

EVALUATING THE PRRI REBELLION AS A WEST SUMATRAN PEASANT MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the following questions: Had the peasants understood the vision of the leadership, would they still have participated in the revolt? Was the swift reluctance towards active military participation the result of a better understanding of the rebellion's aims as espoused by the core leadership? Are the Minangkabau peasantry prone to future profanations of great tradition narratives? By way of using various sources, the writer tries to trace the PRRI Rebellion in the light of grass-root perspective as it is reflected in the eye of interviewee given Om Fahmi's description, that believed that the Minang will continue to protest against the imperialism of Jakarta until this state of affairs appeared.

Keywords: *PRRI rebellion, peasant movement, revolt*

ABSTRACT

Artikel ini berupaya untuk menjawab pertanyaan berikut: apakah para petani paham dengan pandangan para pemimpin mereka?, apakah mereka masih akan tetap ikut terlibat dalam pemberontakan? Apakah sikap lekas curiga terhadap keterlibatan militer aktif merupakan bentuk pengertian yang lebih baik tentang tujuan pemberontakan seperti yang dipahami dan didukung oleh kepemimpinan inti mereka? Apakah petani Minangkabau cenderung menolak borok masa depan dalam narasi tradisi besar. Dengan menggunakan pelbagai sumber penulis coba melacak pemberontakan PRRI dari sudut pandang akar-rumput (petani) sebagaimana tercermin di mata orang yang diwawancarai seperti dikemukakan lewat deskripsi Om Fahmi yang percaya bahwa orang Minang akan tetap melakukan protes melawan imperialism Jakarta selama keadaan yang ditentang di masa pemberontakan itu masih tetap ada.

Kata Kunci: *Pemberontakan PRRI, pergerakan kaum petani, protes*

*) This paper was first prepared in 2006, and no attempt has been made to bring it fully up to date for this publication. The author's thanks go to James C. Scott, Michael Dove, and Mestika Zed for their input.

A. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, Bagindo Fahmi lived a fairly quiet life in a cement house behind the *Taman Budaya* (Cultural Park – the local performing arts complex) in Padang, West Sumatra, Indonesia. He watched his grandchildren enter high school, and welcomed the few people who stopped by, either to chat or to use the pay phone that his wife administered to keep up some income. In February 1958, however, Om Fahmi was at the head of a line of students rallying to the cry of the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (*Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia*, PRRI). He presented a petition to the PRRI leaders with over ten thousand student signatures, he alleged, calling for the military and civilian leaders gathered in Padang to revolt against the central government. Not only did Om Fahmi and his fellow students support the rebellion, but the support of the vast majority of citizens in West Sumatra province allowed an alternative government to maintain itself for years in the jungle while low-level fighting waged with Javanese troops stationed in the cities. Perhaps all of this support came, as Om Fahmi said, because the Minangkabau are the most likely people in Indonesia, even all the world, to protest.¹

Surely there must be, however, specific forces and reasoning leading the Minang people of West Sumatra to protest for specific causes. What were these reasons that allowed the

¹ Interview with Bagindo Fahmi by the author, Padang, 17 June, 2006.

PRRI rebellion of 1958 to gain a popular following among the Minangkabau such that it was able to sustain a guerilla war for several years? Furthermore, how was the popular inspiration and understanding of this conflict different from other Minangkabau rebellions that preceded it? To answer these questions, this paper will first give a brief analysis of three previous rebellions in the Minangkabau region: the Padri Wars (1821-1838), the Tax Rebellion of 1908, and the Communist uprising of 1927. Bearing in mind the tradition of these rebellions, it will be possible to evaluate the nature of popular support for the PRRI. Finally, it will be possible to evaluate to what extent the PRRI rebellion deviated from previous revolts and whether or not it can be classified as a peasant rebellion.

