

Benih Mardeka in Political Movement of East Sumatra, 1916-1923

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Abstract: This paper deals with Benih Mardeka movement was a medium to strive for justice and Indonesian independence in East Sumatra. Benih Mardeka was very loud in spreading the idea of nationalism, publishing numerous articles which criticized colonialism and capitalism. The poor living condition of plantation workers was the main issue used by Benih Mardeka against both the colonial government and plantation companies. It was also used by Sarekat Islam to disseminate patriotic and nationalistic idea. Benih Mardeka was a consistent mouth piece of nationalism among the Indonesian press during political movement in pre-independence era in East Sumatra.

1 INTRODUCTION

The early twentieth century was the time of significant change in the Dutch East Indies. Nationalistic sentiments, lamenting the phenomenon of colonialization were abound in the public sphere. These sentiments could partly be attributed to the colonial strategy of ethical policy. This policy, like a double-edged sword, fulfilled the colonial need for skilled administrators, but also caused the emergence of an educated class critical of colonialism and partial to the increasingly popular idea of national independence during the turn of the century.

This educated class gave birth to the movement of nationalism. The movement grew hand-in-hand with the popularization of the press in Indonesia. The press then were used as a tool to spread the message of independence organizations and the idea of nationalism (Hoogerwerf, 1990). In addition, the press was deemed an effective tool in criticizing the policies of the colonial government and defending the interest of the people. One such tool was the *Benih Mardeka* newspaper. According to Mohammad Said, it was the first newspaper in Indonesia to use the word *merdeka* (independence) as well as the first voice of nationalism and independence in East Sumatra. A quick proof could be glance from its tagline, *Orgaan oentoek Menoentoet Keadilan dan Kemerdekaan* (An Organ to Demand Justice and Independence) (Said, 1976).

Benih Mardeka's name and tagline showed its progressiveness in spreading the idea of nationalism and independence. East Sumatra, at the time a location of *cultuurgebied* (plantation area) was a fertile region for propagandas related to nationalism and political movement. Here, colonial practice was at its most pervasive, the relationship between plantation employer and employee at its most exploitative, giving rise to the practice of *poenale sanctie* (penal sanction) and a high level of inequality between the people and the colonial government and its apparatus.

This paper examined the role of *Benih Mardeka* in the independence political movement of East Sumatra in 1916-1923, analyzing its propaganda on nationalism, advocacy of plantation workers, and agitation of the colonialized. To do this, the situation and condition of the press in East Sumatra in the twentieth century are described, illuminating the central position of *Benih Mardeka* as a press for nationalism and independence.

2 RESEARCH METHODS

This research usages historical method, consists of four stages, namely heuristic, critics, interpretation and historiography. Heuristic is used for documents collection, such as documents and government official reports as a primary sources. Newspapers like *benih mardeka*, *soeara djawa* and *sumatra post*

as an object of research as secondary sources. After data collection require verification, inter and extern critics for data findings. Therefore, data is interpreted so that narrated in historiography

3 THE PRESS

The region of East Sumatra in colonial times was synonymous with the plantation industry. Introduced in the region by J. Nienhuys in 1863, under the Dutch colonial government for the next quarter century, the region became a thriving *cultuurgebied*. Thee Kian Wie stated that plantation development and growth in East Sumatra was unique, exceeding development in other Dutch colonies (Wie, 1977). The growth brought about drastic changes in the region, transforming its geographical, demographic, economic, social, political and cultural aspects.

The changes changed the socio-cultural condition of East Sumatran residents. In terms of demographics, many immigrants came to reside in the region, their numbers later exceeding the native population of Malay, Karo, and Simalungun ethnicities. These immigrants comprised of European, Chinese, Indian, and other Indonesian natives such as Javanese, Minang, Mandailing, Aceh, Toba, and Banjar (Loderichs, 1997). They lived mainly in East Sumatran cities, the centre of the plantation industry. Medan, as the largest city, experienced the most significant demographic change (Miksic, 1989).

Such drastic demographic change caused a variety of interests to emerge. In 1916, many interest groups were founded, among them Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and native organizations. Examples of these organizations were: *Sarekat Islam Medan*, *Boedi Oetomo*, *Sarekat Islam Delispoor*, *Sarekat Islam Tapanoeli*, *Sarekat XII Goeroe*, *Debating Roh Kita*, *Medan Setia*, *Opiumregie-Bond*, *Rekso Sengkono*, *Deli Medan Sumatra Hindu Dharma Sargam*, *Deli Hindu Sabha*, and *Nippondjin Kyokai* (Schadee, 1917). These organizations needed tools or media to show their presence and articulate their interest. The press, which had flourished since the end of the nineteenth century, became a suitable tool.

