In Search of Achmad Sukarno

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For somebody who does not exist Achmad (sometimes spelled Achmed, Ahmad, and Ahmed) Sukarno certainly gets around. Contributing to stress levels amongst academics, Achmad has popped up frequently in the essays of successive generations of undergraduates. This materialization is not surprising given his frequent and longstanding appearances in authoritative reference sources such as encyclopaedias, biographical dictionaries and the like. He appears for instance in the 1994 edition of the Chambers Dictionary of World History. More recently (and naturally) he also graces cyberspace with his ethereal presence, abundantly so in fact. Undoubtedly the internet is the usual source of his undergraduate essay manifestations in recent years. Achmad also appears in some older books about Indonesia. For example, he features in the index (though not the text) of that old stalwart Louis Fischer’s The Story of Indonesia, published in 1959, a book that introduced many people to Indonesia in the 1960s. Similarly Achmad appears in the index to Deliar Noer, The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, published in 1973. He also appears in Brian Crozier’s Southeast Asia in Turmoil, published in 1965, prompting criticism from Harry Benda when he reviewed it in Pacific Affairs the following year.

Indonesia specialists, such as Benda, who deplored the addition of Achmad to Sukarno, probably expected the practice would eventually wither away. Surely the sources in which Achmad appears would gradually gather layers of dust on library shelves as successive generations of students reached for the newer publications from which, Benda and others had banished him. But far from fading away, Achmad seems to be experiencing resurgence. There he is in John Pilger’s The New Rulers of the World, published in 2002. He takes a bow in The Complete Idiot’s Guide to World Conflicts, also published in 2002. He also appears in Barbara Kellerman, Bad Leadership: What it is, how it happens, why it matters, published in 2004. More disturbingly for the Achmad deplorers he also appears in Zachary Abuza’s Militant Islam in Southeast Asia (2003), Robert Hefner’s Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia (2000), and even more recently in W. Roger Louis, The Oxford History of the Twentieth Century (2006). And recently too Achmad has received the seal of approval from the NSW Board of Studies, which has placed Achmad Sukarno in the current NSW Modern History Syllabus, approved in July 2004. In the 999 syllabus he was plain old Sukarno. Like it or not it seems we are stuck with Achmad.

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In this paper I want to look at three questions.

- Where did the Achmad addition to Sukarno originate?
- Is it possible that Achmad really is Sukarno’s other name?
- Does it matter?

**Origins of Achmad Sukarno**

A common view, expressed for instance, by Willard Hanna in *Eight Nation Makers* is that Achmad was added by Western correspondents. According to Hanna, the erroneous addition dates back to 1945 when Sukarno first came to wider Western attention. Perhaps journalists added Achmad because the notion of “first names” and “family names” was deeply embedded in their cultural expectations. Or perhaps they knew better but felt a need to give the appearance of being thorough or well informed. Conceivably, Achmad may have been added at the editorial stage, perhaps even due to misguided altruism in an effort to counter the prejudices of readers likely to regard someone with only one name as uncivilized. Whatever the motivation, Hanna’s explanation is inherently plausible, and one that is attractive to Indonesians and to Indonesia specialists alike, since it provides further ammunition in the good fight against Eurocentrism.

There remains another intriguing possibility: that Achmad was deliberately added by Indonesian nationalists during the revolution with the objective of facilitating the acquisition of support from the Muslim countries of the Middle East. This claim is explicitly made by M. Zein Hassan in his memoirs: *Diplomasi Revolusi Indonesia di Luar Negeri*. Hassan reports that efforts in which he was involved to generate support for the Indonesian cause from these quarters was obstructed (terbentur) by a lack of awareness that Sukarno was a Muslim. He explains that this obstacle was effectively and easily removed by the addition of Ahmad (sic) to Sukarno by the Central Committee of Defenders of Indonesian Independence in the Middle East (Panitia Pusat Pembela Kemerdekaan Indonesia di Timur Tengah). If this claim is correct then it is quite possible that the Western journalist “culprits” acquired Achmad from Middle Eastern sources in the late 1940s. One might add that if this is the original source for Achmad Sukarno then it is indirectly attributable to an “Arab-centric” view of the Muslim world, a phenomenon not at all dissimilar to Eurocentrism.

