Contesting Sarekat Islam in Java, 1917–1927: Elite Strategies, Communist Penetration, and the Fragmentation of an Anticolonial Movement

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Abstract

This article examines the struggle over Sarekat Islam (SI) in Java between 1917 and 1927, focusing on how regional political environments shaped the penetration of socialist-communist ideas and how SI's leading figures responded to that challenge. Rather than treating the division between Sarekat Islam Putih and Sarekat Islam Merah as a simple ideological binary, the study reconstructs the conflict as a spatially differentiated process involving Semarang, Surakarta, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and Bandung. It argues that communist influence became significant not simply because Marxist ideas entered the Indies, but because the decentralized structure of SI, the heterogeneity of its membership, the growth of labor politics, and the concentration of industrial workers in particular urban centers created uneven opportunities for ideological competition. Henk Sneevliet and indigenous activists such as Semaun and Darsono used labor organizations, newspapers, political meetings, and dual membership to work from within an established mass movement. In response, H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, Abdoel Moeis, and Haji Agus Salim did not initially pursue a single strategy. Tjokroaminoto combined ideological accommodation, political participation, and the formulation of Islamic socialism, while Moeis and Salim increasingly advocated organizational discipline and a clearer boundary between SI and communist organizations. The decisive institutional response came through the party-discipline policy adopted at the 1921 SI congresses, followed by organizational consolidation in 1923. The article demonstrates that the resulting split was simultaneously a failure of organizational unity and a successful defense of SI's religious-nationalist identity. Regionally, the split redistributed political constituencies: Semarang became a major center of the communist labor movement, while Yogyakarta and other branches became important centers of the reorganized Islamic-nationalist SI. The study contributes a spatially grounded interpretation of an established episode in Indonesian political history and shows that ideological conflict was inseparable from the geography of labor, print culture, organizational autonomy, and colonial political opportunity.

Keywords: Sarekat Islam; Java; Semarang; Surakarta; H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto; Haji Agus Salim; Abdoel Moeis; communism; regional history; colonial Indonesia

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Method

The study employs the historical method through four interconnected procedures: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The heuristic stage gathered primary and secondary materials concerning Sarekat Islam, the socialist and communist movements, labor organizations, and colonial political institutions. The primary corpus includes Sarekat Islam congress records, the annual report of the Central Sarekat Islam for 1921, colonial intelligence records, and contemporary newspapers including Sinar Djawa, Sinar Hindia, and Soeara Ra'jat. The study also uses contemporary and later monographs and journal articles to establish chronology and historiographical context. The surviving material is especially useful for reconstructing the regional dimensions of the conflict because several sources refer directly to branches, meetings, newspapers, labor organizations, and political actors in particular towns.

Source criticism was conducted both externally and internally. External criticism considered provenance, date, institutional origin, physical or digital transmission, and the relationship between an original document and a later reproduction. Internal criticism assessed authorship, purpose, genre, language, intended audience, consistency, and possible bias. The 1916 congress record, for example, is an institutional source produced from within Sarekat Islam and is therefore valuable for reconstructing the organization's official position, but its institutional character requires caution because it naturally privileges organizational unity and legitimacy. Colonial intelligence reports are treated differently: their proximity to surveillance gives them evidentiary value for dates, locations, meetings, and colonial perceptions, but their administrative purpose and political vocabulary make them unsuitable as neutral accounts of popular motives. Tjokroaminoto's Islam dan Sosialisme is read as a primary intellectual source for his ideological self-positioning rather than as an objective description of all forms of socialism circulating in Java.

Interpretation proceeds through contextual, causal, and spatial analysis. Political terms such as Islam, socialism, communism, discipline, and self-government are read in the political language of the late colonial period rather than assigned meanings retrospectively. The analysis also distinguishes between events that occurred at the same time and relationships that can reasonably be described as causal. Most importantly, the study treats geography as historically consequential. Semarang's industrial and labor environment, Surakarta's dense relationship between Islamic activism and radical print culture, Surabaya's commercial and organizational importance, Yogyakarta's role in central SI administration, and Bandung's position as a congress and political arena created different conditions for political mobilization. The final stage, historiography, integrates these findings into a chronological-analytical narrative that emphasizes agency, continuity and change, and the interaction between organizational structure and regional political environments.

Introduction

The history of Sarekat Islam (SI) in the late colonial period is often narrated through a familiar sequence: the emergence of a mass Islamic movement, the penetration of socialist and communist ideas, the polarization between "SI Putih" and "SI Merah," and the eventual organizational separation of the two currents. That sequence is indispensable, but it can also flatten a conflict that was profoundly regional. The ideological struggle did not unfold in an abstract national arena. It was experienced through particular urban environments, labor markets, newspapers, congresses, branches, and political networks. Semarang, Surakarta, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and Bandung did not merely host events in the history of SI; their different social and organizational configurations shaped what kinds of political action became possible.

The period beginning around 1917 is especially important because several processes converged. The First World War intensified economic pressures in the Dutch East Indies; the Russian Revolution of 1917 gave socialist and communist activists a powerful international reference point; labor organization expanded; and SI was attempting to transform a broad Islamic association into a political movement capable of articulating claims to self-government. By this time, SI had already become one of the most important mass organizations in the Indies. Its attraction lay partly in its ability to connect merchants, workers, peasants, religious figures, and urban political activists under a vocabulary of Islam, social justice, and resistance to colonial domination. The same breadth that produced its remarkable growth, however, also made the organization vulnerable[1] to competing interpretations of what anti-colonial politics should mean.

The regional dimension is visible most clearly in Semarang. The city's concentration of railways, port activities, factories, and wage labor created a social environment in which labor grievances could be translated into political mobilization. The Semarang branch of SI became closely associated with Semaun and the socialist current. Surakarta presented another configuration: Islamic activism, urban print culture, labor politics, and the religiously inflected radicalism associated with figures such as Haji Misbach interacted in ways that could not simply be reduced to the Semarang model. Surabaya remained a major commercial and political center and an important location for SI organization and congresses. Yogyakarta became increasingly significant as a center of central SI administration and later as an important base of the Islamic-nationalist faction. Bandung, meanwhile, acquired significance as a congress city and political arena. A regional reading therefore helps explain why the same organizational rules produced different political consequences in different places.