In general, there were two functions or roles of the press in East Sumatra. The first was as a tool to support and perpetuate the control and interest of the plantation companies and colonial government. The second was as a medium to spread the idea of nationalism and to criticize the plantation companies' inhumane practices and colonial

government's unjust policies by the native organizations and intellectuals (Suwirta, 1999).

The first newspaper published in Medan, named *Deli Courant*, was founded by Jacques Deen, a Dutchman. Published twice a week on Wednesday and Saturday, its first issue was on 18 March 1885. The newspaper was a tool for the plantation companies to articulate their interest. The native press even called *Deli Courant* as the "tobacco newspaper". Another European newspaper with a large influence and readership was *De Sumatra Post*. Issued by the publishing company J. Hallermann & Co. In 1899, several Dutch notables held positions as editor, J. van den Brand, A.J. Lievegood, and Vierhout (Said, 1976). The latter newspaper was more independent and progressive compared to the former.

Another newspaper was *Pelita Andalas*. Owned by the Chinese, it was initially published by *Drukkerij Andalas* in 1911. In 1913, it shortened its name Andalas, and changed publisher to *Sumatraasche Handelsdrukkerij*, Medan. Issued on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, with all editorial membership comprised of the Chinese, this newspaper prioritized advertisements more than news (Adam, 2003).

The first Malay-language newspaper managed by native editors was published in Medan in 1910. Headed by Dja Endar Moeda, this newspaper was named *Pewartu Deli*. It was published by the N.V. *Sjarikat Tapanuli*. A majority of the editors were of Mandailing and Angkola ethnicities. Previously, a Malay-language newspaper named *Pertja Timoer* was published in Medan in 1902. However, this newspaper was published by the same company which printed *De Sumatra Post* and thus print many of the same foreign news as the *Post* (Adam, 2003). *Pewartu Deli* became known as the first national newspaper based in Medan. It was read even outside the East Indies. This was because of its commercial orientation, fulfilling the need for plantation information and investment opportunities in the region. It is important to note that *Pewartu Deli*'s shares was owned and monopolized by Mandailing and Angkola-Sipirok immigrants who were well-known in the business world in the region (Adam, 2003).

The early press movement in East Sumatra was not as nationalistic as a similar movement in Java in the 1910s (Schadee, 1917). The Sumatran press movement initiated by the natives and the Chinese such as *Pewartu Deli* and *Andalas* did not publish many articles related to native welfare, public education, and social justice. These newspapers

were commercial in orientation (Adam, 2003). However, subsequent press movement in East Sumatra was developed more nationalistically. Rapid mobility of people and information caused the emergence of national identity, the sense of becoming a nation due to the use of Malay (Indonesian) as a written language.

4 THE PRESS MOVEMENT

The press movement in East Sumatra found its momentum in the emergence of nationalist idea among the numerous organizations. East Sumatra was a fertile region for issues related to economic inequality and social problems. These issues became a point of debate in the Sumatran press world because two camps were formed, one supporting the colonial government and plantation companies and the other supporting public interest and justice. Political movements in East Sumatra were enriched by the press, which conveyed their idea or propaganda to the public. These newspapers were influenced by the development of Malay language, which later became the Indonesian language. This language was used as a political tool to unite and create an Indonesian national identity. Like in Java, the political movements had their own newspapers; *Boedi Oetomo* had the *Soeara Djawa* newspaper and *Sarekat Islam* had *Benih Mardeka*.

Benih Mardeka was a newspaper which paid attention to the social and political condition of the East Indies, especially East Sumatra. Printed by the publishing company *N.V. Handel Maatschappij Setia Bangsa*, which was founded before the notary public in October 1916, its first issue was on 20 November 1916 (Said, 1976). The company also published the *Soeara Djawa* newspaper, an organ or propaganda tool of *Boedi Oetomo*. *Benih Mardeka* and *Soeara Djawa* was published in the same year, 1916. This was the time when patriotic and nationalistic idea became popular in the East Indies, especially East Sumatra. The colonial government paid little attention to the spread of these idea, especially those propagated by the local press movement (Schadee, 1917).