**The (remote) possibility that Achmad Sukarno is correct**

Until 1994 I had always dismissed with scorn the possibility that Achmad Sukarno might be correct. In that year in Yogyakarta I came across a book on a second hand book stall: *Perdjalanan P.J.M Presiden Ir. Dr. Hadji Achmad Sukarno ke Amerika dan Eropah*, compiled by Winoto Danoeasmoro. Hitherto I had assumed that Achmad Sukarno was purely a Western error, one that no Indonesian would make. Apparently this was not the case, but I assumed this publication was a “one off” and while now less scornful I still dismissed the possibility that Achmad was correct. Then in 2001 in the Muhammadiyah library in Yogyakarta I came across a booklet produced by the Muhammadiyah in 1965 to commemorate the bestowal on Sukarno in April of that year of the “Muhammadiyah Medal” (Bintang Muhammadiyah). The booklet referred to Sukarno as Dr Ir H. Ahmad Soekarno (sic). It seems that the official declaration (reproduced in the booklet) of the Muhammadiyah’s decision to bestow the medal on Sukarno did the same. The declaration (piagam) was signed on behalf of the central Muhammadiyah leadership body (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah) by K.H.A. Badawi and M. Djindar Tamimy, its Chair and Secretary respectively. The booklet also contains photographs of the piagam being read out to Sukarno by Badawi, followed by Badawi handing it to Sukarno and Badawi then pinning the medal on
This discovery gave me pause for thought because it is a credible source. The Muhammadiyah’s reputation for efficiency and intellectual prowess makes it at least a little unlikely that the organisation would make what appears to be a glaringly careless or ignorant mistake. An explanation along these lines cannot be ruled out of course, but under the circumstances it seems even less unlikely. If this was merely a careless or ignorant mistake it was one that at the time the Muhammadiyah surely would have regretted profoundly. The bestowal of the Muhammadiyah medal on Sukarno at this time was a desperate attempt by the Muhammadiyah leadership to court Sukarno. Fearing for the Muhammadiyah’s survival as a legal organisation in 1965, the leadership made a conscious decision to obtain Sukarno’s protection by flattering him and by publicly renewing the Muhammadiyah-Sukarno link. No effort appears to have been spared in this endeavour. A forty five member entourage including the Muhammadiyah’s national leadership and leading members of its councils attended the ceremony in the Presidential Palace, and a large contingent of Muhammadiyah High School students was massed outside. The medal was made of gold and of elaborate design, and the commemorative booklet of some sixty pages was lavish, with a hard cover and filled with photographs. There is also plenty of evidence of attention to detail, such as diligent inclusion of Sukarno’s
many titles where required by protocol in the booklet. All of this suggests that the Muhammadiyah leadership believed that “Ahmad” was correct. Additional evidence pointing in this direction is provided by an incident on 28 October 1963 when Sukarno delivered his well known speech commemorating the Youth Oath (Sumpah Pemuda) at Senayan Stadium in Jakarta. Muljadi Djojomartono, a leading Muhammadiyah figure, introduced Sukarno to the crowd as Haji Ahmad Sukarno.

The apparent Muhammadiyah belief in the correctness of Achmad Sukarno may well have been a mistaken one. But it is more than a little remarkable that the Muhammadiyah leadership should have laboured under it. One would have thought that at least some of the Muhammadiyah leaders knew Sukarno quite well and thus would know whether or not he was Achmad Sukarno. There was after all a long relationship between Sukarno and Muhammadiyah, stretching back at least as far as the late 1930s (which both Sukarno and Badawi were at pains to emphasise on the occasion of the medal award ceremony). Even if none of the Muhammadiyah leaders at that juncture knew Sukarno personally they certainly moved in elite circles, close to the centres of power, and had other formal and semi formal opportunities to meet him. Muljadi Djojomartono, for example (who wrote a forward to the booklet) had been a member of Sukarno’s cabinet for several years.

