



Soetardjo Kartohadikoesoemo

THE SOETARDJO PETITION

Susan Abeyasekere

"Bersedia pajong, sebelum hudjan."

(A Malay proverb, quoted by Soetardjo in defense of his petition. Roughly translated, it reads: Get your umbrella ready before the rain begins.)

With its moderate aim of political autonomy for the Netherlands Indies, the Soetardjo Petition of 1936 was the major test of the willingness of Dutchmen and Indonesian nationalists to cooperate in implementing fundamental political reforms in the 1930's. The proposal was put forward in the hope that it would provide the common goal towards which both Indonesians and Europeans could work.¹ Being a step on the way towards independence, autonomy might appeal to the nationalist movement. Since 1935, that movement had experienced a swing towards cooperation, a term which in the context of Indies politics meant participation in representative councils created by the Dutch. By 1935, most non-cooperating parties had been rendered inactive by internments, repressive legislation and police activity, leaving only the Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia [Indonesian Islamic Union Party--PSII], a shadow of the old Sarekat Islam, to represent the non-cooperators. A new series of cooperating nationalist parties came into existence, the largest being Parindra [Partai Indonesia Raja--Great Indonesia Party] (founded in 1935 from a fusion of Boedi Oetomo and Soetomo's Persatoean Bangsa Indonesia [Indonesian National Union]), followed by the leftist Gerindo [Gerakan Rakjat Indonesia--Indonesian People's Movement] (1937), and two small Muslim parties, Salim's Pergerakan Penjadar [Awakening Movement] (1936), and its rival, Partai Islam Indonesia [Indonesian Islamic Party--PII] founded in 1938 by Wiwoho and Dr. Soekiman. Since these parties aimed to work in the Volksraad (the central representative body), it might have been expected that they would support gradualist political reforms such as the Soetardjo Petition requested. At the same time, autonomy was an ideal to which the Dutch had given lip service since the inception of the Ethical Policy.² By linking autonomy

-
1. In this sentence, the term "European" is used in the contemporary Indies sense to cover both full-blood Europeans, and Eurasians who were legally Europeans and were accepted as Europeans in Indies society. Since the great majority of Europeans in the Indies were Dutch citizens, they are also loosely referred to as Dutchmen.
 2. The Ethical Policy had been officially launched in 1901 as a welfare plan, in opposition to the previous exploitative and laissez-faire attitude to the Indies. Dutch governments pledged themselves to raise the economic, social and intellectual standard of the Indonesians. It was also generally acknowledged that Holland was obliged to train Indonesians for self-government, although the time

with the ideal of a Rijksraad (Imperial Council), Soetardjo hoped to win over adherents of the currently fashionable notions of *rijkseenheid*.³ Would the cooperating nationalists and the Dutch now be prepared to support a proposal for a conference to discuss the means of implementing autonomy for the Indies?

Since 1931, the Indonesians had thirty representatives in the Volksraad, equal to the combined European and Foreign Asian contingents. Soetardjo's petition was the first attempt to utilize the increased Indonesian numbers to effect political change through the council. Although the petition's first impact occurred in the Volksraad, what happened after the Volksraad vote was taken was as revealing as the debate and vote themselves. The initial coolness towards the petition amongst the Indonesian political public was followed by partial support, indicating that the nationalist parties were realizing that a cooperating tactic required gradualist political methods. In Holland, on the other hand, Soetardjo's attempt at cooperation met with disdain: the Dutch showed no reciprocal signs of moving towards the nationalists.

Interestingly enough, the petition was conceived not by any of the leaders of the cooperating parties but by Indonesians unconnected with the organized nationalist movement. Not only did the petition play an important role in clarifying the attitudes of Dutchmen and the nationalist political parties towards cooperation, but it also marked the beginning of a move towards a consciously nationalist stand by members of cooperating parties which were outside the organized independence movement.

The Origins of the Petition

As presented to the Volksraad in 1936, the Soetardjo Petition requested the government in Holland and the States-General to call a conference of representatives of the Indies and the Netherlands. These representatives, acting on a footing of equality, would frame a plan for granting autonomy to the Indies within the limits of article 1 of the constitution, such autonomy to be implemented by means of gradual reforms within ten years. Article 1 of the constitution was an innocuous-looking sentence which merely stated that the Dutch realm consisted

scheme was never spelled out: "in the unforeseeable future" was the commonly-used expression. By the 1930's, other political ideas originating with more liberal-minded Dutchmen, had come to be associated with the Ethical Policy and had brought the policy into disrepute with the conservatives who then dominated the political scene. For instance, many Ethici supported "association," the concept that Indonesians, by working with Dutchmen, would and should adopt Western goals and values. Conservatives considered such notions dangerous; it was better that Indonesians keep to their own way of life.

3. Rijkseenheid, or imperial unity, had become a popular catchword in Dutch colonial thinking in the 1930's. It was considered disloyal to speak of dismembering the Dutch realm by granting independence to the Indies. On the other hand, considerable flexibility was permissible in defining rijkseenheid: while those on the right saw it as an excuse for indefinite Dutch control of the colonies, others thought autonomy for the Indies would actually strengthen rijkseenheid by reconciling Indonesians to less binding ties with Holland.

of the Kingdom in Europe, Surinam, Curaçao and the Netherlands Indies. What this article implied was a legally debatable point, but the sponsors of the petition construed it as indicating that the four parts of the realm stood on an equal footing, subordinate only to the interests of the realm as a whole. To this request the proposers appended an explanatory statement appealing to the need for greater unity between Holland and the Indies. In their view, such unity could be achieved only if the Indonesians, who had recently been dissatisfied and indifferent, were inspired by a plan to establish a relationship which fulfilled their needs.

In August 1936 the signatories of the petition stated that according to their view of the future political form of the Indies, the country would possess the full right of self-government except for matters which were of common concern to both parts of the realm, e.g., international relations. They suggested that when working out a plan, the conference might well adopt the idea of a Rijksraad to regulate these imperial issues.⁴ Although the petition was to prove a unique event in the history of the Indies, the proposers themselves were careful to emphasize its antecedents. In the pamphlet which they issued in 1937 to publicize their petition,⁵ they pointed to similar proposals by nationalists in 1918 and the advocacy of autonomy for the Indies by the (short-lived) associationist Vrijzinnige Groep (Liberal Group) in the Volksraad in 1931.⁶ By 1937, too, the signatories were giving greater prominence to the idea of a Rijksraad, and to a new argument--the external danger to the Indies arising from rumors that colonies might be reallocated to appease the "have-not" powers. Such rumors stemmed from the belief that when Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1936, they discussed the eventual division of the Indies between them. Speculation by certain English parliamentarians on the possibility of making over some colonies--Sumatra was specifically mentioned--to the fascist powers, added to disquiet in the Indies. In the view of the signatories of the Soetardjo Petition, the prospect of a reallocation made it more than ever necessary to ensure the loyalty of Indonesians by granting them more autonomy. As time went on, more and more arguments, sometimes mutually contradictory, were collected in support of a proposal which was obviously intended as a catchall. The beauty of the petition was that it could sustain so many hopes, because it was essentially a simple request for a conference to consider granting an autonomy of undefined content.

It is not surprising that such a proposal should have appeared at this particular juncture. The Depression years had seen the near-disappearance of political debate, since the government suppressed the activities of the non-cooperating organizations and forced the Volksraad to concentrate its full attention on economic matters. In 1936, when the Governor-General announced in June that the economy was

-
4. Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1936-37, Bijlagen, Memorie van Antwoord, August 1936, Onderwerp 26 - Stuk 5.
 5. Indonesië Zelfstandig. Petitie Soetardjo. Door de ondertekenaars der petitie (Autonomous Indonesia. The Soetardjo Petition. By the signatories of the petition) (Batavia, 1937).
 6. This group comprised Fournier (Dutch), Arifin (Arab), and Ratu Langie and Soejono (Indonesians). See Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1931-32, Vol. I, pp. 187-188.

recovering, one could expect a similar revival of political interest, especially since the Depression had revealed many shortcomings in the relationship between Holland and the Indies. Even the European parties grew uneasy at the harshness of the Indies Government's retrenchment measures, which frequently seemed to subject the interests of the Indies to those of Holland. Finally, Indonesians were bound to be influenced by the momentous developments in India and the Philippines during the preceding years. In 1935 India received a constitution under which the provinces became self-governing, and in November 1935 the self-governing Commonwealth of the Philippines was inaugurated, with the promise of independence in 1946. Little wonder that people in the Netherlands Indies were beginning to stir again after the political stagnation of the Depression years. The Soetardjo Petition was merely the first, and the most important, of several new suggestions for the reform of relations between the Indies and Holland.

