

Caught between Three Fires:

# The Javanese Pangulu under the Dutch Colonial Administration

Research >  
Southeast Asia

As a high government institution in the Islamic kingdoms in Java, the *pangulon* had been in existence since the founding of the kingdom of Demak in the early sixteenth century. Together with two other top executive offices, those of the *patih* (chief minister) and the *adipati* (military commander), it was but one level below the sultan and was headed by a *pangulu* (chief religious leader). The general duties of the *pangulon* were guiding the kingdom's subjects in observing Islamic Law (*Syariat Islam*) and overseeing religious administration, from the level of the palace to that of the villages. For this reason, this administrative hierarchy ran parallel to that of the civil government. Specifically, the office of the *pangulon* administered law and justice, which, when it was founded, covered both religious and secular legal matters.

## (1882-1942)

By Muhamad Hisyam

When the Dutch came to Java in 1593, the office of the *pangulon* was fully established, both in the centre of the Islamic states and in the areas under their authority. The VOC then slowly began to establish its control over Java until the end of the eighteenth century when the entire island fell under its authority. Early on in the establishment of its control in Batavia, the VOC wanted to subject the territory to European law. This initially failed, because the people of this area already had their own system of law which they generally obeyed. Yet, working through local rulers, the VOC was gradually able to impose its laws. It succeeded primarily in those aspects of law that were the basis of its power, such as criminal and civil law, which could easily be divorced from the administration of Islamic Law. Those aspects of law that could not be separated from Islamic Law continued to be administered in the customary way. It was for this reason that the institution of the *pangulon* continued to exist as the focus of the application of Islamic Law.

Until its demise in the last year of the eighteenth century, the VOC considered the *pangulu* to be the primary native legal official. The *pangulu* were, therefore, included as advisors to the general court for native affairs established by the VOC. It was thought that they knew best the laws current among the native peoples. This advisory role continued with the establishment of the Netherlands Indies in the nineteenth century and endured until the end of Dutch colonial power in 1942.

The religious courts and the administration of Islam that had fallen under the authority of the *pangulu* were left to function as they had in the past. As a result of this continued practice, it often happened that the jurisdiction over a particular case would be unclear: should it be judged by a civil court or by its religious counterpart? Another problem was that traditional methods of administration and the *pangulu's* minimal professional skills (in 'modern' colonial eyes) resulted in the religious courts often returning decisions that failed to satisfy the contending parties. Nevertheless, wiping out the dual justice system or, in other words, raising the ire of the *pangulu* court, was something the colonial government was not willing or able to do, because it would have created tensions that would threaten its own existence. Hence, a policy incorporating the religious courts into the colonial administration was adopted by *Koninklijk Besluit* (Royal Decree)

Session of the Landraad, ca 1901-1902.

Sitting in the centre is Mr. I.M.Ch.E. Le Rutte, the president of the Landraad.

To his right are the clerk, the *jaksa* (prosecutor), and the *pangulu*. The prisoner is sitting on the floor opposite the Landraad President.



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No. 24 of 2 January 1882, published in the *Stb.* 1882/152. The court was officially called the *Priesterraad* or Council of Priests, but because there are no priests in Islam, it was generally known as the Religious Court (*Raad Agama*).

One obvious change after this incorporation was the shift in the authority to appoint *pangulu* from native authorities, the *bupati* (Regent), to the colonial government, the Resident. This change immediately indicated a lessening of the *bupati's* authority. They lost control of an institution that until then had been a factor in maintaining their power. The *pangulu* themselves now felt their position had them caught "between three fires" (*tussen drie vuren*). The first "fire" was God, to whom they owed their spiritual allegiance. The second "fire" was the colonial power, the entity that now gave them the authority to carry out the administration of religious affairs. The third "fire" was the people, whom they had to serve. These three sides differed not only in character, but also in aspiration. This study does not discuss the first "fire" as this is a difficult matter to identify, both because of its personal character and because of its meta-social nature. Even so, it is fully realized that this "fire" was a motivating as well as a controlling force over the behaviour of the *pangulu*.

In the relationship between the rulers and the people, the role played by the *pangulu* and the religious officials beneath them was obviously that of mediation. Javanese and Madurese Muslim radicalism during the nineteenth century forced the colonial government to be on its guard at all times against the possible rise of anti colonial fervor.

Owing to this mediating role, the various *pangulu* and their subordinate religious officials became the target of the expression of feelings of disappointment during the early decades of the twentieth century, when Islamic socio-political movements began to emerge. Their leadership position grew weak,

because they were considered to have become "lackeys of unbelievers." The critique from the movements not only challenged the mediating function they performed, it also questioned their competence in acting as *pangulu* and the way in which they collected money. Competition for leadership between formal religious leaders (the *pangulu* and their subordinate religious officials) and the informal ones (*ustadz*, *ulama* and *kiyai*; religious teachers and elders) had indeed long existed, but the rise of informal popular leaders through modern organizations, seriously marginalized the position of the *pangulu* and the religious officials. The low level of competence of the *pangulu*, which the colonial government also recognized as a problem, not only caused new movements to aspire to raising their quality, but also led to a revision in the position of the *Raad Agama* under the colonial administration. This disappointment felt by the modern Islamic movement reached its peak when the movement attempted to establish a *Raad Ulama* (Council of Ulama/religious teachers), as a challenge to the *Raad Agama*, at the end of the second decade of the twentieth century. Other large Islamic organizations, such as the *Muhammadiyah* (founded in 1912) and the *Nahdatul Ulama* (founded in 1926) were also critical of the *pangulu's* position.