B. A Survey of West Sumatran Rebellions²

Whether or not Om Fahmi is correct in his assessment of his own people, it is true that the Minangkabau have risen in rebellion several times since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Often, scholars have seen these revolts as being religiously

² One major armed conflict in the province has not been included in this survey: the war for independence against the Dutch, 1945-49. Although West Sumatra had an important role to play in that conflict, and despite popular understanding of that war as serving local interests, I have chosen not to include it because it was neither centered in the province, led by Minangkabau militarily, nor fundamentally dependent on Minang peasant participation.

inspired, or nationalists have absorbed the story of the rebellions into the narrative of resistance to Dutch imperialism. While both religion and rejection of Dutch rule certainly played a role in all the uprisings examined here, a closer examination will show how peasants usually also worked for their own best interest in these rebellions, sometimes using religious or nationalist rhetoric to cover over more economic motives.

Among all the conflicts in West Sumatra since European arrival, the Padri War is arguably the most famous.³ Its foremost leader, Tuanku Imam Bonjol, has been enshrined as a national hero (*pahlawan negara*) and is currently featured on the five thousand Rupiah note.⁴ Imam Bonjol was one of several Minangkabau religious leaders who returned from the *hajj* in the late eighteenth century and felt compelled to change their native society to eliminate the vice and paganism that they believed ran rampant. The movement began as reforms in home villages of these *hajjis*, called Padris because they had departed for the Holy Lands from the port of Pedir. Around the second decade of the nineteenth century the

religious revival morphed into the full-scale invasion of lowland towns by Muslim leaders and peasant followers from their home districts. The towns and communities who were averse to the puritanical reforms and harsh penalties of the Padris lost most of their strongholds in the upland valleys, and they eventually called upon the Dutch stationed on the coast to come to their aid. The Dutch began direct armed conflict with the Padri forces in 1821. They quickly conquered much of the Minangkabau hinterlands, but did not sustain their control over this territory. In ten years' time the Dutch entered the Minang highlands again, this time holding onto all of their conquered territories. By 1837, all of the Padri leaders were captured or defeated, and Dutch forced the Minangkabau to agree to humiliating terms in a treaty that established Dutch "supervision" over the area without giving them the responsibility of direct governance.

Despite its relative fame, scholars long misunderstood the conflict as being narrowly religious, "a clash between the lineage heads of Minangkabau village society and Islamic teachers penetrating the Minangkabau world with new ideas from outside"⁵. Another interpretation, offered mostly by Indonesian scholars working toward the nationalist project, sees the Padri War as early resistance to the Dutch as foreigners and non-Muslims.⁶ Scholars agree that the two sides aligned as traditional Minang leaders who did

³ In this account of the Padri Wars, I follow Christine Dobbin, *Islamic Revivalism in a Changing Peasant Economy: Central Sumatra, 1784-1847* (London: Curzon, 1983), and Rusli Amran, *Sumatera Barat hingga Plakat Panjang* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1981).

⁴ For more on this figure, see Jeffrey Hadler, "A Historiography of Violence and the Secular State in Indonesia: Tuanku Imam Bondjol and the Uses of History," *Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 67, no. 3 (August 2008): 971-1010.

⁵ Dobbin, viii. See also Hadler's intervention on this point.

⁶ This, for example, is the dominant interpretation for Rusli Amran.

not follow Islamic precepts versus Wahhabi-influenced Muslim leaders who sought to impose strict religion throughout the region. This division between the two sides presents an incomplete picture of motivations, however; Christine Dobbin has brought to light the additional economic and local incentives for the supporters of the Padri Islamist cause. The Padris were supported most strongly by non-subsistence farmers out of the valley, wet-rice heartlands. These communities had to bring their goods to market in order to sustain themselves, and therefore required safe travel conditions and clear law for handling economic disputes, conditions which were not present before the Padri Islamic revivalist movement. It was natural, then, that upland farmers try to bolster Islam, which provided both strict moral rules (thus eliminating banditry on the highway) and well-developed jurisprudence (allowing for the regulation of transactions).⁷ Similarly, once the Dutch entered the fray, the Padri side was fighting against their foreign economic incursions and control of a previously free market, again protecting small-scale producers' interests.⁸ Seen in this light, religion in the Padri Wars merely gave expression to the needs of non-subsistence agrarian communities who sought economic stability.⁹

⁷ Dobbin, 127.

⁸ Ibid, 187.

