



Maria Ulfah

IN MEMORIAM:
MARIA ULLFAH SOEBADIO,
1911–1988

George McT. Kahin

With the death of Maria Ullfah Soebadio on April 15, 1988, Indonesia lost one of her noblest women, an unassuming, modest, but very strong champion of women's rights. No one else, I believe, has done so much to advance that cause in Indonesia. Throughout her life she manifested a political and personal integrity and a dedication to social progress that served as an example for her fellow Indonesians. She was the first Indonesian woman to receive a law degree (Leiden, 1933); at 34 years of age she was the country's first woman cabinet minister (1946–1947), and was head of Kowani (the major national women's organization) from 1950 to 1961.

The significant contribution she made to Indonesian society through her long campaign for more enlightened marriage laws and her work on the Committee to Combat Trafficking in Women and Children was widely appreciated, as was her effectiveness as minister of social affairs in Sjahrir's second cabinet. (One of her major duties there was organizing the care and return home of internees released from Japanese prison camps in Central Java). But much less recognized was the important role she also played during the Revolution in Amir Sjarifuddin's and Mohammad Hatta's cabinets, where, with the rank of secretary to the prime minister, she was functionally the chief executive officer. Sjarifuddin, on succeeding Sjahrir as prime minister, had actually asked her to continue at the post of minister of social affairs, but, ever realistic and pragmatic, she felt she could make more of a contribution as head of the prime minister's Secretariat. When Hatta was prime minister in 1948, I can remember sitting in his office awaiting my turn to see him and finding myself next to that truly charismatic long-haired revolutionary leader, Bung Tomo. When in remarking that this was the most efficient office I'd seen in the Republic, I ventured to suggest that this must be a reflection of Hatta's personality. I was quickly corrected and told, "No, that is because of Maria Ullfah."

Maria Ullfah was born August 11, 1911 in Serang (Banten), the daughter of its Bupati, R.A.A. Mohammad Achmad and R.A. Hadidjah Djajadiningrat. While she was still attending primary school her father, then posted to Kuningan, insisted that she live

a Dutch family in Batavia. There she also attended and graduated from a Dutch middle school. Her mother died when she was 16, and when in 1929 the Netherlands East Indies government sent her father to study cooperatives in The Hague he took his children with him. In that year Maria Ullfah entered Leiden's Law Faculty and was graduated with the degree of Meester in de Rechten in 1933 at the age of 22. While in Holland she became caught up in the Indonesian nationalist movement, meeting various Indonesian student leaders, including Hatta and Sjahrir. As a staunch nationalist, she felt an obligation to be a non-cooperator upon returning to Indonesia, and she refused a job with the Dutch East Indies administration. From 1934 until 1942 she taught at the Muhammadiyah's Teachers' Faculty in Batavia, and in 1937 helped Adam Malik set up the nationalist Antara News Bureau. In 1938 she married R. Santoso Wirodihardjo. During the Japanese occupation she worked as an assistant to Indonesia's top legal expert Professor Soepomo in the Department of Justice.

In the first year of the Revolution, her husband served as inspector general of the Republic's Ministry of Education. Returning from one of his tours on December 19, 1948, the day of the Netherlands' blitz attack on Yogyakarta, he was pulled from his car near Magu airport and shot to death by a Dutch major. (When I undertook to investigate his killing, Dutch authorities insisted that the executioner was a sergeant-major and that no Dutch major would have carried out the act.) Maria Ullfah remained a widow until January 10, 1964, when she married Soebadio Sastrosatomo, a close friend and chief lieutenant of Sjahrir in the Indonesian Socialist Party. Their marriage took place while Soebadio was still in jail, where he and Sjahrir had been confined on orders of President Soekarno for alleged (but never proven) support of the 1958 PRRI rebellion. (She and Soebadio were again to be separated from 1974 to 1976 after the Suharto government arrested him on the charge [unproven] of being involved in the 1974 student Malari demonstration.)

Following the Revolution, Maria Ullfah remained prodigiously active and productive as she continued to fight for women's rights as head of Kowani. She occupied various top-level positions in the State Secretariat (1962-1967), served as a member of the State Advisory Council (1968-1973), represented Indonesia at numerous international conferences, went on the Haj with Soebadio, and also managed a visit to Cornell. She was also widely known for her work as head of the state Film Censor's Bureau (1950-1961); but she was rather ambivalent about that job, feeling that it robbed her of precious time needed for more important work, while at the same time being concerned that, if she stepped down, some zealous bigot might replace her.

But more than anything else Maria Ullfah will be remembered for her accomplishments in significantly advancing women's rights in Indonesia and for providing a role model for those who followed her.