Existing scholarship has established many elements of this history. Ruth T. McVey's reconstruction of Indonesian communism remains central for understanding the emergence of organized communism, its relationship with labor politics, and its subsequent confrontation with colonial authority. Takashi Shiraishi's study of popular radicalism demonstrated the importance of urban political culture, print, labor organization, and the changing language of mass politics in Java. Deliar Noer placed SI

[1]Deliar Noer, Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia 1900–1942 (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1996), 108–115.

within the broader history of Islamic modernism and political mobilization. More recent studies have examined the radicalization of SI around the Indie Weerbaar controversy, the communist movement in Surakarta, Agus Salim's opposition to communism, and the political development of SI between 1916 and 1921. These studies provide a strong historiographical foundation, but they often privilege one of three perspectives: the history of Indonesian communism, the ideological conflict between SI factions, or the political career of individual leaders.

The research gap addressed here is therefore not the absence of scholarship on the SI–communist conflict. Rather, it concerns the need to connect organizational strategy with regional political geography. The central question is how the geographical distribution of labor, print culture, branch autonomy, and political institutions shaped the penetration of socialist-communist ideas and the responses of SI's elite. The article asks three related questions: first, why did communist influence become particularly strong in certain SI branches; second, how did H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, Abdoel Moeis, and Haji Agus Salim develop different but ultimately complementary strategies to defend SI's identity; and third, how did the 1921–1923 rupture redistribute political agency and mass support across Java through 1927?

The objective is to reconstruct the conflict chronologically while treating place as an analytical variable. The argument is that the defense of SI against communist domination cannot be understood solely as a victory of one ideology over another. It was an organizational struggle in which the central leadership attempted to transform a heterogeneous and decentralized mass movement into a more disciplined political organization. The communist current, for its part, exploited the very openness and regional autonomy that had enabled SI's rapid expansion. The resulting separation was thus both a defensive success and a strategic cost[2]: the Islamic-nationalist leadership retained control over the institutional core of SI, but the movement lost part of its labor-oriented constituency and its former capacity to function as a single mass coalition.

The contribution of this article is twofold. Empirically, it brings together congress records, contemporary newspapers, colonial intelligence material, and secondary scholarship to reconstruct the sequence from radicalization to organizational separation. Analytically, it proposes that the history of SI in 1917–1927 is best understood as a regionalized contest for organizational and ideological hegemony. The term "regionalized" is important [3]: the conflict was not a uniform national process, but a series of interconnected local struggles whose outcomes were shaped by the social composition and political infrastructure of particular places. This perspective also allows the article to move beyond the static opposition of "white" and "red" and to examine the changing strategies, agency, and constraints of historical actors over time.

[2]Y. Santosa, "Sikap dan Strategi K.H. Agus Salim terhadap Ideologi Komunisme di dalam Tubuh Sarekat Islam 1915–1926," Tsaqofah 18, no. 2 (2020): 122–125.

[3]Yeti Setiawati and Samsudin, "Gerakan Politik Sarekat Islam di Jawa pada Tahun 1916–1921," Historia Madania 4, no. 2 (2020): 355–372, https://doi.org/10.15575/hm.v4i2.9502.

Results

Java as the Political Geography of Sarekat Islam, 1917–1920

By 1917, Sarekat Islam had ceased to be simply a commercial association of Muslim traders. Its expansion created a broad political constituency whose members experienced colonial power differently according to occupation and locality. The organization's national reach depended on a network of branches whose actual political life remained strongly local. This distinction between national identity and local autonomy is crucial. Central leadership could formulate principles and convene congresses, but branch leaders controlled much of the everyday work of recruitment, meetings, labor agitation, and press activity. The regional character of SI was therefore built into its organizational structure. [4]

Semarang illustrates the possibilities created by this arrangement. The city was one of the most important industrial and labor centers in Java, and its railway, port, and factory workforce offered fertile ground for socialist agitation. Semaun, who had entered SI in Surabaya and became deeply involved in labor politics, moved to Semarang and on 6 May 1917 became leader of the local branch. Under his leadership, the branch became more closely connected with the labor movement and with the political vocabulary of socialism. Contemporary and later accounts describe a rapid expansion of membership, from roughly 1,700 members to many thousands. The precise numbers should be treated cautiously because membership statistics in mass organizations were politically consequential and were not always compiled according to uniform criteria.[5] What is less uncertain is the direction of change: Semarang became a major center of radical SI activity.[6]

The relationship between SI and the socialist movement was facilitated by personnel as much as by doctrine. Henk Sneevliet and the ISDV recognized that a small organization dominated initially by European socialists could not easily become a mass movement without entering existing indigenous networks. The strategy commonly described as "block within" or entryism therefore relied on activists joining organizations that already possessed social legitimacy and organizational infrastructure.[7] Semaun, Darsono, Alimin, and other activists could operate simultaneously in labor and SI circles. Dual membership was not initially prohibited, and this institutional openness made ideological boundaries porous.

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[4] Ruth T. McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), 12–18.

[5] Miftahul Habib Fachrurozi, "Indie Weerbaar Polemic and the Radicalization of Sarekat Islam (1917–1918)," *Indonesian Historical Studies* 4, no. 2 (2020): 128–143,https://doi.org/10.14710/ihis.v4i2.9095.

[6]Ruth T. McVey, The Rise of Indonesian Communism (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), 12–18.

[7]Miftahul Habib Fachrurozi, "Indie Weerbaar Polemic and the Radicalization of Sarekat Islam (1917–1918)," Indonesian Historical Studies 4, no. 2 (2020): 128–143, https://doi.org/10.14710/ihis.v4i2.9095.

The role of the press was equally important. Socialist activists understood newspapers not simply as channels for opinion but as instruments of organization. In Semarang, Sinar Djawa and later Sinar Hindia connected political argument with labor grievances, while publications associated with the socialist movement translated abstract concepts such as class solidarity, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism into accessible political language. The survival of issues such as Sinar Hindia from 1918 allows historians to observe [8] that the contest was fought through words, symbols, and representations of social justice as much as through formal organizational decisions.

