

Interview with an Indonesian anarchist about the history and current state of anarchism in Indonesia

Forum voor Georganiseerd Anarchisme

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This interview was conducted in 2023 by Forum voor Georganiseerd Anarchisme, a platform in the Netherlands that aims to establish a specific organised anarchist organisation called Organisatie v. Vrij Socialisme inspired by the platformist and especificismo tradition. The aim of the interview was threefold: to establish closer ties with organised anarchists in Indonesia; to inform people about the Indonesian anarchist movement and its history; and to raise awareness of it.

Given the significant uprising that began on 29 August in Indonesia (2025), we deemed it appropriate to translate the article from Dutch to English to extend its reach.

The interviewee is a member of an Indonesian anarchist federation but their identity is kept anonymous due to security risks.

Thank you for doing this interview with us. Can you tell us a bit about your self?

I am an anarchist, born into a cosmopolitan culture, even though my mother is Dayak, an ethnic native to the island of Kalimantan, with which I have always associated myself. I was active in the student movement, organizing homeless people and in efforts to defend the land of farmers and the urban poor in Java who were being evicted. At that time, I was still studying in Java majoring in journalism. I also manage the self-publishing Pustaka Catut, which produces and translates anarchist materials in Indonesian. I carried out independent research on the topic of historiography of the anti-colonialist movement in the Dutch East Indies, and anarchist anthropology about stateless societies spread throughout Indonesia. My latest research at the moment is a biography of the thoughts of Indonesian National Hero Ernest Douwes Dekker (Multatuli's grandson) which I am working on with history students, and another one is stateless society in the Maluku Islands. I am still committed to continuing this research even though I am serving a 15 year prison sentence for possession of 15 kilograms of marijuana (which is illegal in Indonesia). Currently I am actively organizing the Prisoners Union/Serikat Tahanan, which is more accurately called a collective consisting of anti-authoritarian prisoners spread across various Indonesian prisons. We are trying to build a solidarity movement for prisoners, campaigning for decriminalization, and in the long term, for abolition.

There is a lot to unpack here, and those projects you're involved with sound pretty interesting. But before getting deeper in to that, can you tell us belanda's (slang: Dutch cheese heads) a bit about how you got in contact with anarchism and what the landscape is like in Indonesia.

I was exposed to anarchism through punk music. But I reached my ultimate radicalization in college and I read Bookchin's ideas through Janet Biehl. At that time, I decided to be an anarchist. I am only 28 years old and have been active in the movement for 6 years. Anarchism is now growing bigger, very diverse, but relatively less organized among youth and students. Indonesia is a tropical and resource-rich country, and this has resulted in serious conflict with capital as they seek to control land and resources by expelling the local population. It is difficult to go through a day (24 hours) without hearing news of clashes, demonstrations and criminalization in agrarian cases in large areas across the archipelago. Today, anarchism is perhaps one of the few driving forces that is influential at the grassroots, especially farmers and the urban poor, although its influence is much weaker among workers and indigenous communities.

You speak good English so it's probably easier to get hold of anarchist literature but what about anarchist literature in native Indonesian languages and does it have a long history?

Anarchist literature has entered Indonesia since the early 20th century, apparently mostly in Dutch. For example, the autobiographies of Domela Nieuwenhuis, Leo Tolstoy, and Bakunin. None of it survived or was passed on to the generation of anarchists who emerged at the end of the 90's with the emergence of anarcho-punk. I'm not part of that generation, but there are many studies and interviews that explain that they read from the internet (which was just emerging) and also foreign zines that somehow reached them. Since the 2010s, translations of books from English have begun to appear, such as Alexander Berkman and Janet Biehl. To this day, anarchist literature is increasingly numerous and abundant. There are many articles on anarchism from local authors, although only a few (four authors) have made it into books, and most of them are historical studies. We used to have the website anarkis.org, which had very good content because it not only translated, but also hosted local authors. Unfortunately the website is no longer active. But we have the Underground Archives/Arsip Bawah Tanah which manages a large collection from the 90's to today, and it continues to grow.

To in the historical context, can you tell us a bit about your research and findings of the anti-colonialist movement in the Dutch East Indies, and your latest research about Indonesian national hero Ernest Douwes Dekker (Multatuli's grandson)? And if anarchism played any role in Douwe's Dekker's life and in the anti-colonial movement.

