

MODERN HISTORY

Sukarno – Background

- Family background and education
- Involvement in student nationalist politics in Bandung
- Oratorical skills

Achmad Sukarno was born on the 6th June 1901 in Surabaya, within an atmosphere of emerging Indonesian and Asian nationalist feelings. His father Raden Sukemi, was a Javanese Muslim of the higher priyayi class and his mother a Hindu Balinese of the priestly class. True to Javanese symbolism, which believed that great leaders were born around natural events, Sukarno's birth has a lot of mythology that circles it, such as a volcano eruption geographically near his birthplace.

As a young boy, Sukarno was first sent to live with his grandparents in Tullungungung, where he attended a local Indonesian school. It was here that he was first exposed and influenced by the Javanese mysticism of wayung stories. He became enthralled by the stories moral pluralism, which is consequently reflected throughout his life. He saw himself as the wayung (puppet master) who was able to shape the atmosphere around him.

Sukarno's upbringing was influenced by both his mother and father. His father taught him theosophical beliefs and influenced Javanese culture, while his mother brought elements of Hinduism and Balinese culture. Later on as a nationalist, he would often praise his birth as a product of his 'unity in diversity' (Binneka Tunngal Ika) aspiration for Indonesia.

At the age of five, Sukarno returned to Mojokerto and attended the local village school, where his father now taught, until he was able to gain entry into a local Dutch language school. This entry was possible through the Dutch reforms of the 'Ethical Policy' (late 1900s), which expanded the Dutch East Indies education system to be accessible to the priyayi class. Through securing entry into this school, Sukarno received a higher education meaning that he would later be able to attend a Dutch secondary school.

After finishing his schooling in Mojokerto, Sukarno went to live in Surabaya (1916) with a friend of his fathers, Tjokroaminoto. Tjokroaminoto was a prominent nationalist figure at the time and the leader of Sarekat Islam. This move into his house, "a cradle of ideologies (Legge), consequently immersed Sukarno in Indonesia's developing nationalist movement. As one of the few Indonesians that attended the Hogere Burger School, feelings of isolation sparked his interest in Marxist and Jefferson's readings as he took an anti-colonial political stance. Tjokroaminoto and Sukarno's relationship was that of a master and protégé, as reflected in Sukarno's marrying of his daughter (hung marriage) around the year of 1920. Within this atmosphere, Sukarno's debating, journalist and public speaking skills began through the joining of the Jong Java (Young Indonesian) group in 1918. During this time, he also wrote for the Indonesian magazine Oetesan Hindia, where he professed his developing nationalist viewpoints. Sukarno was soon influenced by other prominent nationalist leaders of the time, such as Douwes Dekkar and Tan Malaka.

This involvement in these nationalist parties shaped his life later on because nationalism became a prominent force within Indonesia's contextual history. Nationalism in Indonesia can be accredited to the weakening of the 'white supremacy' notion (after Japans victory over Russia in 1905) and other forming ideologies such as Marxism (Russian Revolution, early 1920s).

After finishing his schooling in Surabaya, Sukarno went on to get an architecture degree at the Technical College in Bandung. It was here (early 1920s) that his student nationalist politics began, within an atmosphere of rising tension between Sarekat Islam, the Indonesian Nationalist Party and Muslim party's. These conflicting viewpoints provided Sukarno with the opportunity to form a new party. This began through his secretariat role in the Bandung Study Club (1925-26), which in 1927 formed into Indonesia's first Nationalist Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia). This party merged with other party's to form the PPPKI umbrella group in 1927, through the promotion of the merdeka (freedom) principle. PNI along with the help of Sukarno's skillful oratical skills, which were "one of the greatest examples of charisma the world has ever known" (Wejak), was a key to his rise in prominence and influence upon the Indonesian people and society. In 1926, his article 'Nationalism, Islam and Marxism' reflected his first nationalist beliefs, which later (1945) were incorporated into the Indonesian constitution through his Pancasila ideology.