How did the *pangulu* and their subordinate officials feel about this crisis? Evidently, as far as the efforts to improve the competence of the *pangulu* and the *Raad Agama* were concerned, they fully supported it. Simply put, the various *pangulu* themselves felt that the colonial government had not made them or the *Raad Agama* a legitimate part of the governmental apparatus; the *pangulu*, being religious judges, were not paid by the government, so they bore the costs of running their own offices. On the one hand, the *pangulu* were pushed to try to obtain funds for salaries and the operation of

the Courts in ways that were at times excessive. On the other hand, it pushed the *pangulu* to support attempts by Islamic organizations to promote the interests of the Muslim people. There were indeed *pangulu* who were against, for example, the Sarekat Islam (Muslim Union/the most revolutionary association of Muslims) but many of them and their subordinates were involved in the Sarekat Islam's activities, of which they approved and even led. This was true especially of efforts to promote the development of the Islamic community, which were carried out by Islamic organizations using a cultural approach, such as the *Muhammadiyah*. This organization, which had originated among the *Kauman* (headquarters of religious officials) of Yogyakarta, was among those that received broad support from among the *pangulu*. Consequently, even though members of the modern Islamic movement were critical of the *pangulu*, the latter defended their critics as well as they could against the suspicions of the colonial government. There were indeed a few points on which the interests of the *pangulu* and those of the Islamic movements differed. This is not surprising because, whatever the case was, the *pangulu* were religious leaders who also felt responsible for the existence, care, development, and progress of Islam and its adherents. This involved, for example, opposing the efforts to propagate Christianity in the community. Nevertheless, these two groups were able to present a united front when confronted with government regulations contrary to the interests of Islam, as happened in 1937, when the colonial government transferred authority over Islamic inheritance matters from the Religious Courts to the civil courts (*Stb.* 1937/116).

The change in the function of the *pangulu* as a result of the incorporation of the Religious Courts in 1882 demanded a sharpening of their skills in matters of modern colonial administration. Recruitment to the office of *pangulu* and to the *Raad Agama* became selective, even if this was not as stringent as might have been required. Fulfilling the skills requirements by aspiring *pangulu* was indeed difficult. Although the government made demands for certain skills, it did nothing by way of creating schools or programmes to train candidates for their role; candidates were responsible for their own training. Stimulated by the need to fulfil the government's criteria on administrative skills, as well as the knowledge that would be needed to run a modern religious administration, *pangulu* began to support the founding of *madrasah* (Islamic schools) in various locations. In 1905 the *madrasah* Manba'ul 'Ulum in Surakarta was started as a result of the efforts of the *pangulu*, under the patronage of the Sultan.

This was the first native "modern" school to be established. The teaching of Islam using modern methods was then copied by many *pangulu* in the *kauman* areas of several other cities in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. The rise of *madrasah*, which at first aimed to fill the need for new *pangulu* and religious officials who could run a modern religious administration, went on to develop into a modern religious educational institution throughout Java and Madura.

The disappointment of those in the Islamic movement with the *pangulu*, and the instability of the *Raad Agama*, did eventually stimulate efforts by the colonial government to improve the *Raad Agama*, first through the establishment of a commission to reform the *Raad Agama* 1922, and later by its reorganization in 1931. The *pangulu* in turn tried to create unity among themselves and the subordinate religious officials by forming an association. An initial attempt to set up an association of *pangulu* and religious officials was made in 1919; however, this only took concrete form in 1937, after the above-mentioned regulation had been promulgated. This association, called the *Perhimpunan Penghoeloe dan Pegawaiinja* (PPDP/Association of Pangulu and their employees), played a political role in its external relations and worked towards the improvement of quality within its ranks, from its establishment in 1937 until the Japanese occupation in 1942.

Generally speaking, it can be said that, in fulfilling their "sacred mission", the *pangulu* tried as much as possible to formally apply Islamic Law among their Muslim clients, even though they were under the authority of a non-Muslim colonial government. The appearance of modern Islamic movements in the twentieth century, driven by independent Islamic leaders, caused the marginalization of position of the *pangulu* among the socio-religious leadership. Conflict occasionally arose between the interests of the colonial government and those of the Muslims, both as a whole and in the form of modern organizations. In these conflicts the *pangulu* played a mediating role in order to reach a common ground, that is, giving form to the social order. In this way the role of the *pangulu* was determined by the way they gave meaning to their primary task and the manner in which they manipulated this meaning to be able to act within the structure of the society that had created them. ◀

*Dr Muhamad Hisyam* is a senior researcher in Islamic society and history, and recently appointed as Head of the Research Centre for Society and Culture at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences in Jakarta, Indonesia. E-mail: [hisyam@mss.lipi.go.id](mailto:hisyam@mss.lipi.go.id)