⁹ Of course, this is a gross generalization of Dobbin's well-developed and nuanced argument. Nevertheless, I believe that her key innovation is the repositioning of religious issues as one of many factors, even a responsive factor, in a situation

Just more than a century after the Padri leaders returned from the *hajj* and began their revival and rebellion, a new storm began to brew in West Sumatra.¹⁰ After eighty years of demanding corvée labor from the Minangkabau as one of their spoils from winning the Padri War, the Dutch found that tax in labor was no longer economically most beneficial to them. So, in 1908, the Dutch broke their own conditions in the 1837 treaty and implemented a money tax.¹¹ This first faced passive resistance from village heads and the communities they led, but the Dutch then arrested most of the resistance leaders, sending a clear message and eliminating the option of continued passive dissent. An armed uprising then began in the valley of Agam, led by leaders of the Syattariyah Sufi *tariqa*. This uprising was widespread but fairly short-lived, however, as the amulets and other protections that should have warded off bullets proved ineffective and the peasants in

where peasant economic demands underscored all other developments.

¹⁰ In this account of the Anti-Tax Rebellion, I follow Ken Young, *Islamic Peasants and the State: The 1908 Anti-Tax Rebellion in West Sumatra* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1994), and Rusli Amran, *Sumatera Barat Pemberontakan Pajak 1908* (Jakarta: Gita Karya, 1988).

¹¹ Most accounts agree that this treaty, called the "Plakat Panjang" or "Long Declaration," was already a dead letter. For example, Elizabeth Graves testifies to the extent of Dutch intervention in *The Minangkabau Response to Dutch Colonial Rule in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Southeast Asia Project, 1981), Chapter 2.

revolt were quickly defeated by superior Dutch firepower.

Although the Dutch Resident in Padang and many of his military colleagues were eager to call the uprising the work of “religious fanatics” opposed to Dutch intervention, scholarship has shown that the “demand for cash from villagers would have been alarming for many peasants on purely economic grounds.”¹² Again, as with the Padri Wars, religious and anti-foreign issues certainly came into play, but the 1908 rebellion should be seen as primarily launched to serve the economic interests of the peasant class in the face of major upheaval.

After a shorter interlude, rebellion again broke out in 1927, this time in the form of a Communist uprising centered around the town of Silungkang.¹³ After months of incessantly vacillating between action and inaction, the uprising finally reached the point of no return on the night of January 1, 1927. A large group of local men assembled in Silungkang and other villages in that region of West Sumatra and were armed and prepped for battle, despite the fact that the leaders of the local Communist movement were still unsure of whether they intended to

act. The mood of the gathering crowds forced their hand, and they began to assassinate Dutch officials and collaborators in town. This action happened even though most of the movements’ leaders had been arrested in the previous months and the specific plans for that night’s uprising could not be executed. The Dutch had been alerted of the intended revolt and responded quickly by sending in more reinforcements and quelling the uprising. While around twenty-four Dutch were killed, more than a hundred Minangkabau died and well-over a thousand were imprisoned.¹⁴

In this case, the antagonism against the Dutch and the desire for a new socio-economic order served peasants’ interests. “Both Minangkabau merchants and the Muslim community as a whole felt squeezed out by Dutch protection of European and Chinese traders in Sumatra’s west coast ports.”¹⁵ Furthermore, this “Communist” uprising must be seen as a local, not national or international, event because it was not at all well-connected with doctrinal ideas of Marxism. In fact, it directly opposed the national party’s directives and was based on furthering local and personal agendas. The most successful propaganda in the area had not used the themes of international Communism but rather “play[ed] on the grievances and ill-defined aspirations” of the local population.¹⁶ The leaders who organized the uprising came largely

¹² Young, 256.

¹³ In this account of the Communist Uprising of 1927, I follow Harry J. Benda and Ruth T. McVey, eds., *The Communist Uprisings of 1926-1927 in Indonesia: Key Documents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1960), specifically the introduction and translation of Schrieke’s report, and Audrey Kahin, *Rebellion to Integration: West Sumatra and the Indonesian Polity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1999), Chapter 1.

¹⁴ Kahin, 48.

¹⁵ Kahin, 34.