The regional pattern becomes more complicated in Surakarta. Here, Islamic social networks and radical print culture could intersect with communist politics without producing a simple rejection of religion. The later trajectory of Haji Misbach demonstrates that some actors attempted to reconcile Islamic moral language with socialist or communist criticism of colonial capitalism. The Surakarta case is therefore a warning against assuming that "communist" and "Islamic" were always mutually exclusive identities at the grassroots level.[9] The boundary was contested, and the effort to define it was itself part of the political struggle.

Surabaya had a different role. As a major commercial center and an important node in the circulation of activists, workers, and newspapers, it served as an early environment for Semaun and for the wider development of labor activism. It was also an important venue for national SI congresses. Thus, Surabaya linked local political experience with the national organizational arena. The movement of activists between Surabaya and Semarang demonstrates that regional histories were interconnected rather than isolated. Political ideas moved with people, newspapers, organizational correspondence, and congress delegates.[10]

Yogyakarta increasingly became significant as the administrative center of the central SI leadership. Its importance was not simply geographic but institutional. The central leadership needed a location from which it could coordinate branches and formulate an organizational response to radicalization. Yet the distance between central administration and industrial branches such as Semarang also exposed the limits of centralized authority. The very scale that made SI powerful created a problem of political coordination: a central committee could proclaim unity, but local leaders could determine how that unity was practiced.

Bandung, meanwhile, functioned as an important congress and political arena. The 1916 national congress had already demonstrated SI's capacity to articulate a broad political program, including demands concerning representation and the defense of indigenous interests. The significance of Bandung in the wider story lies in how national

[8]Sinar Hindia, 9 September 1918, newspaper issue.

[9]Muhammad Farih Fanani and Siti Maimunah, "Gerakan Komunis dalam Sarekat Islam di Surakarta Tahun 1918–1926 M," Thaqāfiyyāt 20, no. 1 (2021): 65–81, https://doi.org/10.14421/thaq.2021.20104.

[10]Takashi Shiraishi, An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 70–82.

political aspirations were periodically concentrated in particular cities. Congresses temporarily transformed a regional organization into a national public, allowing delegates from different branches to compare experiences, contest policy, and redefine the meaning of membership.

The geographical distribution of these activities suggests that communist penetration was not simply imported from Europe into an otherwise passive Indonesian society. European socialist activists mattered, but the process depended on local actors who translated ideas into the organizational language of Java. It also depended on structural conditions within SI. The organization's broad membership and weakly standardized ideological controls created space for activists to compete over the meaning of anti-colonialism. In this sense, regional social structures were not merely the setting for ideological conflict; they were part of the mechanism through which the conflict developed.

Internal Vulnerability: Heterogeneity, Branch Autonomy, and Ideological Competition

The openness that enabled SI's extraordinary growth also produced its central organizational vulnerability. SI contained traders, workers, peasants, religious teachers, urban intellectuals, and other social groups whose economic interests and political experiences were not identical. Its Islamic identity provided an important symbolic framework, but it did not automatically determine how members should respond to wage disputes, colonial representation, strikes, or the question of cooperation with the state. The organization could therefore function as a coalition without being ideologically homogeneous.

Branch autonomy intensified this problem. Local leaders were able to recruit members and define political priorities according to local circumstances. In Semarang, the presence of industrial workers and organized labor encouraged a political vocabulary centered on wages, strikes, capitalism, and class. In other branches, especially those with stronger networks of merchants, religious teachers, and Islamic reformers, the language of Islamic solidarity and political reform could remain more influential. This regional variation meant that a single national SI identity contained multiple political cultures.

The absence of an early prohibition on dual membership was particularly consequential. At one level, the policy reflected the collaborative character of the nationalist movement: activists belonged to multiple organizations, and cooperation across movements could strengthen resistance to colonial rule. At another level, it made ideological capture possible. Communist activists did not need to defeat SI in an external organizational competition; they could compete within the organization itself. This was an efficient strategy for a small movement seeking access to a much larger social base.

The social crisis of the late 1910s strengthened the appeal of radical labor politics. Inflation and economic hardship after the First World War affected workers and small producers, while colonial economic structures preserved sharp inequalities. Socialist

activists could therefore connect the language of class with grievances that were already visible in everyday life. The appeal of communist politics cannot be reduced to propaganda alone.[11] Propaganda was effective because it addressed real experiences of insecurity, exploitation, and unequal treatment.

Yet the same conditions that made socialist arguments attractive did not make communist politics inevitable. Members interpreted economic suffering through different moral and political frameworks. For some, Islam supplied the language of justice, solidarity, and communal obligation. For others, labor organization and class struggle offered a more direct explanation of exploitation. The contest inside SI was therefore a struggle over political interpretation: which vocabulary could best explain colonial society and which strategy could best change it?

This is where Tjokroaminoto's position becomes historically important. He did not initially reject every element associated with socialism. Instead, he sought to distinguish an Islamic conception of social justice from materialist Marxism. His formulation of Islamic socialism was an attempt to prevent the radical left from monopolizing the language of equality and justice.[12] In other words, his response was not only defensive. It was also an effort to produce a rival political language capable of speaking to the same grievances.

The distinction became sharper as communist activists increasingly challenged the political authority of the central leadership. Darsono's criticism of the financial policies of the Central Sarekat Islam, for example, transformed organizational disagreement into a question of legitimacy. Such disputes mattered because accusations about money, representation, and leadership were not separate from ideology. They provided a concrete means through which the radical faction could portray the central leadership as remote from the everyday problems of members.

The conflict was therefore cumulative. Organizational decentralization created the opportunity; social heterogeneity supplied multiple constituencies; labor grievances provided substantive political issues; print culture circulated competing interpretations; and the absence of a strict rule on dual membership allowed activists to occupy more than one organizational space. None of these factors alone explains the eventual split. Together, they transformed SI into an arena in which regional political cultures could compete over the direction of a national movement.

From Socialist Penetration to Communist Organization, 1920–1921

The year 1920 marked an important institutional transition. On 23 May, the ISDV was transformed into Perserikatan Komunis di Hindia, with Semaun as chairman and Darsono as vice-chairman. The organization later adopted the name Partai Komunis

[11] Sarekat Islam, Derde "Nationaal" Congres der Vereeniging "Centraal Sarekat Islam," 29 September–6 October 1918 te Soerabaja, congress record, 1918.

