



The Existence of Indonesian Peasants in Three Eras: Dutch Colonialism, Japanese Colonialism, and The Independence

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Abstract

This article discusses the existence of peasants during three eras with different powers. During the Dutch and the Japanese colonialism, it can be said that peasant is a profession that must be avoided because it will become an object of exploitation by those in power. During Dutch rule in Indonesia, the policies that exploited peasants were 'culturstelsel' (the forced planting system) and the 1870 Agrarian Law. These two policies made peasants even more impoverished, the lands that formerly owned peasants were forcibly taken away to plant commodities that were in demand on the world market and the profits went into their pockets ruler. During the Japanese colonialism, an obligation to produce rice made peasants increasingly tormented because they had to pursue predetermined targets. During The independence, the peasants were embraced by political parties until they were transformed into mass organizations. Although there has been some progress in the national agrarian political agenda, differences in ideology and interests have resulted in conflicts and struggles between peasant mass organizations, and even with civil society.

Keywords: Peasant, Dutch Colonialism, Japan Colonialism, Independence Era

How to Cite: Saragih, M.W. & Hasibuan, Y.S. (2023). The Existence of Indonesian Peasants in Three Eras: Dutch Colonialism, Japanese Colonialism, and Independence Era. *Journal of Peasant's Right*, Vol. 2 (2): 32-40

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INTRODUCTION

Peasant is an identity pinned to individuals and groups, whose daily activities struggle on the land. This is in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Human Rights of Peasants and Others People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), which refers to peasants as anyone, whether individually or in groups, who is engaged in small-scale agricultural production for subsistence and/or for market, and who depends significantly, though not necessarily exclusively, on family or household labour and other means of carrying out labour in a non-monetized manner, and who has dependence and attachment to the land. (Edelman, 2022).

This definition implies that the production produced by peasants is not always interpreted as subsistence, but also to serve the interests of the market and the ruler. In Indonesia's historical record, this pattern is not a new discourse. The exploitation of peasants by landlords in an inhumane way, it is a product of the past that continues to roll into the present.

Since the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) collapsed at the end of December 1799, the Netherlands began to claim that the archipelago (Indonesia today) was its colony, especially on the island of Java. Exploitation of peasants, for example in 1830 Van den Bosch implemented a forced planting system (*cultuurstelsel*) to gain profits from the colony. The exploitation of peasants was very alarming, it is not known exactly how many people died because of this policy. In 1870 Dutch colonialism again issued the Agrarian and Sugar Law policy (*Agrarische en Saka Wet*), in this case after peasants no longer had land to farm, they were then transformed into industrial plantation laborers

throughout the Dutch colony.

In March 1942 Japan began to occupy Indonesia. The Indonesian people, especially peasants at that time, had many positive expectations that Japan was an 'old brother' who would free them from the shackles of Dutch colonialism. Apparently, this expectation was inversely proportional, peasants were again targeted to be exploited for their energy. Aiko Kurasawa noted that in Java, peasants were required to "compulsorily hand over rice" to the local regent to be forwarded to the Japanese. In the independence era, each political party began to form its own peasants or peasants' group, such as Masyumi (STTI), Nahdlatul Ulama - NU (Pertanu), PNI (PETANI), PKI (BTI) and others. Each peasant organization has its own characteristics, one example of the BTI underbouw PKI implementing one of the land occupation programs of the former plantation industry so that there is no land imbalance in Indonesian society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper uses the historical method consisting of (1) heuristics, which is the collection of historical sources consisting of contemporaneous newspapers collected directly from the Medan Waspada Daily office, journals, and various other literatures; (2) source criticism, which is criticizing the collected sources to determine the authenticity (external) and credibility (internal) of the data as historical facts; (3) interpretation, which is the process of examining historical facts to compile historical arguments and narratives; and (4) historiography, which is the writing process as a synthesis and construction of history (Kuntowijoyo, 2017). Data reduction, data display, and conclusion are part of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Since Van Hogendorp declared the Dutch East Indies in 1800, the real colonialism began. For some historians, this era is also called mercantilism, after the VOC went bankrupt, a new colonial system was born to acquire the archipelago. Dutch colonialism had to regulate the system it had previously run. Because of the rampant problems faced, such as the War with Belgium, the 'Gerakan Paderi' in West Sumatra, and the 'Perang Diponegoro' which drained the colonial purse. Finally, they looked for a way to cover all these things. Through Van den Bosch in 1830 he implemented a forced planting system (*cultuurstelsel*), again sacrificing the peasants. This forced planting system, one of which was to grow coffee in Priangan, West Java, peasants were required to plant a certain amount of coffee, tea and cocoa and then the results were then marketed throughout the world, considering that at that time coffee was in great demand on the world market (Bremen, 2015) It is estimated that thousands of peasants died due to the rigors of the forced planting system. In more detail, the following are the rules of the forced planting system:

1. The demand for each indigenous people to provide agricultural land for *cultuurstelsel* does not exceed 20 percent or one-fifth of their land to be planted with prime commodity types in the world market;
2. Exemption of land provided for the forced cultivation system from taxes, because the crops are considered as tax payments;
3. People who do not own agricultural land can replace it by working on plantations owned by the Dutch East Indies government or factories owned by the Dutch East Indies government for 66 days or one-fifth of a year;
4. The time to implement *cultuurstelsel* cannot exceed the period of planting rice or three months;
5. Excess agricultural production from the provisions will be returned to the people;
6. Damage or famine not due to the negligence of peasants, such as natural disasters

- and pests, will be borne by the Dutch East Indies government;
7. Handover of the technique of implementing the forced planting rules will be given to the local village head as an intermediary. (Bremen, 2015).

When examined closely, none of the regulations on forced cultivation benefited the peasantry, on the contrary, all of them oppressed the weak. It is also undeniable that a lot of agricultural land was forcibly taken by the colonial authorities to plant prime commodities, such as coffee, tea and cocoa in various regions of the Dutch East Indies. In other aspects, if there was a crop failure outside of natural disasters, it was the peasants themselves who would bear all the consequences. According to Berger's notes, the net profit earned by the Dutch colonials from this forced planting system was more than 100 million guilders in addition to the war costs they had spent on war needs (Berger, 1957).

Another Dutch colonial policy that further hurt the peasantry was the Agrarian and Sugar Law (*Agrarische Wet en Saka Wet*) of 1870. The intent and purpose of implementing this law was to liberalize the economy of the Dutch East Indies (Leirissa, et al., 2017). This form of entry of foreign capital was realized in the form of the plantation industry. Generally, every industrial activity to stand upright is based on three conditions, namely: land, means of production, and labor/labor. In the last requirement, most plantation laborers are dominated by people who previously worked as peasants (Pelzer, 2016). Peasants who have changed their profession to become plantation laborers have long days in their new profession, especially local laborers (Stenberg, Budiman, 2022). This arbitrariness made the coolies flee from the plantation. Some escaped, some did not, for those who escaped continued their lives according to their abilities. Meanwhile, those who were caught by the plantation officers would be tortured, whipped, dried under the sun and this was witnessed by all the plantation people to psychologically beat the other coolies if they intended to escape, their fate was not much different from what they witnessed at that time (Bremen, 2015).

Furthermore, in the 20th century, alumni of ethical politics established various organizations such as Boedi Oetomo, Sarekat Islam, the Communist Party of Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, The National Party of Indonesia (PNI) and so on. Indeed, these organizations were more sophisticated in organizing peasants to oppose the colonials (McVey, 2022). The Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) organized peasants and workers to revolt. However, this rebellion did not go smoothly due to a lack of communication between PKI leaders, so the rebellion was sporadic and failed. The leaders of the rebellion were arrested and sent to Digul to live independently (McVey, 2022).

