In 1945, with the horrors of the Second World War still very much around him, George Orwell made the following observation in his essay Notes on Nationalism: "It is important not to confuse nationalism with mere worship of success. The nationalist does not go on the principle of simply gapping up with the strongest side. On the contrary, having picked his side, he persuades himself that it is the strongest, and is able to stick to his belief even when the facts are overwhelmingly against him."

Tilting at windmills: Soetomo and the nationalist milieu between 1935-1942

In late colonial Indonesia during the second half of the 1930s and the early 1940s, only the pragmatists within the nationalist movement still stood a realistic chance of pushing through national unity. One of many photos taken during public meetings. Looking at the source material and the reports, one can hardly speak of shocks or an attempt at keeping this provocative practice a secret. 

In 1941, Mohammad Husni Thamrin, the party's most vociferous spokesman and a particularly active member of the Colonial Council, died of a severe illness, five days after he was put under house arrest by the Dutch colonial authorities. This punishment was imposed on Thamrin after allegations of him harboring pro-Japanese sympathies and planning to subvert Dutch colonial rule. As early as 1937, members of Parindra – who claimed not to adopt this form of greeting as a strategy towards furthering their personal interests. The academic literature clearly shows that fascism, which was for a long time perceived as an ideology too specifically European and chauvinistic to be appealing for colonized peoples, was very much part of a global wave during the interwar years. The most innovative aspect of my work on fascism, apart from pointing out that Indonesia has a tradition of paramilitarism that precedes Japanese occupation, is that it paints a more nuanced portrait of Indonesia's path to nationhood. Much valuable research has been done on the genesis of Indonesian nationalism, but none of it engages with the obvious philo-fascist views of some Indonesian nationalists, including Soearto. 

The Study

Colonial Indonesia, 1935-1942

Nationalism as a means to an end

Parindra's loyal cadres

Fascism and anticolonial nationalism in late colonial Indonesia, 1935-1942

Yannick Langwek

The last sentence of this quote contains an important element: the nationalist persuades himself, which implies that, at least at times, he loses faith in his project – the (independent) nation-state – in pretty much the same way an entrepreneur might lose hope in his pursuits while building an enterprise. Top-down approaches to political history, nationalism, and intellectual histories focusing on the genesis of ideas and worldviews often presuppose an inevitability and seemingly 'organic' development that most probably did not appear to historical actors in their times. Granted, some nationalists were veritable zealots who worked tirelessly to make their dream come true. But many others, no less tireless and diligent, in all likelihood went through periods of doubt, especially when circumstances seemed dire. The pragmatists within nationalist movements, on the other hand, may have looked at nationalism as a means to an end, such as long term benefits and a better life brought together by the appeal of the (independent) nation-state – in pretty much the same way an entrepreneur might look at nationalism as a means to an end, a strategic step towards furthering their personal interests. Nationalists, therefore, a diverse cast of characters from all walks of life brought together by the appeal of the same idea, but not necessarily driven by the same motivations. And of all the nationalists, it is likely that the pragmatists from the upper ranks of any given nationalist movement were most aware of the need for self-persuasion – persuading themselves, but also persuading followers who became tired, frustrated, and disillusioned.

Fascism in Indonesia: a blind spot?