[12] H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, Islam dan Sosialisme (Bandung: Sega Arsy, 2010), 15–18.

Indonesia in 1924.[13] This chronology matters because using the later name "PKI" for every event from 1920 onward can obscure the institutional development of the communist movement. The emergence of an organized communist party did not immediately end its relationship with SI. On the contrary, communist activists continued to operate within and around SI networks, making the organizational boundary between the two movements increasingly contested.

The international context also changed. The Russian Revolution had provided a dramatic model of revolutionary transformation, while the Communist International offered a transnational framework for organizing communist movements in colonial societies. Sneevliet participated in the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920[14], where colonial questions were debated. The importance of this international connection was not that Indonesian activists simply received a finished ideological program from Europe. Rather, international communism supplied concepts, networks, and strategic references that could be adapted to the political circumstances of the Indies.

In Java, adaptation occurred through existing organizations. The labor movement was especially important because it provided a disciplined social network capable of translating political ideas into collective action. Semaun's position within VSTP and SI allowed labor questions to become part of the wider debate about the direction of the nationalist movement. In Semarang, the overlap between SI membership and labor activism was particularly significant. The city thus became a political laboratory in which the boundaries between religious organization, labor union, and socialist party were tested in practice.

At the same time, SI's central leaders were developing a different response. Tjokroaminoto continued to see the movement as a broad coalition and initially preferred to preserve unity. His strategy reflected the practical difficulty of expelling influential local activists from an organization that was still expanding. A premature confrontation could have destroyed the coalition before the central leadership had developed an alternative organizational structure. The regional evidence suggests that his caution was not simply ideological moderation; it was also a calculation about organizational survival.

The conflict over Indie Weerbaar and political representation in the Volksraad further exposed the divergence. The issue of colonial defense raised questions about whether cooperation with the colonial state could serve an anti-colonial purpose. Radical activists opposed arrangements that they regarded as imperial instruments, while SI leaders saw political institutions as arenas through which indigenous demands could be voiced. The disagreement did not begin as a dispute about communism alone, but it helped define the political styles that would later separate the factions.

[13]D.N. Aidit, Lahirnya PKI dan Perkembangannya (Djakarta: Jajasan Pembaruan, 1955), 15–28.

[14]George McTurnan Kahin, Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1952), 53–68.

The 1921 congresses brought these accumulated tensions into a decisive organizational confrontation. At the Yogyakarta congress in March, criticism of central leadership, the position of SI Semarang, and the relationship between Islam and communist politics became increasingly difficult to contain. The debate was not simply between "moderates" and "radicals." It was also between different conceptions of what membership meant. Could one person simultaneously belong to SI and an organization with a different ideological program? Could the anti-colonial movement maintain unity by postponing ideological differences, or did unity require a clear organizational boundary?

The answer emerged at the SI congress in Surabaya on 6–10 October 1921. Agus Salim and Abdoel Moeis pressed for party discipline that would prohibit dual membership in other political organizations, particularly the communist organization. The motion was approved by a decisive majority, conventionally reported as 27 votes to 7.[15] The decision was a turning point because it converted ideological disagreement into an institutional rule. Members who wished to maintain communist organizational affiliation could no longer remain within SI on the previous terms.

The regional consequences were immediate. Semarang, where the radical current had the deepest organizational roots, became the principal center of the separated left-wing current. Surakarta and other branches also became sites of contested allegiance. The central leadership, meanwhile, retained the institutional core of SI and strengthened its authority. The split should therefore be interpreted as a spatial redistribution of political power as much as a doctrinal division. The question was not only who believed what, but where organizational authority and mobilizing capacity remained concentrated.

Elite Strategies: Tjokroaminoto, Moeis, and Agus Salim

The response of SI's elite developed in stages. H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, Abdoel Moeis, and Haji Agus Salim shared a commitment to preserving SI as an Islamic and nationalist movement, but they did not use identical methods. Their differences are important because they reveal that the defense of organizational identity was a process of strategic adjustment rather than a predetermined anti-communist program.

Tjokroaminoto's early strategy combined political participation, ideological formulation, and cautious centralization. His participation in the Volksraad after its establishment in 1918 reflected a pragmatic willingness to use colonial institutions as political arenas. The Volksraad had limited authority, but participation gave SI access to a public institutional forum[16] and allowed its leaders to articulate demands for self-government. The strategy was cooperative in form but critical in purpose.

[15]Harry A. Poeze, "Henk Sneevliet and the Origins of Indonesian Communism," Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 134, no. 2 (1978): 215–226.

[16]Ahmad Fajar, "Politisasi Isu Agama di Media Massa: Strategi Politik HOS Tjokroaminoto dalam Surat Kabar Djawi Hisworo (1918)," Journal of Islamic History 1, no. 1 (2021): 78–100.

This strategy changed as the limits of the Volksraad became clearer. Tjokroaminoto's withdrawal from the council in 1921 symbolized a shift toward a more confrontational and organizationally autonomous strategy. The change also reduced one of the arguments available to the communist faction, which portrayed participation in colonial institutions as evidence of compromise. The significance of this shift lies in its timing: it coincided with the intensification of the SI–communist conflict and helped reposition the central leadership as a defender of independent nationalist politics.

Ideologically, Tjokroaminoto sought to occupy the social territory claimed by socialism without accepting Marxist materialism. His conception of Islamic socialism emphasized justice, equality, solidarity, zakat, and opposition to exploitation. The point was not to deny the social problems identified by socialist critics, but to argue that Islam already contained a moral and social program capable of addressing them. Islam dan Sosialisme later provided a systematic expression of this position, although its conceptual roots predated its publication.

This was a form of counter-hegemonic politics in the precise historical sense that the struggle concerned the ability to define the meaning of justice and the legitimate direction of collective action. The communist current sought to make class struggle the central interpretive framework. Tjokroaminoto sought to make Islamic solidarity and national self-government the central framework. Neither side relied exclusively on coercion. Both depended on organization, print, speeches, and the mobilization of moral authority.