In 2017, when the discourse of anarchism was emerging among students in Indonesia, we had difficulty finding historical footholds. At least, one of the debates at that time was, are we really pioneers today? Did the theory of modern anarchism not spread earlier, during the colonial period for example? This question arises because anarchism is often discredited as theories imported from the West. This accusation is problematic, because the principles of anarchism can clearly be observed in pre-colonial societies. But I want to first explain that modern anarchist politics entered almost simultaneously with the emergence of the socialist movement in Indonesia. Although I found several articles about anarchists and anarchism in the late 19th century, anarchism was almost sympathetically promoted by Ernest Douwes Dekker in the middle of the second decade of the 20th century. And yes, he was the pioneer, and very influential in Indonesia's national awakening! Its influence was felt across the entire spectrum of early politics,

from nationalists, communists and Islamists, whose visions were revolutionary, anti-capitalist and anti-colonial. Anarchism played out in a strange way because at that time, the articulation of national liberation, whoever its political proponents, had a very libertarian tone in the Dutch East Indies. Some historians call it deviation, or tendency, or even ghost.

In 2018, I published a book¹ about the history of anarchism in Indonesia. I carried out this work in a hurry, but it was responded enthusiastically so that there was some follow-up research by other researchers. One of them is a history student who wrote a thesis about Ernest Douwes Dekker. I became his mentor informally, and currently, we are conducting research together for a co-authored book. I used to be very enthusiastic about this historical research, but I feel like this will be my last. My focus and priority now is the ecological crisis, and in this I turn to anarchist anthropology. This scientific discipline will develop a formula for decolonizing anarchism, which is not Euro-centric, non-industrial, “white”, for example, by focusing studies on indigenous peoples. I hope this will be in line with the trend of anarcho-indigenism.

Looking at the Wikipedia page of Ernest Douwes Dekker it doesn't mention anything about his anarchism, do you know how he got influenced and if he wrote any anarchist propaganda? If I'm correct Multatuli never called him self an anarchist but was close friends with Domela Nieuwenhuis, did Ernest Dekker got influenced by anarchism in the time he was in the Netherlands?

Regarding the claims that Ernest is an anarchist, most of them are exonyms, or nicknames from other people. We're investigating it and tried to trace how his ideas were influenced by anarchism, because we found that Ernest quoted the Mother Earth journal managed by Emma Goldman. He advocated strikes, boycotts, sabotage, and commented positively on syndicalism. He read the Russian Christian anarchist Leo Tolstoy and described Jesus as a glorious anarchist. He is even sympathetic to the idea of propaganda by the deed, for individual acts of violence and terrorism. He knows about nihilism. Based on my research, Ernest first became familiar with anarchism from his encounters and contacts with Indian anti-colonial activists, some of whom in their efforts for national liberation had embraced anarchism (a trend that was common in Asia at that time). The most significant is Har Dayal. I have written about this in my latest essay, “From One Explosion to Another: The Radicalization of Ernest Douwes Dekker and Global Anarchism”.² At heart, Ernest was a nationalist, having been influenced by anarchism, and establishing contacts and working alongside anarchists for a time. In the midst of the void of anti-authoritarian history in Indonesia, this alone is worth exploring.

The same thing applies to Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker). He did not claim to be an anarchist. His work, *Max Havelaar*, often considered an anti-colonial novel, was actually an attempt at political annexation, as stated by Rob Nieuwenhuys. But I highlight Multatuli at the end of his life, amidst his opposition to parliamentary socialism, Multatuli actually appeared increasingly radical with anti-state sentiments. For this please read my other essay, “Multatuli and The Tendency of Anarchism”.³ Multatuli is not an anarchist ideologically, but naturally. Multatuli was probably influenced by the French anarchist Elisee Reclus, and he actually became an anarchist(ic) first, at a time when Domela was still a parliamentary socialist.