Nothing had changed the plight of peasants for centuries in the Dutch East Indies, until Japan invaded the Dutch East Indies in March 1942. For the peasants, the expectation was that this was a good sign as fate would change in the hands of the 'elder brother' (Japan) given that there was an issue that this invasion was oriented towards the liberation of Asian people from western domination (Kurasawa, 2016). Thus, almost the entire Pax Neerlandica region carried by the Dutch had fallen into Japanese hands (Alfian, 2016). It should also be noted that the Japanese government structure did not make too many reforms. It is just that they formed certain organizations to mobilize the masses for the needs of the ongoing war (Ricklefs, 2019).

Initially, Japan was friendly towards the Indonesian people. For example, they were allowed to sing the Indonesian national anthem, they were allowed to speak Indonesian, and the Indonesian flag was raised. However, this friendly attitude only lasted for a while, after which Japan showed its true character as a 'cruel old brother.' This was noted by one of Indonesia's renowned sociologists, Selo Soemardjan. The arrival of Japan was warmly welcomed by the Indonesian people, as an 'old brother'. Japan in the early days of the occupation was friendly to the Indonesian people. It turned out that it was all just

camouflage, so that their arrival was not suspected. Japan mobilized people in rural Java to occupy private lands, foreign-owned plantations, and forest lands and then cultivate these lands into agricultural land (Soemardjan, 2015).

After that, harsh actions such as kicking, hitting, and other disrespectful actions have become the daily for the Indonesian people, if they do not understand instructions from the Japanese. This harsh action is often experienced by the lower classes, including peasants who have endured physical torture (Mikayi, 2013). Since then, peasant's expectations of Japan have been wrong, that before and at the beginning of the arrival of Japan was considered as an 'old brother' liberating from all the sorrows experienced during the colonial period. The fact that the Japanese occupation was no less vicious than the Dutch regarding the exploitation of the peasants began in April 1943 when the free market was banned due to war activities, as a result peasants were required to plant and submit a certain amount of rice to be handed over to the Japanese. The rice would be milled and distributed to Japanese (Mikayi, 2013). It's also noteworthy that the policy was determined by the central government, roughly as follows:

1. Peasants were required to sell agricultural products to the Japanese at a certain quota at a predetermined price, for example, Japan needed one ton of rice and the price was about 1,000 Gulden/Yen. Well, the amount must be definitely one ton and the price is not more than 1,000 Gulden/Yen, even though the actual price may be 10 times the price set by Japan;
2. The rice must be delivered to a rice mill designated by the village government;
3. If peasants still had a surplus to sell, after surrendering the set quota, they were only allowed to sell it to a registered mill and were not allowed to sell it to middlemen or to the local market. It is forbidden to pound the grain for commercial purposes without government permission (Kurasawa, 2016).

Furthermore, Japan also established the 'Taman Latihan Pemuda Tani' (Talapeta) in East Sumatra to prepare for guerrilla warfare, in case the enemy landed suddenly. Talapeta was given military and agricultural training as well as ways to sabotage and eliminate enemy accomplices. The organization focused more on recruiting young people for war purposes and only existed in Sumatra, while in Java something similar was the Heiho (Reid, 2016). Generally affected by Japanese policies were peasants, who suffered from chronic poverty and were almost always in debt and bound by the bonded system. With this, they didn't have full control over their own produce. After they paid their debts in the form of harvested paddy, there was usually little left in their hands. Therefore, only a small portion of the harvest could be sold at Japanese prices, which could not fulfill the peasants' household needs (Benda, 2015).

To get a clearer picture of the plight of peasants under that policy, we'll give the example. Take the case of a peasant who cultivates a 0.5 hectare rice field. Such a peasant is representative of peasant in Java. Since the average yield per hectare was 22.19 quintals in 1940, a time when Java enjoyed exceptionally good yields, it is reasonable to assume that the average yield from this 0.5 hectare rice field during the Japanese occupation was around 10 quintals. It is difficult to know how much the harvest depended on the labor of others.