Abdoel Moeis and Agus Salim increasingly moved toward a more explicit organizational boundary. They recognized that ideological persuasion alone could not resolve a conflict in which activists could maintain simultaneous memberships and organizational loyalties. Their advocacy of party discipline therefore represented an attempt to turn ideological defense into institutional control.[17] Santosa's study of Agus Salim emphasizes the latter's rejection of communist ideology within SI, while research on Tjokroaminoto shows how the central leadership's strategy evolved through repeated internal crises.

Agus Salim also used the press as an arena of ideological clarification. Through newspapers and political writing, he argued that Islam and communism rested on fundamentally different assumptions about religion, society, and political struggle. The rhetoric could be polemical, but its political function was practical: it sought to convince members that preserving SI required a choice between organizational loyalties. The newspaper was therefore not peripheral to organizational politics; it was one of the places where the meaning of membership was produced.

Moeis complemented this intellectual campaign with direct political organizing. Meetings, speeches, communication with branches, and efforts to strengthen

[17]Yusuf Budi Prasetya Santosa, "Sikap dan Strategi K.H. Agus Salim terhadap Ideologi Komunisme di dalam Tubuh Sarekat Islam 1915–1926," Tsaqofah 18, no. 2 (2020): 117–128, https://doi.org/10.32678/tsaqofah.v18i02.3598.

organizational discipline translated ideological argument into everyday political practice. The combination mattered. Tjokroaminoto supplied charismatic and ideological legitimacy; Salim supplied systematic argument and public polemic; Moeis contributed organizational mobilization. Their strategies converged because the problem itself had both ideological and institutional dimensions.

The distinction between the three leaders should not be exaggerated. Tjokroaminoto eventually supported the party-discipline policy, while Moeis and Salim operated within the legitimacy of his leadership. Their approaches were complementary rather than mutually exclusive. The historical significance lies precisely in their division of labor: persuasion, ideological differentiation, and organizational discipline reinforced one another.

The 1921–1923 Separation and the Reorganization of Political Space

The party-discipline decision did not simply expel communists; it redefined the geography of SI. The central organization retained branches and supporters that accepted the religious-nationalist line, while the radical current increasingly operated through its own structures. The labels SI Putih and SI Merah emerged from this reconfiguration[18], but they should be understood as political identities that crystallized through the process rather than as two completely separate organizations that had existed unchanged from the beginning.

The subsequent reorganization at the Madiun congress in February 1923 reinforced this institutional separation. The remaining SI leadership tightened membership rules and confirmed the exclusion of activists who refused party discipline. The organization's transformation into Partai Sarekat Islam (PSI) signaled[19] a move away from the looser mass-association model toward a more clearly defined political party.

The communist current followed a parallel trajectory. In late 1921, the communist organization endorsed the formation of SI Merah as an associated mass current.[20] By 1923, SI Merah was transformed into Sarekat Rakyat, while the communist party itself adopted the name Partai Komunis Indonesia in 1924. These changes demonstrate why the period should not be described as if SI Merah were simply an unchanged branch of SI after 1921. It became part of a new organizational configuration in which communist activists sought to mobilize workers and peasants outside the institutional control of the Islamic-nationalist SI.

The spatial contrast became increasingly clear. Semarang retained its significance as a center of labor radicalism. Surakarta remained a crucial site of interaction between Islamic networks, radical print culture, and communist politics. Yogyakarta became

[18]Ahmad Suhelmi, Pemikiran Politik Barat (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2001), 273–275.

[19]Sarekat Islam, Overzicht van de Gestie der Centraal Sarekat-Islam in het Jaar 1921, annual report, 1921.

[20] Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 83–95.

associated with the central SI leadership and its institutional consolidation. Surabaya remained important as a major political and commercial center and as a site of congresses and organizational debate. Bandung, meanwhile, continued to function as an important arena for national political gatherings and later communist organizational activity. These locations formed a connected political geography rather than a hierarchy in which one "national center" simply dictated events elsewhere.

The reorganization also changed the social composition of political constituencies. The Islamic-nationalist SI retained support among Muslim merchants, religious activists, and other constituencies for whom organizational identity and Islamic solidarity were central. The communist movement, through labor unions and mass organizations, sought to deepen support among workers and poorer rural groups. The division was therefore simultaneously ideological, organizational, social, and spatial.

This does not mean that every worker became communist or that every Muslim merchant supported SI Putih. Such a binary would reproduce the simplification the regional evidence challenges. The same communities contained overlapping political identities, and individual loyalties could change. What changed after 1921 was the institutional opportunity structure: members could no longer easily inhabit both organizational worlds at once.

1923–1927: Consolidation, Repression, and the Limits of Political Fragmentation

After the separation, SI's survival depended on its capacity to consolidate rather than simply defeat its opponents. The central leadership strengthened organizational discipline, political education, religious networks, and print activity.[21] The goal was to prevent a return to the earlier condition in which competing ideological organizations could operate inside the same institutional structure. The result was a more clearly defined Islamic political organization, even though it no longer possessed the same breadth of the pre-1921 coalition.

The communist movement, meanwhile, developed its own mass infrastructure. Labor organizations, newspapers, and the Sarekat Rakyat provided mechanisms for political mobilization. The appeal of this movement continued to rest partly on concrete grievances: wages, working conditions, land, and colonial inequality. The earlier success of radical activists in Semarang demonstrated that organizational capacity could convert economic grievances into political loyalty.

The colonial state increasingly treated communist activism as a security threat. Surveillance records are particularly useful here, but they must be read critically. Colonial intelligence reports were written to monitor and control political activity; they therefore tend to frame mobilization through the vocabulary of disorder, agitation, and threat.

[21] Taufiqurrahman, "Islam and Socialism in Indonesia: The Influence of HOS Tjokroaminoto's Thoughts on Agus Salim," Islamic Thought Review 1, no. 2 (2023): 168.

They are nevertheless valuable for identifying meetings, movements of activists, and the administrative response to organizational change.

The suppression of the communist uprising in 1926–1927 radically altered the political landscape. The repression of communist networks, arrests, exile, and the prohibition of communist activity reduced the organizational capacity that had developed during the preceding decade. The consequences extended beyond communists because colonial authorities could use the atmosphere of emergency to monitor and restrict other anti-colonial activists. McVey's account demonstrates the scale of the repression[22] and its significance for the development of Indonesian communism.

