

Catholics in Indonesia

*A View from Historical Perspective*¹

Baskara T. Wardaya SJ²

Abstract: After being colonized and occupied since early 1600s, in 1945 Indonesia declared itself independent. As a religious minority, Indonesia's Catholic community was involved in the country's struggle for freedom and independence. During the rule of President Sukarno the Catholic community remained politically active. But this active involvement in politics began to subside when General Soeharto came to power in late 1960s. Following the downfall of Soeharto in 1988, and as the Indonesian society entered socio-political transition, the political role of Indonesia's Catholic community needs to be re-evaluated.

PRIOR to the arrival of Western colonial powers, the area now known as Indonesia was a vast archipelago comprised of politically independent feudalistic sovereignties. Each of these sovereignties had its own system of belief. The systems of belief usually differed from one ethnic group to the other. By the 3rd or 4th century many Indonesians became Hindu or Buddhist, and a few centuries later the religion of Islam began to spread among the Indonesian population.

Remain Alarming

The coming of the Portuguese in the 16th century in search of spices brought along Christianity, especially to the people who lived in the eastern part of the archipelago, such as Flores Island and the islands of the Moluccas.

Beginning in the 1600s the Dutch were setting foot in Indonesia, first as traders and later (since 1800) as political and economic power. Under the Dutch Indonesia was known as the "Dutch East Indies". When Holland was occupied by France as a result of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, in 1811 Indonesia fell to the British and was administered by Lieutenant Governor Thomas Stamford Raffles. But in 1816 Indonesia was returned to the Dutch. It was in part thanks to the Dutch and British colonial systems

¹ A paper originally prepared for the "Asian Theology Forum on Eucharist: Preparation meeting for FABC General Assembly" conference in Seoul, South Korea, 17-21 May 2009, hosted by Pax Romana, ICMICA, and Woori Theological Institute.

² Baskara T. Wardaya SJ, lecturer and historian at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
Email: baskaramu@yahoo.com

that the archipelago gradually became a modern political unit. Early 1900s witnessed the rise of Indonesian nationalism in the form of national independence movements.

Within a few months after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese invaded the Dutch East Indies. When in March 1942 they came to Indonesia, the Dutch were taken by surprise and militarily unprepared. The Japanese forces easily defeated the Dutch and took over their colonial possession. The Dutch then formed a government-in-exile in Australia.

Following the bombing of Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and Nagasaki (August 9, 1945) and the Japanese surrendered to the Allied forces of World War II, Indonesia proclaimed independence on August 17, 1945. Instead of returning to the feudal, pre-colonial system of politics, the Indonesian freedom fighters declared that the new nation would be a democratic republic. Sukarno became its first President, Mohammad Hatta Vice President.

Learning that the Japanese had surrendered to the victors of the Second World War, the Dutch attempted to re-colonize their former colony. The attempt, however, was met with strong resistance by the young Republic, both militarily and diplomatically. For the next four years the Indonesians fought against the Dutch, until the latter eventually acknowledged Indonesian independence in 1949.

As President of the new Republic, Sukarno was overwhelmingly loved and revered by majority Indonesians. He was very close to the people and he made his government people-oriented and civilian in nature. Moreover, he was very much critical to foreign intervention, including economic one. In the midst of the Cold War tension between the Western bloc led by the United States and the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union Sukarno was persistent in making Indonesia as neutral as possible. He even pioneered the formation of a coalition of the newly-independent nations, called the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Sukarno's closeness to the people and to the Indonesian Communist Party, along with his efforts in promoting neutrality in the Cold War antagonism, were regarded as a serious threat by anti-Communist forces in Indonesia as well as by the United States and its allies. The United States feared that a left-leaning Indonesia would become an easy target for the communist bloc in spreading their influence in Southeast Asia.

In 1965, between the months of September and December about half-a million Indonesians who were accused of being communist were massacred. Soon after the bloodbath, known as the 1965 Tragedy, Sukarno's political authority diminished and later he was forced out of power. He was succeeded by President Soeharto, a military general.

Different from Sukarno, Soeharto's government was elitist, authoritarian, militaristic, and in favor of foreign economic interference. It maintained close relations with developed capitalist nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan. President Soeharto was using all means available, including religions, to keep him in power. His political skills combined with his willingness to use force and violence against those whom he considered as a threat, kept him stay in power for more than three decades. In 1998, however, amid Asian economic crisis and rioting students, Soeharto was forced to step down as Indonesia's top leader.