However, the particular circumstances surrounding the petition are rather unusual. One might have expected such a proposal to emanate from the group of self-styled nationalists in the Volksraad--the Nationale Fractie [National Fraction], led by Mohamad Hoesni Thamrin. This group had pledged itself to work towards the independence of the Indies by means of political reforms. Instead, the petition was signed by such relatively moderate men as Soetardjo Kartohadikoesoemo, a *patih* [administrator directly under bupati] and the president of the Perhimpunan Pegawai Bestuur Boemipoetra (Association of Native Civil Servants--PPBB), Ratu Langie, a lone-wolf Christian representative of Persatoean Minahasa [Minahasa Union], Kasimo, the Javanese president of the Koempoelan Politiek Katoliek di Indonesia (Political Association of Indonesian Catholics--PPKI), Datoek Toemenggoeng, a Minangkabau aristocrat and secretary of the PPBB, and two representatives of racial minority groups, Ko Kwat Tiong and Alatas, Chinese and Arab respectively. Not a Nationale Fractie member among them, although Ratu Langie was so close to Thamrin's group that many Dutchmen considered him as dangerous as an organized nationalist. Moreover, these people had not sought the cooperation or advice of the nationalist movement, which in fact greeted the petition with disdain.

Because the origins of the petition puzzled Dutchmen and Indonesians alike, we should look more closely at what is known about its composition. Soetardjo himself has given a rather ingenuous account of the inspiration which led him to write the petition.⁷ The larger events leading up to it are recalled convincingly enough, and at the time of its presentation he stressed them too: He was alarmed by the repressive government measures which followed the mutiny of *De Zeven Provinciën* in 1933.⁸ In particular, he objected to the arrests of

7. The following is based on a copy of an extract from his unpublished memoirs given to me by Soetardjo.

8. The crew of *De Zeven Provinciën*, a ship in the Dutch Navy, mutinied off the coast of Sumatra in January 1933 in protest against the third salary reduction in two years--part of Colijn's retrenchment measures. After fourteen days at sea, the mutiny was brought to an end when the ship's pursuers (accidentally) hit it with a bomb. In the Indies many Europeans held the Indonesian crew members responsible for the mutiny, although Dutchmen were also involved. But most alarming of all in the eyes of contemporary Dutchmen was the fact that the mutiny appeared to have been activated by members of a communist cell on board the ship. Combined with previous evidence of Dutch communist and socialist revolutionary

leftist leaders and the government's attempt to weaken the powers of the principalities (Surakarta and Jogjakarta), regions which were close to Soetardjo's heart. "In this situation," he writes, "I sought a way whereby I with the support of the *Pamong Pradja* (Indonesian civil service) could help my nation." In dramatic fashion he then recounts how he "suddenly realized" that a civil servant would receive public support so long as his action was based on the law. At that moment he felt guided to reach down a volume of collected laws, which he opened at the Dutch Constitution. His eyes fell on the first article of the constitution, which he immediately interpreted in the manner explained above. Since he knew that his interpretation was inconsistent with articles 62 and 63, according to which the colonies were subordinate to Holland, he concluded that this discrepancy must be corrected if the realm were not to disintegrate. According to his memoirs, Soetardjo thereupon wrote the petition and showed it to Ratu Langie, who, being suitably impressed, immediately signed it, as did the others at a later stage.

The historian cannot, however, rest satisfied with this highly individualistic account. For one thing, it denies the existence of external intellectual inspirations. The idea that article 1 of the constitution justified equality for the components of the realm was not a new one, but had been propounded by several Ethical-minded Dutch legal experts. Soetardjo admits as much in his 1937 pamphlet, when he states: "As far as the constitutional interpretation is concerned, we can appeal to that of Kleintjes, Eigeman, Van Vollenhoven, Struyken and Kranenburg, and moreover to the opinion of the Oppenheim Commission."⁹ Furthermore, his account leaves several questions unanswered. First of all, what led this particular group of people to assume the responsibility of proposing the petition? From Soetardjo's life and activities we can infer various motives. He was a dedicated civil servant, supremely aware of the importance and responsibility of his vocation. He edited the journal of the PPBB, *Pemimpin* (Leader), in which he constantly expounded his philosophy concerning the role of the *prijaji* (officialdom) which he envisaged as a noble one, analogous to that of the *samurai* in Japan--an able governing group helping the country to advance.¹⁰ In his attempt to help his fellow civil servants live up to this ideal, he urged them to devote themselves selflessly to their task (he often inveighed against promotion-seekers), and took practical measures such as campaigning for a Civil Service Academy to produce better-trained *prijaji*--and the government finally did establish such a school in 1938. Soetardjo considered that although the role of the PPBB in representative councils was rightly limited by its constitution to issues concerning administration, *prijaji* delegates should face up to other problems. In *Pemimpin* of March 1938 he ex-

tendencies, the mutiny made Dutchmen increasingly nervous of leftists. The result was a purge of communists and suspected communist front members in the armed services, and repression of leftists generally in the Indies. (See L. de Jonge, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, Vol. I [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969], pp. 173-179.) Interestingly, Soetardjo in fact spoke in support of the 1935 bill to restrict freedom of association and assembly. Little wonder that both Dutchmen and Indonesians mistrusted his contradictory actions.

9. Indonesië Zelfstandig, p. 8.

10. Pemimpin, February 1937.

plained to his fellow civil servants why he embarked on political action by proposing his petition. He said he was much concerned at the excessively backward condition of the common people, to whom he felt a responsibility because he had been elected by them via the members of regency councils. Significantly, he felt that at that time no other person more capable than himself was prepared to take steps to improve the condition of the people, since the nationalist movement had come to a standstill. As an Indonesian civil servant, he felt he had to act as a bridge across the increasing gap between the government and the people. These last two points were reiterated in speeches he made in support of his petition before the Volksraad and at public meetings. In effect, Soetardjo regarded himself as a national leader. In his view, the priajati were rightful leaders of the people, since they had closest contact with the masses in day to day life and exercised constant leadership over them.¹¹

Soetardjo emerged as a nationalist only gradually. Probably his dissatisfaction with the political situation stemmed originally from his deep resentment at the inferiority of the priajati's position vis-à-vis that of the European civil service. The first sign of this sentiment was his pamphlet, *Grievances of the Native Civil Servant*, published in 1919,¹² which complained that Indonesian civil servants were badly treated, were frequently reprimanded in public by the Dutch, and had no right of initiative, of intellectual development or of expression of opinion. His campaign to raise the status and morale of the pamong pradja was later seen in such matters as his sponsorship of Volksraad motions urging the government to appoint more Indonesians to higher administrative posts. And in an article in *Pemimpin* of May 1938, revealingly entitled, "The Slave makes the Tyrant," Soetardjo exhorted civil servants to support the movement for his petition. Although they must behave like civil servants, he argued: "We must never forget we are sons of this country, and that we are free citizens like other inhabitants." Meyer Ranneft described Soetardjo as consumed by bitterness and envy, longing above all for equality with the Dutch.¹³ Soetardjo indeed desired deeply, as did most of the Indonesian intelligentsia, to be respected by prominent Dutchmen. He valued their regard and

-
11. Soetardjo has described his part in determining the role of the civil service in the first days of the Indonesian Republic in 1945. (This account, in a typescript note given to me, no doubt also forms part of his memoirs.) In a top-level discussion with Hatta and Sukarno at that time, he offered to ensure the loyalty of the pamong pradja to the Republic if the leaders of the political movement would recognize the pamong pradja as leaders of the people (pemimpin rakjat)--which, according to him, they did.

Benedict Anderson gives a rather different account of relations between nationalist leaders and the pamong pradja at this time. (Java in a Time of Revolution. Occupation and Resistance, 1944-1946 [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972], pp. 113-114.) Sukarno was apparently willing to give Soetardjo and other civil service leaders important positions in return for their loyalty, while attempting to by-pass the pamong pradja in order to unite the people as a whole with its national leadership.

12. Soetardjo, Grievances van de Inlandschen Bestuursambtenaar (Weltevreden: Indonésische Drukkerij, 1919).
13. Manuscript notes, "Mensen die ik heb gekend. 1930/1931" ("People I have known. 1930/1931"), Meyer Ranneft Collection 979, General State Archives, The Hague.

sought it almost ingratiatingly at times.¹⁴ When he felt rejected he could react bitterly. He was by turns cautious and bold, confusing Indonesians and Dutchmen alike. This variation in approach was mirrored in his petition and in his presentation of it, at one moment warmly praising Dutch rule and at the next denouncing it; while his sincerity in the latter activity was obvious, in the former it was uncertain. But there is no doubt that in the 1930's he became increasingly disillusioned with the Dutch and increasingly bitter in his attacks on them.¹⁵ By 1936 he saw the solution in political autonomy for the Indies. Perhaps, too, he felt in a stronger position to reveal his nationalist aims in 1936 because in that year he assumed leadership of the PPBB from the more conservative regent, Wiranata Koesoema.