¹⁶ Benda and McVey, xxi.

from the lowest classes in the rebellious villages: a barber, an electrician, an old-style tram conductor, a discharged railway employee, an illiterate old man and several “infamous gamblers” figured prominently.¹⁷ Clearly this was an uprising driven by local, low-level motives rather than doctrinal ambitions, and peasants participated, even started, the rebellion because of their own frustrated ambitions.

C. The PRRI Rebellion

The PRRI Rebellion¹⁸ stands apart from earlier movements in West

¹⁷ B. Schrieke, “The Course of the Communist Movement on the West Coast of Sumatra,” in Benda and McVey, 168.

¹⁸ Although various aspects of the PRRI have been well-documented in scholarly works, there is not yet a satisfying survey of the rebellion. Perhaps the closest thing is Audrey Kahin’s survey in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 of *Rebellion to Integration*. An Indonesian work which focuses entirely on the PRRI and its sister rebellion Permesta is R.Z. Leirissa, *PRRI/ Permesta: Strategi Membangun Indonesia Tanpa Komunis* (Jakarta: Grafiti, 1991). Sadly, this book focuses exclusively on the leadership struggles leading up to the rebellion; less than fifteen pages out of 306 deal with the period after the declaration of a revolutionary government, and no treatment of peasant involvement is included in the book. Other books, such as Audrey R. and George McT. Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (New York: New Press, 1995), and James Mossman, *Rebels in Paradise: Indonesia’s Civil War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1961), focus on the extensive foreign involvement in the PRRI. The account given here will utilize primarily Kahin and Leirissa, as well as reports issued by actors directly involved in the PRRI rebellion and scholarly articles treating specific aspects of the conflict.

Sumatra for several reasons. First and foremost, happening after Indonesian independence, it pitted two Indonesian groups against each other. The two sides cannot, though, both be called indigenous; the PRRI rebels encompassed most of the Minangkabau population native to the province, whereas the central government troops and leadership were largely Javanese, leading to many accusations of neo- or internal colonialism. Be that as it may, the rebel cause also included several prominent leaders from Java (among them Sjafruddin Prawiranegara and Sumitro Djojohadikusomo) and allied itself with a parallel rebellion in North Sulawesi called Permesta. This makes the PRRI unique in that it aligned the Minangkabau both with and squarely against groups who had very recently been their allies in the struggle for independence.

This incorporation of other areas points to another major difference between the PRRI and previous movements; the PRRI was led by people not emerging directly from agrarian communities. Unlike the previous rebellions, where small-time religious leaders, peasants and even barbers became the leaders of revolts, the heads of the PRRI were career generals, politicians, and some holders of doctoral degrees from abroad.¹⁹ Thus, when evaluating the PRRI as a peasant rebellion, one must

¹⁹ Probably the most well-educated and distant from the Minangkabau peasantry was the Javanese economist turned politician, Sumitro Djojohadikusumo. He had studied at the Sorbonne and had a doctorate in economics from Economische Hogeschool in Rotterdam. See Mossman’s personal appraisal of him in Mossman, 59.

remember that the leaders were quite distant from the peasant class, even if participation in this uprising served peasant interests.

Connected with this, the PRRI was the first rebellion which established a polity over the region. Although the Padri successfully changed the leaders in many communities, it maintained the decentralized, diffuse system of village government. The Anti-Tax and Communist uprisings were never able to set up a formal administration, even in a local area. PRRI, on the other hand, established itself as a government in the modern sense, and thus had a greater impact on the lives of people throughout the province during the short time in which it functioned fully as a revolutionary state.

Despite these differences, there are also several similarities between the PRRI and previous rebellions in West Sumatra. One might first note that the Minang have ultimately failed in achieving their goals in all of the rebellions examined in this paper.²⁰ Beyond this, the PRRI were also involved in guerilla tactics which had been well honed in previous conflicts. Local knowledge of the jungle and ability to fade away into it

had been crucial for all three previous uprisings. Lastly, and most importantly for examination here, the success of the PRRI was dependent upon the participation and collaboration of Minangkabau peasants with the rebel cause.

