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## The Role of the Indonesian Military in Early Independence: Nationalist and Socialist-Communist Views

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### Abstract

*In the early years of Indonesia's independence, the role and position of the military became a subject of debate involving various ideological perspectives, particularly between nationalist and socialist-communist factions. The nationalist group tended to view the military as a state apparatus responsible for maintaining national stability and sovereignty, while the socialist-communist faction saw it as a revolutionary force that should actively participate in class struggle and social transformation. These differing perspectives influenced military policies and the relationship between the military and civilian government, creating tensions that led to various political dynamics. This article analyzes how these two perspectives shaped the doctrine and policies of the Indonesian military and their impact on civil-military relations throughout the nation's history. Using a historical approach and document analysis, this study aims to examine how these two perspectives influenced the concept and discourse on the role of the Indonesian military in politics during the early independence period.*

**Keywords:** Civil-Military Relations, Early Independence, Indonesian Military, Nationalist, Socialist-Communist



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### 1. Introduction

Since the early years of independence, the role and position of the military within Indonesia's political system have been an ongoing subject of debate. The Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), formed from various armed resistance groups, faced significant challenges in defining its identity amidst an ever-changing political landscape. Two major schools of thought emerged regarding the role of the military: the nationalist group, which emphasized the TNI as a professional and apolitical state apparatus, and the socialist-communist faction, which viewed the military as a revolutionary force that should align itself with class struggle and the people's cause.

This debate was not merely theoretical but had a direct impact on military policies and practices within the TNI itself. From the nationalist perspective, the military was expected to serve as a national defense institution subordinate to the civilian government, maintaining stability while refraining from involvement in practical politics. In contrast, the socialist-communist faction sought to instill the idea that the military should play an active role in social transformation, including becoming part of a political force working towards a more equitable system.

The intersection of these two perspectives reached its peak in various political events, including the struggle for influence between civilian and military forces, as well as major incidents that led to the military's increasing role in politics in the following eras. This article aims to explore how these two perspectives shaped the concept and role of the Indonesian military within the political discourse during the early period of independence.

## 2. Data, Theory and Methodology

This study employs the historical research method, which consists of four stages: heuristics, source criticism (verification), interpretation, and presentation/historiography (Notosusanto, 1971: 35; Kuntowijoyo, 1995). In the source collection stage (heuristics), the researcher seeks to maximize the use of relevant documentary materials, such as autobiographies, newspapers, and government documents (Kartodirdjo, 1982: 101-112). The collected data will be compiled into historical facts after undergoing verification and will be written as the final result of a historical work.

## 3. Findings and Discussions

### 3.1 According to the Nationalist Group

At the dawn of Indonesia's independence, the concept of the role and position of the Indonesian military, as envisioned by the nationalist group, became a focal point in the effort to build a newly independent nation. Nationalist figures from various political, intellectual, and societal backgrounds played a crucial role in formulating a vision for the Indonesian military in the post-independence era.

Sukarno's thoughts on the role of the Indonesian military reflected his dynamic vision of how the armed forces should serve as a key force in both defending independence and shaping the new nation. During this period, Sukarno envisioned the Indonesian National Army (TNI) as both the guardian of national sovereignty and the foundation that embodied the ideals of the Indonesian state.

He emphasized that the emergence and existence of the military were interdependent with the state itself. The strength and perfection of a nation, he argued, relied significantly on its military, which in turn was rooted in the foundational principles and ideals of the state (*Kedaulatan Rakjat*, October 5, 1946 & Sukarno, 1965).

From the early days of the independence movement, Sukarno viewed the Indonesian military as the main pillar in upholding Indonesia's freedom from colonial rule. In his speeches and writings during the independence period, he frequently emphasized the importance of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) as the "last line of defense" that must always be ready to face any threats, both domestic and foreign.

Sukarno also highlighted the importance of the Indonesian military's involvement in national development. For him, the TNI was not only responsible for national defense but also had to participate in efforts to develop the nation's economy, society, and politics. This idea was reflected in his various speeches and writings, where he underscored the significance of the TNI as an agent of change, responsible for advancing national development (*Kedaulatan Rakjat*, October 5, 1947).