At this point I need to introduce the rather pertinent fact that Sukarno himself explicitly and publicly denied that his name was Achmad, insisting that he was just Sukarno. In fact Sukarno corrected Muljadi publicly at the beginning of his Sumpah Pemuda speech, remarking a little testily:

> When did I get the name Ahmad? As I recall my parents gave me only the name Sukarno … But yes, a moment ago I said that … Muljadi wanted to praise me by calling me Ahmad, because the name Ahmad is a name that is truly highly esteemed brothers. But while I express my thanks and feel moved to have this name added, I repeat that my name is just Sukarno.

Similarly testily, in *Sukarno: An Autobiography as told to Cindy Adams*, Sukarno says: “Sukarno is, therefore, my real and only name. Some stupid newspaperman once wrote my first name was Achmed. Ridiculous. I am just Sukarno.”

The incident with Muljadi begs the question why after such a public correction, almost a rebuke; Muhammadiyah would make the same faux pas eighteen months later. Didn’t Muljadi communicate with the rest of the Muhammadiyah leadership? (It is noticeable that he didn’t make the same error in his forward to the commemorative booklet.) This is perhaps not as far fetched as it seems. Although his public inclusion within the Muhammadiyah leadership was useful to the organisation politically at the time, in private Muljadi was probably regarded as *persona non grata* within Muhammadiyah circles. Muljadi had been expelled from Masyumi because of his acceptance of a position within Sukarno’s cabinet during the construction of Guided Democracy. While Masyumi and Muhammadiyah were certainly not of identical minds there was a strong relationship between the two organisations and much of the opprobrium with which Muljadi was regarded by Masyumi figures would have readily transferred into Muhammadiyah. Indeed many Muhammadiyah leaders had also been prominent figures within Masyumi. Nevertheless, even if Muljadi didn’t pass on to his colleagues the news that Sukarno objected to the name Achmad it is remarkable that apparently nobody else in the Muhammadiyah leadership noticed or was informed. Didn’t Muhammadiyah follow Sukarno’s speeches? Perhaps it is simply the case after all that in this instance Muhammadiyah proved less than efficient.

For most scholars Sukarno’s denials/corrections regarding the addition of Achmad to his name
provide an end to the matter. They did for me until 2001. Since then I have been prepared to entertain a degree of doubt. Obviously Sukarno’s statements are of considerable weight, but they are not conclusive proof. It is possible that he was lying or at least concealing part of the truth.

**Occasions when Sukarno may have acquired Achmad**

Indulging my fancy I ask the following question: If Sukarno was actually Achmad Sukarno, how might he have acquired the Achmad? It seems that are four possibilities.

1) His parents might have given him the name Achmad. But this is highly unlikely given their background and the complete absence, apparently, of any motivation to do so. And of course there is not a shred of evidence to support the suggestion.

Slightly less unlikely is the remote possibility that Sukarno adopted the name Achmad at some point during his life, but later chose not to use it, even to conceal it, so that very few people knew him as Achmad.

2) One of those possible occasions was during his early teens in Surabaya. According to his own account, during this period he was profoundly inspired by Achmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah. Although it does seem that Sukarno heard Dahlan speak at this time, and may even have met him, his account of how deeply affected he was by Dahlan at this juncture is more than a little suspect. There is no other evidence to corroborate his claim of the impact Dahlan made on him and he does not seem to have been at all drawn to Muhammadiyah ideas at this time. But it is just possible that Sukarno went through one of those short but momentarily overwhelming teenage phases in which, inspired by Dahlan, he called himself Achmad for a brief period. This period in Surabaya for the impressionable and sensitive Sukarno was certainly exciting for him as he discovered the wide and vibrant world of nationalist politics and encountered all of the ideologies associated with it, including no doubt the Modernist Islam of the Muhammadiyah. While Sukarno’s eclectic and syncretic inclinations were no doubt already deeply rooted in his personality, it is easy to imagine him enthusiastically “trying on” various philosophical, ideological, and political guises in this period as he was just beginning to shape his politics and world view.