One dark and rarely acknowledged aspect of Soetomo's political activism, throughout the 1930s until his untimely death in 1938, was his sympathy for Fascism, National Socialism, and other pro-right and authoritarian movements the world over. From the viewpoint of European Fascists, who typically frame the rise of fascism and authoritarianism in the 1920s and 1930s with the sociocultural dislocations caused by the First World War and amplified by the Wall Street Crash of 1929, fascism was a particularly belligerent permutation of ultra-nationalism and irredentism. Such movements existed all over Europe, and scholars tend to highlight their reactive nature, pointing out that fascism needs to be understood within the larger historical context of the interbellum period in Europe. This Eurocentric understanding of fascism dominated research until the early 2000s, when a small handful of publications slowly started to look at fascism's broader entanglements. But even now, in 2019, it is still safe to say that research on fascism is woefully Eurocentric. How can we explain the larger historical context of fascism in Japan, China, Egypt, the Middle East, or India? The academic literature clearly shows that fascism, which was for a long time perceived as an ideology too specifically European and chauvinistic to be appealing for colonized peoples, was very much part of a global wave during the interwar years. The most innovative aspect of my work on fascism, apart from pointing out that Indonesia has a tradition of paramilitarism that precedes Japanese occupation, is that it paints a more nuanced portrait of Indonesia's path to nationhood. Much valuable research has been done on the genesis of Indonesian nationalism, but none of it engages with the obvious philo-fascist views of some Indonesian nationalists, including Soearto. Why is it that so much academic literature has been produced on political Islam and communism in Indonesia during the 1920s and 1930s, while fascism has no place in hallmark publications on Indonesian nationalism? One obvious point is the "European bias" of fascism that I pointed out earlier. For similar reasons, it was only recently that non-European countries, besides Japan, were identified by scholars as players in fascism's global political arena. In the case of Indonesia, of course, we also need to include fascism specific to the country and its historical trajectory. In hindsight, the arrival of the Japanese in March 1942 overshadowed any previous attempts at building a paramilitary infrastructure and militarizing larger parts of Indonesian society. As a consequence, magisterial works on Indonesian (para-) militarism, such as Robert Cribb's Gangsters and Revolutionaries and Benedict Anderson's Java in a Time of Revolution generally skip the period of "cooperative nationalism" by jumping from the defeat of Soekarno in 1936 straight to the landing of the Japanese in 1942. If we follow the historiographical mainstream, Parindra was an upper-middle-class party that was seeking pragmatic arrangements with the Dutch and only radicalizing as the prospect of Japanese occupation drew nearer, hoping that Japan would liberate the Dutch East Indies from foreign rule once and for all – which, as we know, was a dream that was soon to disappoint. Yet, this is only one part of the story, and once we pay closer attention to Parindra's grassroots activism and its youth organization Surya Wirowana (Sun of Heroes), a different image emerges.

‘Doing fascism’ in late colonial Indonesia

As photographic materials promoted in the party’s own journal Soekarno Parindra [Voice of Parindra] repeatedly show, Parindrist and the young Soearto create their ‘scout’ organization Surya Wirowana had a particular weak spot for open displays of unity and strength, and would use the Roman salute, or more specifically, a version of the salute that is closest to the Nazi version, with the arm in a straight line. Some contemporary observers were quick to note that Parindra was using this rather unusual salute, which set them apart from other Indonesian political parties at the time. While the Dutch National Socialist Movement (NSB; Nationaalsocialistische Beweging) had an active branch in colonial Indonesia, its membership was predominantly European or of mixed Dutch-Indonesian (Eurasian) descent. It was rather striking to see Indonesians perform the Nazi salute. Newspaper articles from the period 1935-1942 remark on Parindra’s bizarre practice, but it was only officially banned in 1941, as colonial authorities became increasingly uneasy about the prospects of a Japanese invasion. As early as 1937, members of Parindra – who claimed they did not adopt this form of greeting as a signal of the party’s leadership, had what they referred to as the groot saluut [most honorable salute] or saluut tehormat as 1937, members of Parindra – who claimed they did not adopt this form of greeting as a signal of the party’s leadership, had what they referred to as the groot saluut [most honorable salute] or saluut tehormat as a different image emerges. (Great salute) or saluut tehormat [most honorable salute]
Parindrist and, like Thamrin, a member of the Colonial Council – marching through ranks of Surja Wirawan members performing the Nazi salute (see fig. 1). Additional newspaper material shows that not only the party’s youth organization, but also the upper ranks of the party used this particular salute deliberately.22

Two years earlier, in 1939, a similar bizarre large-scale ritual was performed during Parindria’s second party congress in Bandung (see fig. 2). Since a range of honorary Dutch guests, amongst them the future prime minister for Indonesia, Joepie van den Ende, was present, the event, we can say with absolute certainty that this newly acquired ‘taste’ for fascist imagery did not go unnoticed. However, Dutch authorities did apparently not see any reason to be concerned. The official reports contain hardly any critical commentary, most notably the Politieke Inlichtingen Dienst (Political Intelligence Department), show no traces of concern about this fascist-style demeanor. The colonial press seemed to be more on the alert,23 but it was only in 1941 that the Dutch colonial government finally banned the salute in response to the German invasion of the Netherlands a year earlier. All along the way, Parindria maintained that the party “did not adopt [the salute] out of a particular sympathy for Hitler and his Nazis.”24

Anticolonial nationalism, fascism, and the global context of the interwar period

What does the use of this salute tell us about the party’s attitude towards fascism? And what role did Parindria’s youth organization, Surja Wirawan, play in the party’s struggle for power? As early as 1932, Soetomo voiced his opinion that the Indonesian nationalist movement had to “recruit ‘kasatrijas’ [educated nobleman] that the Indonesian nationalist movement had to ‘liberate’ from Dutch colonial rule, was eventually banned as the Japanese military determined control over the archipelago. The party had to officially admit that Surya Wirawan was no longer just about campfires, scouting, and singing songs. When Thamrin, Wirawan was no longer just about campfires, scouting, and singing songs. When Thamrin, Thamrin, Parindria’s first party congress in 1939, declared that “Surja Wirawan is the ‘bibit’ [seed] that will make Parindria even stronger in the future,” he was hardly thinking of raising a new generation of devoted pacifists. And, in fact, it was only a year later that the party stated in public that “Surja Wirawan is not a regular scout organization, but a defense unit, based on the Italian model.”

