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THE OTHER MALAYSIA

Writings on Malaysia's Subaltern History

FARISH A. NOOR

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WRITINGS ON MALAYSIA'S SUBALTERN HISTORY

Farish A. Noor is a Malaysian political scientist and human rights activist. He has taught at the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya; the Institute for Islamic Studies, Freie University of Berlin and the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden. He has served as the Secretary-General of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), and is a member of JUST, the National Human Rights Society of Malaysia (HAKAM) and *Suara Rakyat Malaysia* (SUARAM). His columns have appeared in *Malaysiakini.com, Saksi.com, Freemalaysia.com, the New Straits Times, Sin Chew Jit Poh, Far Eastern Economic Review, Asiaweek, Newsweek, Pakistan Daily Times, Impact International* and *Harakah*. His previous works include *Terrorising the Truth: The Demonisation of Islam and Muslims in Global Media and Political Discourse* (JUST, 1997) and *New Voices of Islam* (ISIM, 2002). His upcoming works include *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS* (MSRI, 2003).

ALSO BY FARISH A. NOOR

Terrorising the Truth: The Shaping of Contemporary Images of Islam and Muslims in Media, Policy, Culture
(JUST, 1997)

New Voices of Islam
(ISIM, 2002)

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Foreword by Sumit Mandal

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FOREWORD by Sumit Mandal

FOR A FEW YEARS NOW, Farish A. Noor has written his column *The Other Malaysia* for the Internet news daily Malaysiakini.com. He has covered a considerable range of topics, from the meaning of the word *kafir* to the global damage done by uninformed US foreign policy.

Given the vacuous and compliant opinion-making that dominates much of the mass media in the country, Malaysians have been hungry for independent writing on politics. As a result people have read Farish's articles primarily for content that is political in the traditional sense: Concerned with party politics, institutional democracy and the public performance of politicians. This is mostly the stuff of the published letters and discussions sparked by his column.

Farish does indeed engage formal politics and public life, enough so that on more than one occasion he has been attacked (often by those who oppose his views on religion's role in relation to politics). At the same time, his writings also uncover other forms of politics that have a profound resonance in Malaysian society.

Farish has been articulating realities in the lives of Malaysians that seldom ever find a disciplined public voice. He contests the very things that have been naturalised in official life, including such basics as the Chinese, Indian and Malay 'races'. When writing on Islam, he locates Muslim social and political life within a rich,

vast and multi-dimensional global history. In this manner, Farish has gradually crafted a language through which Malaysians can see themselves for the closely interdependent communities that they are, in the wider world.

Other Malaysias are real and not just a nifty name for a column as Farish writes about history, cultural practices, social change, and everyday life. His columns offer Malaysians and others curious about the country a history, ethics and intellectual solidity that challenges the racialised and authoritarian structure of the bureaucracy and party politics. The very act of writing independently, often taking risks, and the substance of his articles together demonstrate the salience and power of freedom of expression.

The ability to express one's views without fear is not an abstract principle but a daily need in the process of improving the quality of life in the population as a whole. It is intrinsic to the active self-education of Malaysians as culturally and politically aware citizens. At the same time it is the process by which the rules of conduct in shared public life are built. One of Farish's articles defended the right to speak of a leader of the Islamic Party. In this instance, Farish clearly demonstrated his capacity not only to set the rules of conduct, but to take responsibility for them — enough so that he defended the rights of his nemesis. For this he not only gained the admiration and respect of Malaysians but also Indonesian intellectuals championing a pluralist Islamic faith.

The empowerment Farish demonstrates through his writing is invaluable to efforts not only to challenge authoritarianism but to envision sound democratic alternatives. The publication of this book provides the opportunity for further readings of the author's work, hopefully by new and youthful readers. Should this book find its way into Bahasa Malaysia, it would be all the more valuable.

The Other Malaysia is about a country that is here and real, and one that is yet to come. By disavowing racialisation and articulating the mixed and shared cultural and social life, Farish finds the words with which Malaysians can describe and relish their interconnected lives. By speaking up, he demonstrates an emergent and radical assertion of a future public life based on equality and fairness.

