

THE INDONESIAN INDEPENDENCE LEAGUE IN BANGKOK: A PROFILE*

Omar Farouk Bajunid
Jabatan Sejarah
Universiti Malaya

It is often not realized that Thailand can be a useful source of information on the history of the peoples of the Malay archipelago. Indeed ties between the Thai polity and the Malay-Indonesian world have gone on for over a thousand years or more stretching from the days of Sri Vijaya and perhaps even earlier. During the Ayuthayan era the Macassarese featured prominently in the seventeenth century and were directly involved in an abortive court uprising. Local sources suggest also that earlier for a few hundred years Sumatran Muslim preachers had been instrumental in Islamic proselytizing missions among Ayuthaya's southern vassals in Kedah and Pattani. During the reign of Chulalongkorn, a good number of Javanese gardeners were brought to Bangkok to help with the monarch's beautification project of the capital. Around the same period many Baweanese were also recruited as stablehands to look after the King's horses. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw a steady flow of emigrants from the Dutch East Indies into Thailand. Minangkabau peripatetic *ulamaks*, taking the cue from developments in the Malay world introduced the Islamic reformist movement in Thailand. Political turbulence in the East Indies in the 1920s brought about a new wave of political refugees into Thailand, including communist leaders like Tan Malaka. Thailand, had emerged, around this time as an attractive sanctuary for Indonesian political dissidents and agitators.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the population of Indonesians in Thailand had become large, although in some ways, assimilation into Thai-Muslim society had made them hardly distinguishable from the other Muslims in the kingdom. Just after the Second World War, there were 21,480 Javanese and 100 Sumatran displaced persons in Thailand.¹ The actual size of the

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¹ These figures are cited from the Foreign Office records. F.O.371/1946, F7925/12/40, F8189/12/40; and F8187.

Indonesian community comprising people of Indonesian background was much bigger obviously.² In Bangkok, Bahasa Indonesia was used in Friday sermons in Masjid Jawa at Trok Rong Nam Kheng until the 1960s. And along with the Muslim flag, the Indonesian national flag was flown every Friday. Until today, although the vast majority of the Indonesians and their descendents in Thailand have become Thai citizens and appear indistinguishable from the other Thai in a whole range of ways, there are still some individuals, who continue to take pride in their Indonesian background and have chosen to remain as Indonesian nationals living in Thailand.

This brief article attempts to depict a small episode in the history of the Indonesian community in Thailand the hitherto unrecorded contribution of that community towards Indonesia's struggle for Independence. The article introduces a profile of the Indonesian Independence League in Bangkok. It is basically a descriptive account, but in view of the fact that the paper depended almost wholly on oral sources,³ it therefore cannot in any way be viewed as conclusive. Rather, the article should be seen as an endeavour to generate interest, shift attention and open up new ground on a potentially rich area for more rigorous and authoritative research by serious students of Indonesian history.

Just after the Second World War the Indonesian community in Thailand was almost entirely made up of Javanese, Baweanese and Minangkabaus. Although each of these ethnic groups had its own distinctive cultural, linguistic and sociological characteristics they all had strong and special relationship with the wider Muslim community in Thailand. Islam had been a crucial factor in forging this link between the Indonesians and the other Muslims. The bond appeared even more significant with Muslims of Malay background

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This was particularly so because besides this group of displaced persons, who were all labourers there were other Indonesians who had been more permanently settled in Bangkok, some for more than a few decades already.

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My principal informant was Captain Mohamed Shariff bin Taib whose Thai name is Saat Binthep. Captain Mohamed Shariff is now a naturalized citizen, living in Nonthaburi. He is well in his eighties. I have held long interviews with him on this subject as well as other subjects related to my wider interests since 1973 and I am still very much in touch with him. Since he was the key figure in the Indonesian Independence League, most of the oral account I got on the League came from him. However, I also had the opportunity to interview other leading Muslim personalities like Chaem Phromyong, or Haji Shamsuddin, the late Tok Guru Ismail of Bangkok Noi, Bapak Ahmad Lufti and a few others who were able to verify, albeit in a general way, some of the things that Captain Mohamed Shariff related to me. But most people whom I talked to were not quite certain of the actual chronology of events.

as there was an additional common broad cultural denominator between them. Often, the differences between the Indonesians and the other Muslims would not be realized by the Thai. Indeed, at one level, perhaps the more overarching one, the Indonesians shared a common objective identity with the other Muslims of Thailand. This was even more so in Bangkok where the Muslims were a minority group. But at other levels, the Indonesians continued to maintain a strong sense of being Javanese, Minangkabau and so on. Continuing contacts with their kith and kin back home in Padang or Java had reinforced this strong sense of ethnic identity.⁴ But paradoxically, at the same time their interest in political developments back in the archipelago had forged closer links between them. Nevertheless, before the Second World War, there was no formal political or even social organization among the Indonesians in Bangkok or Thailand to espouse the goals of Indonesian nationalism. The situation changed after the war. The Indonesians in Bangkok felt that they had to respond to the political developments in Indonesia.

