

**The Politics of Food and Food Security in
Indonesia during the decolonization period,
1945-1965**

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I. Introduction

The links between the state and the economy has occupied one of the major issues in the economic historiography of Indonesia. The Soeharto era (1966-1998) provided a good example of close connection between the state and the economy, and more importantly, the dominant role of the state in the economy. By placing economic development in the country as a major goal, the Soeharto era has been widely known as "an economic development regime". And yet before the 1998 crisis, remarkable achievements were recorded. rice import decreased steeply "to almost zero",¹ and rice self-sufficiency was achieved in the mid 1980s.² Together with population control and poverty alleviation, the increase in rice production brought a positive image to the regime and its performance has been depicted as "a success story of economic development".³ The image was strikingly different from the period of 1945-65, which has often been described as economically poor and politically unstable. Despite of its agrarian nature, Indonesia was well-known as the world's largest importer of rice.⁴

The paradox could mislead to an impression that in the period of 1945-1965 nothing had been done by the governments in economic terms, especially in food sector. Indonesian history during the period, which has mostly been approached from a political perspective, strengthens the misconceptions that 'Indonesia was preoccupied with politics',⁵ that the government was busy only with political matters. Scholarly attention to the economic rehabilitation and economic decolonization helps to understand the links between the state and the economy during the period. The gap in our knowledge of the issues, however, has only been recently been filled in. In this paper, I will look at the links between the state and the economy in the context of politics of food and food security. The discussion is confined to the role of the state and its agencies in securing domestic food supply, to food production and consumption sides. It is expected that an explanation for the food security of the period could be established. The temporal setting of the discussion is a period of 1945-1965, which in the periodization of Indonesian history is roughly well-known as the Soekarno or Old Order era.

2. The Policies of Food

From the early years of independence, the Indonesian government had paid serious attention to the issue of food. This issue was highly important not only because it related to the people's basic need for living, but for political reasons as well. Domestically, the availability of food affected the political stability in the country. Food also played an important role in the Indonesia's international diplomacy. In 1946, for example, India suffered seriously from harvest failures and encountered famine. On April 1946 the Indonesian government under Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir took an initiative to provide an aid of 500

¹M.C. Rickelfs, *Sejarah Indonesia Modern* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1992), p. 434.

²Hal Hill, "The Economy", in H. Hill (ed.), *The Indonesia's New Order: The Dynamics of Socio-economic Transformation* (St. Leonard: Allen and Unwin, 1994), p. 72.

³Hal Hill and J. Mackie, "Introduction", in H. Hill (ed.), *The Indonesia's New Order: The Dynamics of Socio-economic Transformation* (St. Leonard: Allen and Unwin, 1994), pp. xxiv-xxv.

⁴Hill, "The Economy", p. 54; Nawiyanto, "Ketahanan Pangan dan Politik Pangan Masa Jepang sampai Orde Lama", in Sri Margana, at al., *Sejarah Pangan di Indonesia: Strategi dan Politik Pangan dari Masa Kolonial sampai Reformasi* (Jakarta: Direktorat Geografi Sejarah, Direktorat Jenderal Sejarah dan Purbakala, Kementerian Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata, 2010), p. 202.

⁵Howard Dick, Vincent J.H. Houben, J. Thomas Lindblad and Thee Kian Wie, *The Emergence of a National Economy: An Economic History of Indonesia* (Honolulu: Allen & Unwin and University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), p. 170.



5. Concluding Remarks

The article has shown that food security was a central issue during the period of 1945-1965. The governments during the period were aware of their responsibilities of providing food security in the country. In their views, food security and food sufficiency could not exclusively be achieved with market mechanism. But rather, they believed in the necessity of state intervention. The production and distribution sides clearly indicated the active role of the state in handling the issues. Promoting food production, especially rice, was set as a major target. A number of technical aspects of rice cultivation were improved and better rice technology was introduced. Moreover, the farmers were encouraged to promote the production of rice by providing them with credit incentive. The stocks of rice were further secured by conducting regularly-held rice procurements and also rice imports. To guarantee the fulfillment of the people's need of food, especially in deficit areas, rice injection was carried out. In addition, the governments also tried hard to keep the prices of rice affordable by the low income earners.

On consumption side, the governments encouraged the Indonesians to have adequate nutrients intakes. The primary reason was the deep concern on the malnourished Indonesians. Many Indonesians had low quality and insufficient food consumption. From the food security perspective, the measure put an extra challenge to the government because more quantities of foods were required, apart from better quality and more diversified foods. On top of this, a much bigger challenge actually arose from the growing population size, meaning that more mouths needed to be fed. The increase in food production could not keep up with the growing population. The fact that food crisis contributed to the regime change in the mid-1960s, therefore, should not be linked to the absence of the role of the state, but rather to the failure of the state to adopt adequate and systematic ways of tackling the food related-problems.

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