Sumit Mandal
Kyoto, 7 November 2002

INTRODUCTION:
Looking For Another Malaysian Story

THE ARTICLES IN THIS BOOK were written between 1999 to 2002 for the news website *Malaysiakini.com*. In the wake of the economic and political crises of 1997-98, Malaysian society was on the lookout for alternative sources of information and news. That *Malaysiakini.com* appeared on the scene not long after was not a surprise: At the time there were about thirty or so alternative and opposition websites operating in cyberspace, scoring tens of thousands of hits on a daily basis.

Being an academic and activist meant that I was offered a wide variety of outlets for my writings. At the time, my articles were appearing in the *New Straits Times, Harakah, Saksi.com, FreeMalaysia.com* and *Malaysiakini.com.* It seemed as if a state of radical dislocation had set in, and the moment was right for alternative writings to come to the surface at long last. Though the articles tended to focus on politics and the political, the pieces for *Malaysiakini.com* were more focused towards the reactivation of the memory of the past and to bring to light aspects of Malaysia's marginalized and subaltern histories and narratives that had been buried for so long. I wanted to remind us of the manifold possibilities that remain with us still, and the alternative paths the country could have taken (and still can, if it decides to do so).

The Other Malaysia was an attempt to write a deconstructive form of political history, showing that history and historiography themselves were political in nature and that the awkward silences and blind spots in the national historical narrative were not there by accident. If and when such erasures occur, they do for a reason and with ideological motives behind them. It was this sustained attempt at recovering the forgotten episodes of our collective past and present that drove me to write the articles that appeared in my column.

Throughout my adult life, I have been struck by the lopsided and myopic perspective that is clearly evident in the collective imaginary of the Malaysian nation. The contribution of 'Other' ethnic and racial groups, the role of women in the country's historical development and the pre-Islamic past of the country have been conveniently sidelined and relegated to the footnotes of history. Instead we have been given a static and monological account of a nation whose development has followed a linear path unobstructed by historical contingencies or alterity. The net result is the creation of a monolithic historical discourse with a two-dimensional historical subject at the centre. Yet who and what is this agent of history? A close reading of Malaysian official historiography will show that the Malaysian historical subject remains male, Malay/Bumiputera, middle-class and Muslim. But surely this is just one aspect of Malaysian identity that is far more complex and cries out to be problematised and interrogated further. If many of the articles focused on the role played by these Malay-Male-Muslim leaders and thinkers, it was precisely because I wanted to show that there was no such thing as a simple and rigidly defined Malay-Male-Muslim subject. *The Other Malaysia* tried to do just that, by foregrounding elements of the past that would complicate such attempts to construct a flat and static historical narrative premised upon such simple essentialist notions of identity and difference.

In the course of the writing, I have experienced ups and downs like many academics and writers are wont to do. There were moments when I was gripped by a paralysing sense of doubt and scepticism, feeling that my efforts were of little worth and that the message was simply not getting through. Reading the newspapers in the country these days leaves one with little hope that things can ever change or that Malaysian society is able and prepared to question itself. But then there were always the gaffes and blunders of prominent leaders, who would provide me with the few bright sparks and lighter moments when the mood turned sour. Thanks to them, I was reminded of the fact that politics can also be downright ridiculous and that what may appear as evil and malign may well be the result of a more common human failing: Imbecility.

But though our leaders may fail us, the task of deconstructing and reconstructing history and politics remains. History and politics are, and have always been, two of the most contested discursive terrains for the simple reason that to control the writing of history means having the power to determine the past, present and future of any nation. The political dimension of history and the historicity of politics are factors that should never be bracketed out of the discussion, and we cannot and should not abdicate our rights and responsibilities to participate in both areas. We need to remember that politics and history are not — and should not — be confined to political institutions and the ivory towers of academia. For politics and history to be truly democratic, open and plural, they need to be won back by ordinary people like us who will take them back to the level of everyday life. Politics and history, if they are to retain their relevance for the nation, must be the property of the nation as a whole, and this means finding it everywhere and anywhere – from the level of the subaltern to the popular.

Though the articles written for *Malaysiakini.com* were mere academic pieces written with a 'popular touch', they were nonetheless an attempt to get the ball rolling. It is my hope that such work can be multiplied and intensified in the future, as any nation that yearns for change must begin from the roots itself. No project of social reformation or transformation can ever succeed if it fails to engage in an auto-critique of some of its most fundamental beliefs and understandings.