In his political ideology, Sukarno saw the Indonesian military as a crucial political force in realizing national aspirations. He believed that the military should be an integral part of national politics and play a role in shaping and implementing policies that promote national interests. However,

Sukarno also emphasized the importance of military neutrality in domestic politics to maintain national political stability. Additionally, he stressed the need for discipline and loyalty within the ranks of the Indonesian military. According to him, the military's success in safeguarding national sovereignty depended on the discipline and devotion of its members to the state and its ideology.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Hatta's perspective on the role of the Indonesian military reflected his belief that the armed forces should play a key role in upholding Indonesia's independence. As one of the leading nationalist figures, Hatta had a strong vision of the military not only as the guardian of national sovereignty but also as an agent of development and a unifying force in society (*Harian Umum Guntur*, December 8, 1948).

During his tenure as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense in 1948, Hatta emphasized that the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution should remain a guiding spirit in every action taken by the TNI (*Sinar Pembinaan*, March 16, 1980 & Tim Redaksi Idayu, 1982, pp. 238-239). Hatta believed that the military should serve as a driving force for change in Indonesian society. In his speeches and writings before 1950, he consistently emphasized the importance of the military as an instrument for achieving social welfare and supporting government diplomacy (*Kedaulatan Rakjat*, December 18-19, 1945 & Hatta, 1992).

Additionally, Hatta also highlighted the importance of the Indonesian military's involvement in national politics. For him, the military should be a moderate and responsible political force committed to the principles of democracy and civilian supremacy. Hatta asserted that the military must maintain its neutrality in politics and refrain from engaging in particular or extreme political activities.

In his political thought, Hatta also emphasized the military's role as an instrument for maintaining national unity and cohesion. According to him, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) should serve as a social unifier, capable of bringing together diverse ethnic, religious, and social groups under a shared national spirit. Thus, the TNI was expected to become a symbol of unity and Indonesia's national identity (Budisantoso, 2022, p. 351).

Sutan Sjahrir's view on the role of the Indonesian military reflected his belief that the military should be a force that plays a crucial role in both securing independence and building the new nation. As one of the key nationalist leaders, Sjahrir had a strong vision of the military as a fundamental pillar in upholding national sovereignty and advancing social justice (*Nasional*, March 3, 1947).

Sjahrir argued that the military should serve as an instrument for achieving broader national goals. In his view, the military was not merely a defensive force protecting the nation from external threats but also an agent of social and economic development responsible for the people's welfare. He believed that the military should be actively involved in infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and other sectors that directly impact the lives of the people.

Furthermore, Sjahrir emphasized the military's role in upholding civilian supremacy and democracy. In his vision, the military must remain neutral in political affairs and avoid involvement in particularistic or authoritarian political activities. For him, the military should safeguard civil liberties and human rights while ensuring that the political process operates according to democratic and just principles (Sjahrir, 1994).

In his political outlook, Sjahrir also highlighted the importance of the Indonesian military as a tool for securing democratization and addressing social inequalities. He believed that the military should be at the forefront of advocating for the people's rights and ensuring that every citizen had equal opportunities to grow and participate in the country's political and economic life. Sjahrir argued that the Indonesian military, which was born from the spirit of youth, should uphold the ideals of the people's struggle without veering into fascism or militarism, which could threaten democracy.

Nevertheless, in the current state of the world, it is indeed necessary for us to enhance our capability to defend our homeland and our people with a fully equipped defense system. We need such a defense structure. We require a military force that is organized according to modern standards. All of our youth must be trained in this capability.

...In our struggle, which takes the form of and utilizes the instruments of the Indonesian state, we are compelled to establish a state apparatus for struggle, namely the military. However, this must not mean that we become servants of the state or the military, turning into fascists or militarists. The boundaries of this issue must be sharpened with the spirit of our people's revolution so that we do not end up killing our revolutionary spirit by falling into militarism and fascism (Sjahrir, 1994, pp. 33-34).

### 3.2 According to the Socialist-Communist Group

The concept of the role and position of the Indonesian military, as understood by the socialist-communist group, underwent various evolutions influenced by their political views and ideology. The socialist-communist faction, which had significant influence in Indonesian politics at the time, had a distinct understanding of the military's role in the newly independent society.

In the early years of Indonesia's independence, socialist-communist leaders viewed the Indonesian military as a revolutionary tool that should be directed toward protecting the interests of the people. They believed that the military should serve as an instrument for realizing socialist and communist agendas within the country. This perspective was reflected in the efforts of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) to gain influence within the military and steer it toward social revolution (Aidit, 1963).