Is it right to see Soetardjo as a rival to the organized nationalists? Some of the latter certainly did. A writer in the Parindrist daily *Tempo* argued that the motive behind the Soetardjo Petition was that if the Indies became independent, Soetardjo would become "radja," or at least that Soetardjo wished to ensure "that he is not forestalled by the champions of the present nationalist movement, who may also wish to become president of Indonesia!"¹⁶ Soetardjo himself never attacked the organized nationalists as they did him, but the fact that he did not consult them before introducing his petition perhaps indicates a certain distrust of them. This may, however, more properly be interpreted as a realization by Soetardjo that his methods differed from those of the organized nationalists. He never intended to seek mass support for the petition;¹⁷ his attention was concentrated on getting it through the Volksraad. He described his petition as the "lowest common denominator" of opinions in the Indies community;¹⁸ apparently

-
14. De Jonge relates an interesting tale in this connection. On his departure from the Indies, Governor-General de Jonge received an unexpected visit from Soetardjo, Prawoto and Datoek Toemenggoeng, described in his *Herinneringen* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1968), pp. 387-388. According to de Jonge, Soetardjo delivered a speech of gratitude to him, saying that although they had not always agreed with his measures, they had always known where they were with him, and that made it easy for them to esteem the many good things he had done. De Jonge was touched, and proceeded to read them a fatherly lesson against overestimating their capacities; did Soetardjo really think he could be compared with the great Dutch officials like De Kat Angelino and Hart? He noted that they listened attentively and bowed deeply over the hand he extended to them. This story could be interpreted in a number of ways, but it seems unlikely that Soetardjo, having quite gratuitously made a friendly overture to De Jonge, would find a satisfactory response in such a patronizing dressing-down. It also seems to be characteristic of Soetardjo's approach that he did not like to argue directly with his superiors, a fact that made them suspicious when they later heard that this apparently meek and polite man was criticizing their policies behind their backs.
 15. That Soetardjo did feel persecuted by the Indies Government is clear from his memories of interrogations and threats of exile or administrative discipline from his superiors, recorded in a short biography of Soetardjo presented as a preface of his *Dasar Essentieel Pendidikan Tjalon Sardjana Pantjasila* (Djakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1969), p. 13.
 16. *Tempo*, March 23, 1938.
 17. Interviews with the author, November, 1970.
 18. *Nationale Commentaren*, March 12, 1938, p. 153.

he had carefully calculated that a moderate, rather vaguely-worded proposal like his had the best hope of being carried. Publicly he explained that he knew that a proposal aimed at winning the support of the Indonesian nationalist movement would have had to include much more sweeping demands.¹⁹

What about the motives of the other signatories of the petition? Being another prominent Indonesian civil servant, Datoek Toemenggoeng's sentiments may have been similar to those of Soetardjo. It has already been mentioned that Ratu Langie was regarded as a nationalist hardly distinguishable from those of the organized movement. Like Soetardjo, he had become more and more nationalistic over the years. Being a Protestant from the Minahasa, he shared that area's strong regionalism and had held aloof from the nationalist movement, refusing to join the PPPKI in 1928.²⁰ However, he often attacked Dutch rule in closely-reasoned speeches in the Volksraad, concentrating particularly on the iniquities of economic exploitation. With his extensive academic background and his great awareness of the importance of international developments for the Indies,²¹ he was considered by many Dutchmen as one of the most dangerous of the Volksraad nationalists. The authorities were no doubt glad to seize the opportunity of expelling him from the Volksraad in 1937 for entering faulty travel declarations, a fairly common activity among Volksraad members.²² This event only helped to radicalize him further. In 1938 he founded and edited a Dutch-language weekly, *Nationale Commentaren*, which became famous for its nationalist disposition, and in 1939 he steered his small Minahasan party into Gapi (Gaboengan Politik Indonesia--Indonesian Political Federation--formed in 1939), thus finally reconciling himself to the organized nationalist movement.

Ratu Langie, Kasimo, Ko Kwat Tiong and Alatas, all being representatives of minority groups, may have felt the need to support a program for autonomy in preference to full independence on terms unfavorable to their groups. The parties of all these men showed in the 1930's an increasing tendency to move towards the organized nationalists, culminating in the joining of the nationalist federation Gapi by

-
19. Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, July 29, 1936, p. 568.
 20. The Indonesian political federation, Persatoean Perhimpoean2 Politik Kebangsaan Indonesia, created in 1928, proved still-born, since its member parties failed to work together for any common objective.
 21. Ratu Langie had delivered a speech in the Volksraad on the influence of developments in the Pacific as early as 1928. In the 1930's he was involved in writing two books on the subject: Indonesia in den Pacific (Sukabumi: Soekaboemische Snelpersdrukkerij, 1937), and in conjunction with Soetardjo and Thamrin, De Pacific (no publisher or place of publication given, 1938).
 22. Ratu Langie was convicted for defrauding the state of f.200 by means of false travel documents (Pertja Selatan, April 22, 1937). In 1939 the Attorney-General reported to the Governor-General that investigation had shown that over the period 1936-1939, sixteen Volksraad members had given false information concerning travel and accommodation costs. Five of these had thus defrauded the state of amounts ranging from f.234 to f.1003. Interestingly, he recommended prosecution only of the two biggest offenders. (Letter from Attorney-General to Governor-General, June 2, 1939, No. 2087/A.P., in State Archives [The Hague], Mailrapport No. 591/39 [secret].)

the PPKI, Persatoean Minahasa and Partai Arab Indonesia [Indonesian Arab Party--PAI]. Ko Kwat Tiong's party, Partai Tionghoa Indonesia (Chinese Indonesian Party), applied to become a member of Gapi, but was accepted only as an associate. The official goal of the PPKI was merely progress for the Indies, but the party came to look upon independence with favor.²³ It is perhaps fair to say that the signatories of the Soetardjo Petition took the old Ethical Policy spirit more seriously than did the organized nationalists, partly because they stood to gain more from it. Shades of the Ethical Policy are discernible in the pamphlet which they produced in support of their petition: it brought into play quotations from De Kat Angelino (the advocate of "synthesis") and Kipling (East and West *can* meet) against both extremes of its opponents. Ratu Langie had only recently been a member of the Vrijzinnige Groep, which espoused a program that read like a manifesto of the Ethici.²⁴ Kasimo, Ko Kwat Tiong and Alatas were likewise adherents of "integration." It was perhaps because the organized nationalists recognized this group of signatories as latter-day Ethici that they often despised them: association parties had long since been rejected by the nationalist movement. Certainly Soetardjo was frequently castigated as naive, the word most often used to deride the idealistic Ethici.

Soetardjo and his fellow signatories saw their role as rather different from that of the organized nationalist. In their pamphlet they argued that nationalism

. . . is not limited to the group who are now commonly described as nationalists, and who to judge from the formulation of their spokesmen in the Volksraad want the complete political independence of Indonesia. But next to this group of intellectuals stands another group, that of the "moderate nationalists," who limit their political ideals within the framework of political cohesion with Holland: Indonesia an autonomous part of the realm and endowed with equal rights.²⁵

Because both these groups worked in representative institutions--the litmus test for cooperation in the Indies--it seems that both can be called cooperating nationalists. It so happened that, as the quotation reveals, the organized nationalist movement of the time consisted mainly of radical nationalists, cooperating and otherwise, who would accept nothing short of independence. Moderate nationalists belonged also to organizations which lacked strictly nationalist objectives. The Soetardjo Petition, for instance, did not emanate from the PPBB; in sponsoring it, Soetardjo was acting in a personal capacity. As an organization, the PPBB did not express an opinion on the petition. However, this very emergence of nationalism in groups from which the Dutch traditionally expected loyalty was perhaps more likely to alarm the authorities into considering placatory measures.

-
23. The gradual move towards nationalism by the PPKI is reflected in its history before 1936. Originally founded in 1925 as Pakempalan Politiek Katholiek Djawi (Political Organization of Javanese Catholics), it soon adopted the name Perkoempoelan Politiek Katholiek di Indonesia, and attended the second PPPKI Congress of December 1929 as well as the Indonesia Raja Congress of January 1932.
 24. Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1931-32, Vol. I, July 13, 1931, pp. 187-188.
 25. Indonesië Zelfstandig, p. 9.

The Petition in the Volksraad

The Volksraad debates on the Soetardjo Petition offer a rare instance of Indonesians and Europeans discussing the possibility and form of an autonomous Indies. The variety of tones in this discussion is striking, even within the one speech. Soetardjo's defense of his proposal,²⁶ for instance, was in general strongly worded, but it contained also some appeals to the Europeans. His first two points dealt with the lack of trust in the community towards the government. Moderate and loyal native groups, he claimed, had found that government suppression of the extreme Left threatened themselves as well. Worse than this, the retrenchment measures of the Depression and lack of consideration for Indonesian wishes in filling leading official positions, had embittered the native civil service. His final reasoning was connected with external affairs. The Indies, he warned, could not be uninfluenced by the turbulence in the Pacific region. He pointed also to the colonial hunger of other countries, and warned that Holland should not rely on the protection of "certain great powers" (notably Britain). The Dutch colonial position could be weakened or strengthened by one factor--the wishes of her colonized peoples. He then outlined the steps which he considered necessary for the formation of an autonomous Indonesia. These included the implementation of administrative reform in the Outer Islands so as to give those regions democratic autonomous group communities; the abolition of dualism in the civil service; the transformation of the Volksraad into a fully-fledged parliament, with departmental directors responsible to it; the establishment of a Rijksraad, consisting of representatives from both Holland and the Indies; and citizenship of the Indies for those who by birth, descent or future orientation belonged to that country.