To frame analysis of the causes and nature of peasant participation, it will be useful here to provide a general outline of the leadership and chronology of the rebellion. The Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (*Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia* or PRRI) was declared on February 15, 1958, but its roots trace back until at least 1955. After the election of that year, the government seated a new People's Representative Council (DPR), Indonesia's legislative body, with the most seats going to the Indonesian National Party (PNI) and Masyumi (the Muslim coalition), followed by the Nadhatul Ulama (traditionalist Islamic party) and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). This new legislature proved less than ecstatic in following the lead of an increasingly authoritarian President Sukarno. After going through several cabinets rapidly because of their stalemate on policy, Sukarno in 1957 declared a new principle in government, "Guided Democracy," in which allowed him to pull together a cabinet without the oversight of the DPR. The group which felt most injured by this development was Masjumi, the Muslim coalition with strong roots in West Sumatra which lost most of its influence in the government. Party leaders were also deeply concerned about the apparent rise of the PKI and Sukarno's left-leaning tendencies.

²⁰ This point can, of course, be debated. Insofar as the Padri Wars were to establish greater Muslim piety, they did achieve their goals, but the leaders were forced in the end to surrender to the Dutch on very degrading terms. With regards to the PRRI, there are those in West Sumatra now (largely veterans of the movement) who argue that they achieved their goal with a forty-year delay, referencing the regional autonomy law after Suharto's downfall. Taufik Dt. Mangkuto Rajo, interview with the author, Padangpanjang, 21 June 2006.

Similar concerns were rising in the military. Key military leaders in West Sumatra, led by Colonel Djambek, created the “Movement Against Communism,” railing against political developments on Java. Of equal or greater concern for the military, though, was their own decline in power. The West Sumatra-based Banteng Division, despite being the most heavily decorated of the three divisions on the island, was being dissolved into the North and South Sumatra commands as part of a simplification of the armed forces.²¹ Furthermore, General Abdul Haris Nasution, a long-time enemy of the leading Sumatran officers (despite being a Sumatran Batak himself), had been reinstated as head of the armed forces. In response to these developments and the discontent among the rank and file because of their poverty, a series of councils was held demanding reforms in Jakarta politics. Among these reforms were the end of “Guided Democracy,” return to the 1945 Constitution, the replacement of Nasution, and the reincorporation of former vice-president Hatta (the country’s most prominent Minangkabau, but one who did not support the rebellion) into the government.

The dynamics of regionalism are perhaps the most interesting. Central Sumatra (of which West Sumatra was a part) had already gone without a democratically elected governor for years when the 1955 elections took place. As the province remained in political limbo, Ahmad

Hussein, the head of the Banteng Division and thus the top military officer in the province, decided with much popular support to replace the appointed governor in December 1956. Hussein as acting governor then began several stalled development projects and called loudly for a more local distribution of the income from the oilfields in the province (near the east coast town of Pekanbaru). In these actions he and his collaborators gained tremendous popularity and also meaningfully increased the standard of living for several more remote areas.

Throughout the course of 1957, the rhetoric on both the Sumatran and Jakartan sides escalated, requiring Sukarno to call a “National Consultation” (*Musyawahar Nasional*) in September with the goal of ending regional dissent. The commanders from North, Central, and South Sumatra all presented a united front at this conference, but very few concrete results emerged. Over the next few months, accusations that linked the military leaders with a botched assassination attempt on Sukarno, as well as bellicose statements from fringe military and civil leaders associated with the movement, pushed the conflict to the brink. On February 10, 1958, Ahmad Hussein issued an ultimatum on behalf of both the Sumatran military leaders and several civilian politicians (led by Mohamed Natsir, head of Masyumi), demanding that the current government step down and allow a new administration to form without Sukarno or his unconstitutional innovations. The Revolutionary Government was declared

²¹ This insight regarding Banteng’s superior record comes directly from Mestika Zed, “PRRI dalam Perspektif Militer dan Politik Regional: Sebuah Reinterpretasi,” *Diakronika*, 1, no. 1 (Juni 2001), 7.

five days later, and armed conflict began within a week.