The socialist-communist faction also emphasized the military's role in fighting for the social and economic rights of the people. They saw the Indonesian military as a tool to combat imperialism and capitalism while advocating for wealth redistribution to the lower classes. This view was evident in the PKI's support for peasant and labor movements and their attempts to influence military policies in favor of agrarian reform and industrial nationalization. At the same time, the socialist-communist group was critical of the military's structure and leadership, which they considered too exclusive and aligned with the conservative political and military elite. They pushed for military reforms to create a more democratic and inclusive structure that better represented the interests of the people. In an international context, the socialist-communist faction sympathized with Eastern Bloc nations, particularly the Soviet Union, and sought support from these countries to strengthen the Indonesian military and advance the socialist agenda in Indonesia.

Tan Malaka, a revolutionary figure influential in Indonesia's independence struggle, had a unique perspective on the military before 1950. As one of the founders of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and a leader of the revolutionary movement, his thoughts on the Indonesian military were centered on directing it toward a social revolution led by workers and peasants.

Tan Malaka's ideas prioritized the concept of the military as a revolutionary force that should be part of the class struggle to achieve a socialist society. He also highlighted the importance of discipline and ideological loyalty within the Indonesian military. For him, soldiers had to possess a strong class consciousness and a deep commitment to socialist and revolutionary principles. Political and military education for Indonesian soldiers, according to him, should aim to awaken revolutionary awareness and strengthen solidarity between the military and the people.

Regarding his concept of a united struggle, Tan Malaka viewed the Indonesian military as a force that must integrate with the people in revolutionary struggles. For him, this unity included the integration of political and military struggles, as well as the solidarity between the Indonesian military and the people in achieving social revolution and national independence. He emphasized that

significant social change could only be achieved through a combined political and military effort. Tan Malaka firmly believed that the military should be part of the people's struggle for independence and social justice. He saw the unity between the military and the people as key to successfully resisting colonialism and fighting for national sovereignty (Poeze, 2008).

Tan Malaka considered mass mobilization, including Indonesian soldiers and youth, crucial in achieving independence and social change. He emphasized the need for unity between youth, workers, peasants, and the military to bring about significant transformations in society (Poeze, 2008). Tan Malaka recognized the importance of military reform within the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) to achieve broader revolutionary goals. He highlighted the need for structural and leadership changes in the military to better serve the interests of the people. However, despite his idealistic vision of the military's role, Tan Malaka was also aware of the political and military complexities in Indonesia at the time. He understood that achieving revolutionary objectives required a well-thought-out strategy and that transforming the military's orientation and structure would take time.

Alimin, an Indonesian communist leader and intellectual actively involved in the independence movement, had significant thoughts on the military, particularly regarding its role in nation-building, revolutionary struggle, and its relationship with civil society. Alimin believed that the Indonesian military should serve as a primary instrument in building an independent nation. For him, the military was not only responsible for protecting national sovereignty but also for acting as a social and economic development agent committed to the people's welfare. He stressed the importance of the military's involvement in national development programs such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare to improve the people's quality of life (Alimin, 1947).

In his view, the Indonesian military should also be at the forefront of fighting against all forms of oppression and imperialism. Alimin believed that the military must champion the people's rights, including political, economic, and social rights. To him, the military should be an instrument for broader social change, defending the interests of the common people and fighting for social justice. Furthermore, Alimin emphasized the need for strong relations between the military and civil society. In his writings, he advocated for military reform, particularly restructuring and reorganizing all armed forces, including the police.

The reorganization of all armed forces and strength, including the police force. All armed forces must work actively and rationally; fostering brotherhood and strengthening friendships among all armed forces based on love for the nation and revolutionary patriotism. (Alimin, 1947, p. 42)

Another Indonesian communist figure, Musso, believed that the Indonesian military should serve as a vehicle for the people's struggle to achieve independence and social justice. For him, the military was not merely an instrument of state power but a revolutionary army that fought alongside the people against colonialism and capitalism. His thoughts were reflected in his efforts to shape the military as a tool for advancing socialist and communist ideals in Indonesia.

The military, as the most important instrument of state power, must receive special attention. Its cadres and members must be given special education that aligns with the army's duty as the primary apparatus to defend our National Revolution, which also means defending the interests of the working people. The army must be united with and favored by the people. It must be led by progressive cadres. Naturally, and especially within its leadership, it must be cleansed of reactionary and counter-revolutionary elements. (Musso, 1953)

Musso emphasized that the military should maintain a close relationship with the Indonesian people. He believed that the army must understand and support the people's aspirations in their

struggle for independence and justice. To him, the military should represent the people's power in their fight against colonialism and exploitation.