However, assuming that he is fully dependent and that the 'bawon' (share for harvest laborers) in this area is one-fifth of the yield, the total bawon that this peasant has to pay is 2 quintals. After paying the bawon, 8 quintals remain. Assuming that the surrender quota is 30% of the harvest, he surrenders 2.4 quintals, leaving him with 5.6 quintals of paddy. If he has debts, he must repay these 5.6 quintals of paddy. If the peasants are lucky enough to be free from debt, all the remaining paddy can be his, provided he sets aside 0.5 quintals of seeds, after which his family can consume it depending on the number of people in the household (Kurasawa, 2016).

Another harsh reality for peasants was that they were not given the opportunity to buy rice back at the market. To make up for the rice shortage, the government encouraged people to eat a variety of complementary foods, introducing what propagandists commonly referred to as the "struggle menu" of "bubur perjuangan" (consisting of a mixture of yam, cassava and katul) and "bubur Asia Raya" (Sinar, 2009). Various foods that had not previously appeared as staple foods were encouraged to be utilized. These include the stumps and trunks of banana and papaya trees, and cassava leaves. Papaya leaves are cooked with soil or lime (calcium) to remove the bitterness. Snails are also recommended as a meal replacement as a protein substitute. These substitutes are of course unsatisfactory, even despicable to the Javanese. They prefer to eat rice compared to other foods, and for them rice is so important and indispensable that they often say. "if you have not eaten rice, you have not eaten" (Kurasawa, 2016).

On top of the debris of suffering, there must have been something in everyone's soul to rebel against the arbitrariness of the Japanese who were initially regarded as liberators but turned out to be crueler than the Dutch colonials (Ricklefs, 2017). Rebellions during the Japanese era were few, here is one example. This peasant rebellion occurred in Indramayu, starting from the stipulation of mandatory rice handover which was quite high among peasants for Japan. While other districts were not as high as those set to the peasants in Indramayu. Because everything had been done to overcome the Japanese policy, in 1944 the peasants could no longer stand this policy. A peasant uprising broke out, one of whose leaders was K.H. Irsyad - a respected religious teacher in his village - and asked for holy water that could provide immunity for anyone who drank it. With all the peasant tools at his disposal, he used them to hit the sun-worshipping Japanese heathens. The uprising was tough but only lasted a short while. In the end, the rebellion was suppressed by the Japanese and its leaders were tortured, some even died (Benda, 2015).

The early era of independence was a fiery euphoria in decolonizing all Dutch practices and legacies. The Indonesian people didn't like anything related to the Netherlands, which is why the echoes of the independence revolution were so powerful. The Dutch, who returned to Indonesia from September 1945, still thought that the people were still the same three years later, but it turned out that they were already fighting back, plus in November 1945 Moh. Hatta issued 'Maklumat X' to form mass organizations and political parties to realize the agreed democratic system (Kahin, 2013).

This period saw intense warfare throughout Indonesia, with the Dutch keen to restore their power, while Indonesia was adamant about maintaining its independence. There were many casualties between the two sides from all walks of life. Until then, the dispute between Indonesia and the Netherlands was resolved through the United Nations in The Hague on December 27, 1949, two important decisions were that Indonesia was in the form of a Union commanded by the Dutch and the issue of West Irian was resolved a year after the recognition of sovereignty (Kahin, 2013). Not accepting this decision, a year later Indonesia broke off its relationship with the Dutch, because it was not in accordance with the livelihood of an independent Indonesia.

Entering the early decades of Indonesian independence, peasant organizations had become more prominent even though they were not yet independent, including the PKI having the Barisan Tani Indonesia (BTI), Masyumi having the Indonesian Islamic Peasant Union (STII), PNI forming the Indonesian Peasant Association (PETANI), PSI forming the Indonesian Peasant Movement (GTI), PRN forming the Indonesian Peasant Struggle Agency (BPRPI), and NU forming the Nahdlatul Ulama Peasant Association (Pertanu) (Fauzi, 2017).