According to the information from *Kroniek 1916*, released by *Oostkust van Sumatra Instituut*, in 1916 the East Sumatran press movement had not been well-developed, being left far behind the press movement in Java (Schadee, 1917). Press movement and development depended on social organizations' development. Four organizations were vital to the Indonesian press development, namely *Boedi*

Oetomo, *Sarekat Islam*, *Indische Partij*, and Indonesian Communist Party (Hoogerwerf, 1990). In addition, there were also *Sarekat Tani* and *Sarekat Kaoem Boeroeh*. These different organizations had different interests. *Boedi Oetomo* for example, was based on Javanese tribalism, while *Sarekat Islam* on Islamic universalism (Overzicht ... Pers 1920, 1921).

The commercial orientation of East Sumatran press was disrupted by *Benih Mardeka*, which published articles demanding justice and equality. One of its article stated that *Benih Mardeka* means the seed of independence. The newspaper's tagline of "*Orgaan oentoeke menoentoeke keadilan dan kemardekaan*" was intended to inform its audience that it was a tool to achieve justice and independence (Benih Mardeka, 20 August 1918). *Benih Mardeka* criticized colonialism and capitalism sharply, citing press development in Java. There were space or columns for political criticism or satire, titled *Boeal*, which articles were written by an author with the pseudonym *Meong*. This column was popular among readers as it was written in a humorous style (Said, 1976).

In its early years, *Benih Mardeka* could be discerned as a tool or organ *Sarekat Islam* in East Sumatra. Explicitly, this was not stated. However, the newspaper published many of *Sarekat Islam*'s news. This was probably because most of *Benih Mardeka* editors were important figures in the organization. The first chief editor was Mohamad Samin, a Minang who was also a commissioner for *Sarekat Islam* of East Sumatra. Also present in its editorial board was Mohamad Joenoes, a vice head of *Sarekat Islam* of Asahan. The newspaper's company director was Tengkoek Radja Sabaroedin, the president of *Sarekat Islam* of Medan Deli. Sabaroedin had ties with the Deli sultanates (Said, 1976).

Benih Mardeka underwent several changes in leadership. Mohamad Samin's tenure as chief editor was not long, his name no longer found in the paper editorial list on 3 April 1918. This role was taken by Tengkoek Radja Sabaroedin. Mohamad Joenoes remained as editor (Benih Mardeka, 3 April 1918). On the 1 August 1918 issue, the name R.K. Mangoenatmodjo showed up as an editor under Mohamad Joenoes. Mangoenatmodjo was an editor for the *Soeara Djawa* newspaper. In Maret 1919, the name of Abdoel Moeis, a leader in the national headquarter of *Sarekat Islam*, was printed as editor above Mohamad Joenoes. In Mei 1919, the name of Parada Harahap was included as editor, but not for long. By August that year, all these names disappeared, leaving only the name of Mohamad

Joenoos. According to Mohamad Said, these editorial changes reflected the uncomfortable internal condition of the newspaper at the time (*Benih Mardeka*, 1 August 1918).

In addition to editorial change, the newspaper also underwent several name changes. From *Benih Mardeka* since it was first published until 31 March 1920, the name was changed to *Mardeka* on 1 April, (*Mardeka*, 1 April 1920) only for it to be changed again to the original *Benih Mardeka* in January 1921. The later change lasted until early 1924. Then, the newspaper was merged with another named *Warta Timoer*, resulting in the name *Benih Timoer*. Although there was no clear reasonings for the name changes, (Algemeene ... over de maand Januari 1921, 1920-1931) they did not affect the newspaper's tendency in voicing out criticisms against capitalism and colonialism, as well as defending public interest.

Benih Mardeka played a vital role in the movement to spread the idea of patriotism and nationalism in Indonesia. Even though there were differences in opinion among the native press leaders regarding these movements, *Benih Mardeka* continued to express the idea of nationalism. These differences increased the dynamism of political movements in East Sumatra, strengthening those who believed in an Indonesian identity, especially *Benih Mardeka* leaders.

5 SAREKAT ISLAM

Benih Mardeka's development was intertwined with *Sarekat Islam* in East Sumatra, even though this relationship was not explicitly stated like "*Soeara Djawa*" and *Boedi Oetomo*. During its founding, *Benih Mardeka* leaders also held leadership positions in *Sarekat Islam*. Implicitly, these dual positions had made *Benih Mardeka* a mouthpiece of the *Sarekat Islam*. This organization was very influential in the decades of 1910s and 1920s, before the Second World War, as stated by A.P.E. Korver (Korver, 1985). Founded officially on 11 November 1912 in Solo, Central Java, it became a significant force in the Indonesian independence movement, giving birth to many national leaders and patriots. *Sarekat Islam* in its peak claimed to have two million members in all of East Indies (Bezemer, 1921). *Sarekat Islam* then established its branches throughout the East Indies, including in East Sumatra. The region had become a unique one due to its development as plantation area. The presence of many immigrants fostered the spread of patriotic

and nationalistic idea. The inequality between the oppressor and the oppressed was such that *Sarekat Islam* became very influential in the region.