For Musso, a revolutionary army must be based on proletarian democracy principles, prioritizing the interests of the working class. However, he also recognized that radical social change would not happen overnight. Musso understood that achieving revolutionary goals required a well-planned strategy and patience in building political awareness among both the people and the military. He stressed the importance of cooperation between the army and the people in their fight for genuine independence (Musso, 1953).

Meanwhile, Amir Sjarifuddin, a former Prime Minister who later declared himself a communist, had profound thoughts on the role of the Indonesian military during the early years of independence. His ideas reflected his strong political background and ideological commitment to the socialist movement. He viewed the Indonesian military as a crucial force in the struggle to achieve and safeguard Indonesia's independence. His perspective included the understanding that the military had to be part of a broader social transformation, fighting for Indonesia's sovereignty. Amir Sjarifuddin emphasized that a revolutionary army must be an integral part of the people's struggle.

We acknowledge that at the start of the revolution, it was not the formal army that fought, but the people. However, over time, our revolution must be perfected. In our country, which is undergoing a revolution, we must also establish revolutionary instruments. Among the most important revolutionary instruments is a well-organized military.  
(*Kedaulatan Rakjat*, June 10, 1947)

Amir Sjarifuddin's views on the Indonesian military were closely linked to his involvement in the formation of Pesindo (Persatuan Indonesia), a political and military organization. As one of Pesindo's key supporters, Amir Sjarifuddin played a central role in shaping the organization's vision and mission. Pesindo was established with the goal of creating a nationalist, revolutionary, and anti-imperialist military. The organization was seen as an effort to organize and mobilize revolutionary forces within the Indonesian military, particularly those with strong ties to the people (Anderson, 1988, pp. 284-288).

#### 4. Conclusions

Based on the thoughts of prominent nationalists such as Sukarno, Mohammad Hatta, and Sutan Sjahrir regarding the role of the Indonesian military, it can be concluded that the concept of the Indonesian military's role at the time reflected a holistic vision. This vision saw the military not only as a national defense force but also as an agent of social development, a unifying force, and a guardian of democracy. These nationalists viewed the military as a pillar in Indonesia's struggle for independence from colonial rule and in the process of building a sovereign nation. They believed that the military should act as both a protector of national sovereignty and a driver of social change, responsible for the people's welfare.

Moreover, these nationalists emphasized the importance of the military in ensuring political stability, upholding civilian supremacy, and promoting democratization. For them, the Indonesian military had to be a moderate and responsible political force, committed to democratic principles and justice. Their ideas also highlighted the importance of military education focused on character development and responsible leadership, as well as the military's role in national development and as a social unifier capable of integrating various elements of Indonesian society. The nationalist vision of the Indonesian military's role illustrated a comprehensive perspective on the military's significance as an instrument for achieving broader national goals, encompassing defense, development, and national consolidation.

Despite their differing visions, the socialist-communist groups also played a significant role in shaping the concept of the Indonesian military's function and position, adding important dynamics to Indonesia's political and military development at the time. The thoughts of Tan Malaka, Alimin, Musso, and Amir Sjarifuddin on the role of the military and its involvement in politics revealed diverse perspectives shaped by their ideological backgrounds and political contexts. However, both commonalities and differences can be identified in their views.

All four figures agreed that the military should have an active role in politics, but they differed in how this involvement should take place. Tan Malaka and Musso, as communist figures, tended to view the Indonesian military as a tool for achieving radical social and political transformation, whereas Alimin and Amir Sjarifuddin emphasized the military's role in state-building and safeguarding national sovereignty.

Regarding the relationship between the Indonesian military and the people, all these figures recognized the importance of strong ties between the military and the people. They believed that the military should be rooted in the people and fight for their interests. However, their approaches to achieving this relationship varied, depending on their political perspectives. Alimin and Amir Sjarifuddin stressed the importance of civilian supremacy in governing the state and maintaining democracy, whereas Tan Malaka and Musso had a more flexible stance, adapting their views based on the political context and revolutionary strategy.

Their thoughts on the role of the Indonesian military and its political involvement reflected the diversity of ideological and strategic perspectives in Indonesia's political struggle before 1950. Despite their differences, a fundamental point of convergence among them was the acknowledgment of the military's crucial role in state-building and national defense.

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