

## The Role of the Bumiputera Press in the Indonesian National Movement in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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Received 9 October 2024; Received in revised form 18 November 2024; Accepted 20 November 2024

### Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk: (1) Menjelaskan lahirnya pers Bumiputera, (2) Menjelaskan perjuangan pergerakan nasional Indonesia pada awal abad ke-20, (3) Menjelaskan peranan Pers Bumiputera terhadap pergerakan nasional Indonesia. Penulis menggunakan metode dalam penelitian sejarah yang terdiri dari beberapa tahap yakni: mengumpulkan sumber, kritik sumber, interpretasi, dan historiografi. Hasil dari penulisan artikel ini menunjukkan bahwasannya: (1) Lahirnya pers Bumiputera didukung oleh perkembangan pendidikan di Hindia Belanda, (2) Munculnya kaum terpelajar menjadi motor penggerak lahirnya pergerakan nasional Indonesia, (3) Pers Bumiputera sebagai alat menyuarakan kepentingan rakyat untuk melawan ketidakadilan dari penguasa kolonial dan feodal serta media provokasi dalam membangkitkan keberanian rakyat kecil terhadap kelompok penguasa.

**Kata kunci:** pers bumiputera, surat kabar, pergerakan nasional.

### Abstract

*This article aims to: (1) Explain the emergence of Bumiputera press, (2) Explain the struggle of the Indonesian national movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, (3) Explain the role of Bumiputera Press in the Indonesian national movement. The author uses methods in historical research that consist of several stages, namely: collecting sources, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The results of this article indicate that: (1) The emergence of Bumiputera press was supported by the development of education in the Dutch East Indies, (2) The emergence of educated people became the driving force behind the birth of the Indonesian national movement, (3) Bumiputera Press served as a tool to voice the interests of the people against the injustices of colonial and feudal rulers and as a medium of provocation to awaken the courage of the common people against the ruling groups.*

**Keywords:** bumiputera press, newspapers, national movement.

### INTRODUCTION

The life of the press in Indonesia at different times shows notable differences. The prominent difference is the life of the press during the colonial rule of the Dutch East Indies compared to the period of independent Indonesia. During the Dutch colonial rule, the existence of the press had various backgrounds and functions. The political and economic dominance of the Dutch meant that the press during this time primarily voiced colonial interests.

The Dutch colonial press can be classified into three categories: Dutch colonial press, foreign Eastern press, particularly Chinese, and Bumiputera press (Taufik 1977).

“Bataviase Nouvels” was the first press or newspaper owned by the Dutch, published on 7 August 1744 in the Dutch East Indies. This newspaper was published in Dutch but involved Bumiputera as its employees (Miftahul Habib F 2017). The aim of this press was to disseminate news

and strengthen the existence of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. The Chinese press industry, particularly the Chinese Peranakan, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the emergence of the newspaper Li Po. In line with its owner organization, Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan (THHK), this newspaper aimed to unite all Chinese people in the Dutch East Indies (Iyus Jayusman and Miftahul Habib Fachrurozi 2023). For the Bumiputera, the press considered the first national newspaper was Medan Prijaji. This newspaper is regarded as the first national newspaper because it used Malay (Indonesian) and all its workers, from the editor to the printing, publishing, and its journalists, were native Indonesians (Miftahul Habib F 2017).

Along with the development of the press in the Dutch East Indies, national consciousness among the native people began to grow. The emergence of educated people as a result of ethical politics led to the formation of various movement groups (Wasana 2000). The feeling of shared fate as an oppressed nation raised awareness among educated Bumiputera to advance the native community. This awareness to advance the native community became the forerunner of Indonesian national consciousness (Suhartono 2001).

National awareness among Bumiputera people occurred through various channels including education,

organizations, arts, and trade. Newspapers served as the most effective communication medium to convey information, education, entertainment, and persuasion/propaganda. Newspapers could be used to publish news, advertisements, and were a suitable choice for conveying personal or organizational messages to the wider community. Thus, newspapers became the most effective medium to awaken national consciousness (Miftahul Habib F 2017).

This writing aims to reveal past events concerning the activities of the press in the Dutch East Indies, including colonial-owned press, foreign-owned press, and Bumiputra press. The primary issue in this writing is the role of the Bumiputra press in relation to society and the national movement in Indonesia. It is expected that this research and writing will provide insights and benefits, particularly for those who care about history and society in general.

