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DIIS Brief

State-Building and Foreign Intervention in the Muslim World: Lessons to Learn from Dutch “Liberal Colonialism”

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Abstract:

This brief essay compares Dutch colonial policies in Indonesia with the current involvement of Western states in state- and nation-building processes in the Middle East. Setting the normative debate aside, it argues that contemporary foreign-policy makers might be able to draw some lessons from the retrospective analysis of the so-called “ethical policy,” with which the Dutch colonial administration tried to combine counter-insurgency measures with modern institution building in the early twentieth century.

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Introduction¹

The results of the involvement of Western governments and international organisations in contemporary state- and nation-building processes in what has come to be called the “Broader Middle East” are not looking all-too promising. In particular the two attempts of “coercive democratisation” in Afghanistan and Iraq are increasingly looking flawed. For the majority of journalist and academic observers, the two cases are well on their way to turning into examples of failed Western foreign policies. Indeed, apart from rather dubious electoral processes, the structures in neither Afghanistan nor Iraq resemble anything close to those in a democratic state. In both countries, the incumbent governments have no control over their territories or their peoples. The nascent political institutions and their representatives are protected by foreign troops, and many state functions have been taken care of by largely intransparent collectives of foreign international, national, and non-governmental organisations.

At this point in time, these two examples of the new, post-colonial *mission civilisatrice*² look like they might end in a similar fashion to their historical predecessors: when colonial troops had left the subjugated territories of the global periphery, the international community transferred formal sovereignty to quasi-states that entirely lacked internal sovereignty, i.e. the institutional capacity to govern their respective societies (cf. Jackson 1990). In very many cases, therefore, decolonisation did not lead to the emergence of independent states with accountable governments, but to various forms of authoritarian rule, corrupt regimes, repressive politics and territorially demarcated societies marred by civil wars.

The Dutch Policies of “Liberal Colonialism”

The current situation in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine seems to have certain parallels with these state-building experiences from the era of decolonisation. From an analytical

¹ This essay is a by-product of the author’s current research project *Islamic Radicalism and the Global Public Sphere. A Historical Genealogy of Modern Knowledge on Islam*. The author thanks the Danish Social Science Foundation for supporting this project with a two-year grant.

² This is the way that Roland Paris has labelled the policies of an admittedly heterogeneous global alliance of “liberal internationalists” which sets out to use the normative legal framework and the institutional setting of consolidated democratic states as tools to support state- and nation-building processes in the former Third World (Paris 1997).

point of view, it is therefore reasonable to compare current policies of state- and nation-building with colonial experiences in establishing rule and order in the Muslim world. However, this comparison is not intended as a moral judgment. Whether Roland Paris' normative position, i.e. that the new *mission civilisatrice* is much more benevolent than its predecessors (Paris 2002), is right or wrong does not stand to discussion here. Such a normative decision is difficult to make and depends on the individual perspectives under which moral judgments are made. There are many arguments to support both putting current cases of externally orchestrated processes of state- and nation-building under the label of neo-colonialism and perceiving them as legitimate attempts made by international and transnational actors to promote global security, democratic rule and civic liberties. Leaving this moral decision to the reader, this essay aims to analyse current policies designed to establish democratic states in the light of some political experiences from the colonial past.³ More precisely, it poses the question of whether contemporary foreign-policy makers might be able to learn some lessons from the colonial legacies of political intervention. An ideal case in point is the “ethical policy” with which the Dutch colonial administration reacted to the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Indonesia.

In 1901, the Dutch government inaugurated a new political strategy for the Dutch East Indies, the so-called “ethical policy”. In the light of being engaged in full-scale warfare in Aceh (1873-1903), North Sumatra, where insurgents under the banner of Islam had declared a “holy war” against their colonial suppressor, and engaged in numerous incidents of rural unrest, often guided by local religious authorities (*ulama*), the Dutch colonial authorities adopted a new political strategy that was intended to correct previous policies to establish rule and order by coercive means alone. Under the pressure of both violent anti-colonial resistance and the liberal-minded public at home, this new colonial policy was designed to indicate a break with the colony's exploitive past. Although it intended to introduce elements of market economy and democratic rule, the ethical policy did not promote preparation for independence, but was a kind of benevolent colonialism guided by the welfare of the colonised rather than the exploitive interests of the coloniser (Vlekke 1945: 179). Given the Islamic colour of the

³ It goes without saying that this short essay does not present a comparative in-depth analysis, but rather a sketch of ideas that leave aside any discussion of the very different contexts of current and colonial intervention.

insurgence and the almost complete absence of a specific Islamic policy on the side of the Dutch colonial administration,⁴ the new ethical policy was not only a “liberal mission”. At the same time, it was an expression of the awareness that the administration in the Dutch East Indies had to deal with the increasing politicisation of Islam, a hitherto almost neglected phenomenon.