It is only through such a deconstructive approach to history and politics that some of our settled understandings of identity and difference can be dislocated and questioned further. Such an approach will also help us reveal the underlying power structures and violent hierarchies that have kept communities and classes apart, and which have sustained the status quo for so long. A critical and interrogative approach is required if we, as a nation, are ever going to create an environment where a new politics of anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-communitarianism and pluralism can be born.

The Other Malaysia should not, therefore, be read as an attempt to subvert one official historical narrative and replace it with another. If anything, my aim was to render such moments of hermeneutic closure and epistemic arrest impossible. Rock the boat if you have to, but keep the dynamics of critical thought, open enquiry and self-criticism going nonetheless. Reform and change will not come from stale platitudes and pedestrian comforts. We need to recover our rational agency and potential as actors on the stage of history. But let that history be an interesting one too.

Farish A. Noor
October 2002

Acknowledgements

The articles written for *Malaysiakini.com* would not have seen the light of day (or the glare of the computer screen) were it not for the constant support and assistance I received from a number of close friends and associates. My thanks go to Steven Gan, Siew Eng and the staff of *Malaysiakini.com* for their support from the beginning. Steven in particular was a patient and understanding editor, who appreciated that overworked and underpaid academics have the habit of missing their deadlines or sending in their articles at the last minute. More often that not the staff of *Malaysiakini.com* had to deal with the legion of typographical errors that festooned my pieces. Yet they were taken in, warts and all, given a quick make-over and put up on the site the very next day.

Many of the historical and political pieces were written with the help of other academic colleagues whose intellectual input proved crucial when my own was wanting. In particular I would like to thank Chandra Muzaffar, Syed Hussein Alatas, Alijah Gordon, Sumit Mandal, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Clive Kessler, Noraini Othman, Nungsari Radhi, Romain Bertrand and Rustam A. Sani for their help, both direct and indirect. The works of Chandra Muzaffar, Syed Hussein Alatas and Alijah Gordon were the guiding posts that motivated me and compelled me to take up political science and philosophy

as my main disciplines. Rustam Sani was particularly helpful in providing me with copies of the writings of political leaders like Ibrahim Yaakob, Burhanuddin al-Helmy and Ahmad Boestaman. These works were of incredible use and value to me, both in my research work and subsequent writings. Sumit Mandal was always a pleasure to work with, and I value our academic collaborations highly for the simple reason that he was the one academic whose interests were closest to my own. Among the friends dearest to me, Chandra Muzaffar, Zainah Anwar, Sumit Mandal, Sharaad Kuttan, Kean Wong, Amir Muhammad, Karim Raslan and Patricia Martinez were the ones who helped me the most and stood by me when things invariably became more difficult. The moral support I received from Chandra, Zai and Patricia helped me get through some of the darker periods when I felt that my efforts had come to naught and that all hope was lost. Thanks must also go to Raman Krishnan, Amir Muhammad, Irman Noor, Amri Rohayat, Sharmin Varghese and Elizabeth Wong who painstakingly went through the text and helped me prepare the final draft before publication. I owe them a coney dog at least, if not a special appearance by root bear himself.