Another influential Parindrist, the journalist Soedjardo Tjoekrissowo, shared these ideas and espoused militant ideas shaped by the fascist ‘role-model’ in an article written for the Indonesian-language newspaper Soeoe Oasoom. Complaining about the ‘lack of character’ of his fellow nationalists, he urged his compatriots to get inspired by European ‘men of great character’, including Hitler and Mussolini. After quoting one of Soetomo’s letters and praising the virtues of self-sacrifice, he incorporated his own words into the party’s manifesto: “that this newly acquired ‘taste’ for fascist ideologies in Europe, in fact, it was only a year later that the party stated in public that “Surja Wirawan is not a regular scout organization, but a defense unit, based on the Italian model.”

The threat of a Japanese invasion looming larger and larger on the horizon, the colonial authorities slowly realized that Parindria and Surja Wirawan were far more than the ‘Esperanto’ of another fascist organization. The journal of the staunchly conservative Nederlandse Volkskrant, acknowledged that “Indonesians take European organizations which were Instruments of Hitlerism as a role model. Indonesians learned about Nazism from the mouths of European ‘teachers’, hence they learned it from people who, from an Indonesian point of view, were highly respectable.” This analysis is, in many respects, typical of the way Dutch observers in the 1930s and early 1940s looked at these trends among parties like Parindria.

An underestimated threat

Earlier in the 1930s, a Japanese, European-educated nobleman called Notonindito set up a short-lived party which he unambiguously named Partai Fascist Indonesia (Indonesian Fascist Party). The very brief history of this party – apart from many important impulses that have opened my eyes to the possibility of a serious fascist ‘hyde’ among certain parts of the Indonesian nationalist movement – has been presented by Indonesian scholar Wilson in his book .

The ‘birth pangs’ of paramilitarism

Fascism, very much like the contemporary far-right, had a great appeal and took root in the most diverse geographic and sociocultural settings. While it was undeniably a social and political diaspora in Europe after the First World War, its appeal – the promise of national regeneration through an explosive mixture of mass-militarization, authoritarian leadership, and mobilizing the public on a large scale – was truly global. In the last decade of Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia, some nationalists oscillating between traditionalism and modernism, such as Soetomo or Tjoekrissowo, were fascinated by the aura of Europe’s new ‘strongmen’. This sympathy for fascism rarely went hand in hand with a deep understanding of fascist ideologies in Europe. In fact, the writings and speeches of politicians and intellectuals collaborated with Partai Indonesia Raya, particularly her analysis of fascist imagery and basic concepts. Did contemporary observers, including the Dutch authorities, become more aware of the dangers that lay at the heart of Parindria’s self-aggrandizing, bigoted ideology? When the Japanese landed on Java in May 1942, they were eager to absorb Surja Wirawan into their military apparatus. Surja Wirawan was renamed Barisan Pemuda Asia Raya [Greater Asia Youth Corps] and trained to serve Japanese interests. However, Partai Indonesia Raya (Parindria), the party that was rather isolated from the fight for ‘liberation’ from Dutch colonial rule, was eventually banned as the Japanese military determined control over the archipelago. With the party banned, its militant youth organization, originally designed to fight for a ‘glorious race’, became the instrument of yet another foreign oppressor.

Notes


2 Susan Afseyskwarro’s important work on the globalization of fascism, however, was not a part of her analysis – in fact, the word, apart from a few isolated references to ‘Japanese fascism’ and its similarities and provocations, was only absent from her account. See Afveyskwarro, S. Relations between the Indonesian Colonization Department and the Nazi Germany, 1935-1942 (PhD diss., Adelaide, 1972).

3 Journal of the Indonesian Ministry of Education, 1935-1942, 1935-1942, [Greater Asia Youth Corps] and trained to serve Japanese interests. However, Partai Indonesia Raya (Parindria), the party that was rather isolated from the fight for ‘liberation’ from Dutch colonial rule, was eventually banned as the Japanese military determined control over the archipelago. With the party banned, its militant youth organization, originally designed to fight for a ‘glorious race’, became the instrument of yet another foreign oppressor.