In the wake of Soeharto's fall from power Indonesia underwent a period of political transition, a transition from authoritarian and undemocratic government to a more people-oriented and democratic political system. This transitional period is widely known as the period of "*Reformasi*" (Reformation), in which Indonesians hoped to reform the country from a country ruled by an authoritarian government into a

functioning democracy based on maximum participation of the citizens; social and economic justice; and corruption-proof government.

Today the transition continues. There have been much success in this period of transition, but new problems arise. Among them are the widespread corruption, daunting economic difficulties, domination of foreign capitals, lack of effective political leadership, and an ever growing threat to its pluralistic tradition.

Democracy is widely practiced in the national and local levels, but forces of anti-democracy remain alarming. Sources of anti-democratic threats include certain religious groups, certain military circles, and some well-organized economic powers. The political role of religious adherents continues to be unclear, but with one obvious exception, namely the Indonesian Moslems.

Relative Freedom

As mentioned above, as a vast archipelago that comprised of thousands of islands and hundreds of ethnic groups, Indonesians originally had diverse systems of belief. With the coming of organized religions from abroad, however, many Indonesians abandoned their traditional faith and embraced new religions, especially Buddhism, Hinduism and later Islam. These religions dominated much of the archipelago during the pre-colonial period. In the 16th century the Portuguese introduced Catholicism to the people of the Indonesian archipelago, especially those who lived in the eastern part of the territory. Between 1546 and 1547 St. Francis Xavier came to the area on a Portuguese ship and taught Catholic faith to the people of the Moluccas.

The coming of the Dutch in the early 17th century, however, made the propagation of the Catholic faith difficult. For some obvious reasons the Dutch were more favorable toward Protestants than to the Catholics. Preaching the Catholic faith was made almost impossible except in places like the islands of Flores and Timor. In Amboina Catholics were forced to change their faith and become Protestant. There were numerous incidents that demonstrated Dutch animosity and repression toward Catholic missionaries. In 1924, for instance, Fr. Egidius d'Abreu SJ was executed because he taught Catholic faith and celebrated the Eucharist in prison. Fr. A. de Rhodes, a French Jesuit who Romanized Vietnamese characters, was expelled from the Dutch East Indies after being forced to watch his cross and Mass kit being burned. Yoanes Kaspas Kratx, a lay Catholic from Austria, was also expelled from the colony because he was helping several Catholic priests who were passing through Batavia, the colony's capital. Kratx went to Macau and later he became a Jesuit.

Despite the repression by the Dutch, Catholic faith began to grow in Indonesia in the early 1900s. This was in part thanks to the tireless efforts of Dutch missionaries such as Father F. van Lith, a Jesuit, who baptized the first Javanese Catholics in 1904 and provided excellent education to many young Indonesians. Some of these educated young students would become future leaders of Indonesian Catholics, including Archbishop Albert Soegijapranata of Semarang and national politician Frans Seda.

While occupying Indonesia the Japanese did not seem care much about religions, let alone the Catholics, whose number was still very limited when they took over the Dutch East Indies in 1942. The only religion they cared for was Islam, because of its large following, in the time when the Japanese needed as much as possible support from Indonesians in their war efforts against the Allies. Under the Japanese many Catholics suffered enormously. Dutch missionaries were interned along with other Dutch nationals

under very disheartening conditions, while many facilities belonged to the Catholic community were taken over by the Japanese and were used to serve their own purposes.

During the rule of President Sukarno Catholics enjoyed relative freedom. This was in part because as a person whose parents adhered to two different religions, President Sukarno was very much open to any religion. When exiled in Flores he was helped by Catholics of the island. Sukarno was a Moslem, but he was also very close to and well-loved by people of other religions, including the Catholics. A number of Catholic leaders were able to maintain close relations with the President.

The relative freedom that had been enjoyed by the Catholics continued during the early years of General Soeharto's presidency, while the number of Catholics was on the rise. But by the end of the General's rule Catholic communities were increasingly marginalized, and often became targets of numerous anti-Christian acts.

Very Limited

During Indonesia's struggle for independence Catholics actively participated in fighting against Dutch attempt to re-colonize Indonesia. Young Catholic soldiers such as Agustinus Adisucipto, Ignatius Slamet Riyadi and Josaphat Sudarso fought courageously and sacrificed their lives for the sake of the country's independence. They were officially declared national heroes and their names are all over the country even today, as many public places such as airport and streets are named after them. When Archbishop Soegijapranata had to choose between having his headquarters located in the Dutch-held territory or in the territory which was fully in control of the Indonesian forces, he moved and chose the latter. The Archbishop's act symbolized the adherence of the Catholics to the Indonesian government and their refusal to support Dutch control of Indonesia.