Indonesia had been proclaimed an Independent Republic in August 1945 but that proclamation was contested by the Dutch. The attempts by Holland to re-occupy the East Indies had brought about an armed revolution by the Indonesians. The international community was divided in its attitude on the question of the recognition of Indonesian Independence. The Philippines had declared its support for the Indonesian Independence⁵ but Thailand was non-committal. The Indonesian case was not sympathetically portrayed in Thailand in the media and was very little understood by the people. This was what primarily prompted the Indonesians in Bangkok to form the Indonesian Independence League of the *Persatuan Indonesia Merdeka* in 1946 with a view to rectifying the

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Many of the Javanese community members I interviewed claimed to have family connections in Singapore as well. The Minangkabaus appear to maintain an interesting communicational network with their ethnic brethren in Malaya, Java and Padang. Many of the older members of this community would make an effort to make a pilgrimage to Padang, the original homeland.

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The Philippine Senate, for example, "unanimously approved a resolution fathered by the Senator Mariano J. Cuenco, expressing the sympathy of the Filipino people with the Indonesians in the present struggle for freedom from the Dutch". See *The Sunday Times* (Manila), 9 December 1945.

imbalance of information on the Indonesian cause in Thailand. The monopoly that the Dutch Embassy in Bangkok had on the flow of news in Thailand regarding the Indonesian case was the primary target of attacks by the League. It was therefore basically set-up to propagandize the Indonesian version of the conflict with the aim of eliciting the sympathy and support of the people and the government of Thailand for the Indonesian cause. This effort was viewed as urgent and necessary as it would certainly complement the international campaign that was being undertaken elsewhere to gain world support for Indonesia. The case of Indonesia itself was to be brought up before the United Nations Organization and a positive attitude towards Indonesia especially from non-western countries would strengthen its position. The League had also intended to mobilize whatever support it could within Thailand to be channelled directly to Indonesia.

The League was founded with a membership of about five hundred people comprising mostly Indonesians or those of Indonesian extraction. A Management Committee, consisting of the *Ketua* or Chairman, *Bendahari* or Treasurer and *Setiausaha* or Secretary and seven committee members, was entrusted with the responsibility of running the League as well as planning its activities. Except for the *Ketua* who was a Minangkabau immigrant in Siam the other members of the Management Committee were all Javanese immigrants or *Peranakan Jawa*. Captain Mohamed Shariff bin Taib, a former sea-captain was appointed as *Ketua*; Mahmud bin Samarn as *Setiausaha* and Mohamed Shariff as *Bendahari*. The League was headquartered at the residence of Captain Mohamed Shariff in Soi Ban U, Bangkrak Bangkok.

The sources of finance of the League came from a monthly one-baht subscription each collected from its members and generous contributions from the committee members. The *Ketua* himself made substantial personal donations. The cost of running the League was high covering the area of administration, meetings, correspondences and the expenses incurred in providing relief and accommodation to the Indonesian political refugees in Bangkok.

The first important move that the League undertook was to establish some kind of dialogue with the Thai Government of the day with a view to exploring the possibility of soliciting Thai support for the Indonesian cause especially in terms of giving recognition to the Indonesian Independence and supporting Indonesia's position in the United Nations. This was undertaken with the help of a leading Muslim personality Chaem Phromyong, or Haji Shamsuddin who was the *Chularatmontri* or Minister-Councillor for Muslim Affairs at that time. Haji Shamsuddin also had the advantage of being a close colleague of Pridi Panomyong, the prime architect of the 1932 Revolution in which Haji Shamsud-

din was also involved as one of its promoters.⁶ Pridi was a statesman of considerable stature and commanded the respect of the government leaders of the time.⁷ His goodwill was considered crucial to the attempts of the Indonesian League to win over the government and the Thai people to its cause. A meeting was arranged between Pridi on the one hand and the representatives of the League led by Captain Mohamed Shariff bin Taib and Mahmud bin Samarn on the other.