¹ Perang yang Tidak Akan Kita Menangkan: Anarkisme dan Sindikalisme dalam Pergerakan Anti-kolonial dan Revolusi Kemerdekaan 1908–1948

² <https://medium.com/@pustakacatut/from-one-explosion-to-another-the-radicalization-of-ernest-douwes-dekker-and-global-anarchism-1bff7963df03>

³ <https://medium.com/@pustakacatut/multatuli-and-the-tendency-of-anarchism-95e4db14d4fe>

You say you're shifting, your focus more on anarchist anthropology to look for answers to combat the ecological crisis and to also decolonize anarchism. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

When we read anarchism, the anarchism discussed in Indonesian language literature is a translation of 19th century anarchism from Europe, such as Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, Alexander Berkman and Rudolf Rocker. Their ideals were noble for collective ownership of the means of production by the working class. Therefore, our anarchist movement is class struggle oriented, in a rather conventional sense. But if you read about the Mayday actions from 2017 to 2019 in Indonesia, you will notice that the composition of the so-called anarchist bloc mostly came from students and youth, and was concentrated mainly in big cities on the island of Java.

Just for context, Indonesia is an archipelagic country with a centralised and Java-centric developmentalism. Over the years, Java has become so industrialised that your image of Java is no longer the one depicted in Multatuli's novel about farmers oppressed by colonial officials and local feudal figures. Large factories are established in Java, and the best educational centers are also established in Java, and this makes Java the center of the highest population (and pollution) growth. Young people from rural areas ranging from Sumatra to Papua (the government claims that in Indonesia there are more than 300 ethnic groups, although in reality there are many more) go to Java to study. One of them is me, from Kalimantan. How can I and thousands of other students from suburban areas, who are exposed to political thinking such as anarchism, continue to struggle if we have finished our studies and returned to our respective cities (or villages) which are not industrialized and sometimes, still live traditionally?

I am not saying that anarcho-syndicalism is irrelevant in Indonesia, but I want to explain that making syndicalism the only approach is not enough. We can't just invite fishermen in coastal villages to discuss The Haymarket affair, for example, or tell tribal chiefs whose communities still live on shifting cultivation, to fight for wages and seize factories. The point is, there are still many of us who come from diverse and non-industrialized economic realities. In the Marxian conception, this is sometimes called a pre-capitalist economy. But I prefer to call it non-capitalist, because "pre" implies that in the future it will turn into capitalism or must lead there as a historical certainty. The logic of Marx's dialectic of historical materialism and the ambitions of global capitalism today are equally dangerous for indigenous peoples and farmers who today are trying to defend their land, who are actually opposing the establishment of factories, or plantation and mining industries on the land they have previously controlled and managed. In fact, in some places, farmers and communities are actually fighting to have large-scale factories or plantations in their places closed, because it makes them even more miserable. Finally, there is a contradiction: how can we be syndicalists, when all this time we have stood with the peasant movement and indigenous peoples? What should we say when the orientation of the people's movement is to oppose industry or destroy it, not seize it?

The concept of class struggle must be expanded, and I agree with the theory offered by *\$Especifismo* which was formulated by anarchists from Latin America. This does not necessarily mean the working class in the field of industrial struggle, and I will quote from what they say: "The anarchist understanding of the social forces behind social change is much more general than the Marxist formulation. Unlike Marxism, it does not assign a special role to the industrial proletariat. In anarchist writings, we find all kinds of workers and the poor, all the oppressed, all

who somehow belong to peripheral groups or areas, and are therefore a possible element in the revolutionary struggle for social change.”

In short, the Spanish Revolution of 1936 can be an inspiration for urban workers’ movements in industrialized areas of Java, especially in Jakarta and West Java. But in many places in the archipelago, I believe that learning from the practices of the Zapatistas in Chiapas and the Kurds in Rojava is more relevant. This means decolonizing ourselves from the tentacles of states that try to annex us, the reach of capital that tries to control our resources, and the cultural values that devalue us and want to erase us, drag us into a globalized economy but only leave us as spectators, as consumers. This is also increasingly relevant because we are facing global warming due to human industrial activity. Community autonomy in managing resources locally and decentralised has been proven to be more ecologically sustainable. In this case, I see that the environmental, indigenous peoples and agrarian reform movement are connected to each other. Anarchism can play a crucial role in steering all three along an anti-authoritarian path.