For SI, the consequences were ambivalent. The central organization had succeeded in preventing communist domination of its institutional structure, but the price was the loss of a significant portion of its labor-oriented constituency and the fragmentation of a movement that had once united diverse social groups. The defense of organizational identity therefore cannot be measured simply by asking whether SI remained Islamic. It must also be measured against the organization's capacity to mobilize a broad social coalition against colonial rule.

By 1927, the political geography of the earlier SI had been fundamentally altered. The conflict that had begun inside a mass Islamic organization had produced separate political infrastructures: an Islamic-nationalist party with its own organizational discipline and a communist movement increasingly separated from SI and targeted by the colonial state. The division was not the inevitable endpoint of ideological difference. It emerged from the interaction of regional social conditions, organizational choices, ideological campaigns, and colonial repression.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the history of SI between 1917 and 1927 should be interpreted as a struggle over organizational hegemony as much as a clash of ideologies. The central issue was who could define the legitimate political identity of a mass movement. This interpretation is compatible with Gramscian approaches to hegemony, but it also requires a historically specific understanding of how hegemony operated in a colonial society. The contest took place within civil society—through newspapers, religious gatherings, labor unions, congresses, and political organizations—while the colonial state remained a powerful actor capable of surveillance and coercion. The SI–communist conflict therefore involved both consent and institutional power.

From this perspective, the communist strategy was effective precisely because it did not begin by demanding an immediate organizational rupture. Entryism allowed activists to work through institutions that already possessed legitimacy among indigenous communities. In Semarang, the strategy succeeded because it intersected with a dense labor environment and with a branch leadership willing to connect SI politics to

[22]Ruth T. McVey, The Rise of Indonesian Communism (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), 200–220.

workplace grievances. This supports Shiraishi's emphasis on popular radicalism while adding a spatial dimension[23]: radicalization was not simply a chronological stage in Indonesian nationalism but a process whose intensity depended on local political economies.

The Surakarta evidence complicates a purely class-based explanation.[24] The existence of Islamic communism around figures such as Haji Misbach demonstrates that religious identity could remain politically meaningful within radical movements. The contest was therefore not between religion and politics in a simple sense. It was over competing interpretations of religion, justice, property, and anti-colonial action. Fanani and Maimunah's study of Surakarta is particularly useful in showing how communist activism there interacted with Islamic political culture.

The response of Tjokroaminoto also deserves reinterpretation. His initial tolerance of socialist activists inside SI should not be read merely as ideological confusion or weakness.[25] It was a rational response to the organizational realities of a mass movement. Expelling the left before the central leadership had built stronger institutional mechanisms could have produced an even earlier fragmentation. His strategy therefore moved from accommodation to differentiation as the balance of organizational power changed. The development of Islamic socialism can be understood as part of this adaptation: by claiming the language of social justice, Tjokroaminoto sought to deny communism a monopoly over the critique of exploitation.

Moeis and Agus Salim represent a complementary form of counter-hegemonic action. Their insistence on party discipline transformed an ideological dispute into an institutional boundary. This was decisive because ideological persuasion could not resolve a structural problem created by dual membership. Their strategy also reveals the importance of political timing. The rule was not imposed at the first sign of radicalization; it emerged after several years of experimentation, polemic, and failed attempts to maintain unity. In that sense, the 1921 decision was a cumulative product of earlier regional conflicts.

The congresses themselves should be viewed as mechanisms of spatial integration. Bandung in 1916, Surabaya in 1918 and 1921, and Yogyakarta in 1921 brought regional branches into a shared political arena. Congresses allowed the central leadership to transform local disputes into national questions, but they also allowed local grievances to challenge central authority. The 1921 congresses were therefore not merely ceremonial

[23]Takashi Shiraishi, An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 83–95.

[24] Tsabit Azinar Ahmad, "Sarekat Islam dan Gerakan Kiri di Semarang 1917–1920," *Jurnal Sejarah dan Budaya* 8, no. 2 (2014): 225–232.

[25]Ahmad Fajar, "From Struggling to Maintaining Power: Cokroaminoto's Maneuver in Political Crisis of Sarekat Islam in 1912–1921," Islah: Journal of Islamic Literature and History 2, no. 2 (2021): 163–179.

events.[26] They were institutional technologies through which a geographically dispersed organization negotiated its identity.

The historiography of Indonesian communism sometimes risks treating the growth of communist politics as a linear progression from Sneevliet to ISDV, then PKH/PKI, and finally the 1926–1927 uprising. The SI-centered regional evidence suggests a less linear trajectory. Communist politics developed through organizational borrowing, local adaptation, and competition inside existing movements. Likewise, the history of SI should not be narrated as a simple decline after 1921. The organization lost unity and mass reach, but it also gained a clearer ideological and organizational identity. The rupture was therefore simultaneously a contraction and a consolidation.

The colonial state forms the third dimension of this process. Colonial surveillance and repression did not create the SI–communist conflict, but they shaped its consequences. The state's limited political institutions, especially the Volksraad, offered a narrow arena for constitutional politics, while surveillance constrained radical activism. Once the communist movement was treated as a security threat, coercion transformed the balance between the two currents. The 1926–1927 repression demonstrates the limits of both communist revolutionary strategy and the possibility of sustaining a broad anti-colonial coalition under colonial conditions.

The regional approach also changes how agency is distributed among historical actors. Sneevliet mattered, but he could not have produced a mass movement without Semaun, Darsono, local branch leaders, labor networks, and readers of the radical press. Tjokroaminoto mattered, but his authority depended on congress delegates, branch loyalty, religious networks, and organizational institutions. Salim and Moeis were effective because their arguments resonated with a constituency that still regarded Islamic identity as politically meaningful. Agency was therefore relational: leaders acted within regional structures and could succeed only when local actors translated their strategies into practice.

The evidence also requires caution concerning membership figures. Claims that SI had reached two million or more members are present in the historiography, but the figures vary substantially according to date, counting method, and whether local affiliations were counted as formal membership. For that reason, this article emphasizes the documented pattern of mass expansion rather than presenting a single membership number as exact. The same principle applies to the vote on party discipline, which is conventionally reported as 27 to 7. Where sources differ in detail, the existence and direction of the decision are more secure than every numerical detail.