Peasant organizations under the auspices of political parties also serve as a forum for conveying aspirations and each peasants organization has a different program (Fauzi, 2017).

For example, the Indonesian Islamic Peasants Union (STII) wants to improve the position of the peasants, defend the sovereignty of the state and the religion of Islam of course, and perfect the structure of the Indonesian state, which is based on God Almighty. Natsir as chairman of Masyumi at the time had the belief that Indonesia did need industrialization, but all growth has its own dynamics. Indonesia is an agrarian country that cannot be urged to immediately become an industrialized country. Agriculture also does not have to be developed like Sukarno's proposal, which is to use technology as early as possible, it will have a bad impact because the knowledge of the local community is not yet qualified to control it all. STII, in this case, is actually not undermining Sukarno as President, it is just that the knowledge of peasants must first be improved so that they are able to face the future (Historia, 2022).

Meanwhile, the BTI in Medan, executing abandoned lands that were former plantation industries was an opportunity for those who were homeless to claim these lands. Not only that, party members also participated in land grabbing (Hasibuan, J.A., et.al, 2023). It is suspected that members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in Medan were involved in land occupation around the plantation area. Because this action was known to the authorities, they were arrested. Although some BTI members were arrested, from the beginning the BTI was formed to acquire land from those who were greedy for land control. This also showed that the BTI's actions had spread a very sharp social gap (Indisch Courant, August 22, 1951).

It is also undeniable that the PKI as a political party wanted to realize a new order, in the form of equitable land distribution so that there would be no social inequality (Waspada, June 20, 1951). These land occupation practices were carried out by a community organization, the Barisan Tani Indonesia (BTI), which was an underbouw of the PKI. They came in droves with hoes, machetes, sickles, and other equipment and forcibly took over the land in question, which they then used as a place to live (Koran Sumatera, August 16, 1951). Parties such as SOBSI, Sarbupri, and BTI firmly stated that they would eliminate all tobacco companies in Medan, to obtain equality in land ownership (Ikhsan, 2022).

The PKI through its community organizations, participants, and other affiliates continued to reject the arrival of foreigners to occupy land in Medan, as peasants quickly occupied former plantation lands. Through the speeches of its party members, the PKI urged the people to continue to reject foreign products (Koran Sumatera, May 31, 1955), especially those from Britain and America, the mother capitalists. They called on the people to reject feudalism and neo-colonialism (Harian Rakyat, August 15, 1955). The PKI also criticized Prime Minister Burhanuddin Harahap; the composition of the cabinet drawn up by the current state executor was not competent enough. This would have an impact on the conduct of the 1955 General Elections, which were likely to be postponed again as in previous times. At the moment, it appeared that Burhanuddin and his cabinet were looking for excuses not to hold the elections in the near future. The BTI also requested that the Burhanuddin Harahap Cabinet be dissolved because it did not favor the small people, especially the peasants and workers (Waspada, October 13, 1955).

In East Java, the land occupation by the BTI responded by Pertanu (affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama - NU). As a political party, NU suffered the most from unilateral actions, so Pertanu intervened to curb the BTI movement, and clashes were inevitable. The core strength of both the party and Pertanu lay with the kiai, most of whom owned large tracts of land. When the PKI through the BTI escalated its actions, the NU of East Java issued a strong political statement that these actions or also called with 'Aksi Sepihak' were counter-revolutionary and counter-productive to Soekarno's goals. Moreover, in addition to stating that many NU members had been victimized, the statement concluded that the NU was still

patient with provocation in the form of these 'Aksi Sepihak'. In fact, the statement gave a clear message that continued provocation would invite retaliation from NU members. The problem is much more complicated. Institutionally, a kiai's wealth cannot be separated from his pesantren. Often someone donates something to the kiai or pesantren through the kiai. The Waqf land is fully controlled by the kiai (Sulistyo, 2017).