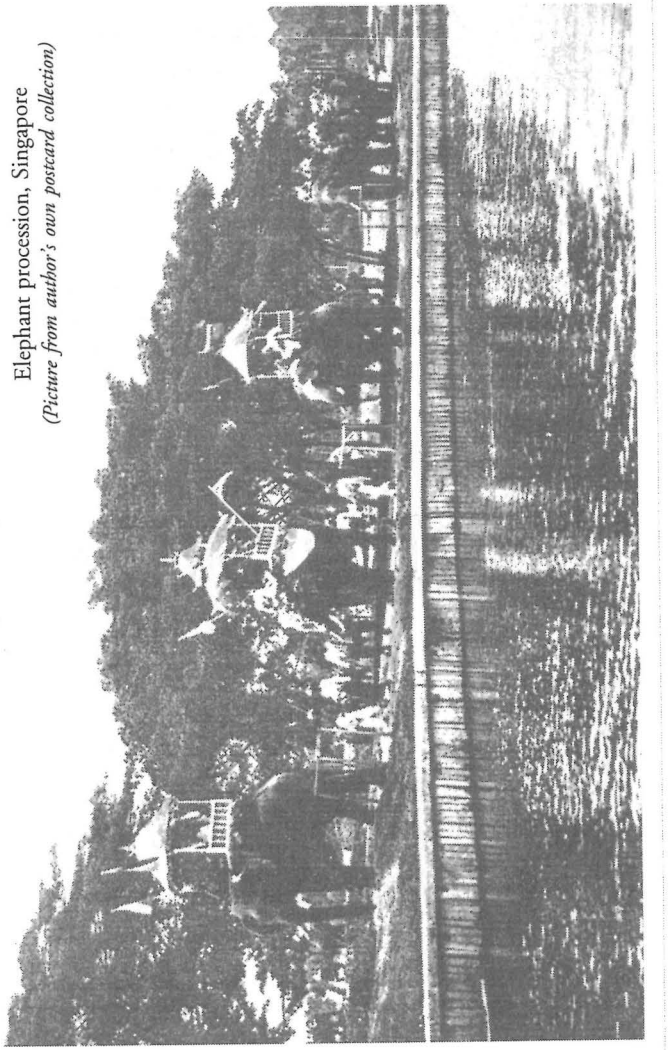
My wife Christele was patient enough to bear with me as I stayed up till the early hours of the morning pounding the keyboard and she above all knew what it was like having to live with a ranting and fuming ne'er-do-well whose only defence against a political system gone off the rails was a sarcastic jibe aimed and timed at the right moment. She was, in many ways, the beacon that kept me on the right track and whose own sense of objectivity and fair play reminded me of my many shortcomings.

Thanks are also due to the readers of the columns, whose response and feedback reminded me of what my priorities should be and when I was in danger of straying off the path. Their encouraging letters and emails kept me going and reminded me that I was not labouring in isolation. Though I cannot thank them all personally, I hope that this book will be a testimony of sorts to their support and my determination to carry on. To all of them, I would also like to say 'thank you'.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my dear departed friend Nik Rashidin Nik Hussein, who was for me a friend, mentor, teacher and fellow traveller walking along the same path in search of that Other Malaysia that we have lost.

Sultan Abu Bakar
(Picture from author's own postcard collection)

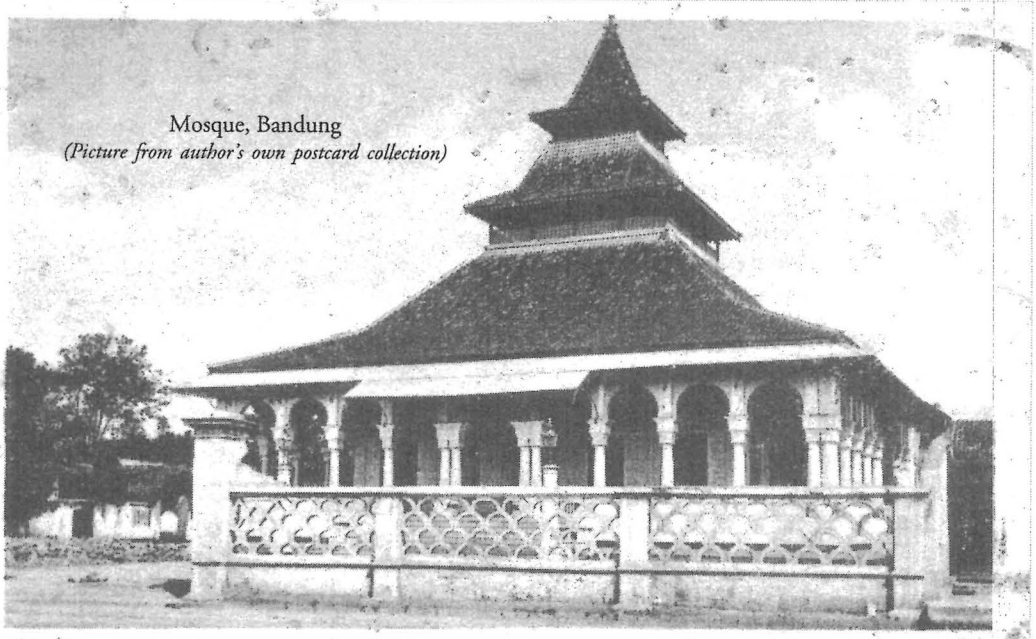
Malay postman, Singapore
(Picture from author's own postcard collection)