## **METHODS**

This research method employs a historical research methodology consisting of four steps: heuristics, criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Setiawan and Kumalasari 2018; Wibowo, Wulandari, and Setiawan 2020). This method will analyse historical events and present them objectively and systematically. Therefore, factual events are needed as historical sources, both primary and secondary.

Primary sources are those derived from participants or witnesses of events directly using other senses, mechanical tools, documents, agreements, archives, and newspapers. Meanwhile, secondary sources are information obtained from those who did not see the events directly, which can be in the form of oral, written, or audio-visual information (Wibowo et al. 2020).

Historical sources need to be critically evaluated both internally and externally. Internal criticism refers to critique of the essence by comparing it with other sources, while external criticism determines the authenticity of historical sources by ensuring the material contains historical information. Sources that have been validated will then be interpreted. Interpretation is the interpretation of sources by providing a realistic perspective on past events. The final step is historiography or writing. Interpretations are arranged into paragraphs using appropriate thinking skills and grammar (Abdurrahman 2011).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Emergence of the Press in the Dutch East Indies

Press in Indonesia began when the VOC required a printing medium for its administrative needs. Governor-General Gustaaf W Baron Von Imhoff granted permission to Jan Erdmen Jordens to publish *Bataviasche Nouvelles*, which first

appeared in 1744. During the administration of Governor-General Herman Willem Daendles (1808-1811), the newspaper *Bataviasche Koloniale Courant* emerged, containing news from the colonial government as well as news from Europe. The emergence of liberalism in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century impacted the Netherlands with the implementation of more democratic regulations. This liberal system provided opportunities for the capitalists, thus the development of the press in the Dutch East Indies flourished (Yulianti 2000).

During the British occupation in 1811, the Dutch newspaper *Bataviasche Koloniale Courant* was replaced by the English newspaper *The Java Government Gazette*. This newspaper contained auction news and jokes ridiculing the government itself. In 1816, when the Dutch regained power, *The Java Government Gazette* was replaced by *Bataviasche Courant*, which was later renamed *Javas Courant*. This newspaper published Multatulli's works by Douwes Dekker (Taufik I 1977).

Trade cities such as Batavia, Surabaya, and Semarang grew into industrial centers and also became newspaper hubs in Java. In Semarang, *De Locomotief* was published as the first daily with attachments in Javanese script, Chinese characters, and Arabic script. In Surabaya, *Oospost* was published, later renamed *Soerabajasch Handelsblad*, while

in Batavia, there was De Java Bode. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, journalists were dominated by Indo people, including H.C.O Clockener Brousson from “Bintang Hindia”, E.F Wingger from “Bintang Barat”, and G Francis from “Pembrita Betawi” (Yulianti 2000).

Bumiputera journalists first appeared in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Batavia, R.M Tirtoahwinoto, F.D.J Pangemanan, and R.M Toemenggoeng Koesoemo Oetojo became the chief editors of the newspapers “Ilmu Tani”, “Kabar Perniagaan”, and “Pewartia Prijaji”. In Surakarta, R. Dirdjoatmojo served as the editor of “Djawi Kanda” and in Jogjakarta, Dr. Wahidin Soedirohoesodo became the editor of the Javanese language journal “Retno Doemilah”. In 1903, R.M Tirto Adhi Soerjo founded the newspaper “Soenda Berita” with financial support from the Cianjur regent R.A.A Prawirodirdjo. In 1907, R.M Tirto Adhi Soerjo established a weekly magazine named “Medan Prijaji”, which was then transformed into a daily newspaper (Shiraishi 1997).

The establishment of Bumiputera newspapers was one method used as an institutional tool in the struggle of the Indonesian nation. The establishment of newspapers was based on the organizational needs as a means of easy and effective communication with the masses. Through newspapers, the conditions of the native people during the

Dutch colonial period can be seen, including the impoverishment experienced by Indonesian society in various fields, the low status compared to Europeans, and discrimination against Bumiputera and the Dutch (Agus Susilo 2018).

### **Scope of Bumiputera Press**

The content in newspapers during the movement covered politics, education, international news, religion, culture, and advertisements. Newspapers during the movement published articles related to political demands regarding the injustices felt by Bumiputera in various aspects of life. These injustices stemmed from feudal government as well as the Dutch colonial government and private companies (Anon 1914). Through these newspapers, Darsono and Mas Marco Kartodikromo wrote bold articles to awaken society from ignorance. One of the articles written is “Giftige Waarheidspijlein” (The Poisonous Truth Court). In this article, Darsono discusses “Setan Oeang”, which was a political term during the movement aimed at capital owners or entrepreneurs. At that time, the Dutch East Indies government only prioritized capital owners and ignored the lives of native people.