Clearly, current cases of state- and nation-building in the Middle East share some of the challenges with which Holland’s colonial rule in the early twentieth century was confronted in Indonesia. Particularly with regard to the situation in Iraq, it therefore is interesting to pose the question of in which ways the “liberal colonialists” reacted to these challenges and what their new policies achieved.

Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje: a Dutch Paul Bremer cum Bernard Lewis?

In the preface to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of his book *Orientalism*, the late Edward Said launched an angry tirade against the “combative and woefully ignorant policy experts” who inform American administrations in the process of foreign policy making (Said 2003: xxi). Looking at the situation in Iraq, Said’s assault against the community of US policy advisors seems not entirely without justification. Hilary Synnott who served under US administrator Paul Bremer from July 2003 to January 2004 as “the Coalitions Provisional Authority’s Regional Coordinator for the four southern Iraqi provinces” came to the conclusion that the Coalition in Iraq did not have an accurate view of the political and socio-economic situation of the country. Moreover, Synnott criticised the Coalition’s administration for not being aware of the cultural and historical differences between twenty-first century Iraq after foreign intervention and twentieth-century Germany and Japan under post-Second World War reconstruction, and, even worse, for not recognising the limits of its own knowledge and the extent of its own ignorance (Synnott 2005: 54).

Obviously, the US government’s decision to go to war was based on very limited knowledge of the political and social conditions their troops and civil staff would face in Iraq. Given the amount of knowledge accumulated at American universities, this

⁴ Previously, colonial policies toward Islam were characterized by the belief that its influence could be eliminated by the rapid Christianisation of Indonesia. Therefore, Christian missionary work in Indonesia was subsidised by public funds (Benda 1972: 84).

ignorance is hardly to be excused. Even the grand old man of American Orientalism, Bernard Lewis, could have told the US administration something about the essential differences between the political reconstruction of European, Asian or Middle Eastern states. Although Lewis tends to reinforce Orientalist stereotypes in explaining political developments as a result of the unchanging nature of Islamic culture, his reputation as a leading historian of the Middle East is beyond question and his work would have contributed to the knowledge necessary for a better understanding of regional forces.

Against this background of neglect, Dutch “liberal colonialism” gives the impression of having had much more sophistication compared to the Coalition’s intervention in Iraq. With the appointment of Snouck Hurgronje as Advisor on Arabian and Native Affairs in Batavia in 1898, the Dutch government had installed one of the world’s leading Orientalists. Between 1889 and 1891, Hurgronje had written a special study of Indonesian Islam and undertaken in Muslim guise almost seven months of participating observation in the holy city of Mecca (Pedersen 1957: 22). Then, he became Advisor to the Government for Eastern languages and Muslim law, exercising direct influence over Dutch policies with regard to the Achenes War (Reid 1969: 271). Even long after his departure from Indonesia in 1907, Hurgronje’s influence on Dutch colonial policies cannot be underestimated.

To a certain extent, Snouck Hurgronje was a Bernard Lewis and a Paul Bremer in one person. Born in 1857, Hurgronje first studied theology but shifted to Semitic philology in which he completed his doctorate in November 1880 on the origin of Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. From 1881 to 1887, he taught at the institute for the education of bureaucrats for the Dutch East Indies in Leiden, and until 1889 he served as professor of Islamic Law at the University of Leiden (cf. Waardenburg 1962: 18-24). Snouck Hurgronje was not only instrumental in defining Holland’s new colonial strategy in Indonesia, but also in reformulating the colonial administration’s political and military response to the insurgency in Aceh. There, he undertook a careful study of the problem on the spot and suggested combining the military counter-insurgency measures with more benevolent policies towards the Muslim believers. Hurgronje criticised the attitudes of secularist and Christian politicians at home, who viewed Islam as a formidable enemy only, and he advocated viewing politics and religion separately when dealing with the Islamist insurgencies. In sum, based on his profound knowledge

of Islam and his attentiveness to the social particularities of Indonesian society, Hurgronje was able to substantially influence Dutch colonial policies and therewith to help improve the general security situation in Indonesia (cf. Vandenbosch 1959: 196-201; Vlekke 1945: 173).