This speech contained carefully worded appeals to all groups in the Volksraad. Soetardjo believed that his petition, based as it was on the search for an autonomous Indonesia, "should be acceptable to moderate and loyal groups, from Parindra to the regents' corps." At the same time he reassured the Europeans that "in our group there is no place for action which breaks the political bond between both parts of the realm. . . . This bond, which is really already centuries old, shall, if it is altered so as to conform with the 'ethical calling' adopted by the Dutch people, bring much profit, in our honest conviction, not only to Holland but also to the Indies, and make both countries great." He found the problem of the position of the Dutch in an autonomous Indonesia a delicate one, and could only say: "It is self-evident that the Dutch will occupy a position of honor in our midst. This does not in the least detract from the requirement that in increasing measure Indonesia will be responsible for carrying out the affairs of this country." He concluded with a plea to the Europeans for support, reminding them of the friendly feeling which had recently arisen between the white and brown members of the Volksraad, for which he particularly thanked (as it were in hopeful anticipation) the leaders of the Eurasian Indo-Europeesch Verbond [Indo-European League--IEV], the right-wing Vaderlandsche Club [Fatherland Club] and the associationist Politiek-Economischen Bond [Political Economic League--PEB].

26. Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, July 9, 1936, pp. 74-83, and July 29, 1936, pp. 566-568.

The petition was able to pass through the Volksraad largely because it won the votes of the biggest European party, the IEV, which held eight of the twenty-five European seats. The IEV was troubled by the declining position of Eurasians during the Depression years, and disappointed to find that the government ignored its complaints. At the same time as Soetardjo launched his petition, the IEV began an open attack on government policy towards Eurasians. Its leader, De Hoog, denounced the government in a very bitter speech in the Volksraad on July 30, 1936, and was supported by a flood of approving letters from IEV branches.²⁷ In the same year, moreover, there were signs that the IEV was increasingly concerned at Holland's dominance of the Indies' economy.²⁸ Carried on the tide of their mounting opposition to the government and their desire for greater independence from Holland, the IEV was prepared to support the petition because it requested a conference and because it suggested the establishment of a Rijksraad.²⁹

Obviously Soetardjo could not hope to placate all the Europeans in the Volksraad. The Christelijk Staatkundige Partij (Christian Constitutional Party--CSP) and the Vaderlandsche Club were openly hostile from the outset. Verboom, the Vaderlandsche Club's president, interpreted Soetardjo's speech as a threat to the Europeans.³⁰ C. C. van Helsdingen of the CSP completely rejected the idea of considering autonomy for the Indies within ten years, since in his view the country was not ready for it. His suspicion of "Native intellectuals" was made clear by the aspersions he cast upon them; in his view they were not suited to taking over from the Dutch the task of governing the Indies, because he doubted whether they had the "mentality which is necessary confidently to expect from them objective judgments about--to name just a few matters--the interests of capital at home and abroad, the interests of minorities and different racial groups, and also the interests of the masses." He enquired: "Have the ethical norms of honesty, integrity, incorruptibility, etc., taken such deep root that they are in a position to neutralize and negate the ever-recurring public nepotism and what goes with it?" These virtues, he hinted, could only be found in Christian nations. However, he was sufficiently infected by the prevailing dissatisfaction with the state of relations between Holland and the Indies to suggest, instead of a conference, a commission in the Dutch Lower House on colonial affairs.³¹ This proposal was supported by other Europeans, including Roep (PEB) and Kerstens of the Indische Katholieke Partij [Indies Catholic Party]. None of the Europeans approved Soetardjo's plea for autonomy within ten years. When finally Soetardjo amended the petition to omit the ten-year term,³² he won the support of the five-man PEB and thus

27. See the IEV Blauwboek (Batavia: Ruygrok & Co., 1936).

28. See P. W. J. van der Veur, "Introduction to a Socio-Political Study of the Eurasians of Indonesia" (Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, 1955), pp. 265-268.

29. See De Hoog's speech, Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, September 18, 1936, pp. 1544-45.

30. Ibid., Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, September 28, 1936, pp. 1680-81.

31. Ibid., Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, September 17, 1936, pp. 1515-17.

32. Ibid., Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, September 28, 1936, p. 1666.

ensured a majority vote for his proposal, since 8 Europeans voted with 18 Indonesians and Foreign Asians to give a 26/20 vote on the issue.³³

The support of Indonesians in the Volksraad was not as easy to win as might have been expected. In the event, six of them voted against the petition. Two of these members, Notosoetarso and Sosrohadikoesoemo, were known to be conservatives who invariably voted with the government. The other four, however, were members of the Nationale Fractie, which had split over the petition for tactical reasons. Six members of this group, led by Thamrin, reluctantly voted for the petition on the grounds that it sought to hold a conference which could lead to autonomy.³⁴ The other four pronounced that a movement for autonomy was useless unless it had support outside the Volksraad. Soeroso also disliked the vagueness of the petition's wording, and feared that any autonomy granted by means of the conference would maintain the dominance of the European element in government, thus rendering the petition futile to Indonesians.³⁵ It is possible, too, that personal dislike entered into Soeroso's opposition. He had several times made attacks on Soetardjo and on Indonesian civil servants in general, whom he regarded as sycophants of the rulers. Wirjopranoto, who, like Thamrin and Soeroso, was a representative of Parindra in the Nationale Fractie, considered the petition objectionable because it would weaken the ideology of the nationalist movement, since its aim fell short of independence.³⁶ Wiwoho, who had been appointed to represent Indonesian Muslims and who later led the Partai Islam Indonesia, complained that the petition contained no guarantee that the proposed conference would result in autonomy.³⁷ In short, these members of the Nationale Fractie were still strongly under the non-cooperating influence. They were not prepared to abandon their independent, radical standpoint by appearing to support a gesture which seemed unlikely to succeed to the degree they wanted, might weaken the nationalist will if it gained minor concessions but no real autonomy, would render them vulnerable to the charge of being little more than Ethici at heart . . . and would entail recognition of the leadership and initiative of a relatively conservative civil servant. As will be seen, in taking this attitude, the Nationale Fractie members who opposed the petition reflected the initial reaction of nationalist parties and press outside the Volksraad.

It was thus amidst widespread dissatisfaction with the proposal itself that the Soetardjo Petition was accepted by the Volksraad. Everyone objected to its vagueness, which left open to doubt what, if anything, would be decided by the conference it requested. However, as Soetardjo had probably calculated, it was this very vagueness which brought the petition support, since given a wish for more autonomy, one could hope that the conference might further one's own specific goals. Soetardjo had achieved something unique. Never before had a

33. Ibid., Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, September 29, 1936, p. 1694.

34. See Thamrin's speech, ibid., Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, September 29, pp. 1693-94.

35. Ibid., Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, September 18, 1936, p. 1526.

36. Ibid., Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, September 28, 1936, p. 1676.

37. Ibid., Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, September 29, 1936, p. 1693.

proposal of such wide-reaching political significance been passed by the Volksraad. It had moreover proved a catalyst among the European members, since it provoked an unusual display of approval for the idea of a commission on colonial relations, indicative of the general discontent on this topic. There had also been a degree of consensus among Volksraad members in support of the concept of a Rijksraad.

A surprising aspect of the whole debate, however, was its relatively subdued nature, as though everyone knew in advance that the petition had no hope of success; even if the Volksraad passed it, it would be rejected by the government in Holland. The lack of interest in the petition is revealed by the failure of a quarter of the Volksraad to vote on the issue.³⁸ An Indonesian paper alleged that they had preferred to attend an (unspecified) Provincial Council meeting. It also commented that the Indies government's announcement of the devaluation of the guilder, in September 1936, deflected attention from the contemporaneous debate on the petition.³⁹ Outside the Volksraad, press and public evinced little interest and less approval for the petition, which seemed to gain the blessing of the legislature almost by mistake.

Indonesian Responses Outside the Volksraad

Strangely enough, it was not until Soetardjo's petition had been passed by the Volksraad that it aroused public interest. While at first both Indonesian and Dutch papers, with important exceptions, had taken a decidedly cool attitude towards the petition, many Indonesian newspapers now began to praise it. True, leftist papers like *Kebangoenan* continued to throw cold water on the whole idea, proclaiming that the petition had no hope of success. But the proposal had a strong champion in Mohammad Tabrani, the editor of *Pemandangan*, who greeted it with enthusiasm, and from its first appearance urged that a mass movement be organized to interest the masses in the petition.⁴⁰ He publicized this idea with renewed vigor after the Volksraad's adoption of the proposal, and on October 5, 1936 suggested that all parties participate in a body which would work out a five-year plan for the implementation of autonomy according to the Soetardjo Petition. In February 1937 he again urged that an independent committee be established to propagandize the petition in order to influence the decision of the government in Holland.⁴¹ The year 1937 was to prove an important year for those who had hopes of a change in Dutch policy towards the Indies, since in that year the Lower House elections took place, to be followed by the formation of a new cabinet.

