



**Mohammad Natsir (1948)**

# IN MEMORIAM: MOHAMMAD NATSIR (1907–1993)

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On February 6, 1993 Mohammad Natsir died in Jakarta at the age of 84. Last of the giants among Indonesia's nationalist and revolutionary political leaders, he undoubtedly had more influence on the course of Islamic thought and politics in postwar Indonesia than any of his contemporaries. By nature extraordinarily modest and unpretentious, he had a well deserved reputation for personal integrity and political probity. He always lived simply with respect to house and attire, even in 1950 as prime minister. (When I first met him in 1948 and he was the Republic's minister of information, I found a man in what was surely the most mended shirt of any official in Yogyakarta; it was his only shirt, and the staff of his office a few weeks later pooled their resources to get him a new one in order, they told me, that their boss would look like "a real minister.")

Born of Minangkabau parents in the West Sumatran town of Alahan Panjang (some 30 miles south of Solok) on July 17, 1908, Natsir grew up in what he remembered to be a very religious area. It was also agriculturally prosperous—in contrast, he recalled, to the impoverished nearby Silungkung district which was a center of the Communist uprising of 1927. His father was a clerk in a government office in Alahan Panjang who had graduated from an Indonesian language primary school and did not know Dutch (HIS schools had not yet been established in the area). His mother, too, could read only Indonesian. The parents realized they had a gifted child and did their best to secure a good education for him. After attending a year of private school in Padang he spent three years at the Hollands-Inlandse school in Solok, while also after school attending the Islamic school there directed by a follower of Haji Rasul (an influential scholar who introduced the Muhammadiyah into West Sumatra and in 1918 had founded the famous Sumatra Thawalib School in Padang Panjang). Natsir then won a series of scholarships that took him first through MULO (1923–27) and then to the prestigious AMS (Algemene Middlebare School) in Bandung, from which he graduated in 1930. This was, he said, the only AMS in Indonesia that had a Western Classics division, and it was therefore especially attractive to him. The rector of the school, Van Bessem (Natsir couldn't remember his first name), was a specialist in Greek culture who taught Latin and Greek, and Natsir studied Latin with him. (Natsir became fluent in English as well as Dutch, developed a good command of French and German, and soon mastered

Arabic.) Van Bessem, Natsir recalled, was an unusual man, who was highly respected by his students and had a strong influence on them. These included Sjafruddin Prawiranegara, Mohamad Roem, Jusuf Wibisono, and Sutan Sjahrir (who was in the class ahead of Natsir.) "We saw him as our guru, for he was much more than just a teacher." He gave them books on political thought, which "he used to explain and discuss with us between classes" and encouraged them to think in terms of Indonesian independence: "sometime you must be free," Van Bessem told them. Natsir told me that, though after the 1927 rebellious activity by the Communists the Dutch regime had become more restrictive towards the nationalist movement and meetings were forbidden, Van Bessem allowed Natsir and his fellow students to hold them in his classroom.

But in Bandung Natsir was also an avid student of Islam.<sup>1</sup> While attending the AMS there he joined the modernist Persatuan Islam and attended classes organized for its members by the influential modernist Ahmad Hassan. In 1928 his first published article appeared in the organization's journal, *Pembela Islam*. The next year he also became a member of the Jong Islamieten Bond, founded by Hadji Agus Salim, lectured to its members and soon became head of its Bandung branch. But he saw Persatuan Islam as the more important of the two organizations, for it emphasized Islam as being "a social and political system" and "its influence spread deeper into the villages." Because of his belief in the importance of furthering educational efforts in behalf of Islam he turned down scholarship offers for both the law school in Batavia and the Rotterdam School of Economics, electing instead to enter the Training School for Non-European Teachers, from whose two-year course he graduated in 1932. Later that year he founded the Pendidikan Islam (Islamic Education), an organization that flourished until 1942 when, along with all other private schools, it was closed down by the Japanese. The Pendidikan established a co-educational school in Bandung (with branches later in several other West Java towns) which included a seven-year primary division (averaging 80 students), a three-year secondary division (averaging 90 students), and its own two-year Teachers' Training School (with an average of about 30 pupils). As with other so-called "wild schools" established by nationalists during this period, the colonial authorities refused to accept the Pendidikan's school as part of their own educational system, even though its curriculum included that of the Dutch colonial schools as well as Islamic education. Natsir recalled that the curriculum incorporated "new liberal trends in education such as were then being developed in the German *Arbeid Schulen*—that is emphasis on practical education" as exemplified by a field attached to the school where students were taught farming.