Counterinsurgency and Courting the Colonised

The two major goals of Snouck Hurgronje's endeavours should be understood within the new framework of ethical policies. Thus, curbing the Islamist insurgency was only a precondition for his long-term aim of securing the loyalty of the Indonesians for an unlimited time. In changing colonial policy goals from exploitation to development, it was intended to raise the standard of living in the colonies to that of Dutch society. Only in this way would the colonial administration be able to ensure the loyalty of the colonised and therewith to strengthen the political foundations of the Netherlands (Vlekke 1945: 174). In principle, Hurgronje's Islamic policies were a means of achieving a much larger vision: the modernisation of Indonesia according to the Dutch blueprint and the transformation of the colonial relationship into a lasting bond between homeland and colonies.

Following this vision, Hurgronje's strategy was to make use of the different forms of political, religious and social allegiance that characterised Indonesian society. He rejected simplistic and deterministic approaches that viewed Islam as the only source of political loyalty for Indonesians. In the rules of customary law and Indonesia's traditional aristocracy he found social institutions that limited the influence of Islam. These traditional institutions rather than religion guided most Indonesians in the political affairs of everyday life. Consequently, the colonial administration could exploit these allegiances to deeply rooted traditions in order to fight Islam as a political ideology in its appearance both as local and as pan-Islamist forms of anti-colonial resistance. In addition, Hurgronje distinguished between Islam as a political force and as a religion. In promoting his strategy of "twin policies of tolerance and vigilance", of the authority's neutrality over Islam as a religion and its resolute repression as a political ideology (Benda 1972: 88), he tried to isolate the proponents of political Islam from the ordinary believers. To a certain extent, these policies of divide and rule were

successful in reducing the level of militant resistance to Dutch rule. However, while serving the colonial administration's short-term goals, the new ethical policy failed in the long run. Why was Hurgronje's Islamic policy not able to forge firm bonds of loyalty between Holland and its colony?

Snouck Hurgronje was aware of the fact that the utilisation of Indonesia's traditional institutions could only support his policies in the short term. He believed the increasing modernisation of Indonesian society would inevitably weaken their influence on the population and therewith their ability to contain the power of political Islam. Parallel to the weakening of customary law and the aristocracy, Islamic institutions would gain in strength and therefore remain a major obstacle to the long-term goal of a lasting bond of loyalty between Indonesians and the motherland. He saw that, ultimately, Islam would remain a major threat and that the separation of religion and politics could only be a means of achieving the ultimate aim of defeating Islam as a relevant power in Indonesian society. Hurgronje's ambivalence vis-à-vis Islam, calling for a more benevolent approach in order to reach its final defeat, was guided by the deeply anchored convictions of his time. In equating modernisation with Westernisation and secularisation, there was no way for him to view religion in general and Islam in particular as a potentially modernising force. By definition, modern Indonesia could be neither an Islamic Indonesia nor an Indonesia ruled by traditional institutions. The development of modern Indonesia had to follow the path of European modernisation. In his final analysis, this goal would be reached by means of Western education. Eventually, in his view, the role of Islam would diminish under the impact of the new ethical policy and its measures of political, economic and societal reform (cf. Benda 1972: 89).

Conclusions: Lessons to Learn from Dutch "Liberal Colonialism"

In March 1942, the Japanese occupation ended Dutch rule in Indonesia. The attempt to re-establish Holland's colonial empire through military means (1947-49) failed, not least under the diplomatic pressure of the US, and Indonesia finally proclaimed independence in December 1949 (cf. Jung *et al.* 2003: 207-208). Moreover, Islam has remained a major force in both Indonesian politics and society, becoming even more

visible since the resignation of President Suharto, which in May 1998 ended almost 50 years of authoritarian rule in the country. Apparently, none of Snouck Hurgronje's long-term goals have been achieved. Ethical politics were not able to prevent the separation of the colony from Holland, and the accelerated modernisation of Indonesia has not diminished the public role of Islam. In this light, at least three lessons of relevance to the current situations in Iraq and in Afghanistan might be learnt from the Dutch example.