Tabrani's campaign bore fruit in March 1937, when a Soetardjo Petition Committee was established. It included Drs. Soebroto of Parindra and Sardjan of Penjadar, but none of the signatories of the

38. Eight of the non-voters were Indonesians, 4 European and 3 Chinese.

39. Soeara Oemoem, October 3, 1936.

40. July 11, 1936, summarized in Overzicht van de Inlandsche en Maleisch-Chineesche Pers (IPO) (Weltevreden: Bureau voor de Volkslectuur, 1936), p. 458.

41. Pemandangan, February 8, 1937, summarized in IPO 1937, pp. 110-111.

petition.⁴² Soetardjo wrote later that the committee had asked him to lead it, but he had refused, since he considered that this responsibility was better carried out by leaders of the nationalist movement.⁴³ This indicates that the proposers of the petition saw their role as limited to work in the Volksraad, where they continued to speak in defense of their proposal while the decision in Holland was still pending. Consideration of the petition proceeded at a very slow pace at the upper level. It was discussed briefly in the States-General in the first half of 1937, in connection with the Indies budget, but a final decision was postponed until the Governor-General's advice on the matter reached the Minister. A decision was not handed down until November 1938, more than two years after the vote in the Volksraad. There was thus plenty of time to put pressure on the authorities, and that such pressure was needed was clear from the negative tone of the remarks made both by members of the States-General and by the Minister for Colonies, Colijn, in early 1937.

In his speech in the Volksraad in July 1937, Soetardjo appeared depressed by these remarks, commenting: ". . . It is my firm conviction that if the line announced by Minister Colijn is followed, in another three hundred years we will still not be considered ripe for the autonomy we request."⁴⁴ However, he pressed ahead with his request, now proposing two five-year plans to prepare the Indies for autonomy. In August he spoke again in a fighting mood, but still preserving his restricted role as a moderate, nationalist civil servant:

If our petition is rejected by Holland--which I certainly hope it will not be--then this will prove that in this fake parliament there is no room for constructive political work of the more fundamental kind. The future of this country must then be fought out further outside this hall by those of our compatriots who consider themselves called to it, i.e., by the professional politicians, of whom Thamrin is the first representative in this hall. I or my group, as standing outside that political movement, cannot take part in it.⁴⁵

Only a few months afterwards, however, Soetardjo decided in fact to participate in a public movement in support of his petition. In October 1937, the Central Soetardjo Petition Committee was established, its president being Soetardjo himself. The rest of the committee consisted of the other signatories of the petition, and other prominent Indonesians, like Hadji Agoes Salim, Atik Soeari and Iskandar Dinata of the Sundanese regionalist party, Pasoendan, and Hendromartono, the trade union leader.⁴⁶ Sartono, previously president of the non-cooperating Partindo and now an independent Bandung city council member, became its vice-president. To have won the support of such an influential former non-cooperator as Sartono was certainly a feather in Soetardjo's cap. Apart from Gatot Mangkoepradja,⁴⁷ however, no other

42. Sinar Deli, May 1, 1937.

43. Soeara Oemoem, December 13, 1937.

44. Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1937-38, Vol. I, July 9, 1937, p. 99.

45. Ibid., Zitting 1937-38, Vol. I, August 5, 1937, p. 720.

46. Pemandangan, October 6, 1937.

47. Tempo, August 25, 1936, describes Gatot Mangkoepradja as speaking in support of the petition at a Pasoendan meeting.

prominent former radicals appear to have spoken out in favor of the petition. Soetardjo later explained that he had finally yielded to "repeated and strong urges from many sides" to lead a central committee, because the group established in March could not seem to get off the ground. Soetardjo had noted that no one else in the organized nationalist movement seemed to be working for the petition, for which he felt responsible as one of its initiators.⁴⁸

The new committee proposed setting up local branches all over the Indies to propagandize and to collect signatures for the petition. Many such sub-committees were founded on the initiative of parties which supported the petition, and many, often large, meetings were held at which motions were passed in favor of the proposal. Salim and Soetardjo were active in publicizing the movement in the Outer Islands. The campaign spread also to Holland, where the communist-influenced association of Indonesian students, Perhimpunan Indonesia was backing the petition. A committee was formed there in September 1937 to propagandize for the petition, and in March 1938 this group, consisting mainly of Perhimpunan Indonesia and SDAP (Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij--Social-Democratic Workers' Party) members, sent an open letter to all members of the Lower House, drawing attention to the great public interest evinced in the petition in the Indies.⁴⁹

In the new Dutch cabinet, formed in June 1937, the Roman Catholic Welter replaced Colijn as Minister for Colonies. To most nationalists this seemed bound to be an improvement, since they had met no one as unsympathetic to their requests as Colijn. Besides, the new minister was a member of the RKSP (Rooms-Katholieke Staats-Partij--Roman Catholic State Party) which was generally more liberal than Colijn's Anti-Revolutionnaire Partij. *Pemandangan* greeted the new cabinet hopefully, hailing Welter as an "ethically-inclined liberal." *Soeara Oemoem* also regarded Welter as an improvement on Colijn.⁵⁰ At any slight bend in the road, the cooperating nationalists were inclined to glimpse better prospects, being unable to imagine anything worse than the miles they had already traversed.

In the Indies, however, the Soetardjo Petition campaign ran into considerable difficulties. For one thing, the collection of signatures proved a failure. Unused to this form of political action, and no doubt afraid of committing themselves to paper, people failed to sign. One case brought up by Soetardjo in the Volksraad showed they had reason to fear.⁵¹ A *controleur* in Palembang had, according to Soetardjo, confiscated lists containing 967 signatures supporting his petition. Some signatories were questioned and two people fined. An official report revealed the way in which an unfamiliar Western concept was likely to be transmogrified at the local level in the Indies. It appeared from the resident of Palembang's account that a certain Hadji Moh. Sabit was exploiting Ratu Adil or Djojjobojo expectations in his collection of signatures for the petition. He had told local inhabitants that the petition asked for freedom, or requested the Dutch to

48. See *Pemimpin*, March 1938, and *Soeara Oemoem*, December 13, 1937.

49. *Pemandangan*, September 4, 1937. A copy of the open letter is to be found in the Soetardjo Collection.

50. *IPO* 1937, pp. 439 and 482.

51. For details of the following story, see SA (The Hague), *Mailrapport* No. 777/39.

keep their promise to leave the Indies at the end of one hundred years, or to hand over the government to another ruler. Sabit also apparently stated that he was authorized by the government to collect signatures, and gave the impression that those who did not sign would miss out on certain advantages in the future. He had therefore been fined and his signatures confiscated as being extorted under false pretenses.¹ This confused story, typical of several reported at different times from outlying areas, illustrates the sort of difficulty faced by the Soetardjo Petition movement.

Perhaps the hardest blow that the campaign received was the refusal of most Indonesian parties, including the biggest ones, to support it. It was to be expected that the non-cooperating PSII would oppose the petition. In November 1937 the party forbade its members to be associated with the Central Soetardjo Petition Committee, one of its reasons being, in a spirit of defeatism, that "having seen the experience of the nationalist movement in British India, it is very naive to expect to win dominion status without the force of a well-organized popular movement." Another explanation given was that very little could be expected of the Imperial Conference suggested by the petition so long as the nationalist movement remained crippled by the government.⁵²

More unexpected was the lack of support from the cooperating parties Parindra and Gerindo. Two of the Nationale Fractie members who voted against the petition in the Volksraad, Soeroso and Wirjopranoto, were Parindrists, as were two others, Thamrin and Koesoemo Oetoyo, who cast votes in favor. Division of opinion appeared also in the party outside the council. In a letter from London, dated December 1936 and printed in the Parindra daily, *Soeara Oemoem* (January 4, 1937), the party's president, Dr. Soetomo, appeared to defend the petition. Commenting on the current speculation in England concerning reallocation of colonies, he said that it was most necessary to strengthen the Indies; this the Dutch could do by fulfilling the ideals of the Indonesian nation and also by agreeing to the Soetardjo Petition's request for autonomy. Parindrism publications generally were divided in their attitudes. All adopted a pessimistic outlook concerning the fate of the petition, but while some attacked Soetardjo, others expressed respect for his effort.⁵³ Reporting to the party on the petition in May 1937, Thamrin approved Soetardjo's proposal to hold a conference, since that implied "an admission that the way of government here should be changed, and that Indonesians must be consulted, and it gives an opportunity for Indonesian representatives to propagandize nationalist ideals." He advocated that the party support the petition on condition that delegates to the proposed conference were chosen in such a way that Indonesian national ideals were heard, and that a propaganda action was launched to explain the petition to the common people.⁵⁴ Despite this advice and the obvious support of Drs. Soebroto, the central executive of Parindra decided in December 1937 that it would not support the petition, although it considered a conference between

52. PSII Press Communiqué, November 29, 1937. This is included in a collection of documents relating to his petition in the possession of Soetardjo.

53. See Soeara Parindra, August 1936.

54. This advisory report is included in the Soetardjo collection mentioned in Note 52.

representatives of Holland and the Indies to be necessary.⁵⁵ The moderates had lost out.