Finally, the conflict demonstrates a broader pattern in the history of colonial Southeast Asia: mass organizations could become sites where apparently distinct ideologies were translated into shared languages of justice and emancipation. SI's

[26] Sarekat Islam, Sarekat Islam Congres (1e Nationaal Congres), 17–24 Juni 1916 te Bandoeng, congress record, 1916.

openness made it capable of becoming a national movement, but that openness also created conditions for ideological competition. The communist current exploited those conditions from within; the Islamic-nationalist leadership responded by narrowing organizational boundaries[27] and strengthening ideological coherence. The result was not the disappearance of radical politics but its relocation into a different organizational geography.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the struggle over Sarekat Islam in Java between 1917 and 1927 was a regionalized contest for organizational and ideological authority. Communist penetration became significant because the decentralized structure of SI, the heterogeneity of its membership, the expansion of labor politics, and the distinctive social environments of cities such as Semarang and Surakarta created uneven opportunities for radical mobilization. Sneevliet provided an international socialist connection and an entryist strategy, but indigenous activists—especially Semaun and Darsono—were decisive in translating that strategy into local political practice.

The response of SI's elite developed through stages. H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto initially combined organizational caution with political participation and the development of Islamic socialism. As communist influence became more deeply embedded in particular branches, Abdoel Moeis and Haji Agus Salim pressed for clearer organizational boundaries and party discipline. The 1921 decision to prohibit dual membership transformed ideological disagreement into an institutional separation, while the reorganization of 1923 consolidated the Islamic-nationalist SI. This was a successful defense of SI's organizational identity, but not an unqualified victory: the movement lost part of its labor-oriented constituency and its capacity to function as a single mass coalition.

The regional perspective is essential to this conclusion. Semarang was central to labor radicalism; Surakarta demonstrated the complex interaction between Islamic networks and communist politics; Surabaya linked commercial, labor, and congress politics; Yogyakarta became an important center of central SI administration; and Bandung served as a major arena for national political assembly. These places were connected through activists, newspapers, congresses, and organizational networks, yet their different social structures shaped political outcomes in distinctive ways.

The article's contribution is therefore to reposition the SI–communist conflict from a purely ideological binary into a history of spatially differentiated political competition. Its novelty lies in showing how regional political economies and organizational infrastructures shaped both the success of communist penetration and the strategies

[27] Muhammad Farih Fanani and Siti Maimunah, "Gerakan Komunis dalam Sarekat Islam di Surakarta Tahun 1918–1926 M," Thaqāfiyyāt 20, no. 1 (2021): 69–80.

through which SI's leaders resisted it. The eventual fragmentation of the movement was neither an inevitable result of ideological incompatibility nor merely the product of individual rivalry. It emerged from the interaction of local agency, organizational structure, political language, and colonial power. By 1927, the political landscape created by this struggle was fundamentally different from the broad coalition SI had represented a decade earlier: Islamic-nationalist politics and communist politics had become institutionally separated, while colonial repression had further narrowed the space for radical mass mobilization.

Table 1. Regional Political Geography of the SI–Communist Conflict, 1917–1927

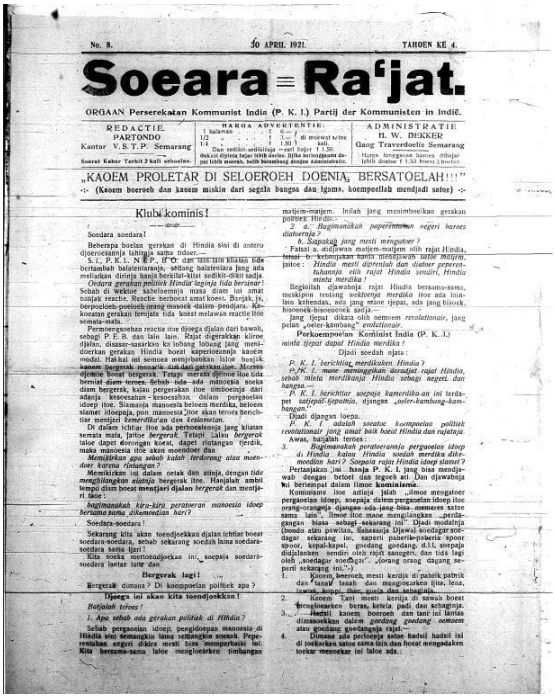
Region	Historical setting	Key political function	Significance in the conflict
Semarang	Industrial, railway, port, and wage-labor center	SI branch, VSTP, radical press, communist organizing	Principal center of the radical/communist current
Surakarta	Strong Islamic networks and urban print culture	SI activism, religious radicalism, labor and press networks	Demonstrated interaction between Islam and socialist/communist politics
Surabaya	Major commercial and political city	Early SI/labor activity and national congresses	Linked local activism with national organizational decisions
Yogyakarta	Center of central SI administration	Central coordination and congress politics	Important base for organizational consolidation of SI Putih
Bandung	Major political meeting and congress venue	National congresses and later communist organizational activity	Connected regional disputes to wider movement politics



SINAR - HINDIA

MATAHARIAH.

Figure 1 Sinar Hindia, 9 September 1918. Contemporary press evidence of the radical political print culture associated with the Semarang milieu.



No. 8. 30 APRIL 1921. TAHOEN KE 4.

Soeara = Ra'jat.

ORGAAN Perserekatan Kommunist India (P. K. I.) Partij der Kommunisten in Indië.

REDACTIE. PARTONDO Kantor V.S.T.P. Semarang

HARGA ADVERTENTIE: 1 halaman f 6.— 1/2 " f 3.— 1/4 " f 1.50 di moeka satoe kali.

ADMINISTRATIE H. W. DEKKER (Gang Traverdoelle Semarang

„KAOEM PROLETAR DI SELOEROEH DOENIA, BERSATOELAH!!!"

-:- (Kaoem boeroeh dan kaoem miskin dari segala bangsa dan igama, koempoellah mendjadi satoe) -:-

Klubi kominis!