One question to ask when assessing the peasant side of the PRRI rebellion is when in this process the popular support of the movement emerged. The Minangkabau in the military were drawn into the struggle by some of the same issues that caused discontent among their generals; many of them opposed the break-up of the Banteng Division, and the poor conditions for soldiers during the 1950's. Most of all, though, those in the military felt a great loyalty to their leaders, particularly Ahmad Hussein, and so followed him into rebellion.²² The local military men, then, should be seen starting their support in 1956 with the various councils. Among the rest of the populace, scholarly assessments have pointed to strong support for the PRRI because of the development work which had been done under Ahmad Hussein since he assumed the position of governor.²³ This support would have been building from the end of 1956, roughly the same time period as the rise of military rank-and-file support. Finally, others cite intimidating propaganda for a year leading up to the proclamation that led them to join the movement.²⁴ One of the most peculiar but telling pieces of propaganda was the myth that if Sukarno succeeded in his desire to implement Communism (which was ascribed to him by the

²² Ismael, interview with the author, Bonjol, 22 June 2006.

²³ Leirissa, 58; Kahin, 190.

²⁴ Taufik Dt. Mangkuto Rajo; Roslaini Binti Sabirin, interview with the author, Padang Panjang, 21 June, 2006.

Sumatran leadership), that the government would impose atheism on the people and forbid all prayer.²⁵ Even with these factors, there are conflicting reports of the level of support at the very outset of the armed rebellion. As James Mossman, a British journalist who traveled into Central Sumatra in March, 1958, later wrote, the rebels' "appeal touched the faith and commercial instincts of the Menangkabau [sic], who responded warmly, until the shooting started. Thus at the outbreak of the civil war Central Sumatra offered an apparently united front."²⁶ Interviews with West Sumatra residents who witnessed the events suggest that the wider population was not sold on the idea of rebellion until the central government army began to attack. When the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) began to strafe the towns and roads to prepare for their invasion, "all of society wanted to participate in the struggle."²⁷

The armed struggle ended fairly quickly for the cities, but stretched on for years in the countryside. The government began to strike almost immediately, dropping bombs on major cities and potential invasion sites starting on February 22.²⁸ The

²⁵ Nazwir L.D. Simarajo, interview with the author, Padang, 1 June, 2006. This myth was told both in Pak Nazwir's village and his wife's hometown.

²⁶ Mossman, 107.

²⁷ "Semua masyarakat mau ikut perjuangannya." Nazwir L.D. Simarajo. Some other interviews echoed this sentiment, but none stated the idea so strongly.

²⁸ Makmum Salim, *Sedjarah Operasi Gabungan Terhadap PRRI-Permesta* (Jakarta: Pusat Sedjarah ABRI, 1971), 20.

more striking action was when it dropped paratroopers on the airfields outside Pekanbaru on March 12, taking the city, the nearby oilfields, and the recently dropped American weapons cache (intended for the rebels) “without a single shot coming out of the mouths of their weapons;”²⁹ the PRRI soldiers had fled in the face of invading forces. The response was a disheartened rebel military leadership, trying to excuse the loss by pointing to the extenuating circumstances of fighter planes.³⁰ Although this loss was followed shortly by the brief occupation of Medan by a sympathetic Batak general, the rebels had to surrender Padang in April following another well-executed air strike by the central government forces.³¹ This signaled the beginning of an all out retreat by the rebel forces as the government troops worked their way up the coast and into the mountains to Padangpanjang, also working their way up from the east coast towards the central Minangkabau valleys. By October 1958 the PRRI propaganda magazine distributed abroad could only say “Apart from the major towns along the belt of Padang-Bukittinggi-Pajakumbuh [which is to say, all the major towns in the province], the whole area is practically under PRRI control.”³² The PRRI cause, then,

²⁹ Ibid, 23.

³⁰ Mossman, 111.

³¹ Kahin, 216. Kahin points out just how poor the PRRI defenses and planning were in addition to the good execution of the government troops under Ahmad Yani.

³² *PRRI Bulletin: Voice of New Indonesia*, 1 [October 15, 1958], 6. A familiarity with

had been driven into the jungles, where it was able to sustain itself for quite a long time. Volunteer soldiers lived in the forests for up to two years, while their families provided for them as best as possible.³³ The rebel leadership sustained itself in the woods, as well, keeping up the pretense of a government and even going so far as to declare a new state, the Federal Republic of Indonesia (*Republik Persatuan Indonesia*, RPI) in early 1960.³⁴ For the most part, however, the years from 1959 to 1961 were marked by an uneasy ABRI occupation of West Sumatra’s major towns while guerilla attacks, increasingly sporadic and insignificant, were the only sign of the rebels in the province.