Gerindo took a similar line. In October 1937 its executive issued a manifesto stating that the party had decided to support the petition so far as the request for an imperial conference was concerned, but this request amounted to nothing because it forbade Gerindo members to sit on the Soetardjo Petition committees.⁵⁶

The apathy of the nationalist movement could be attributed to a number of factors. After years of past setbacks, defeatism was an understandable reaction, and no doubt many radical-minded nationalists could not bear to think that where the organized movement had failed, an upstart like Soetardjo could succeed. In general terms, the nationalists' lack of confidence may have been caused by the exclusion of Indonesians from the most responsible positions in politics and administration, and their lack of initiative aggravated by the disappearance of many of their best leaders. More particularly, the cooperating nationalist movement itself was of very recent origin, and its experience over the difficult and still lingering Depression years made it slow to feel its way in a new situation. Certainly one could not say, as Pluvier does, that the Soetardjo Petition, "overtly demonstrating the wish to cooperate with the administration and with democratic Dutch circles in order to make a united stand against the imminent dangers, was a clear expression of the popular movement's change of front."⁵⁷ The petition neither originated from the popular movement nor received its clear support. Only a few very small parties and the regionalist party Pasoendan joined the movement to publicize the petition.⁵⁸

The Dutch Response

The Soetardjo Petition had passed through the Volksraad with the vote of the IEV which claimed to represent the major part of the European community in the Indies. But what support did the proposal in fact receive from the Dutch outside the Volksraad? For the purpose of this enquiry, the Dutch can be subdivided into the European population in the Indies, the Indies government authorities, and the Dutch in Holland, as represented in the States-General and at the government level. In their attitudes to the petition, each group was influenced by its estimation not only of the merits of the proposal, but also of the extent and significance of the general support for the petition. Very obvious at all levels was the ease with which the petition was dismissed.

Even the European community in the Indies can be further subdivided into the Eurasians, who looked on the petition with some favor,

55. Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad, December 13, 1937.

56. Pemandangan, October 5, 1937, quoted in IPO 1937, pp. 668-669.

57. J. M. Pluvier, "The Soetardjo Petition," in Journal of the Historical Society, University of Malaya, Vol. II (1963-64), p. 52.

58. The groups which supported the Central Soetardjo Petition Committee were Pasoendan, PAI, PPKI, Persatoean Minahasa, Perhimpoean Peladjar2 Indonesia (Indonesian Students Association), Sarekat Ambon, PTI and Pergerakan Penjadar.

and the generally hostile remainder. Although the IEV had cast their votes for the proposal, they were unwilling to proceed further with this joint Indonesian-European bid for political reform. Admittedly, their newspaper *Onze Stem* was one of the few European papers which defended the petition. But that the Europeans were no more inclined than usual to hobnob with Indonesians was clear from their failure to support the public campaign for the petition. *Onze Stem* stated that the IEV had voted for the petition because it was a first step towards a Rijksraad. If the propaganda at meetings in support of the petition had stressed the aims of a conference and a Rijksraad, continued the paper, then the IEV would have participated. "But these meetings have gone to extremes and therefore we have remained aloof."⁵⁹ As in other colonial countries, a mass movement involving cooperation between Europeans and the indigenous population was found to be impossible.

With very few exceptions, the Soetardjo Petition received a bad press amongst the European community in the Indies. The big daily papers all expressed their opposition, sometimes in ways offensive to Soetardjo. The general consensus was that the proposal was inopportune and that the Indies were not ripe for autonomy. And as with most proposals originating from the Indonesian population, the European press then proceeded to ignore the issue. In fact Zentgraaff, the extremely influential editor of the *Java-Bode*, did not even deign to mention the petition until June 8, 1938, when he condemned it in passing as "dangerous to the state"; in his view political action outside the representative councils should be forbidden. The small group of liberal-minded Dutchmen spoke out strongly in defense of the petition. *Kritiek en Opbouw*, for example, frequently expressed its support, but its voice did not carry far.

Despite widespread dissatisfaction with the petition itself in the Dutch community, there was nevertheless a definite movement in favor of greater autonomy for the Indies. As noted above, during the Volksraad debate many Europeans reacted favorably to the suggestion of a Rijksraad, which would give the Indies a voice in determining policy relating to matters affecting both the colonies and the mother country. The Depression years had been traumatic ones for the Indies, arousing the most conservative Dutchmen to protest against Holland's treatment of her colony. Scholarly journals on colonial affairs which carried several articles condemning the Soetardjo Petition at the same time featured many eloquent demands for the reform of colonial relations, especially in the economic field. Two articles by high-ranking former Indies government officials are classic statements of the case against Holland's Depression policy: "Indië Vraagt Hulp," by J. J. Schrieke, and "Hollands Fout in Indië," by J. W. Meyer Ranneft.⁶⁰ Both articles emphasized the suffering inflicted on the Indies because of Holland's control over its budget and currency. As Meyer Ranneft pointed out, "The Indies was the only debtor-country in the world that remained on gold and that did not wholly or partly repudiate its debts or in other ways reduce the value of its currency." One of the symptoms of the resultant dissatisfaction was the Soetardjo Petition. Even the most loyal supporters of the government, stated Meyer Ranneft, expected one thing of it: some perspective for themselves and the Indies. The solution offered by writers of such articles varied. Whereas Schrieke

59. *Onze Stem*, July 22, 1938.

60. Printed respectively in *Indisch Genootschap, Vergadering van 8 Mei, 1936* (The Hague, 1936), pp. 55-94, and *De Gids* (Amsterdam, 1937), pp. 289-326.

was content to demand a grant of at least 30 million guilders per annum from the Netherlands to aid the recovery of the Indies, Meyer Ranneft requested autonomy for the Indies government; a new relationship must be worked out between it and Holland.

Thus conservative and liberal Europeans in the Indies were momentarily in agreement in pressing for more autonomy for the colony, although they had very different ideas of the form autonomy should take. Liberals envisaged an autonomous Indies in which Indonesians would rule. Though conservatives like Meyer Ranneft and De Hoog did not spell out their view of an autonomous Indies in detail, their support for the concept implied that Europeans in the colony would take over responsibility for the colony from Europeans in Holland. The home government was felt to be too unresponsive to the wishes of Indies Europeans: it had been both too lenient to the nationalists and too harsh in its economic measures.

Faced with this general restlessness, what was the reaction of the administration in the Indies? Secret official correspondence shows that Dutch officials there were very much aware of the growing demand for more autonomy not only among Indonesians but also among Europeans. What was most remarkable was the ability of the topmost decision-makers to claim that no changes were necessary to lull this unrest. The conservative administration in Holland had a vested interest in maintaining its control over Indies policy; for this reason it resisted moves towards autonomy by fellow-conservatives in the colony. On a higher plane, conservative administrators in both Holland and the Indies genuinely believed that they were following the right path for the Indies' development. No one else could be credited with sufficient objectivity to assume this sacred task.

The reports on the Soetardjo Petition by two officials close to events--the Government Delegate for General Affairs to the Volksraad (W. G. Peekema) and the Adviser for Native Affairs (E. Gobée)--were hard-hitting and sacrceely lent themselves to complacent interpretation.⁶¹ Although Peekema was not impressed by the reception of the petition among the public and in the Volksraad, he could see that native public opinion was no longer confined to a small minority, but was growing, stimulated by events at home and abroad. Significantly, in the Volksraad there had been some support for the idea of calling a conference, and more for the establishment of a state commission which could replace such a conference or prepare for it. Peekema expected this to be the first sign of greater demands in the future. He considered it advisable that these aspirations be channeled while there was still time; otherwise concessions would be forced and claims would become more radical. Interspersed with this assessment went a strongly worded attack on the government's lack of political policy. Peekema pointed out that while during the past years the government had given economic preoccupations as an excuse for saying nothing about the country's political future, this line of reasoning would be outdated with the passing of the Depression. The other favorite evasive tactic, the argument that the Indies were not "ripe" for political advance, was, said Peekema, "a will-o'-the-wisp which lands every deliberation in a morass." The question of when and how autonomy would be reached had

61. These two documents are included in S. L. van der Wal, De Volksraad en de Staatkundige Ontwikkeling van Nederlands-Indie, Vol. II (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1965), pp. 222-261.

to be faced. If the petition were passed by without any perspective being opened up for the foreseeable future, the reasonable and moderate attitude of native groups would disappear.

After the down-to-earth realism of these warnings, Peekema's conclusions seemed lame, as Gobée commented in his report. The former official suggested that the demand for a conference be rejected on the grounds that at least at the moment there was a lack of commonly accepted basic principles. The preparatory work should be done by a State Commission which would propose outlines for the gradual political development of the Indies. Gobée did not consider that this went far enough. He thought that dissatisfaction was far more widespread than Peekema had reported. In his view, the Indonesians who engaged in moderate political action were nevertheless sympathetic towards extremists who turned more fiercely against the government. He pointed to the rising interest in Japan, and stated that people were coming to the conclusion that since nothing more could be expected of Holland, they could not be worse off under Japanese domination, which at least would not discriminate racially against Indonesians. The government offered nothing politically to which moderate Indonesians could appeal in reply to the leaders of the extremist parties. Gobée suggested that the conference should be called, but that its task should be limited to formulating principles for which the practical content could be worked out by a State Commission. In the meantime there should be steady Indianization of the administration, as an essential precondition for autonomy.