Articles about education were also frequently published in newspapers, for example, Retno Doemilah, which discussed the education of native children and women's education according to Islam

(Retno Doemilah No 94, 11 December (Anon 1909)). Some newspapers featured foreign news in special columns, such as the newspaper “Doenia Bergerak”, which often published news about the European war (Doenia Bergerak No 21, 2014). Articles published in “Islam Bergerak” even specifically discussed religious issues in each edition (Anon 1918). The newspaper “Doenia Bergerak” frequently published articles about culture and social criticism, for example, articles about the rampant gambling culture and the Bumiputera people adopting Western ways (Anon 2014).

### **The Colonial Government's Attitude Toward Bumiputera Press**

The colonial government's response to the press in the Dutch East Indies was to issue various regulations regarding the press, including Reglement op de Drukwerken in Nederlandsche Indie, Drukkers Reglement, Haatzai Artikelen, and Persbreidel Ordonantie (Yulianti 2000) In 1856, the colonial government issued the Reglement op de drukwerken in Nederlandsche Indie. This regulation was issued because the government felt disturbed by the emergence of liberal private press that openly opposed the government. Press manuscripts had to be examined by the government before publication, along with justice officials and the general secretary. The Drukkers Reglement, issued in 1906, required printed manuscripts to be

submitted to the local government within 24 hours after publication. The Haatzai Artikelen, issued in 1914, contained articles about inciting hatred. The Haatzai Artikelen was a repressive regulation aimed at curbing press freedom. The Persbreidel Ordonantie, issued in 1931, contained provisions for the Governor-General's authority to prohibit certain publications and newspapers deemed capable of disturbing public order.

These regulations applied to all press, including Bumiputera, foreign Eastern, and Dutch press. However, in practice, there was a difference in the treatment of sanctions; the Bumiputera press faced heavier penalties compared to those imposed on the Dutch press. Almost all Bumiputera journalists faced press charges. Marco Kartodikromo, as the editor of “Dunia Bergerak”, faced press charges and spent the rest of his life in exile in Boven Digoel. The article that caused Marco to face press charges was published in “Dunia Bergerak” No 15, titled “Wong Gede”, No 19 titled “Ah, Javanen Zijn Erg Dom” (Ah, Javanese are indeed foolish or Ah, Orang Jawa memang Blo'on), and No 22 titled “Keluh Kesah yang Amat Sangat”. Similar experiences were faced by “De Express” figure Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo, who wrote an article titled “Krach of Vress?” (Strength or Fear?), R.M Soewardi Soerjaningrat with his article “Een Voor Allen, Maar Ook Allen Voor Een” (One for all, all for one), and

Douwes Dekker with his article titled "Onze Helden Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo en R.M Soewardi Soerjaningrat" (Our Heroes Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo and R.M Soewardi Soerjaningrat) (Moedjanto 2010). Douwes Dekker was exiled to East Kupang, Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo to Banda, and R.M Soewardi Soerjaningrat to Bangka. At their request, the internment punishment was replaced with exile; they chose to be exiled to the Netherlands (Van Niel 1984).

### **The Emergence of the Indonesian National Movement**

The ethical political policy replaced the forced cultivation policy and liberal policies, providing new hope for the Bumiputera community to advance, as ethical politics encompassed three main principles: irrigation, population migration, and education (Radhitya Eka Widjanarko, Alanur, and Birsyada 2023). In ethical politics, the Dutch colonial government aimed to provide skilled and cheap low-ranking officials through educational programs. The Dutch colonial government prepared irrigation programs to water private Dutch plantations and provided cheap labour through migration programs (Kansil 1988; Kartodirdjo 1993).

The educational programs created a literate class, which backfired on the Dutch as it led to a consciousness of being an oppressed nation. Education encouraged the sense of awareness, supported by information from the outside

world, motivating the educated to seek freedom. The political ideas of the educated class, from searching for national embryos to the initial ideas of liberation from colonialism, were channelled through relatively new means for the Bumiputera: organizations (Wasana 2000).

### **Orientation of the National Movement**

The Indonesian national movement is the movement of a nation seeking its identity as the Indonesian people to achieve its aspiration of an independent Indonesia. This movement was channelled through modern organizations such as Sarekat Islam, Budi Utomo, and Indische Partij. The goal of these organizations was to achieve Indonesia's independence from foreign colonialism. The national movement was expressed in various forms such as mass meetings, the press, labour unions, strikes, and political organizations (Yulianti 2000).