In another aspect in East Sumatra, the peasant organization that fought for its customary land was the Badan Perjuangan Rakyat Penunggu Indonesia (BPRPI) which was established in 1953 at the initiation of the Malay people (Koran Sumatera, 25 August 1953). They consider that the position of the lands occupied by other organizations is based on the indecisiveness of the government. BPRPI is also very entitled to the lands that are being disputed, because from the beginning some of the land that was occupied belonged to the 'Melayu' indigenous people. BPRPI then fought against government policies not by protesting on the streets or mobilizing the masses, but by making statements of objection to the government and plantations. This has violated the customary rights of the Malay people and is detrimental to the poor who were experiencing a downturn at that time (Agustono, 1995).

Thus, the portrait of peasant organizations under political parties is to be an intermediary in achieving political goals, although it seems independent, but it is the party people who are at the forefront in realizing the programs of peasant organizations. As explained above, the BTI carried out land occupation of former plantation lands initiated by PKI figures. Similarly, the clashes that occurred between the BTI and Pertanu in East Java were all in defense of their respective parties. Like mushrooms in the rainy season, the people came together to occupy the land, although it is also undeniable that there were already many people who inhabited the land before Indonesia's independence, so they worked on it until the early decades of independence (Ricklefs, 2017).

Another interesting point in the independence era was the birth of Law Number 5, in 1960 on the Basic Regulation of Agrarian Principles (UUPA 1960). The very dynamic and prolonged tug of political interests resulted in the birth of agrarian regulations with a nationalist character being slightly hampered. This is important considering that since the proclamation of Indonesian independence, there has been no attempt to break *Agrarische Wet* as the basis of agrarian law in Indonesia. For this reason, President Sukarno called the presence of the UUPA 1960 as an effort to break the agrarian law that was '*structured based on the goals and joints of the colonial government/colonialism*'. There are several main points in the UUPA 1960 that increasingly give recognition to peasants, namely:

1. Recognition of land as having a social function, not an economic one;
2. Land reform or Agrarian Reform as a policy to guarantee the rights of the people, especially the poor, and peasants;
3. Protection of the peasantry from oppressive relationships (*exploitation de l'homme par l'homme*), namely by abolishing exclusive rights to land such as private land, perdikan land, and so on;
4. The interpretation of the Right to Control of the State (HMN) replaces *domen verklairing* (the principle of ownership by the state), as a form of state presence in using agrarian resources for the greatest prosperity of the Indonesian people.

The work of existing peasant organizations also contributed to the birth of the 1960 UUPA. The PKI itself was quite clear in the birth of the 1960 UUPA, and in its development also made the issue of land reform. Meanwhile, NU was also quite influential as one of the parties that drafted the 1960 UUPA, including the figure of KH. Zainul Arifin, Chairman of the DPR-GR who ratified the UUPA at that time. (Luthfi, 2018) (Anggraeni, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The position of peasants on the stage of Indonesian history, namely during the three eras from Dutch colonialism to independence, can be said to be dynamic. During these three eras, the existence of peasants was underestimated because they only became mere extras or more precisely became the material for exploitation of the Dutch and Japanese colonials for both economic and political interests. The fate then immediately changed because peasants had entered the group of political parties and became organizations, such as Pertanu, STTI, BTI, and so on. Unfortunately, the euphoria to support the peasants did not go smoothly because there were clashes with civil society and those who did not share the same ideology. The result was bloodshed between fellow children of the nation, this is truly ironic. Peasants are back to the early phase; Peasants are again seen as a lowly and sometimes shameful profession especially for people under the age of 30. In the end, people are getting less and less willing to become peasant, even though if we look further back, the Indonesian nation will never stand without peasants.

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