In developing his own appreciation of Islam, Natsir told me, the two non-Indonesian Islamic leaders who influenced him most, and whose writings he already studied closely during this formative prewar period, were Mohammad Abduh, the famous Egyptian Islamic reformist (who had close ties to Jamal al-Din al Afghani) and his follower Rasjid Rida, editor of *Al Manar*, then perhaps the most influential Modernist Islamic journal worldwide. Natsir was especially impressed by Mohammad Abduh's *tafsir* (interpretative commentary on the Koran), by his demonstration that Islam was a social system, that Islamic ethics be interpreted in terms of social values and social justice, and by his stand against colonialism. He was also favorably impressed by Abduh's and Rasjid Rida's argument that the fortunes of Islam could be best advanced in the modern world not only by purifying the Mohammedan religion of its accumulated corrupt and superstitious

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent account of Natsir's activities in the pre-war decade see Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement In Indonesia, 1900-1942* (London and Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973).

practices, but also through an understanding of Western knowledge—a perception that was clearly evident in the curriculum of Natsir's Pendidikan schools.

During the 1930s Natsir, wrote extensively—frequently for *Pembela Islam* and other journals, publishing his first book, *Mohamad als Profeet* (in Dutch) in 1929, and his first book in the Indonesian Language, *Cultuur Islam*, in 1934 (for which Professor Wolf K. Schumacher of the Bandung Technical Institute, and a good friend of Natsir, wrote the introduction). Natsir gained even more of a reputation as a leading spokesman for reformist Islam in his widely circulated exchange with Sukarno (then interned by the Dutch in Bencoolen) in April–June 1940. Sukarno admired Natsir's writings and had developed some sympathy for the stand of Persatuan Islam generally, and the exchange was friendly. If Islam were to keep abreast of the times, Sukarno argued, its adherents should make rationalism their “guiding star” and interpret the words of the Koran and Hadith consonant with the overall “spirit of Islam” rather than in strict accordance with “the letter.” Although Natsir in this exchange agreed that through independent thinking adherence to Islam could be strengthened and its accretions of superstition dissipated, he believed that Sukarno had gone too far in his advocacy of rationalism as the key to understanding Islam, pointing out that even Kant, whose name Sukarno had invoked, acknowledged that “pure reason” had its limitations.<sup>2</sup>

During the Japanese occupation Natsir continued to focus on the field of education, being appointed head of the Bandung city Bureau of Education. As with nearly all Islamic leaders, he also became a member of the overarching Moslem Organization the Japanese obliged all Islamic groups to join—the Madjelis Sjuro Muslimin Indonesia (Council of Indonesian Moslem Associations), generally known as the Masjumi, and precursor of the post-occupation political party known by that shortened name.

It should be noted that, while in later years the Masjumi was sometimes accused of not being sufficiently forthright in its condemnation of the militant Darul Islam movement (which during the 1950s remained powerful in West Java), Natsir certainly did not support the movement and always insisted that the concept of an Islamic state be regarded as an *ideal*—something yet to be achieved and still very far removed from the reality of the present. In the meantime, he argued, Moslems should strive for a democratic political order; for as he expressed it to me in 1971, “as far as the Moslems are concerned, democracy comes first, because Islam can prosper only in a democratic system.” Through that system, he held, they would ultimately have the opportunity for putting through legislation consistent with Islamic precepts, and if “there was enough time and freedom to educate Indonesians as to the character of Islam, more and more of them would come to love it.” But he acknowledged that this would be a long-term process that would take “one or two generations.”