Many mass meetings (vergadering) were often conducted by organizations consisting of ordinary people, such as Sarekat Islam, ISDV, and Indische Partij. In 1911, Douwes Dekker with Indische Partij successfully gathered a significant crowd in Bandung. Douwes Dekker's success was imitated by Sarekat Islam in 1913, which gathered 10,000 people. Sarekat Islam's success was due in part to the influence of charismatic leader H.O.S Tjokroaminoto (Shiraishi 1997).

Sarekat Islam, as an organization of ordinary people, had newspapers distributed in various regions, each managed by the local Sarekat Islam organization. "Oetoesan Hindia" and "Bendera Islam" were newspapers owned by Sarekat Islam in Surabaya, while in Bandung there was "Kaoem Moeda", and in Surakarta, the newspaper "Sarotomo". In Semarang, they had "Sinar Djawa", which later changed its name to "Sinar Hindia". Qualitatively, Bumiputera newspapers still lagged behind Dutch newspapers. Dutch newspapers were supported by financial and political power, while Bumiputera newspapers were supported by idealism, solidarity, and nationalism (Abdul Wakhid 1999).

The emergence of political movements at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was accompanied by workers' movements to improve their positions, leading to the rise of labour unions in the Dutch East Indies. In 1905, the first labour union, SSD (Staatsspoorwegen Bond), was established, followed by the Tram Labour Union, Customs Labour Union, and the Indonesian Teachers' Union, as well as unions of factory workers and farmers (Van Niel 1984).

### **The Colonial Government's Reaction to the National Movement**

The colonial government's attitude towards movement organizations can be classified as soft and antagonistic.

Governor-General Van Heutz welcomed the establishment of Budi Utomo as a sign of the success of ethical politics. However, his successor, Idenburg, took a cautious stance towards Sarekat Islam, only recognising it as a local organization not controlled by the Central Sarekat Islam (Ricklefs 1995).

In facing the movement, the Dutch colonial government always emphasized the pluralism that existed in Indonesia. The Dutch government considered that there was no Indonesian nation; there were only the Javanese, Kalimantan, Sundanese, Sumatrans, and Balinese. The national movement was viewed as merely regional/ethnic movements and movements from certain groups that felt dissatisfied with their position. The colonial government consistently depicted the Dutch East Indies as if there was one ethnic group oppressing another (Kansil 1988).

### **The Role of Bumiputera Press in the Indonesian National Movement**

The movement group, with full awareness, utilizes the press as a highly effective communication tool in disseminating resistance ideas against colonialism. Newspapers are used as a means to convey political thoughts and ideas that ignite the spirit of independence. Through critical writings, the movement group voices dissatisfaction with the colonial government, highlights injustices, and

raises national consciousness among the oppressed society. Newspapers also become a strategic medium for the movement to oppose various policies made by the colonial government and traditional authorities that support oppression. Through widely circulated writings, they are able to expose practices of blatant injustice that harm the people. This resistance is not only aimed at the colonizers but also at local rulers who submit to the colonial system and play a role in suppressing their own people (Wasana 2000).

In addition to being a political tool, newspapers are also utilized by the educated class to combat cultural erosion caused by foreign cultural influences. In a colonial situation, local Indonesian culture is threatened with replacement by foreign cultures that undermine national identity. The educated class uses newspapers as a platform to nurture, develop, and preserve Indonesian culture, while also instilling national values within society.

With such an important role, the press at that time was not merely a conventional communication tool, but also a means of struggle against foreign domination in various aspects of life. Both the movement group and the educated class realized that through the press, they could build collective awareness, disseminate national ideas, and maintain cultural integrity amid attacks from

foreign influences attempting to weaken the Indonesian nation (Kartodirdjo 1993).

The role of the Bumiputra press in the national movement can be categorized into three aspects, namely as an organizational organ, as a medium of criticism towards the Government and private entities, and as a medium of mass provocation.

### **As an Organizational Tool**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the growth of the press in the Dutch East Indies was rapid, established by various parties for their own interests. The growth of the press was dominated by Dutch and foreign Eastern press. Bumiputera press was established by organizations as part of their movement activities. Budi Utomo had newspapers in various cities such as Retno Doemilah in Jogjakarta, Guru Desa, Dharma Kanda in Surakarta, and Medan Prijaji in Jakarta. Sarekat Islam had Oetoesan Hindia and Bendera Islam in Surabaya, Sinar Djawa in Semarang, Kaoem Moeda in Bandung, Medan Moeslimin, and Sarotomo in Surakarta, and Pantjaraan Warta in Jakarta. Indische Partij had De Express in Bandung. National Indische Partij had Het Tijdschrift, Beweging, Persatoean Hindia and penggoegah. There were also privately owned newspapers like Sedjatama in Jogjakarta, Soeara Poeblik in Surabaya, Bergerak in Sibolga and Perwata Deli in Medan (M Ghani 1978).