Popular favor during the armed conflict definitely rested with the PRRI, as can be seen from enlistment practices. At the outset most of the men of the province enlisted as soldiers for the PRRI militias. Some joined feeling compelled to do so, fearing that their non-participation would cause them to be labeled as a Communist or jailed as a central government spy.³⁵ Others were genuinely supportive of the cause and the leaders, and ready to commit themselves with a passion not seen since the war for independence from the Dutch.³⁶ Even among those who supported the cause, however, many

West Sumatran geography will testify as to how mild this assertion really is.

³³ Roslaini Binti Sabirin; Taufik, interview with the author, Bonjol, 22 June, 2006.

³⁴ Kahin, 224.

³⁵ Taufik.

³⁶ Bagindo Fahmi.

chose not to join the rebel army because of their disapproval of the methods or their doubts about the PRRI's odds for success; this was especially prominent in border areas as opposed to the Minang heartland.³⁷

Soon after the conflict began, popular support even in the heartland shifted forms rather quickly from overt military to covert moral contributions. This was in response to the early PRRI losses and pressures exerted on the families of rebel soldiers by the occupying central government army.³⁸ After the shift the most significant marker of general support for the rebels was providing them food and supplies. In Padang Panjang, the West Sumatran city where the occupation was longest and reputedly the harshest, a thriving black market conducted primarily by teenagers and women sustained the militias in the jungle.³⁹ Additional support was provided by silence, which often came at a very high cost.

³⁷ This is reported in Edward M. Bruner, "The Toba Batak Village," in *Local, Ethnic and National Loyalties in Village Indonesia: A Symposium*, ed. G. William Skinner (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations and Yale University Cultural Report Series, Southeast Asian Studies, 1959), 52, on the northern fringe of the movement, and in Mossman, 119, on the border with South Sumatra.

³⁸ Maryam Zunaria, interview with the author, Lubuk Alung, 18 June, 2006.

³⁹ Taufik Dt. Mangkuto Rajo; Roslaini Binti Sabirin; Sutina Binti Sabirin, interview with the author, Padang Panjang, 21 June, 2006; and Mak Katik, interview with the author, Padang, 7 April, 2006. Sutina Binti Sabirin was one of the smugglers who specialized in cooking oil at 15 years old; Mak Katik dealt in cigarettes at the precocious age of 11.

During this period, rapes, kidnappings, and on-the-spot executions were not uncommon for those suspected of withholding information about rebel activities.⁴⁰ Also, by 1961 the central government troops had burned over 10,000 homes in West Sumatra, mostly of accused rebel collaborators.⁴¹ The strong statement from these incidents was that the general populace of West Sumatra was willing to suffer through them and not turn in the rebel militias.

Not all of society supported the rebellion, however. In the plantations on the eastern coast, for example, the plantation workers and their supervisors alike hated the rebel troops, who would come around demanding taxes from the plantation.⁴² Others felt that the principles on which the rebels were protesting were just, but did not justify a military revolt.⁴³ These groups were a minority, though, perhaps a growing minority throughout the course of the struggle.

The militias, irregulars, and leadership of the PRRI did not descend from the jungles until 1961,

⁴⁰ Roslaini Binti Sabirin; Sutina Binti Sabirin; and Betti Yusfa, "Kekerasan Dalam Zaman PRRI di Tilitang Kamang, 1958-1961," *Diakronika*, 1, no. 1 (Juni 2001), 59-66.

⁴¹ "Lebih 10.000 Buah Rumah Rakjat Terbakar di Sumatera Barat," *ANTARA*, no. 107/A (18 April, 1961), 4, cited in Hidayasri, "Komando Daerah Militer III 17 Agustus di Sumatera Barat (1959-1963)," (Thesis, Universitas Andalas, 1990), 40.

⁴² Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1985), 151.