Sarekat Islam found an ideal tool to convey and spread its idea in East Sumatra through *Benih Mardeka*. In this, it emulated the practice of its parent organization in Java, where *Sarekat Islam* used newspapers to spread its radical idea. Among the newspapers used were *Oetoesan Hindia* in Surabaya, *Sinar Djawa* in Semarang, *Pantjaran Berita* in Betawi, and *Saroetomo* in Surakarta (Hoogerwerf, 1990).

Benih Mardeka published many reports on the results and plans of *Sarekat Islam*'s meetings in East Sumatra. For example, it reported the plan for the general meeting of the Medan – Deli branch of *Sarekat Islam* on 21 March 1920 two days earlier, on 18 March 1920. It included the meeting's agenda, such as discussing the previous year's report and financial statements, electing future officers, planning for demonstrations, and gathering among the branch members (*Benih Mardeka*, 18 March 1920).

Benih Mardeka also reported on the congresses of national branch of *Sarekat Islam*. The 1918 Surabaya congress was attended by Mohamad Samin (*De Sumatra Post*, 2 December 1919), who reported in detail the congress' result as well as his inputs to the congress. These inputs including reporting the condition of contract workers in East Sumatra plantations, suggesting the abolition of *poenale sanctie*, conveying the conflict between capitalists and residents, and sharing educational development in the region (*Benih Mardeka*, 17 April 1918). They were reported in successive editions of *Benih Mardeka*.

Legal issues also came to the attention of *Sarekat Islam* in East Sumatra, driven by a legal problem experienced by a *Sarekat Islam* member and *Benih Mardeka* editor, among other reasons. Mohamad Joenoos was brought on trial by the court of the Deli government and sentenced to three months in jail for his critical article in *Benih Mardeka*. He mocked the Deli Sultan for his land dispute with Tengkoeh Hadji Djahir, writing an article titled *Hewan Mengamuk* (The Mad Animal). In its legal effort, *Sarekat Islam* of East Sumatra worked together with *Sarekat Islam Tapanoeli*, *Djamiatoel Moehabbah*, *Boedi Oetomo*, and *Nationale Indische Partij* (*Benih Mardeka*, 27 March 1920).

In the social and political spheres, *Sarekat Islam* paid attention to the demand of the elimination of forced work in East Sumatra, distribution of land, and improvement of plantation workers' life. The

first demand was directed to the *Volksraad* (parliament), which responded with a letter on 16 November 1918. *Sarekat Islam* also met directly with the governor of East Sumatra for this purpose, discussing the difficult economic condition (Benih Mardeka, 25 March 1920). The governor responded by temporarily abolishing forced work and eliminating tax for the poor as much as f. 12,5. However, the policy did not apply to those considered as the sultan's subjects as they deem forced work custom or tradition, refusing its abolition (Benih Mardeka, 25 March 1920).

On the issue of land distribution, *Sarekat Islam* worked with *Djamiatoel Moehabbah*, *Sarekat Islam Tapanoeli*, *Boedi Oetomo*, and the *Nationale Indische Partij*. These organizations demanded to the governor and sultan for a just land distribution between the governor's and sultan's subjects. Also, they demanded land certificates and cultivation right of unoccupied land in the jungle. These demands were later made by all *Sarekat Islam*'s branches in East Sumatra (Benih Mardeka, 25 March 1920).

6 WORKER RIGHTS

The life of plantation workers was of great interest to the East Sumatran press, especially the practice of *poenale sanctie*, often called hidden slavery (Overzicht ... Pers 1918, 1919). This practice had been mentioned since the turn of the twentieth century, when van den Brand polemical brochure was circulated even in the Netherlands (Brand, 1902). The issue was so sensitive that debates repeatedly occurred between the European and native presses, as well as between the native presses (Bremant, 1997).

The Dutch East Indies government regulated the plantation industry under *Koelie Ordonnantie 1880*. The regulation included work hours, salary, and sanctions for plantation employer and employee who violate it (*Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indie 1880*, No. 133). Workers under this regulation were called contract worker, and those who violated the contract were deemed to have committed *poenale sanctie* (Wertheim, 1987). The contract was intended to protect plantation companies from rebellious workers. However, it was misused by the companies, who often tried and punished the workers by themselves. Sick workers were fined with forced work which time was determined arbitrarily by the companies (Stoler, 1985).