Elephant procession, Singapore
(Picture from author's own postcard collection)

Malay girl
(Picture from author's own postcard collection)

Malay lady, Singapore
(Picture from author's own postcard collection)



Mosque, Bandung
(Picture from author's own postcard collection)

PART ONE
Politics and the Political

POLITICS HAS BEEN my main area of concern for the past few years. Trained in philosophy and political science, I was drawn to politics in general and Malaysian politics in particular from my student days. Having spent half of my life in Europe, I could not help but compare the differences between the conduct of politics in the West and how it is practiced here in the East. Malaysian politics is of great interest to me, not least for the reason that its neo-feudal character has been shaped to such an extent by the cardinal values and reference points of Malay culture: Religion (Islam), Tradition and Modernity. These three elements have been the nodal points upon which the rich and often confounding tapestry of Malay and Malaysian politics has been weaved.

There is, however, always the danger of taking the surface phenomena of politics too seriously or literally. One of the biggest drawbacks as far as contemporary academic scholarship on Malaysian politics is concerned is the tendency to accept unquestioningly the essentialist categories of race, culture, ethnicity and religion as fixed and totalising. What has often been neglected is an auto-critique of some of the most basic premises upon which Malaysian politics has been understood and played out.

Political scientists in general remain unpersuaded by the claims of deconstruction and discourse analysis. But I would argue that this is a fundamental mistake as it leaves them open to the charge of over-simplifying — to the point of trivialising — a subject that is often too complex to be compartmentalised and quarantined within conventional epistemic categories. The lived experience of the politics of everyday life is simply too messy, and Malaysian politics is often messier than others. This also

happens to be its charm and the main reason why I am attracted to it.

There is also the risk that in our reading of Malaysian history as static and monological we often leave out the unstated elements of the past that have been relegated to the margins or footnotes of political history. Many of the articles that were written for *Malaysiakini.com* were executed with the specific aim of bringing to light the forgotten aspects of our shared political past. That there was, and will always be, aspects of the Other Malaysia that should never be forgotten. It is only by remembering the past in its totality — with its 'what ifs' and 'what might have beens' — that we can remind ourselves of the potential for change that remains with us still.

1 | MANY OTHER MALAYSIAS

This article was written in mid-2000, at a time when Malaysia's political leaders were openly discussing the need to introduce and enforce new legal restrictions on the use of, and access to, the Internet. The argument then was that the Internet was responsible for creating 'strife and discord' among the population, and that it was being used to disseminate anti-Government propaganda. These concerns came in the wake of the financial crisis of 1997 and the political crisis of 1998 that witnessed the emergence of a number of websites and chatgroups with alternative viewpoints. Many of these alternative websites were then linked to the Opposition parties and the popular reformasi *(reform) movement. Malaysiakini.com was singled out on several occasions on the grounds that it was said to be an independent 'pro-Opposition' news portal.*

MALAYSIA, LIKE MANY OTHER developing countries in the world today, seems to be facing a crisis of "governmentality". By this I refer not only to the difficulties faced by those who are at the forefront of the process of governance and management of the state, but also the problem of trying to understand what 'governance' means in the context of a world where conventional modern categories and notions such as borders, frontiers, territorial spaces and discursive economies have been put to question.

From the day the Internet revolution hit the country, the ruling elite and those who man the machinery of the State have been hard-pressed to come up with new modes of governing and controlling Malaysian society and its constituents. The problem is, we no longer seem to recognise where the boundaries of this thing called 'Malaysia' really lie and what constitutes the thing itself.

The advent of the Internet has brought to the surface once-hidden or marginalised aspects of Malaysian society, both from the past and the immediate present, to our attention. Suddenly, we come face-to-face with a plethora of once-invisible constituencies, ranging from millenarian religious movements to discriminated gender groupings. 'Malaysia', it would seem, has been a mirage all along. What lay beneath the façade of a seemingly unitary space was actually a multiplicity of 'Malaysias' that are now coming out into the open.

That this was bound to happen is old news to those who could read the signs. Years ago, I lived in the state of Sabah in East Malaysia where my family was posted. Living there for four years taught me how people on the margins of mainstream Malaysian society saw and located themselves in relation to the centre. East Malaysians were complaining all the time about how they were being sidelined in the national political and cultural discourse that was being churned out by the propaganda and educational machinery of the State.