Formulating a decolonized anarchism means tracing back the reality of our local context with the theories of anarchism, creating new ones if necessary. For example, our history textbooks at school only tell about the history of the kings before or during the arrival of Dutch colonialism. In fact, many communities in the archipelago, for almost all their history, lived autonomously, in small populations, relatively egalitarian, without any centralized institution that could be called a state. This has been documented by European missionaries, explorers and colonial officials during their encounters with these communities. I need to quote the results of Alfred Russel Wallace’s research, in his work *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), when he lived in the Aru Islands, Maluku:

“I daresay there are now near five hundred people in Dobbo of various races, all met in this remote corner of the East, as they express it, “to look for their fortune;” to get money any way they can. They are most of them people who have the very worst reputation for honesty as well as every other form of morality,—Chinese, Bugis, Ceramese, and half-caste Javanese, with a sprinkling of half-wild Papuans from Timor, Babber, and other islands, yet all goes on as yet very quietly. This motley, ignorant, bloodthirsty, thievish population live here without the shadow of a government, with no police, no courts, and no lawyers; yet they do not cut each other’s throats, do not plunder each other day and night, do not fall into the anarchy such a state of things might be supposed to lead to. It is very extraordinary! It puts strange thoughts into one’s head about the mountain-load of government under which people exist in Europe, and suggests the idea that we may be over-governed. Think of the hundred Acts of Parliament annually enacted to prevent us, the people of England, from cutting each other’s throats, or from doing to our neighbour as we would not be done by. Think of the thousands of lawyers and barristers whose whole lives are spent in telling us what the hundred Acts of Parliament mean, and one would be led to infer that if Dobbo has too little law England has too much.

...I have thought how wild and ferocious the Bugis sailors looked, and how little should like to trust myself among them. But now I find them to be very decent, well-behaved fellows; I walk daily unarmed in the jungle, where I meet them continually; I sleep in a palm-leaf hut, which any one may enter, with as little fear and as little danger of thieves or murder as if I were under the protection of the Metropolitan police. It is true the Dutch influence is felt here. The islands are nominally under

the government of the Moluccas, which the native chiefs acknowledge; and in most years a commissioner arrives from Amboyna, who makes the tour of the islands, hears complaints, settle disputes, and carries away prisoner any heinous offender. This year he is not expected to come, as no orders have yet been received to prepare for him; so the people of Dobbo will probably be left to their own devices.”

This side of history is what I have been trying to explore since 2018 in research that I call the Proyek Suku Api (PSA)/ Fire Tribe Project (FTP). In 2021, my first research results will be published, namely Dayak Mardaheka: History of Stateless Society in Borneo Hinterland. Currently, I am conducting research on Maluku, although because I am in prison, I can no longer carry out field observations, but completely literature studies. The plan is that I want to discuss every region in Indonesia, including Java and Sumatra, over the next half decade. In this way, hopefully we will rediscover the theory of anarchism which originates from ancestral practices, or what has recently been referred to as Anarcho-Indigenism. This theoretical approach is currently developing, especially in the United States, as a consequence of the anarchist alliance of white settlers with indigenous Indians. And you know what their slogan is? Land back!

Edit 2025: Their research got published in “Anarchy in Alifuru: A History of a Stateless Society in the Maluku Islands” and has been translated into English by Minor Compositions, an imprint of Autonomedia. The book will be released in February 2026, but is available for pre-order now from the following link: <https://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=1596>

The book can also now be downloaded from the following link: <https://archive.org/details/anarchy-in->

That’s all really fascinating and hopefully we can get your work translated to Dutch to spread it here further, to keep our shared history of anti-colonial and bottom up resistance alive. In your opinion, is it possible, or necessary, to build contacts and alliances between anarchists in the Netherlands and anarchists in Indonesia? What do you think unites us?

Anarchists in Indonesia are not yet organized, or do not yet have a platform, although we are sure that in the next few years, one will be formed. I also don’t know what the main agenda of the anarchist movement in the Netherlands is. But I want to explain that Dutch anarchists have been loyal allies in the Indonesian national liberation struggle. The recent article by Russian historian Vadim Damier, “Anarchists of the Netherlands and the Anti-Colonial Movement in Indonesia”⁴, shows the historical links between us.

The anarchists of the Netherlands since 1904 have opposed colonial rule in the Netherlands India (modern Indonesia). Without creating their own organizations in the colony, they strove to establish close contacts with representatives of the Indonesian national movement, first of all, with Indonesian students who studied in Europe. The interaction took place in the form of solidarity campaigns, the struggle against repression and the sending of troops to the colony, as well as in the process of cooperation within the League against imperialism. However, true to their anti-authoritarian, anti-militaristic and pacifist doctrines, the Dutch anarchists refused to support the idea of creating an independent Indonesian state. After members of the Indonesian Communist Party came to the leadership of “Perhimpunan Indonesia” in 1931, regular co-operation with the anarchists was gradually phased out. However, Dutch anarchists continued to express solidarity with the struggle against colonial rule and protested against the repression of the Indonesian national movement.