Arbitrary and heartless actions were committed against the workers even before they worked in

plantations. They were deceived in the recruitment process especially in poor villages in Central Java. A popular term for this deception was *pengwewerakan buruh*. The agent or *werek* enticed the villagers to work in plantations with high salaries and decent life in Deli (Szekely-Lulofs, 1985). The deception and fraud committed by these agents were unable to be controlled by the colonial government. They closed one eye towards the deception as if in cahoots with the agents and the colonial law enforcement (Benih Mardeka, 20 April 1918).

When they arrived in the plantation, the workers became trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and suffering. The plantation companies made it such that workers cannot escape this cycle, giving salaries on the first date of the month and 16th of each month (Deventer, 1921). On these dates, the plantation held night markets in which all activities were legal, including gambling, prostitution, and open trade of alcohol and drugs (AS GB-MGS, No. 4268). It was thus unsurprising to find that plantation life was full of violence and criminality.

A divisive issue of plantation life was *poenale sanctie*. This issue was heavily debated between the native and European presses. Among the native press leaders who debated on this issue was Mohamad Samin and the editor of *Soeara Djawa*, R.K. Mangoenatmodjo. They also debated with the European editor of *De Sumatra Post* (Overzicht ... Pers 1918, 1919). Despite these debates, *Benih Mardeka* cooperated with other newspapers, such as *Pewartar Deli* and *Soeara Djawa*, to report for the interest of the contract workers. These newspapers initiated the collection of donation for the workers, managed under the organizations of *Sarekat Islam* dan *Boedi Oetomo*. They also paid attention to the development of press in Java so as to fine tune its reporting regarding plantation life (*De Sumatra Post*, 21 February 1918). The *Benih Mardeka* editors saw plantation life for themselves by visiting the workers in the plantation. The workers informed them of more demands, such as shorter work hours, free housing in plantation, and pension after their contract was over (Benih Mardeka, 2 May 1918).

Considering the difficult plantation life, *Sarekat Islam* issued several resolutions in their general meetings, which were reported by *Benih Mardeka*. Several points of these resolutions were brought to the national *Sarekat Islam* congress in Surabaya in 1918, (1) Abolition of *Poenale Sanctie*; (2) A minimum salary of f. 60; (3) A maximum length of 8 hours work; (4) Workers who finish their contract are allowed to terminate their contract; (5) Workers who have worked for 15 years must be given

pension; (6) Workers who wish to live in East Sumatra must be given land with right of cultivation (*erfelijk individueel bezit*); (7) Paid maternity leave between 7 months of pregnancy and 40 days after labor; (8) Legal issues must be brought before the colonial government or *Landrechter*; (9) All workers' children must be educated in plantation schools; (10) Gambling in plantation must be made illegal (Said, 1990).

These ten demands were the result of the advocacy conducted by the *Benih Merdeka* and *Sarekat Islam* leaders in East Sumatra. The advocacy found its momentum during the speech given by Mohamad Samin in the general meeting of *Sarekat Islam* Medan – Deli on 17 February 1918. The speech criticized and condemned the terrible condition faced by workers in plantation (Soera Djawa, 18 February 1918). In his speech, Mohamad Samin described the influx of foreign investment in East Sumatra. The rapid growth of plantation was mainly due to contribution of Javanese immigrant workers under the bond of contract regulation called *Koelie Ordonnantie*. He censured the deception committed by agents, which caused much suffering to the workers as they receive low salary and horrible treatment in the plantation. An example of this suffering is the punishment of *poenale sanctie*, a practice which he had criticized regularly as editor of *Benih Merdeka* (Said, 1990).

7 CONCLUSIONS

The Dutch East Indies in the early twentieth century was a time of flux. Dutch ethical policy had produced many native intellectuals who were influenced with nationalistic sentiments prevalent in the time. These intellectuals established many organizations which later demanded independence from the Dutch. Even though these organizations were initially based in Java, later they spread to other regions such as East Sumatra.

The rapid development of East Sumatra due to plantation growth had resulted in a stark difference between the colonialist and the colonized. This difference was made visible especially by the nationalist movements which had begun to take roots in the region. These movements used the press, especially newspapers, as a tool to spread their nationalist propaganda. A notable newspaper in this regard was *Benih Merdeka*, which published many articles critical of colonialism and capitalism in East Sumatra. Wretched plantation life experienced by the workers drove *Benih Merdeka* editors to write

and publish many articles to condemn the colonial government and their subsidiaries, as well as the plantation companies. In these actions, *Benih Merdeka* had truly fulfilled its tagline of “An organ to demand justice and independence”.

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