A far more conservative report came from the Director of Education, A. D. A. de Kat Angelino, who was known to be a strong defender of government policy.⁶² He repeated an argument which he had expounded in his book, *Staatkundig Beleid en Bestuurszorg in Nederlandsch-Indië*,⁶³ that further political emancipation at the center in the Indies would mean the transfer of power from the Netherlands nation to an oligarchy of the more or less educated. He rejected this. Political emancipation should be only the last result of universal, fully *social* emancipation. This policy the government was wisely pursuing. Apparently the proposers of the Soetardjo Petition had in mind the example of British India, where a scheme for the preparation of autonomy was being undertaken, but this project De Kat Angelino condemned as purely artificial because it disregarded the backwardness of the masses. Moreover, he disapproved of the very aim of autonomy, which sounded too negative. The goal should be to strengthen the realm and the ties between its parts. To this end the formation of a Rijksraad would be useful; it should consist of a body of experts advising the Crown on imperial matters, and could develop into a form of Imperial Parliament.

A fourth important report to the Governor-General was issued by the Council of the Netherlands Indies, the former's advisory body.⁶⁴ Its advice was entirely negative. In the council's opinion, the petition conflicted with the constitution and was particularly undesirable because it appeared to aim at dominion status, for which the country

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 261-284.

63. A. D. A. de Kat Angelino, *Staatkundig Beleid en Bestuurszorg in Nederlandsch-Indië* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1929).

64. Van der Wal, *De Volksraad*, pp. 287-316.

was not prepared. The council considered that reform at the regional levels, which would give increased participation to the broad levels of the population, was more important than reform at the center.

An interesting aspect of the official reaction to the Soetardjo Petition is the extreme slowness with which it was deliberated at the top level, indicating indifference and the absence of any conviction that the matter was urgent or important. The Minister of Colonies could make no decision on the petition until he had received the relevant reports and advice from the Governor-General. But it was not until September 1938 that Tjarda van Starckenborgh Stachouwer, after some prompting from the Minister, finally sent his report. The new Governor-General perhaps had the excuse that it took him some time to find his feet, but obviously he did not give high priority to the petition. His report on the matter shows a remarkable ability to ignore anything disturbing in the advice he had received.⁶⁵ Although he began by admitting that there was widespread feeling in the Indies that the country's development was outgrowing its constitutional structure, that the European population felt that the Dutch government exercised too much influence on the conduct of the Indies administration, and that the politically-conscious part of the native population wanted leadership in its own hands, he then proceeded as if these facts were irrelevant to the petition. His conclusions rested heavily on the advice of the Council of the Indies and of De Kat Angelino. He agreed with them that extension of autonomy should occur in the regional sphere, as in fact it was occurring (in theory) through the administrative reforms then in progress.⁶⁶ Even if the government attempted to set out a political plan, it would give no satisfaction and would merely cause confusion. Calling a conference or commission would give the damaging impression that the government was admitting weakness, and at the same time it would arouse wild hopes which could only be disappointed. The Governor-General clearly thought the petition could be rejected with impunity. He pointed to the fact that important native organizations disapproved of it, and that it had been greeted with indifference. He did not think it worthwhile, as even De Kat Angelino had, to offer alternative reforms. In his opinion a Rijksraad, for example, would not be useful, and its composition would create problems.

So much for the advice of the Governor-General who the Indonesians had hoped would be more liberal than his predecessor, Jhr. de Jonge. It is worth noting that neither of these men was impressed by the political advances made in other colonies during their term of office. They both firmly believed that the Americans were trying, for ulterior motives, to rid themselves of a responsibility in the Philippines. To every Indonesian reference to the Philippines they countered triumphantly that the Americans welcomed Philippine independence because then Philippine exports to the United States could be taxed, and insisted that the Filipinos themselves did not want independence ("an unripe fruit" "of which the people would gladly be delivered," so the Government Delegate described it in the Volksraad⁶⁷), because they

65. Ibid., pp. 382-390.

66. For a discussion of the decentralization measures of the 1930's, see H. J. Benda, "The Pattern of Administrative Reforms in the Closing Years of Dutch Rule in Indonesia," Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 25, No. 4 (August 1966), pp. 589-605.

67. Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1935-36, Vol. I, July 26, 1935, p. 488.

would be undefended, a prey to Japanese economic and political expansionism. Far from being shamed by comparison with other colonial powers, Dutch self-esteem was merely reinforced. They at least were not selfishly shirking their duties; at whatever cost to themselves, they would see that the Indies were given a solid basis in economic and social well-being before political autonomy was considered.⁶⁸

On such matters, the Governors-General and their respective Ministers for Colonies were in complete agreement. In February 1937, the then Minister for Colonies and subsequently Minister-President (the Dutch equivalent of Prime Minister), Dr. Hendrik Colijn, had already spoken slightly of the Soetardjo Petition in a States-General debate.⁶⁹ Referring to it and to another petition which requested the right of enquiry for the Volksraad, he complained: "What concerns me about both petitions is especially that consciously or unconsciously they assume that the emancipation of the Netherlands Indies is the primary task." Climbing onto his old hobby-horse, he proclaimed that there was no national unity in the Indies and that of much more importance than dominion-status for the country was the training of the separate population groups for "local and regional citizenship, expressed in participation in and care for their own daily interests." Theoretically the Minister was to make no pronouncement on the petition until he had received the Governor-General's advice, but official and parliamentary opinion was already clear. In both Houses of the States-General, only the Social Democrats and the Communists spoke in defense of the petition during debates on the Indies budget in 1937. Since both of these parties were rendered suspect to the rest of the parliament by their past association with revolution, their support was unlikely to endear the petition to others. The Communists in particular were discredited, because in conformity with the Moscow line, they had recently made a *volte-face* and were now currying favor with "bourgeois democratic" parties in an attempt to form a united front against international fascism. The Indonesian communist, Roestam Effendi, presented his party's new colonial policy in the Lower House in February 1937:⁷⁰ the Communists had abandoned their slogan "Indonesia free from Holland now!" since Communists would not support independence "if it would turn out to the advantage of fascist states." The Indies, threatened by Japan, should not be independent but rather should be strengthened against fascism both militarily and through democratic reforms. To this end Effendi supported moderate demands like that embodied in the Soetardjo Petition. Other members of the House greeted Effendi's new look with heavy sarcasm or mild distrust. With such friends, did the petition need enemies?

If supporters of the petition had hoped for a more favorable response in 1938 from the newly-elected Lower House and the new Minister for Colonies, Welter, they were rapidly disillusioned. From the more extensive discussion of the petition in the States-General in February and May of 1938, it was clear that opinion there had not changed. Welter's approach to colonial policy was the same as that of Colijn, although he had in the past shown signs of apparent inconsistency.

68. *Ibid.*, Zitting 1939-40, Vol. I, July 31, 1939, pp. 546-547.

69. Staten-Generaal, Handelingen van de Tweede Kamer, February 12, 1937, pp. 1617-18.

70. *Ibid.*, February 10, 1937, pp. 1552-55.

For example, a public speech made by him in 1936 on "Holland's Task in the Netherlands Indies" seemed to indicate that Welter was aware of the stirrings of momentous changes in the Indies and that he thought they should not be resisted face on.⁷¹ Certainly Soetardjo referred to this speech with hopeful approval when introducing his petition to the Volksraad.⁷² To judge from Welter's previous and subsequent performance, however, it would appear that this address was either misleadingly meaningless or an aberration. In his pronouncements as Minister, Welter expressed opposition to change and general satisfaction with the status quo in the Indies. In the States-General in 1938 he supported Colijn's stand that political reform must henceforth proceed at the local level. According to him, Dutch colonial policy was geared to the masses, not to the movement of the Western-educated, alienated nationalists.

A great French publicist once said, the task of government is not to hear the voices of those who speak, but to listen to those who do not speak. In the course of many years the Indies Government has learned this art, and if I listen I hear that those tens of millions really only want to be able to work their plot of land peacefully, to pluck its sober fruits and to live peacefully with their wives and children.⁷³

While still maintaining the fiction that he was suspending judgment on the Soetardjo Petition until he had heard from the Governor-General, Welter rejected any idea of autonomy for the Indies. Being so eminently quotable, he must be cited again:

Who that is aware of the beneficial work which the Dutch people have done in the Indies and also of the wholesome influence which the Dutch Parliament has on the course of events in the Indies, would now wish to make an end to that situation? I believe that to pose the question is at the same time to answer it.⁷⁴

In his view, it was not time to consider new political reforms at the center, since the 1925 reform had not yet been digested. In answer to "natives who strive for political development," he recommended that they work with the Dutch authorities for the spiritual and material development of their people. This was the only way to political advancement--not by means of the conference table. He concluded by expressing his pleasure "that this idea is increasingly catching on in native circles."

To judge from the remarks of members of the States-General, Starkenborgh, Welter and Colijn were fairly representative of Dutch colonial thinking of the time. The 1937 election had brought little change in the composition of the Lower House. The Roman Catholics and Anti-Revolutionaries had gained slightly at the expense of the Liberals and the Christelijk-Historische Unie [Christian Historical Union--CHU], and the ruling confessional parties' coalition maintained a clear

71. A report of this speech is given in De Indische Gids, 1936, pp. 841-843.

72. Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1936-37, Vol. I, July 9, 1936, p. 76.