With Indonesia's declaration of independence Natsir became active politically as a member of the Masjumi Party Council and was one of its representatives in the KNIP (Komite Nasional Indonesia Pusat—Central Indonesian National Committee). Within the Masjumi he soon emerged with his friends Sjafruddin Prawiranegara and Mohamad Roem as head of the party's progressive wing, generally then referred to as the “Religious Socialists.” The term Natsir explained to me in later years was a bit of a misnomer, for the socio-economic formula which he and these colleagues espoused called for a mixed economy, encompassing socialist, cooperative, and private components, but with it being understood that attached to private property went the social responsibility to use it in a way that

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<sup>2</sup> For good accounts of the 1940 Sukarno-Natsir exchange, upon which I have here drawn, see Bernard Dahm, *Sukarno and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), esp. pp. 189–95, and Noer, *Modernist Muslim Movement*, esp. pp. 279–95.

would promote the welfare of the community as well as that of the owner. This was in fact very close to what Mohammad Hatta advocated (though Hatta put somewhat more emphasis on the cooperative component), and, like him, Natsir perceived Islam as fully compatible with democratic socialism. In 1971 when I had discussions with Natsir about these matters his views appeared generally the same as during the revolution, except that he had now become deeply disappointed over the continuing lack of social justice and the increasing disparity in wealth between the rich and the poor. Wealth, whether of the individual or the state, he emphasized, brings with it a responsibility to society and should be utilized so as to extend greater prosperity to the population as a whole.

During the revolution Natsir found considerable affinity with the socio-economic views of Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir, head of the Socialist Party. (It should be recalled that most of the country's revolutionary leaders then espoused some variant of socialism.) He joined Sjahrir's second and third cabinets (March 12, 1946–June 27, 1947) as a representative of the Masjumi with the portfolio of Minister of Information. And with the formation of Hatta's cabinet (January 29, 1948–December 19, 1948) he served again in that post.

In the midst of the Dutch army's blitz attack against Yogyakarta on December 19, 1948, Hatta, Natsir, and Sukarno were the Republic's three leaders who prepared speeches to be read over the Republic's radio exhorting the population throughout the Republic to resist the Dutch and in no way to cooperate with them in areas they occupied. Before the speeches could be broadcast Dutch planes rocketed and destroyed the radio station, but the original and carbons of these typewritten speeches were well guarded after the Dutch captured the city and were circulated from hand to hand and their contents passed on by word of mouth. (On January 10, 1949, carbon copies were smuggled out to Jakarta and there made available to Thomas Critchley, the Australian representative on the UN's Committee of Good Offices, and Jusuf Ronodipuro of the Republic's underground organization there for mimeographing and distribution throughout Java.)<sup>3</sup>

Of the three speeches Natsir's was the hardest hitting and the most detailed as to measures that were to be taken against the Dutch. He called upon the Indonesian people to mount a "tenacious and fierce struggle, wherein quarter shall neither be asked nor given . . . each territory must organize its battle strategy without too much dependence upon the central administration. . . . We must obstruct and sabotage every effort to consolidate the Dutch government. This means that civil servants must be 100% noncooperative. It means that rich men and socially minded men must establish a relief fund for the most important civil servants to prevent their forced co-operation with the Dutch because of a hungry stomach . . . better to be jailed than to be a puppet or a traitor."

On September 6, 1950, Natsir was appointed by President Sukarno as formateur of the second cabinet of the now fully independent Republic of Indonesia. (Hatta had led the cabinet of the first such government—federal, rather than unitary in character, as was the one now headed by Natsir). Based on the Masjumi, of which Natsir was chairman, and several smaller parties and non-party specialists, the new cabinet was successful in putting down rebellions in the South Moluccas and South Sulawesi, but was unable—as with several successor cabinets—to achieve success in ending the Darul Islam rebellion in West Java. It succeeded in recovering thousands of weapons left over from the revolution and in absorbing into civilian society a large number of former army personnel and members of

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the courage of two Indonesian girls, Jo Abdurachman and Jo Kurnianingrat, typewritten carbons of these speeches were deftly slipped to me even though I was under arrest and in the custody of Dutch Military Police, and I was able to take them to Jakarta.

irregular guerrilla units; but it was unable to make any significant progress in reducing the numbers of a civil service, badly bloated by having had to absorb the bureaucracies of both the revolutionary republic and those from what had been the Dutch-controlled areas. Natsir's cabinet maintained an independent, non-aligned foreign policy that leaned a bit more toward the West than toward the Communist bloc, refusing US offers of arms but being receptive to American technical assistance. During the Korean War it abstained on the US resolution condemning China and worked together with India in an attempt to end the fighting.