### **As a Media for Criticism of the Government and Private Sector**

The resistance from the educated Indigenous people was expressed in a relatively new space for the educated class, namely newspapers. Most newspapers were critiques from the press, which was also part of the movement, regarding social inequalities, injustices from feudal rulers, colonial powers, and oppression from private entities. As written by Suwardi, who critiqued the Dutch government for holding a Dutch independence celebration in its colony, the Dutch East Indies or Indonesia. (Moedjanto 2010; Soebagijo I.N 1918).

A similar critique was conveyed by H Misbah in Medan Muslimin No. 4, 1918, which critiqued the increasing suffering of the people due to oppression by the Dutch colonists, “zamannja soedah amat seekarnja, sedang adanja tindesan malah bertambah2banjak dan beratnja. Politik yang dilakoeken di Hindia pada ini waktoe, amatlah tida mengertiken orang, sifat Islam di Hindia kalang kaboet gerakja soeara pers dan pergerakan di tanah Djawa amat bertambah-tambah seroenja...”. According to the citation, it is explained that people’s sufferis was heavier for the Dutch’s suppression. Thus, by utilizing the existed press, people’s movement kept ongoing in criticizing the social gap and people’s suffering.

Critiques in newspapers were not only conveyed in written articles but also

in the form of cartoons. A cartoon published in Islam Bergerak on 20 April 1918 depicted a thin farmer ploughing a field with his mouth gagged and wearing a sign that read *padjek* (tax), while beside him stood a capitalist sucking the farmer’s blood through a hose connected to the farmer’s belly. Newspapers were also used as a platform for a war of pens among figures, such as Marco Kartodikromo and Dr Rinke on the issue of the *Mindere Welvaarts Commissie* (Investigative Commission on the Welfare of Indigenous People) (Wasana 2000).

### **As a Medium of Mass Provocation**

The movement utilized the press to influence the masses, not only to awaken national consciousness but also to evoke critical feelings towards the social conditions of society. Strikes as a reaction to the arbitrariness of capitalists or entrepreneurs in various regions around 1916-1918 heavily utilized newspapers (Soewarsana 2000).

In terms of provocation, the newspaper *Sinar Jawa* was the most prolific in publishing ideas and criticisms presented by figures from Sarekat Islam Semarang. It provided strong criticism of the political, economic, and social imbalances occurring in colonial society. This newspaper became increasingly radical after being managed by Semaon, Darsono, and Marco Kartodikromo. Several times, this newspaper provoked strong

reactions from the colonial government, leading to court cases. Marco Kartodikromo's life ended in exile in Boven Digoel (Soewarsana 2000).

H. Misbach's speech on the suffering of tobacco workers published in *Panggoegah* caused a strike among tobacco field labourers. As a result of this strike, 60 farmers, including Haji Misbach, were arrested by government officials for allegedly disturbing public order and causing unrest. Haji Misbach was accused of being the mastermind behind the strike. Haji Misbach's house was searched, accompanied by other repressive actions from the colonial authorities (Shiraishi 1997).

## CONCLUSION

The press (newspapers) serves as a mass communication tool that functions to disseminate news, thoughts, ideas, and concepts from individuals or specific groups. The Indigenous Press is the press published and managed by Indigenous people or those who identify Indonesia as their homeland. The birth of the Indigenous Press was a result of the progress made by Indigenous people in acquiring knowledge and education, supported by the desire to be free from oppression. The emergence of the Indigenous Press was a collaboration between educated elites and traditional elites.

The struggle of the Indonesian national movement manifested as a result of advancements in education and national consciousness. The educated class sought new ways to alleviate the suffering of the people. The method employed was not through violence and armed force but by instilling a sense of nationalism and enlightening the Indonesian people from ignorance through organization.

Various approaches were taken to awaken national consciousness, including movement organizations, education, and mass gathering meetings (vergadering). The press (newspapers) played a crucial role in these activities. The delivery of messages that were communicative and easily understood made the press (newspapers) highly effective in influencing the Indonesian populace.

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