73. Staten-Generaal, Handelingen van de Tweede Kamer, March 1, 1938, p. 1257.

74. Ibid., p. 1260. The same reference applies to the rest of this paragraph.

majority over the Liberals, Social Democrats and Communists. The non-confessional parties were more favorably disposed towards Indonesian autonomy than the others, and in this situation the Roman Catholics, with almost a third of the Lower House seats, occupied a crucial position. The RKSP contained a mixture of people, ranging from almost socialist-minded members to old-style conservatives like Welter. But on the subject of the Soetardjo Petition, Roman Catholics stood behind their Minister. A conservative Catholic member, Bajetto, commended the Minister for his negative attitude towards the petition. "To those who are inclined to see a solution to political problems in submission to nationalist aspirations, I wish to point to the lessons of history, which . . . always prove that this only leads to the posing of intensified demands," an example being British India.⁷⁵

Apart from the leftists, only a very few speakers like A. M. Joeke of the Liberal Democrats and B. C. de Savornin Lohman of the CHU appeared to think it necessary to consider any new political reforms. Joeke asked why the Indies could not settle its own budget without the need for approval from the States-General.⁷⁶ As we have seen above, Welter thought the influence of the Dutch Parliament a beneficial one. De Savornin Lohman favored a Rijksraad as De Kat Angelino envisaged it,⁷⁷ but the Minister dismissed this out of hand as unnecessary--he already had enough advisory bodies.⁷⁸ In Dutch society outside the States-General there was scarcely a glimmer of interest in reform in the Indies, except among the leftists.

In November 1938 the Royal Decree on the Soetardjo Petition was finally sent out to the Volksraad.⁷⁹ It rejected the petition on several grounds. Article 1 of the constitution could give no support to Soetardjo's request because it "gave no indication of the state of autonomy of the Netherlands Indies." The Dutch policy towards the Indies was to increase the control of its inhabitants over internal matters, and according to this principle a number of important reforms had been promulgated within a short period. Existing constitutional and legal provisions offered room for further advance. But political autonomy must grow as "the naturally ripening fruit" of the social and economic development of the country; otherwise it was "artificial." Like the Governor-General, the Minister had ignored any stirrings of unrest in the Indies, both because he believed them insignificant, and because to acknowledge them "could be seen as a sign of weakness."⁸⁰ The final decision yielded not an inch, not even, as Peekema had urged, to open up any perspectives.

75. Ibid., February 24, 1938, p. 1219.

76. Ibid., February 25, 1938, p. 1236.

77. Handelingen van de Eerste Kamer, May 19, 1938, p. 708.

78. Ibid., May 20, 1938, p. 723.

79. The decree is included in Van der Wal, De Volksraad, Vol. II, pp. 394-396.

80. Quoted from a communiqué to the Queen from the Minister, November 8, 1938, in ibid., p. 392.

Reactions to the Rejection of the Petition

As the Dutch decision-makers had predicted, little outward interest was aroused by the fate of the Soetardjo Petition. Most observers seem to have regarded its rejection as a foregone conclusion, and it received little attention in the Volksraad after 1936. At the opening of the 1937 and 1938 sessions, Soetardjo spoke with a mixture of hope and bitterness about the future of his proposal, with bitterness rapidly gaining the upper hand. Since it was clear at an early stage that the States-General and the Minister opposed the petition, his speeches each year were almost the same as when the final blow fell. He stressed increasingly the discredit into which the Volksraad was falling, the international threat of war⁸¹ and the dangerously widening gulf between Dutch and Indonesians. The members of the Nationale Fractie hardly deigned to mention the petition, but they made their opinion clear by speaking in Malay during the 1938 session--a demonstration which caused indignant flutterings in official dove-cotes.⁸² The European members had similarly long given the petition up for lost, but that they, too, were not altogether happy at its failure to influence the authorities in any way was shown by their continued advocacy of some sort of reform in colonial relations. However, receiving no encouragement from either the Indonesians or the government, they failed to formulate any concrete proposals.

The moderate, non-organized nationalists in the Volksraad had made their bid to do something which had not been attempted since the Radical Concentration of 1922: to unite discontented Europeans and Indonesian members in an attempt to force a reform in imperial relations. The opportunity was there to push home the point that a large and growing majority of Volksraad members wanted more autonomy for the Indies. If it had had more unanimity in the Volksraad, to which a stronger backing by the Nationale Fractie would have contributed, the petition might have made more impact on the decision-makers. Perhaps nothing would have deflected the course of Dutch colonial policy in these years, but it seems likely that if any political development in the Indies could have done so, it would have been combined European and Indonesian pressure for gradual political reforms through the Volksraad, rather than extreme demands by a small isolated group of nationalists. At the time, the organized cooperating nationalists rejected this parliamentary path and, debarred from or neglecting other alternative paths, they clung to the radical tradition sanctified by the non-cooperators.

Surprisingly, however, the failure of Soetardjo's initiative did not give rise to greater gloom and inactivity among nationalists. In many ways the petition had a catalytic effect on the nationalist movement, helping to stir the organized nationalists out of the apathetic defeatism in which they had been languishing since the non-cooperating movement had been paralyzed. As *Pemandangan* remarked in December 1938,

81. To exert last-minute pressure, he directed a question to the government in October 1938, suggesting that his proposed conference should issue a statement that the population of the Indies wished to retain its connection with Holland. The question was prompted by current rumors that the Indies would be divided up among other powers.

82. See Van der Wal, De Volksraad, Vol. II, pp. 369-377.

although the petition had been rejected, that did not mean it was valueless. The petition had appeared at a time when the popular movement was weak, and the public discussion it aroused stirred the movement into action.⁸³ The cooperation of parties on the Central Soetardjo Petition Committee had given a boost to organizational development. In July 1939 Soetardjo pointed to the validation of his earlier prediction that in case of the failure of his petition, "Mr. Thamrin would be called upon to speak."⁸⁴ For by that time Gapi, embracing almost all nationalist parties, had been founded. It had followed directly after the dissolution of the Soetardjo Petition Committee in May 1939. Perhaps, as one commentator put it, the rejection of the petition was more important than the petition itself.⁸⁵

Admittedly, this new turn of events could not be attributed entirely to the petition. A more obvious improvement in the general economic situation at this date may have had something to do with it. Hope arising from the tense international situation from 1938 onwards was also a driving force behind the new unity. The nationalists hoped that the threat of war would cause the Dutch to seek a rapprochement with them.

Despite the outright rejection of Soetardjo's methods by radical nationalists, the organized nationalist movement did not simply swing back to the old solution of rallying the forces in the face of opposition. The Nationale Fractie began to make more constructive use of the Volksraad by introducing motions aimed at democratization. For instance, Wiwoho, who had voted against the Soetardjo Petition, introduced a proposal on very similar lines in 1940. More generally, the petition had made a significant contribution to the nationalist movement, in that it encouraged piecemeal advances rather than vague demands for independence. Gapi adopted the immediate aim of a parliament for Indonesia, and devoted its full resources to campaigning for this objective.

What of the effect of the rejection of the petition on its proposers? We have already referred to Ratu Langie's assumption of the editorship of the nationalist weekly *Nationale Commentaren* from 1938 onwards. Doubtless the failure of the petition which he had co-sponsored helped increase his identification with the organized nationalist movement, into which he steered his party when it joined Gapi in 1939.

This was also the fate of Kasimo's PPKI and the PAI to which Alatas belonged. Thus three of the signatories of the petition moved from positions outside the organized nationalist movement to take up a commitment to a wider, more radical goal within it. As for PPBB members in the Volksraad, in 1941 Soetardjo led them to assume a position committed to nationalist goals; in July of that year they formed themselves into a "Middle Group" aiming at autonomy for the Indies within the terms of article 1 of the constitution.⁸⁶ Naturally the extent of

83. Quoted in IPO 1938, p. 824.

84. Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1938-39, Vol. I, July 10, 1939, p. 35.

85. M. Natsir in Pandji Islam, December, 1938. (Cited in Natsir, Capita Selecta, Vol. I [Bandung/The Hague: van Hoeve, 1955], pp. 236-237.)

86. Handelingen van de Volksraad, Zitting 1940-41, Vol. I, July 15, 1941, p. 208.

the contribution of the petition's rejection to the increasingly public commitment by its signatories to nationalism is debatable, but it must have been an important factor.

While officials closest to events in the Indies grew increasingly uneasy at the estrangement of Indonesians from Dutch rule and at the dissatisfaction evinced by many Europeans there, the Dutch in Holland and their top decision-makers were not to be impressed by proffered umbrellas: they refused to believe it was going to rain until the storm was upon them. But even if the Soetardjo Petition failed to achieve its goal, it had the useful outcome of helping to unify and increase the effectiveness of the nationalist movement. Introduced by moderate nationalists whom its rejection helped to radicalize, the petition taught a lesson in gradualism to the organized nationalist movement.