It was over the question of West Irian that strains first developed in Natsir's previously warm relationship with Sukarno. Although just as critical as Sukarno of the Netherlands' refusal to negotiate a satisfactory solution of that issue (the UN-sponsored Round Table Agreement with the Netherlands had stipulated that a settlement be consummated within a year), Natsir felt that other problems demanded more urgent attention and advocated a more restrained and less openly confrontational approach than Sukarno, who called for economic sanctions against the Netherlands. Natsir prevailed—to the keen disappointment of Sukarno—further alienating him by insisting (correctly) that Sukarno's constitutional position as president did not permit his involvement in matters of foreign policy. Natsir's government fell on April 26, 1951 over an adverse vote in Parliament concerning a relatively minor issue of domestic policy, but there is no doubt that Sukarno's influence with some of the opposition members (especially the PNI) was a significant factor in this defeat.

Unfortunately this difference over West Irian strategy was the beginning of an estrangement between the two leaders that was to grow over the next half decade, fed primarily by differences between them as to the appropriate system of government for Indonesia. Natsir, as chairman of the Masjumi party, sought to maintain parliamentary government and the prevailing party system, while Sukarno argued that they had proven ineffective and should be replaced by a more authoritarian system—Guided Democracy—wherein his own powers would be greater.

But the culminating factor in this estrangement came at the end of November 1957 in what was known as the Cikini Affair, a grenade attack to assassinate Sukarno which was very nearly successful and did kill many children at the school he was visiting. Natsir had nothing to do with this nor did he have any foreknowledge of the plan. But those who threw the grenades were members of the Masjumi's youth wing (GPII) and their mentor, Colonel Zulkifli Lubis, was an anti-Sukarno senior officer on friendly terms with some of the party's leaders. Furthermore, a car belonging to an official of the Masjumi's Jakarta office had been used in the attempt. It was thus not unnatural for Sukarno to suspect that senior party leaders were involved. Not until some six months later, well after Colonel Lubis had fled Java to join Colonel Ahmad Husein and his rebellious PRRI government in West Sumatra, did Sukarno—by then having obtained clear evidence that the CIA was backing the rebels—conclude that the CIA rather than the Masjumi had stood behind Colonel Lubis. (That Sukarno may have been correct in his assumption that the CIA was the ultimate *dalang* behind the Cikini Affair was given some credence in the investigations initiated in 1975 by Senator Frank Church, chairman of the US Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence, when it focused on alleged assassination plots against foreign leaders.)

But in the meantime Sukarno believing that the top Masjumi leaders had at least some responsibility for the attempted assassination, countenanced, and possibly instigated, efforts to harass Natsir and two other top Masjumi leaders—Sjafruddin Prawiranegara and Burhanudin Harahap. Fearing for the safety of their families, they fled to West Sumatra and the protection offered by the autonomous area Colonel Husein had established there.

Not until well after their arrival in Padang did the three Masjumi leaders learn that Husein and his two key advisors—Colonel Maludin Simbolon and Dr. Sumitro Djojohadikusumo—had for months been in contact with the CIA and secretly been given arms and funds by it. The three Masjumi leaders did not find this backing unacceptable, though they were disturbed that they were given so little information about it. And they were supportive of the idea of mounting pressure on the Jakarta government to change its character and to at least clip Sukarno's wings if not actually oust him. (They had little interest, however, in the dissident colonels' other major objective of ousting their bitter rival, General Nasution, Chief-of-Staff of the government's armed forces.) But they were convinced that the rebel colonels and Sumitro were unrealistic in thinking they could be successful even without the backing of Colonel Barlian, the army's commander in South Sumatra—support the three Masjumi leaders correctly believed would not be forthcoming. They did manage to restrain the inclination of some of the dissident military leaders to establish a separate state of Sumatra. But they were unable to keep the colonels from what seemed to them to be an unnecessarily provocative challenge to Prime Minister Djuanda's Jakarta government embodied in their five-day ultimatum of February 10, 1958, made while Sukarno was out of the country. When the Masjumi leaders argued against the unrealistically precipitate nature of this move, the colonels informed them that the die had already been cast, leaving the clear impression that pre-existing outside commitments to the United States required them to proceed. The only important moderating influence that Natsir and his two Masjumi colleagues in Padang were able to exercise was to insure that the break with Jakarta would entail no disintegration of Indonesia's territorial integrity, and that it be clearly stipulated that the counter government declared on February 15—the PRRI (Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia) be regarded as covering the *whole* of Indonesia.