3) Another possibility is that Sukarno took the name “Ahmad” while he was under the influence of Ahmad Hassan of Persatuan Islam. As we know from his celebrated correspondence with Hassan in the early 1930s, Sukarno certainly studied and thought deeply about Islam in this period. He stated a number of times that this was the point in his life that he truly embraced Islam. That he was in prison and exile at the time, lonely and in some despair lends some credence to this claim. The phenomenon of religious commitment during imprisonment is well known. To signal his new found commitment to Islam perhaps he took a Muslim name. If so that of his religious teacher would have been a likely choice. But once again there is no evidence that he did.

4) In a similar vein, perhaps Sukarno added Achmad to his name at some point during his exile in Bengkulu, West Sumatra. The Muhammadiyah community in the small town of Bengkulu was the centre of his life for the several years he spent there. The local branch of Muhammadiyah employed him and he was very active in local Muhammadiyah activities, involvement which facilitated publication of several articles he wrote on Islam and politics in Modernist Muslim journals. Sukarno joined Muhammadiyah at the beginning of this period and married into this Muhammadiyah community at the end of it. (His wife Fatmawati was the daughter of the local leader of Muhammadiyah.) Certainly this was not a sophisticated, cosmopolitan community and
he was still far from the centre of events. Nevertheless it was a big improvement for Sukarno socially and psychologically compared with the extreme isolation he experienced in Endeh, Flores during most of the 1930s. It is thus not inconceivable that he took the name Achmad during his Bengkulu period in order to fit in better with his new community. The slightest hint of evidence that this might have been the case is provided by the fact that one of those responsible for producing the commemorative booklet discussed above was Oei Tjeng Hien (later Abdul Karim), a Muhammadiyah member who knew Sukarno intimately during his Bengkulu period. (Oei Tjeng Hien also attended the Muhammadiyah medal ceremony.) If correct, the intimate knowledge of Sukarno during his years in Bengkulu might also be the source of the Muhammadiyah belief that Sukarno was or had been called Achmad Sukarno.

5) The final point in his life in which there is a slight possibility that Sukarno took the name Achmad is during his pilgrimage to Mecca in July 1955. Muslims performing the haj often take a haj name, as Soeharto did in 1991, becoming Muhammad Soeharto (although subsequently he does not appear to have used it). Again that this might have happened in Sukarno’s case is a possibility but there is no hard evidence to suggest that it did, merely some slight hints pointing to the possibility. In his reminiscences of his time as Commander of the President’s Personal Bodyguard (Komandan Detasemen Kawal Pribadi Presiden), H. Mangil Martowidjojo provides an eyewitness account of Sukarno’s haj experience but makes no mention of Sukarno taking a haj name. He does, however, give a lavish eye-witness description of the abundant tears Sukarno shed while praying beside the Prophet’s tomb, emphasising how moved Sukarno was by the occasion. There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of this account or the genuineness of Sukarno’s emotions. Thus, given his state of mind it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Sukarno, swept up by the occasion, adopted a haj name, such as Achmad. Interestingly, one member of the entourage of thirty one that accompanied Sukarno to Mecca was Winoto Danoeasmor in his capacity as Vice Head of the President’s Household (Wakil Kepala Rumah Tangga). Winoto is the author of the book mentioned above which (with Sukarno’s written permission) recounted Achmad Sukarno’s journey to America and Europe which took place in the middle of the following year. Did Winoto ascribe Achmad to Sukarno in this publication because as a member of the haj entourage he was aware that Sukarno had taken Achmad as a haj name and had no reason to believe that Sukarno did not wish to use it?

