the Perhimpunan Panghoeloe dan Pegawainja (PPD)/Association of Pangulu and their employees, played a political role in its external relations in an attempt to improve quality of its ranks, from its establishment in 1937 until the Japanese occupation in 1942.

Generally speaking, it can be said that, in fulfilling its “sacred mission”, the pangulu tried as much as possible to formally apply Islamic Law among their adherents, but this was only possible under the authority of a non-Muslim colonial government. The appearance of modern Islamic movements in the twentieth century, driven by independent Islamic leaders, caused the marginalization of position of the pangulu among the socio-religious leader- ship. Conflict occasionally arose between the interests of the colonial government and those of the Muslims, both as a whole and in the form of modern organizations. In these conflicts the pangulu played a mediating role in order to reach a common ground, that is, giving form to the social order. In this way the role of the pangulu was determined by the way they gave meaning to their primary task and the manner in which they developed their role in order to mean to be able to act within the structure of the society that had created them.

Dr Muhamad Hisyam is a senior researcher in Islamic society and history, and recently appointed as Head of the Research Centre for Society and Culture at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences in Jakarta, Indonesia.

E-mail: hisyam@iis.sosial.mps.go.id