With most of the rebel colonels' tactical acumen significantly less than that of General Nasution and his staff, and many Indonesians antagonized by their reliance on American power, the PRRI was soon militarily very much on the defensive and reduced to largely guerrilla operations. Natsir, Sjafruddin, and Burhanudin had to leave the towns and operate from deep in the jungles, where ultimately they gave up some two months after the colonels had negotiated their own terms and surrendered.

Bereft of any military protection, Natsir, the last to surrender, emerged from the jungle on September 25, 1961 accompanied by the last six of his followers. With the other defeated rebel leaders he was jailed and later put under house arrest on Java where he remained until after the fall of Sukarno in 1966.

As with most the other PRRI leaders, Natsir had expected that their proven anticommunism and record of opposition to the Sukarno regime would insure that under the Suharto government they would have at least the degree of political freedom that they had enjoyed under Sukarno before they had joined the rebellious colonels in Sumatra. They were, however, soon shocked to find this was not to be. Natsir and his colleagues were forbidden to re-establish the Masjumi or to play any meaningful political role. Even Masjumi leaders such as Anwar Haryono and Mohamad Roem, who had never joined in the rebellion, were effectively shut out of political life, with Roem ultimately concluding that the Suharto government was much more fearful of the political potential of Islam than of any politically radical secular group, Communist or non-Communist. When in 1968 the government permitted only a single Moslem political party, one that it itself sponsored—Parmusi—and then appointed the party's chairman, pushing aside Mohamad Roem, who had been elected to that office, Natsir was convinced that Roem's political diagnosis of the Suharto regime was correct. He now concluded that his own energies would best be spent in developing

non-political efforts at Islamic education and social work, and especially support of Islamic missionary activity, the latter being embodied in the Dewan Dakwah, which he helped found in 1967 and of which he became chairman.

Though denied any access to a formal political role, it would have been out of character for Natsir not to have joined the Petition of 50 group in its protest of May 13, 1980 via a petition to the DPRS (a parliamentary body generally understood to be under Suharto's control). This criticised two recent speeches of President Suharto, charging that in them he had misused the state ideology, Pancasila, to attack those he regarded as his political opponents in ways that would provoke conflicts between social groups rather than promote national unity, as was the original purpose of the Pancasila. Like most of those who signed the petition, Natsir soon suffered the president's anger and retribution by being forbidden to travel abroad. This did not intimidate him, however, and in 1990 he joined with two other prominent men, the retired general, A. H. Nasution, and the former senior PNI leader Sanusi Hardjadinata in a public appeal deploring the Suharto government's departure from the social and political goals of the revolution and the constitution.

When I last talked with Natsir in early January 1991, approximately a year before he died, he was clearly keenly disappointed and saddened by the condition of his country. This was not only because he saw the Suharto government as showing a stiflingly repressive authoritarianism. ("Sukarno," he said, "was a gentleman in comparison to Suharto.") It was also because of his perception of the state of Indonesian society itself. For he saw most of its upper strata as having become grossly materialistic, selfish, and shorn of social conscience; with this development being accompanied by a widening gap between rich and poor.

During the last decades of his life Mohammad Natsir showed little interest in trying to train intellectual cadre that would survive him, this being generally the case, and notably so with the Dewan Dakwah. Professor Deliar Noer, one of Natsir's closest and most prominent associates, has put the matter very well. He notes that Natsir believed that "New leaders should not be engineered . . . they should not be deliberately created. Finding new leaders should depend on the community; it should be the community that chooses them."<sup>4</sup> Mohammad Natsir's ideas and personality did, however, touch many people, and there are today respected men of influence in Indonesian Islamic circles who hold him in great esteem and whose views he has significantly shaped. And especially during the middle years of his life he had a profound influence on the development of Islamic social and political thought in Indonesia and also played an important role in the unfolding of his country's political history.

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<sup>4</sup> *Panji Masyarakat*, No. 691, August, 1991.