Does it matter?

It does matter, but obviously not as much if Achmad Sukarno is incorrect. If the addition of Achmad to Sukarno is simply an error or a fabrication it matters as a cautionary tale of how an error can catch hold and persist over decades in the literature, despite efforts to eradicate it. There is the added mild interest derived from the fact that the error’s origin, or at least its persistence, probably proceeds from a lingering cultural imposition, from a Eurocentric attitude in the world of publishing and journalism, and even a little in the world of scholarship. Sukarno would no doubt regard this as further proof of the need for more thorough retooling to rid the world of such “oldefos” attitudes. If, however, Sukarno was actually Achmad Sukarno, even if only for a brief period, then the issue is more important. The circumstances under which he acquired the name and the reasons for the acquisition would tell us something more about Sukarno.

I have already suggested that Sukarno might have adopted the name Achmad due to a passing youthful enthusiasm; or because of a deepened spiritual commitment to Islam during imprisonment, or because of a desire to more closely identify with his Muhammadiyah community in Bengkulu. If Sukarno did adopt the name Achmad for one of these motivations then it would enrich our understanding of his personality in general and his psychological state at the time. There is another possible motivation, one that is more explicitly political. Adoption of
Achmad by Sukarno sometime between 1934 and 1942 may have reflected a decision, one perhaps influenced by the circumstances in which he was placed in this period, to attempt a shift in his political persona in an Islamist (*santri* or Islamic nationalist in alternative terminology) direction. His flurry of writings on Islam in this period also could be interpreted in this light. Naturally, if correct this would shift our understanding of the evolution of Sukarno’s politics.

But irrespective of whether or not Sukarno was ever Achmad Sukarno his emphatic denial of it still tells us something. And this provides another reason why it matters, at least a little, even if it is wrong.

The reason for the emphatic denials is very likely to lie in politics, more specifically in the politics of identity. Sukarno’s identity was always not merely of personal importance, it was politically important, even precious. Thus, at least after a possible flirtation with a more Islamist identity, it didn’t just matter to him on a personal level that he was fundamentally a Javanese (and partly Balinese) *abangan* Muslim. It mattered to him politically as the leading exponent and articulator of the nationalist (we might say secular nationalist) synthesis, which (albeit narrowly) dominated post-independence Indonesian politics, and therefore determined the ethos of the Indonesian state over which Sukarno presided for more than two decades. Of course it was possible to have a “*santri* sounding name” such as Achmad and be a secular nationalist. But Mohammed Sukarno or Achmad Sukarno would have sounded less authentically Javanese, certainly to the *abangan* ear, and especially in the 1950s and 1960s. In this period, particularly in the 1960s after the banning of Masyumi and the establishment of Guided Democracy, Sukarno’s brand of nationalism was not only more radical politically, it was also more overtly *abangan* (which effectively made it more secular, although few would have used this term). Linked to this is that in this period too the political base that Sukarno appealed to most and whose support he courted first and foremost was primarily Javanese and *abangan*, organisationally manifested in the PKI and the left of the PNI. The degree to which Indonesia’s internal political conflict in the 1960s was played out through the prism of a “culture war” should not be downplayed or forgotten. In this conflict *santri* and *abangan* identities, together with all their signifiers, including perhaps personal names, were artificially contrasted and politicised. While it might be pure coincidence, it is noticeable that Sukarno’s public and irritated denials of Achmad came in this period.

There is no evidence that Achmad Sukarno ever existed, in the sense that Sukarno took the name Achmad. There does, however, remain the intriguing possibility that he did so, with attendant modestly significant implications. In another sense Achmad Sukarno certainly does exist, if only as a quirky but seemingly immortal error. Either way, Achmad Sukarno cannot be ignored, and nor should he be.