<Book Review>

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Reviewed by Lin Hongxuan*

Amir Sjarifoeddin has long been overdue for a biography. Jacques Leclerc's (1981; 1993; 2011) work came close, but his oeuvre was distributed across several journal articles and book chapters, published in English, French, and Indonesian. A biography of Amir was especially necessary given his pivotal position as the Indonesian prime minister who signed the disastrous Renville Agreement of 1948, which made enormous concessions to the Dutch but was shortly voided by the Dutch military's Operation Kraai. These events broke the already tenuous unity of the republic's leaders and laid the foundation for the fratricidal violence—erupting most obviously at Madiun in 1948—that would plague the republic for decades to come.

Meandering and musing in style, Rudolf Mrázek's biography of Amir is a pleasure to read, much in the vein of his *Sjahrir* (1994) and *A Certain Age* (2010). It is a book to "pleasure through," as if on a river cruise, to use a metaphor often deployed by Mrázek himself. This is not the kind of book young scholars have the luxury of writing, with its many musing allusions to Kafka, Kant, and Homer, but that makes it all the more refreshing to read. With a proven author of such incisive yet lyrical books as *Engineers of Happy Land* (2002) and *The Complete Lives of Camp People* (2020), the editors have been perhaps more permissive. Much of the pleasure comes from anecdotes both touching and wrenching, but this biography's greatest strength is the sense it conveys of young people caught between worlds in the interwar years —between the world of the Indies, with its freewheeling cosmopolitan intelligentsia circles of all ethnicities, and the world of the as-yet-unborn Indonesian republic, in which the pluralistic and trans-ethnic ethos of Dutch imperial culture (at least for those privileged enough to access it) would have no room to exist. Amir was one such person, and his experiences may well have been totemic. He was certainly not the only politician so torn by the painful necessities of gov-

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erning a new and beleaguered republic. This painful negotiation between mutually exclusive worldviews, this sense of being torn between two poles, would permeate the postwar period, tormenting the republic's Dutch-educated leaders in their ill-fated negotiations with the Dutch and fragmenting its leadership over which compromises were truly necessary.[1)]

Chapter 11 stands out for its cogent yet dramatic, narratively tight but not terse, overview of the decisions and events that shaped the first crucial months of the Indonesian republic. This characteristic is especially evident in Mrázek's coverage of the early days of organizing the republic's armed forces (Amir's responsibility, as defence minister in Sjahrir's first cabinet) and the ebb and flow of key policy decisions surrounding the Battle of Surabaya. Amir's policy decisions, especially his commitment to relying on decentralized militias and training commissars to shape a Mao Zedong- or Tom Wintringham-inspired "people's army" fighting a "people's war," while also courting former KNIL cadets for the republican army's officer corps, proved to be immensely important for the republican war effort.[2)] To my knowledge, no other work has produced such a coherent and curated synthesis of the key decisions that were made during this period.

Enjoyable as the book is, it does contain some missed opportunities. For instance, in Chapter 10 the nature and strength of the bonds between Amir and his "followers"—Soedjatmoko, Soebadio, Soedarpo, Sitoroes, Aboe Bakar Loebis, among others (p. 130)—is never quite made clear. Mrázek uses the metaphor of metro trains passing each other, of *correspondence* (French) and *coincidence* (Italian), to describe the swirl of activity in the loose network of would-be activists around Amir from the 1930s on. While the metaphor is appealing, the connections need a stronger explanatory basis: did Amir's circle of followers/admirers emerge out of his time teaching at the *volksuniversiteit* (*sekolah rakjat*)? Did they know him from the underground lectures he gave during the first months of the Japanese occupation? Did they come from his nationalist party Gerindo, or were they perhaps attracted by his writings in the newspaper *Kebangoenan*? In any event, their organizational capacity, and therefore whether they could be reasonably construed as a concrete—as opposed to spectral—"underground," would also depend on how regular their communications arrangements and cellular structures were. These arrangements and structures, or lack thereof, deserve some sustained discussion. Similar problems plague the study of underground and semi-underground Indonesian organizations such as Partai Republik Indonesia and Pendidikan; what did it mean to lead, and what did it mean to follow? For example, Mrázek writes that Amir had "many connections with the communists and intellectual extremists" (p. 154) in the republican capital of Yogyakarta, but it is not clear from reading the preceding chapters how such ties were built and maintained. Rather, Mrázek's characterization of Amir tends to emphasize his general marginality and estrangement from radical politics.