But just before the scheduled meeting took place Sutan Sjahrir happened to stop over in Bangkok on his way to New York. On learning of this, some of the members of the League took the opportunity to call on him. Although the League had aspired to be the mouthpiece of the Indonesian revolution in Thailand its members did not have any direct contact with any political movement in Indonesia or elsewhere and depended largely on radio broadcasts and personal communications for information. This was one reason why they could not highlight Sutan Sjahrir's visit since they had no advance notice of it. They were of course thoroughly briefed on the latest developments in Indonesia by Sutan Sjahrir, a briefing which proved useful during their meeting with Pridi. Whilst Pridi appeared sympathetic to the representation made by the League's delegation at their meeting, he expressed surprise that there had been no official attempt to woo Thailand by Indonesia. It was also noted that Indonesia had sent an official delegation to India to seek support for Indonesia and a delegation along the same line should be considered. The League representatives were encouraged by Pridi's attitude and immediately assured him that their contact was an exploratory one which was aimed at laying the groundwork for future Thai-Indonesia relations and that they would act immediately so that an official Indonesian delegation be sent

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The Thai name of Haji Shamsuddin is Chaem Phromyong. In my interview with Haji Shamsuddin in 1977 he admitted to being one of the plotters of the 1932 coup and traced his association with Pridi to his student days in Cairo. His name (Chaem Phromyong) is also cited in the list of coup promoters in a work on the 1932 Revolution. See Thawatt Mokarapong, *History of the Thai Revolution*, Bangkok, 1972, p. 243.

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Pridi Phanomyong became Prime Minister of Thailand between March and August 1946 and was succeeded by Admiral Thamrongnavasat, who served for 14 months until the coup of November 1947. Pridi actually had to leave office later after allegations of his implication in the mysterious death of King Ananda. But his supporters continued to dominate the parliament. Admiral Thamrongnavasat was actually his frontman. See Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism*, The Social Sciences Association of Thailand, Thai Khadi Institute, Thammasat University, Bangkok, 1979, pp. 2-14.

to Thailand as soon as possible.

Around that time, an Indonesian political activist of Sumatran origin by the name of Haji Khasruddin had just arrived in Bangkok after fleeing from the Dutch in Borneo. After a series of meetings with the *Ketua* of the League, Captain Mohamed Shariff, Haji Khasruddin was persuaded to return to Sumatra, despite the danger to meet Dr Muhammad Hatta with a view to requesting him to send a formal Indonesian delegation to Thailand to seek Thai recognition of their Independence. The prospect of such a recognition appeared very promising. Haji Khasruddin was briefed on the meeting that transpired between the representatives of the League and Pridi. It was impressed upon him that there could not be a better time to seek Thai support in view of Pridi's own sympathy for and understanding of the Indonesian cause. Haji Khasruddin's mission bore fruit when he got to Bukit Tinggi. Dr Muhammad Hatta was persuaded to act immediately and did so by instructing Sudarsono, who was then accredited to India to make an official visit to Thailand.

Some months later an Indonesian, named Ishak, arrived in Bangkok from India and arranged a meeting with Captain Mohamed Shariff at Hotel Europe, where he was staying. Captain Mohamed Shariff was informed that his visit was a preparatory one pending the visit of Sudarsono. But as Ishak had come to Bangkok on the eve of the impending military coup by Phibun Songkhram, he was warned not to visit Pridi Panomyong in view of the uncertain political situation in Thailand. On the 8th of November 1947 Phibun Songkram staged the expected military coup and installed Khuang Aphaivong as the interim Prime Minister. Ishak, ignored the warning given earlier by the *Ketua* of the League, went ahead to call on the Prime Minister of Thailand, Khuang Aphaivong. As it turned out Khuang Aphaivong declared that it was not possible for his government to consider the question of giving recognition to Indonesia because as his government was only a few days old it too had to grapple with the problem of securing its own recognition by others especially the western government. Not long afterwards Sudarsono himself arrived in Bangkok as an accredited Indonesian Ambassador but he too failed to secure a positive response from the Thai government. Thailand, of course eventually recognized Indonesia as a sovereign and Independent State but that was only after Holland itself, following the Round Table Conference at the Hague late in 1949 had agreed to recognize Indonesia's Independence.

The Indonesian Independence League was also active in various other ways apart from its efforts in pursuing, though without much success, Thai officials recognition of the Indonesian Republic. The

League mobilized all its resources to evoke sympathy and support from Muslims throughout the kingdom. Using the extensive connection of mosques throughout Thailand, the support and sympathy of the Muslims were evoked. Haji Shamsuddin, as *Chularatmontri* helped to disseminate information on the Indonesian struggle. As a whole the response showed by the Muslims was extremely good. Mosques emerged as collecting centres for donations in cash and kind. Large stocks of rice were collected. There was a very high degree of awareness among the Muslims on what was going on in Indonesia. And this came about largely through the efforts of the League's propaganda machinery. The donations that were collected throughout the mosques were however not able to be delivered to Indonesia because of transport and other related problems. Eventually they were distributed locally at the respective mosque levels. But the psychological impact of the spontaneous and widespread gesture of support for the Indonesia struggle was probably far more significant than the actual material contribution made.