That constituencies such as these could feel left out and marginalised was ironic but perhaps to be expected. It was ironic for the simple reason that the story of a multiracial Malaysia we constantly tell ourselves has become the national narrative which binds our community together. Every year we bear witness to colourful National Day parades where practically every ethnic group in Malaysia is represented. The State goes out of its way to ensure that all communities are enrolled into this public

pageant and given the chance to take part in the weaving of the collective narrative that the nation tells itself.

However, upon closer examination one cannot help but notice the subtle and not-too-subtle inconsistencies and unstated biases that lurk within this national discourse.

Again the National Day parade serves as a good example: During the parade we see practically all the major and minor races and ethnic communities represented, but the way in which each ethnic community is given a place and role within it tells us a lot about our shared assumptions of which are the dominant races and which are not. Simply looking at how each ethnic, religious and cultural constituency is located within the parade speaks volumes on how our socio-cultural topography is laid out and how uneven the political terrain of the country really is.

Many a time I have heard the complaint that during these parades the ethnic groups from East Malaysia are represented as the 'exotic' brethren from that other side of Malaysia who are somehow always lagging behind the rest. This image of East Malaysians as being our 'backward' second cousins is further reinforced by some of the advertisements and images we get from our own tourism authorities. Invariably, East Malaysia is presented to tourists and West Malaysians alike as a 'land of mystery' once ruled by the 'White *Rajas*' (as if West Malaysia was not!), infested with wild animals and, yes, descendants of savage headhunters.

Now, this sort of patronising nonsense was obviously not going to be tolerated for long. Sooner or later, those on the receiving end of this unflattering imagery were bound to respond, and subsequently reject it. The same could be said of a host of other marginalised, suppressed and/or slighted constituencies that exist in the country. After being confined to the margins of the national imagination, they were bound to seek ways and

means to redress this imbalance. This is where the Internet comes in.

The Internet has become the solution for many constituencies who somehow feel they have been left out in the discursive economy of the nation. Like that other invention which paved the way for the modern era, the handheld revolver, the Internet has managed to equalise the relationship between the strong and the weak, the dominant and the suppressed.

What the Internet does is to pave the way for other means of discursive activity to take place. In chatrooms and websites that cut across the unchartered terrain of cyberspace, a slew of communities have emerged, discussing matters as diverse as the need for an Islamic state to the need for a secular option for the future. For here, at least, we do not need police permits for meetings involving more than five people at a time.

The State's response to all this has been sadly predictable. The technocrats and securocrats have responded to the emergence of these sites with alarm and suspicion. That so many private and autonomous discursive networks have appeared overnight means (to some of them, at least) the need for more policing and control, as the State fulfils its maximalist potential. Now there is even talk of controlling the Internet by allowing strict anti-sedition laws to operate in cyberspace as well.

Repression and control, however, will not and cannot stop the fact that alternative ideas and beliefs exist in our society; controlling their activities will not bring them any closer to integration. Clamping down on Islamist websites and chatgroups will not erase the presence of these communities any more than banning gay websites will lead to the elimination of homosexuality. The fact that such groups do exist, have always existed and have the right to continue to exist has been bracketed out of the discussion altogether. But to think of such draconian

measures to clamp them down is perhaps an indication of the level of desperation that exists in the corridors of power in the country these days.

In view of these pressing realities, what other option is there for the State and its citizens? Well, for a start, we might as well admit that some of our most conventional and orthodox understandings of the nation-state, the art of government and the political process itself needs to be radically re-considered. Rather than pressing with the mistaken notion that the nation is a unified entity with clearly demarcated and governable boundaries, we need to accept that it is actually an expansive and unlimited terrain that is fundamentally unsutured, open and multifarious in nature.

National communities are in fact assemblies of collective imaginations, more often than not in direct contestation and confrontation with each other. Traditional-minded securocrats may regard this as a cause for alarm but level-headed optimists might see in this the potential of creating a productive and positive critical mass where ideas are free to flow and the best of them will flourish.