⁴ <https://ras.jes.su/nni/s013038640016179-4-1-en>

It seems that during the Cold War no more contacts could be found. We're disconnected. But there are valuable lessons. Dutch anarchists had warned how dangerous state formation would be to Indonesian nationalists. Now, we feel for ourselves the suffering caused by our own government, and finally, must liberate ourselves, once again, this time not against Dutch colonialism, but against our own Republic. The memory of our collective struggle must be preserved as a reminder to keep the national liberation struggle on an anti-authoritarian path. We will not repeat the same mistakes made by our predecessors. And here is our tough task.

The Indonesian state has been founded on the blood of its own people. Efforts to centralize power had defeated the short-lived federalism mode of government at the end of the 1940s.

As a result, this gave rise to various rebellions, some of which were separatist movements, such as the Republic of South Maluku. This was followed by Aceh, to West Papua. The only one who succeeded was Timor Leste. They are still fighting for independence in exile in the Netherlands to this day. What is the position of Dutch anarchists towards the national liberation movement? Can the exiled national liberation movement in the Netherlands articulate their political vision so as not to form a state, but rather to learn from the Kurds in Syria and the Mayan people in Mexico, and learn lessons from Indonesian national liberation that instead created new oppression?

This can start with a reflective question, would the wealth and privilege that's being enjoyed today in the Netherlands be possible without the first Dutch expedition under de Houtman to the East Indies, without hundreds of years of oppression, genocide, taxes, and the slavery that our ancestors experienced? This doesn't mean Dutch anarchists should develop some kind of responsibility for historical guilt in the post-colonial world that we face together. And on the other hand, Dutch anarchists must consistently direct their criticism at the Indonesian government and stand in solidarity with national liberation against it, and of course, with the anarchist movement in Indonesia. Socialism in Germany, in this case, gave the wrong direction. Recently we can see anti-fascist flags flying at the same time as Israeli flags, because they think that opposing Israel means being anti-Semitic. They have been through the Jewish genocide, and tried their best to help the politics of Zionists.

Going beyond historical facts, we must base ourselves on a contemporary analysis of capitalism today. Such as the transfer of production parts from America and Europe to countries in the global south because of cheap wages, or intervention in the sovereignty of countries in the south, which for decades has created chaos and damage, then led to a wave of migration to Europe. What kind of cooperation and solidarity is forming between us may already be apparent now. Personally, I recommend that Dutch anarchists become allies of the national liberation movements of Papua and South Maluku, which are trying to separate from Indonesia. The hope is that the social work and insertion process can radicalise them in a more anti-authoritarian direction. In general, as hosts, I think Dutch anarchists will face increasingly challenging immigration issues due to the crises in Africa and the Middle East, as this has happened now (the 2021 military coup in our neighbouring country Myanmar alone has displaced millions of people from their lands). That means building solidarity with people of colour, fighting for a social and political climate that is more conducive to a relatively multicultural society, and preventing the growth of the seeds of fascism that will create a xenophobic dystopia. As an anarchist from Indonesia, this is all I can imagine for today and the future prospects between Dutch anarchists and us (Indonesia and all people of the global south).

Thank you so much for your insights and your research on this all, it's fascinating and covers a lot of important topics to think about and hopefully it will inspire others. I feel like it's time to address the elephant in the room, and that is you being in jail and serving up to 15 years. Can you share a bit about this and how people can support you?

I am a marijuana user, supporter of marijuana legalisation and drug decriminalisation. I was involved in activities that I can't describe here. In essence, I was imprisoned when I transported 15 kilograms of marijuana directly from the source in the highlands of Aceh and planned to sell it to finance my activities (something I currently do not recommend to my comrades considering the government's harsh repression of drug traffickers). I have written about my experiences and perspectives through the prisoner's union, and the book is being translated into English.

In essence, we here live in a corrupt prison culture that cannot be compared with prisons in Europe. Our food rations were so inadequate that we had to buy them ourselves. We also have some obligations for dues, not to mention some illegal levies.

Solidarity.

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Follow the prisoner's union channel that I belong to, and be sure to contact them to get a .pdf version of a collection of writings on prisoner experiences to give you an insight into the conditions and struggles of anti-authoritarian prisoners in Indonesia:

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