Another missed opportunity is evident in relation to Amir's Dutch friends. Sympathizers

such as Johann Heinrich Adolf Logemann, Julius Schepper, Willem Frederik Wertheim, and other law school professors who mentored Amir at the Batavia Law School deserve more detailed analysis than Mrázek provides. The degree of these Dutch sympathizers' assistance and support for Amir and similar activists went far beyond *noblesse oblige* and seemed to indicate tacit support for Indonesian independence or at least devolution in the near future. That alone is remarkable and justifies a little more attention. The sympathizers' influence was clearly formative for Amir, after all, and several of them would play important roles in the torturous negotiations at Linggadjati and the USS *Renville*. It was, perhaps, the past influence of such mentors and their presence at and around the negotiating table that made Amir pliable, even when the terms presented to him were obviously politically unviable.

The most important contribution of this book lies in asking and answering some of the most thorny questions in scholarship on the Indonesian revolution: historically intriguing questions such as "How did the republican government sell, and Indonesians respond to, the painful concessions made to the Dutch in the Linggadjati and Renville Agreements?" or "Why did Amir Sjarifroeddin agree to the manifestly disadvantageous terms of the Renville Agreement?" find at least partial answers here. Other historians have considered such questions before, notably George Kahin, Benedict Anderson, and John Legge in their seminal works; more recent synoptic accounts such as David van Reybrouck's *Revolusi* (2024) rely on these classics. That said, none of them approach the level of detail and expanse that Mrázek can afford in this biography.

Similarly, Chapter 12 excels in offering an answer to why Amir drifted into Musso's orbit and sleepwalked into the fratricidal debacle at Madiun in 1948. The Madiun Affair remains a poorly understood episode of internecine violence among the republicans, smothered by the Indonesian state's continuing assertion that Indonesian Communists had been duped into betraying the revolution. Through painstaking and comprehensive analysis of Amir's intimates and observers, from Amir's children to the Vatican's representative in Indonesia, Mrázek reconstructs an unparalleled picture of an agitated and depressed leader, one who understood that his gambit on Dutch goodwill—expressed in signing the Renville Agreement—had failed miserably; it was this painful disenchantment that led him to wager his remaining political influence—and ultimately his life—on Musso's version of the Gottwald Plan at Madiun.

Earlier scholarship by Leclerc (1993), Ann Swift (1989), and Harry Poeze (2011) has speculated along similar lines, but Mrázek's attention to detail and stylistic flair paint a psychological portrait that is much richer and more compelling.

In sum, this biography is a fine work from an esteemed scholar who has already proven his deft hand with biography. In many ways, it serves as a necessary complement to Mrázek's earlier biography of Sutan Sjahrir (Mrázek 1994), Amir's contemporary intellectual, fellow nationalist activist, and (like Amir) erstwhile prime minister. Like Amir, he signed a deeply unpopular agreement with the Dutch, and his government fell because of it. Sjahrir's and Amir's differing

personalities and ideological trajectories are on full display here, and each biography serves as a foil to the other, helping readers understand the political calculations and emotional undercurrents that proved remarkably pivotal in Indonesia's early years. While thick, this book is never plodding; while its density may hamper its chances of appearing on graduate students' syllabi, no student of Indonesia's recent history can afford to ignore it.

Notes

1) The poles were an imperial past of ethical cooperation and occasional good faith, versus the republican present of barely restrained *élan* and uncompromising demands for freedom; on another axis, Indonesians were torn also between the two increasingly intransigent camps of the bipolar Cold War.
2) KNIL, or the Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army), was the pre-1942 colonial army stationed in the Netherlands East Indies.

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