Soedara soedara!

Beberapa boelan gerakan di Hindia sini di antero djoeroesannja lahirnja sama toeboe.—

S.I., P.K.I., N.P., I.C. dan lain-lain kitaloe tida bertambah belalenanja, sedang kalaireksa jang ada melarikan diriija hanja berkilat-kilat sedikit-dikit sadja.

Sebab di wektoe sabeloemnja masa diam ini amat banjak reache. Reache berhoeat amat koeat. Banjak ja, berpoeloeh-poeloeh orang moseek dalem pendjara. Kekoeatan gerakan lenjapa tida koeat melawan reactie itoe semata-mata.

Permengarahkan reactie itoe djoega djalan dari bawah, sebagi P. E. B. dan lain lain. Rajat digerakkan kiloee djalan, disasar-sasarkan ke lobang lobang jang mendoerkan gerakan Hindia boeat koperieremnja kaoeng modal. Hal-hal ini semoea menjebabkan liloe banjak kaoem bergerak menarik diri dari gerakan itoe. Mereka djemoe boeat bergerak. Tetapi mereka djemoe itoe tida bersiat diam-teroes. Sebab ada manoesia soeka diam bergerak, kalau pergerakan itoe timboelnja dari adanja kesoesahan - kesoesahan, dalam pergaoelan idoep itoe. Sianapja manoesia beloem merdika, beloem sianat idoepnja, jen manoesia itoe akan tetoeta berichtiar mentjari Kemerdikaan dan Kelamelan.

Di dalem ichtiar itoe ada pertoemboengja jang kiatan temasa mata, jaitoe bergerak. Tetapi kalau bergerak laloe dapet dorongan koeat, dapet roentangan tjerdik, maka manoesia itoe akan moemboer dan .

Memikirkan apa sebab kalah terdorong atau moendoer karena roentangan?

Memikirkan ini dalam oetak dan atinja, dengan tida menghilangkan atinja bergerak itoe. Hanjalah ambil tempo diam boeat mentjari djalan bergerak dan mentjari. itoe :

bagimanakah kira-kira peratoeran manoesia idoep bersama sama dikemoedian hari?

Soedara-soedara!

Sekarang kita akan toendjoekkan djalan ichtiar boeat soedara-soedara, sebab sekarang soedah lama soedara-soedara sama tjari!

Kita soeka mertoendjoekkan ini, soepaja soedara-soedara lantas toeroe dan.

Bergerak lagi!

Bergerak dimana? Di koempoelan politiek apa?

Djoega ini akan kita toendjoekkan!

Beljalah teroes!

1. Apa sebab ada gerakan politiek di Hindia?

Sebab pergaoelan idoep, pergidoepan manoesia di Hindia ini semangkin lama semangkin soesah. Pepereintahan negeri diara mesti bisa memperbaiki ini. Kita bersama-sama laloe mengloearkan tinbangan matjem-matjem. Inilah jang menimboelkan gerakan politiek Hindia.—

2 a. Bagimanakah paperintahan negeri haroes diatoeroe?

b. Siapakah jang mesti mengatoer?

Fatsal a. didjawab matjem-matjem oleh rajat Hindia, tetapi b. ketimpangan harda mendjawab satoe matjem, jaitoe : *Hindia mesti diperintah dan diatoer pepereintahannja oleh rajat Hindia sendiri, Hindia minta merdika!*

Begitoelah djawabnja rajat Hindia bersama-sama, meskipon tentang soeltonja merdika itoe ada lain-lain kehendak, ada jang maoe tjepat, ada jang bisoek, bisoeseek-bisoeseek sadja.—

Jang tjepat dikata oleh oemoem *revolutionair*, jang pelan „oeler-kambang" *evolutionair*.

Perkoempoelan Kemlinist India (P. K. I.)

minta tjepat dapat Hindia merdika!

Djadi soedah njata :

P. K. I. berichtiar merdikakan Hindia?

P.K. I. maoe meniapkan dorapat rajat Hindia, sebab minta merdikanja Hindia sebagi negeri. dan bangsa.—

P. K. I. berichtiar soepaja kanerdikan ini terdapet satjepat-tjepatnja, djangan „oeler-kambang-kambangan."

Djadi djangan loeroe.

P. K. I adalah soeatoe koempoelan politiek revolutionair jang amat baik boeat Hindia dan rajatnja.

Awas, hatjlah teroes :

3. Bagimanakah peratoeranja pergaoelan idoep di Hindia kalau Hindia soedah merdika didemoedian hari? Soepaja rajat Hindia idoep slamat?

Pertanjakan ini, hanja P. K. I. jang bisa mendjawab dengan betoel dan tegoeh ati. Dan djawabnja ini berlempat dalam ilmoe **kominisme.**

Kominisme ilmoe atinja jaitoe „ilmoe mengatoer pergaoelan idoep; soepaja dalem pergaoelan idoep itoe orang-orangnja djangan ada jang bisa. memeres satoe sama lain", ilmoe itoe maoe mangilangkan „perdagangan biasa sebagi sekarang ini". Djadi modalnja (boendo atau pawitan, bahasanja Djawa) soedagar soedagar sekarang ini, saperti poleriek-poleriek spoor, spoor, kepal-kepal, goedang goedang, d.l.l, soepaja didjalankan sendiri oleh rajat sanegeri, dan tida lagi oleh „soedagar soedagar". „(orang orang dagang seperti sekarang ini.")

1. Kaoem boeroeh, mesti kerdja di pabrik pabrik dan tanah tanah dan mengloearkan djia, lesa, tawak, kopi, thee, goela dan sebagainja.
2. Kaoem Tani mesti kerdja di sawah boeat mengloearkan beras, ketela padi dan sebaginja.
3. Hasil kaoem boeroeh dan tani ini lantas dimasoekkan dalem *goedang goedang oemoem* atau goedang goedangnja rajat.—
4. Dimana ada perloenja satoe hasil hasil ini di toekarkan satoe sama lain dan boeat mengadaken toekar menoekar ini laloe ada.

Figure 2 Soeara Ra'jat, 16 April 1921. Contemporary newspaper evidence from the period of the 1921 SI organizational dispute.

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