⁴³ Mossman, 107.

when a general amnesty was offered to them by the central government.⁴⁴ Most of the leadership were given amnesty but exiled from public life permanently; this fate even extended down to local heads of the PRRI.⁴⁵ The majority of the rank and file was integrated back into society, and some even went on to have leadership positions in society again.⁴⁶

D. Conclusions

Given the character and extent of the popular support given to the PRRI rebellion, it is apparent that this rebellion differed from those which preceded it. Like previous rebellions, it depended on peasant participation; in 1959, 85% of Indonesians still lived in a village setting,⁴⁷ and attempting a movement without them would be inconceivable. The PRRI, however, did not grow out of lower-class society; rather it was formulated and led by generals and intellectuals.

⁴⁴ Kahin, 226.

⁴⁵ Ismael, Maryam Zunaria. Ismael was the military commander in Bonjol, who was forced into retirement at age 41 and never held a job again. Maryam Zunaria's father, Hj. St. Zainal Abidin, was the civilian leader for PRRI in Pariaman district; he was forbidden to hold any public leadership positions ever again, including at his local mosque, and died in disgrace in 1963, soon after the rebellion ended.

⁴⁶ Taufik. Taufik was a student soldier who functioned as a guerilla fighter in the forest for two years; after returning to society he eventually was elected to the state legislature. One of his colleagues apparently became the president of the State University of Padang.

⁴⁷ Rudi Pirngadie, *The Problems of the Government and the Army in Indonesia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for International Affairs, 1960), 3.

The dual levels at which the PRRI rebellion functioned, that of the educated leadership and of the peasant rank-and-file, makes this the first revolt in West Sumatra where the goals were widely disparate among the various participants. While in previous rebellions, such as the Communist uprisings of 1927, different locals may have been avenging different personal vendettas in their participation, they all shared a basic understanding of the uprising as redressing their dissatisfaction with Dutch economic dominance. By contrast, in the PRRI the leadership spoke and wrote of a struggle against Communism and constitutional infidelity by Sukarno,⁴⁸ whereas the peasants were focused on their own economic prosperity and personal freedoms.

This split understanding of the PRRI is a classic example of the great and little traditions at play in the same movement. Furthermore, judging from the accounts given above, the peasant concept of the mission of the PRRI was not unlike other little movement conceptions of contemporary rebellions in Southeast Asia. In the Vietnam struggle for independence, for example, "salvation from the foreigner was taken by the peasantry to include salvation from hunger, tenancy and taxes."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ This is apparent in the *PRRI Bulletin: Voice of New Indonesia* series, a series of English language public relations propaganda journals issued from the PRRI foreign office in Europe.

⁴⁹ David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: UCalifornia Press, 1971), 277, cited in James C. Scott, "Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the

This is not very distant from the explanation overheard by James Mossman: “When the revolution swept the nobility away, many of the new leaders spoke of the rediscovery of an older, more truly Indonesian order; a golden age, when the peasants had stood firmly on the ground of their liberties and the economy had been varied and vital.”⁵⁰ Peasants in the Minangkabau territory and the surrounding area believed that since this goal had not been fully achieved through the independence movement, the struggle must be continued against the imperialism of Jakarta until this state of affairs appeared. Thus, following James C. Scott’s idea of the adaptation or profanation of the narrative of the leadership,⁵¹ the narrative among the peasants twisted the leadership’s concept of gaining greater autonomy from Jakarta to say that this struggle would bring about freedom from all government interference and an age of prosperity.

Of course, earlier rebellions had carried similar idealistic dreams, but the PRRI was the first incidence in West Sumatra where the leadership did not share the millennial vision of the masses. Had the peasants understood the vision of the leadership, would they still have participated in the revolt? Was the swift reluctance towards active military participation the result of a better understanding of the rebellion’s aims as espoused by the

core leadership? Are the Minangkabau peasantry prone to future profanations of great tradition narratives? These are questions which require further study, or even speculation. It is likely, however, given Om Fahmi’s description, that the Minang will continue to protest.

Little Tradition, Part II,” *Theory and Society*, 4, no. 2 (Summer 1977), 241.

⁵⁰ Mossman, 77.

⁵¹ Scott, 242.

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