Under the rule of President Sukarno many Catholics were active in politics. Catholic figures such as I.J. Kasimo and Frans Seda were nationally known and well-respected. Meanwhile the Catholic Party was prominent among other political parties of the period.

When in 1965 people who were accused of being communists were massacred, apparently many Catholics did not explicitly object to it. In the wake of the massacre, however, many Catholic individuals and institutions helped families of the victims and accompanied those who were imprisoned because of their association in one way or the other with the Indonesian Communist Party—or with any leftist ideas. This period also witnessed conversion to Catholicism of many survivors of the 1965 Tragedy.

Under the rule of President Soeharto, called the "New Order" government, Catholics participated in many aspects of the country's life, but their political prominence gradually diminished. This was in part due to the rise of the Moslem's political role and influence, and also due to the reluctance of a growing number of Catholics to engage in political participation. Many were more interested in social and charity works or simply laying low amid the political dynamics of the country. As a result, slowly but certainly the Catholics were politically marginalized by the Indonesian society at large.

In a quite surprising number, however, young Indonesian Catholics were involved in the *Reformasi* movement to challenge President Soeharto's authoritarian rule in order to make Indonesia more open and democratic. Unfortunately when Soeharto did indeed step down in 1998 and the country was ready for a democratic change, the political role of the Indonesian youth in general began to subside, and along with it the role of the Indonesian young Catholics.

Today, with only a few exceptions, the political role of Indonesian Catholics is generally very limited and their political contribution to the nation in general remains less than clear.

“Get up, let us go.”

Looking at the Indonesian history and observing the current social and political condition, one could ask: in that kind of socio-political context, what has been and what should be the role of the Catholic faith in Indonesia? This is certainly an important question to ask, but perhaps it wouldn't be proper to ask the question to the faith itself, since any faith is of course not a human being that can be asked.

Instead, we should ask leaders, members of the faith: in that kind of socio-political dynamics of Indonesia, especially in this socio-political transition period, what do you think should be the role of the Catholic faith? Remember, Catholics in Indonesia are just a religious minority of about 3.5 percent of the total population.

For one, it seems that for many Indonesians (despite the minority status) the faith had been a source of inspiration, energy and blessings in their participation in the nation's life and socio-political dynamics. This was clear from the participation of Catholics from the struggle for independence period up to the end of the Sukarno government.

But in the last several years, unfortunately, the public participation of Indonesian Catholics in the country's socio-political life has not been as clear as it used to be. We then are compelled to ask certain questions, such as: does it mean that in Indonesia the faith has ceased to be a source of inspiration, energy and blessings for many Catholic Indonesians in their socio-political participation?

While that kind of question is still waiting to be answered, in the last several years it seems that certain groups of Catholics in Indonesia are more interested in making Catholic liturgy as “beautiful” (read: intricate) as possible as a religious ritual than in remembering the discipleship aspects of any Catholic religious ceremony, in which it should inspire the participants to be active “proclaimers” of the Good News wherever they are. If this is true, then perhaps it's time for Indonesian Catholics to re-evaluate and discuss whether membership in the Catholic faith is encouraging or discouraging their active participation as Indonesian citizens in working together for a better Indonesia.

After all, when on that Thursday night Jesus held the Last Supper with His disciples in that Upper Room, He did not mean that the disciples would only deepen their personal faith, but also that they would be ready to proclaim the Good News wherever they were—not only among themselves, but also among other people, other nations, and eventually the whole world. Perhaps it was not merely a coincidence that in that same night one of the sentences Jesus uttered to His disciples shortly after the Last Supper was: “Get up, let us go” (Mark 14:42).

Final Reflections

As a final reflection it is important to hope that instead of making the faith merely a religious conviction that absorbs the people's time and energy for the sake of the faith itself, Indonesian Catholics should regard their faith as God's invitation and mission to proclaim the Good News, to renew the world, including the society or country where they live. Catholic faith should encourage and energize them in their involvement and participation in the life and the dynamics of their nation. The involvement and

participation should not be necessarily limited to socio-political involvement, but also involvement and participation in other aspects of Indonesian life as a nation.