The first is a rather trivial lesson and regards the way in which in particular the military intervention in Iraq took place. In contrast with the Dutch example, the Coalition in Iraq was guided by wishful thinking rather than by sober knowledge, as Hilary Sinnott's (2005) and Toby Dodge's (2005) analyses clearly show. Hurgronje's combination of tolerance and vigilance took into account the socio-political conditions on the ground, an indispensable condition for both counter-insurgency measures and institution building. In this way, the Dutch colonial administration was able to successfully fight Islamist militancy in Indonesia and to establish a certain level of security, also in the war-torn province of Aceh. The almost complete disregard that the Coalition in Iraq showed with respect to the particularities of Iraqi society and the expertise of various warning voices, in contrast, created a situation in which military security measures sparked the insurgency rather than to contain it.

The second lesson is related to the situation of domination and occupation. Although the proponents of Dutch liberal colonialism wanted to put an end to colonial exploitation, the new ethical policy was barely able to convince Indonesians to accept the modernisation of their state and society under the tutelage of an enlightened Dutch colonial administration. In the long run, the liberal-minded reform measures did not diminish but rather enhanced the resistance of both the forces of Islamism and Indonesian nationalism. Even worse, the decades of Dutch and Japanese occupation contributed to the authoritarian path that Indonesian politics have taken since independence. It seems likely that the new form of the *mission civilisatrice* will also share the predicament of its successors. The association of political and economic reform with foreign occupation, military repression, and international tutelage inevitably compromises both the sincerity of foreign intentions and the durability of the implemented institutions on the ground. To be sure, this does not mean that the

imposition of institutions from outside will always fail. Rather it depends on the specific context in which these external interventions take place. In post-Second World War Germany and Japan, the policies of coercive democratisation followed self-inflicted defeats in war. Moreover, the newly implemented institutions were accepted by the political and economic elite because they served the key interests of these nations (Bellin, 2004-5: 606).

Finally, there is the role of religion in society. Although Snouck Hurgronje rejected any essentialist image of Islam, but analysed its forms as the result of historical transformations, he nevertheless shared the negative attitude of modern Europe toward religion in general. His personal distance from religion (Waardenburg 1962: 129) was underpinned by his belief in a conception of secularist modernity that until now has been a dominant feature among European intellectuals. According to this conception, religion and modernity are nested in a zero-sum game. Consequently, modernisation necessarily implies secularisation, i.e. the decline of the role of religious values and institutions for individuals and societies. Contemporary developments have proven this classical association of modernisation and secularisation wrong.⁵ Not only have non-Western cultures contradicted this linear and teleological reading of modernity, but also its flaws have become apparent in developments within the “hegemonic” culture of the so-called West. The role of Catholicism in the break-down of Polish communism is a case in point. Recent developments in Turkey show which way a political party that claims its roots in religious values can become a major force of democratic reform (cf. Jung 2005: 21-29). Rather than being part of a zero-sum game, religion and politics in modern societies enter into a relationship of permanent societal negotiation. From this perspective, Snouck Hurgronje’s conviction that the modernisation of Indonesia would almost inevitably go hand-in-hand with the decline and disappearance of Islamic institutions has proved wrong – at least for the time being.

Regarding current interventions in state- and nation-building processes, Hurgronje’s failure is a good example of the importance of overcoming the stigmatisation of Islam as an essentially anti-modern force. As in the European example, religion has played a

⁵ For a good discussion of the origin, persistence and refutation of some meanings of secularism, see Beckford (2003). Regarding the current role of religion in international politics: (Haynes 1998), and of Catholicism in recent and Islam in future processes of democratization: (Casanova 2001).

multi-faceted, ambivalent and often contradictory role in the modernisation of the Islamic world. International policies of democracy promotion in the Muslim world have to acknowledge this fact and to get rid of the stereotypical remnants of nineteenth-century secularism and scientific positivism which for so long have impacted on Western conceptions of modernity. The normative frameworks, religious practices and social movements within Islam can provide elements to promote democratic change as well as patterns for the justification of authoritarian rule (cf. Jung 2004). Precisely this ambivalence calls for an informed and reflexive approach towards the Muslim world. Foreign interveners in state-building processes in the Muslim world have to carefully re-think the role of religion in modernizing societies and to avoid the historically deep-rooted but ill-perceived homogenisation of Islam into a unique and principally anti-modern system of “Otherness”.

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