Likewise the League had also arranged a meeting with the Thai Red Cross to work out ways of providing medical aid to the Indonesian victims of the armed struggle. Prior to the meeting, the editor of the *Bangkok Post*, a Mr. McDonald was contacted and informed of the proposed meeting. As a result, there appeared, the following day, a news item which reported the meeting between the League and the Red Cross of Thailand. The publicity exercise was actually intended to commit the Red Cross to respond positively to the League's request for assistance. This too had proved effective because within a matter of days the League was notified of the decision of the Thai Red Cross to offer medical aid to Indonesia through the International Red Cross.

Through the assistance of a Singaporean Chinese, the League was able to produce in English a pamphlet outlining the Indonesian case for Independence as put forward by Indonesia before the United Nations Organization. This pamphlet was widely distributed to all government agencies and ministries in Thailand. Over and above this there were also consistent efforts to brief the Thai press of the Indonesian struggle with particular emphasis on its origins and goals. Regular meetings and lectures were organized to keep the Indonesian community informed of up-to-date developments in Indonesia. Whenever the occasion arose the League would try to reach the Thai public. For example, at the Public gathering to commemorate the Death of Mahatma Gandhi at Silpakorn College the League, responding to an invitation for it to send a speaker, selected Mr. Irfan Dahalan, a Java-born immigrant, who had lived and settled in Bangkok, as its representative. In order to demonstrate his contempt for colonialism, and taking advantage of his early Islamic

education in India, he delivered his speech in Hindi whilst the other speakers spoke in English.

It is clear that a significant contribution of the League was its attempt to enlighten the Thai public and government on the Indonesian version of their struggle to counteract the monopoly of western propaganda on the issue in Thailand. The League was also directly responsible for laying the groundwork for the establishment of Thai-Indonesian relations at the governmental level. It was probably most successful in mobilizing Muslim support and sympathy in Bangkok and elsewhere in the kingdom. The Muslims, particularly those in Bangkok, not only became more aware of the developments in Indonesia, but indirectly participated in the struggle through their acts of donation in cash and kind in support of the cause. The League also became a rallying ground for Indonesians in Thailand providing them with an opportunity to be involved with the political developments in Indonesia. Paradoxically however this was also a factor which brought about the short existence of the League. Almost as soon as the Independence of Indonesia was achieved the League began to countenance problems which finally led to its demise. This was due to many factors. Outstanding among them was the fact that the League was originally set up with the primary objective of assisting the realization of Indonesian Independence, although its members shared different political learnings, motivations and visions in respect of their attachment to Indonesia, they were all bonded together more by the urgency of the immediate task which created a lot of room for cooperation and collaboration among them. As soon as their objective of assisting Indonesia achieve recognition of its Independence was realized, political differences among the members began to surface. This was not helped by the rift in the new Indonesian leadership which had some effect on the League as well as on the Indonesian community in Bangkok. Some members of the Indonesian community and the League itself adopted a strongly pro-Soekarno stance, while others, led by Captain Mohamed Shariff bin Taib, deplored Soekarno. Moreover, the developments within Thailand itself made it more difficult for them to exist as a body representing foreign interests.

At the suggestion of the new Indonesian Ambassador to Thailand, another committee called the *Jawatankuasa Warganegara Indonesia* or the Indonesian citizens committee was formed. Four of the seven committee members of the League joined this new Association. The Founding Secretary of the League, Mahmud bin Samarn, left for Indonesia. Captain Mohamed Shariff bin Taib, an ardent supporter of Sultan Sjahrir's Socialist Party, found it difficult to work with the others in the League who were staunch supporters of *Partai Nasional Indonesia*. The formation of the

Jawatankuasa Warganegara Indonesia, appeared to have duplicated the role of the League. Hence a decision was made to dissolve the League. The new Association was strictly non-political. Its activities were confined to organizing social programmes. It was more like a welfare or mutual-help body. A *Syarikat Kerjasama* or co-operative store was set-up for its members. Interest on political developments in Indonesia, however, continued to be shown. However, there was also disillusionment. As more local born Indonesians, particularly the younger generation, became exposed to the immediate social, political and cultural realities in Thailand and more importantly, the demands of Thai citizenship, whatever remained of emotional and psychological ties that the community had with Indonesia became less and less meaningful.