Personal faith for deepening personal spiritual life is important, but so is personal faith as the basis for collective participation as part of a larger national community and humanity.

Reference:

- Boelaars OFM Cap, Huub J.W.M. *Indonesianisasi: Dari Gereja Katolik di Indonesia Menjadi Gereja Katolik Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: 2005).
- Cribb, Robert and Colin Brown. *Modern Indonesia: A History since 1945* (London and New York: 1995).
- Ricklefs, M.C. *A History of Modern Indonesia since 1300* (Stanford, California: 1993).
- Subanar SJ, G. Budi. *Kesaksian Revolusioner Seorang Uskup di Masa Perang* (Yogyakarta: 2003).
- Susanto SJ, A Budi (Editor). *Harta dan Surga: Peziarahan Jesuit dalam Gereja dan Bangsa Indonesian Modern* (Yogyakarta: 1990).
- Wardaya SJ, Baskara T. *Cold War Shadow: United States Policy toward Indonesia, 1953-1963* (Yogyakarta: 2007).

Statistics of Catholics in Indonesia

	No Catholics	Population	Cath Percentage	Diocese	Year Source
1	693,885	712,491	97.39%	<u>Ende</u> (Agung)	2004 ap2005
2	615,330	637,193	96.57%	<u>Ruteng</u>	2004 ap2005
3	503,597	19,056,082	2.64%	<u>Semarang</u> (Agung)	2004 ap2005
4	501,079	14,389,898	3.48%	<u>Medan</u> (Agung)	2004 ap2005
5	475,775	493,044	96.50%	<u>Atambua</u>	2004 ap2005
6	411,036	11,279,332	3.64%	<u>Jakarta</u> (Agung)	2002 ap2004
7	265,492	530,043	50.09%	<u>Sanggau</u>	2004 ap2005
8	256,280	274,373	93.41%	<u>Larantuka</u>	2004 ap2005
9	243,923	2,477,906	9.84%	<u>Pontianak</u> (Agung)	2004 ap2005
10	188,120	2,329,853	8.07%	<u>Sibolga</u>	2003 ap2004
11	178,592	11,519,628	1.55%	<u>Makassar</u> (Agung)	2004 ap2005
12	153,723	676,082	22.74%	<u>Sintang</u>	2004 ap2005
13	150,457	3,400,000	4.43%	<u>Surabaya</u>	2004 ap2005
14	140,220	244,440	57.36%	<u>Merauke</u> (Agung)	2004 ap2005
15	138,592	2,089,825	6.63%	<u>Ambon</u>	2004 ap2005
16	125,123	1,189,829	10.52%	<u>Kupang</u> (Agung)	2004 ap2005
17	123,948	4,332,770	2.86%	<u>Manado</u>	1998 ap2004
18	122,428	2,374,744	5.16%	<u>Samarinda</u> (Agung)	2004 ap2005
19	121,042	583,095	20.76%	<u>Weetebula</u>	2004 ap2005
20	96,864	35,000,000	.28%	<u>Bandung</u>	2004 ap2005
21	93,518	6,908,437	1.35%	<u>Tanjungkarang</u>	2004 ap2005
22	88,255	14,829,884	.60%	<u>Malang</u>	2004 ap2005
23	85,017	518,884	16.38%	<u>Timika</u>	2004 ap2005
24	84,297	438,475	19.23%	<u>Ketapang</u>	2004 ap2005
25	76,744	17,698,013	.43%	<u>Purwokerto</u>	2004 ap2005
26	76,201	10,828,441	.70%	<u>Palembang</u> (Agung)	2003 ap2004
27	73,000	9,153,000	.80%	<u>Padang</u>	2004 ap2005
28	66,115	13,080,511	.51%	<u>Bogor</u>	2004 ap2005
29	54,567	556,583	9.80%	<u>Manokwari-Sorong</u>	2002 ap2004
30	53,585	2,332,864	2.30%	<u>Palangkaraya</u>	2004 ap2005
31	45,750	77,850	58.77%	<u>Agats</u>	2004 ap2005
32	44,880	837,300	5.36%	<u>Jayapura</u>	2004 ap2005
33	35,505	1,848,989	1.92%	<u>Pangkal-Pinang</u>	2004 ap2005
34	30,653	8,057,209	.38%	<u>Denpasar</u>	2004 ap2005
35	28,218	434,503	6.49%	<u>Tanjung Selor</u>	2004 ap2005
36	13,631	3,054,129	.45%	<u>Banjarmasin</u>	2004 ap2005