That these interests may compete and collide with each other is also a potentially positive thing as well, for the simple reason that as once-alienated communities are forced into close proximity with each other, they will be forced to adapt and negotiate with one another. At the very least, even if we hate each other we would have to learn a common language so that we can curse each other intelligibly.

Recognising the multifaceted nature of Malaysian society is something that is long overdue, and thankfully the Internet has made this move an imperative one. True, our traditional notion of what constitutes Malaysian society may well be challenged as a result. Already, we see signs that traditional values and markers of political

identity have lost their currency among the young. But that in itself is not necessarily a bad thing: In place of the monological and static discourse of the old, unified Malaysia we may well be on the verge of watching a new fragmented, pluralist and differentiated national narrative being born.

Our children may not grow up to know of the old Malaysia that was neatly circumscribed by the vectors of race, religion and ethnicity. The brave new world of the future promises to be a more complicated one, and one that demands a new understanding of governmentality. It's just a pity that the last one to understand this is, as usual, the Government itself.

2 | SULTAN ISKANDAR DZULKARNAIN'S *MEGA-PROJEK*

This article was written in early 2000, at a time when the term 'mega-projek' *had become common currency in Malaysia. The country's meteoric rise and economic development after the recession of the mid-1980s was due in part to the expansion of the manufacturing and industrial sectors, as the Malaysian Government opened the way for more foreign direct investment (FDI) and capital to flow into the country by providing foreign multinationals with infrastructure and logistics back-up. By the mid-1990s, however, the massive development projects proposed by the Government aroused the concern of many local groups, ranging from environmental NGOs to consumer associations. Plans such as the longest bridge in the world, the tallest building in the world, the longest city in the world and the Multimedia Super-Corridor (MSC) provoked protests from ordinary consumers. After the political crisis of 1998 – brought about by the untimely dismissal and subsequent arrest and imprisonment of the then-Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim — the term* 'mega-projek' *soon found its way into the vocabulary of the Opposition parties in Malaysia as well.*

THE TERM '*MEGA-PROJEK*' has, thanks to the changing political mood in the country, become a household word

these days. In the press, mainstream and alternative, we read and hear of the numerous mega-projects that seem to dot the once-uncluttered Malaysian landscape: buildings that are too high, too big and — most embarrassing of all — too empty; dams that seem to serve no purpose; bridges that take you nowhere fast; and more shopping centres and golf courses than we will ever need.

Malaysia, it seems, has fallen prey to that infernal postcolonial disease called rapid and uneven development, where the rulers who have come to power are bent on 'teaching a lesson' to their ex-Colonial masters by imitating everything that the 'evil West' has done but on larger, gaudier and more vulgar terms. If they make microchips, so will we — except ours will be the biggest in the world.

Those who think that such useless, costly and time-consuming mega-projects are a novel development in the country should think again, as history shows that such things have long been a part of our feudal and neo-feudal political culture. Mega-projects did not come about thanks to new construction methods or technologies; even when the peoples of the Malay archipelago lived in less complicated times they were forced to labour under the vain and wilful ambition of leaders who were too ambitious for their own good.

One such ruler came from the state of Perak. In the middle of the 18th Century there lived a certain Sultan Iskandar Dzulkarnain (r. 1752-1765). His exploits are recorded in detail in the classic Malay *hikayat*, the *Misa Melayu*. The *Misa Melayu* describes Sultan Iskandar's curious tendency to while away his time thinking of all kinds of amazing projects that would uplift the name and reputation of his kingdom. He built a number of mosques, which helped to improve his reputation and Islamic credentials in the eyes of his people. But he also indulged in all kinds of useless and unusual activities such as boat-

racing (without modern outboard motors or jet-skis, of course), fishing expeditions, royal hunts and grand fetes.

One day, Sultan Iskandar had the bright idea of building an enormous tower in the heart of his capital. The tower, he decided, would match any of the great monuments of the ancient age as described in the epics of the past. It would be the tallest building in the world and attract thousands of people to his kingdom. It would break all records and exceed the expectations of everyone. The whole world would speak of the glory and majesty of Perak. They would proclaim: "*Perak boleh!*"

But building this monstrous monument was not exactly a routine task for the Ministers of the royal court. The royal treasurer, chief minister and minister of defence begged the Sultan to reconsider his royal decree. The tower was simply too high, too big and too expensive for the coffers of the state to bear. And what of the consequences? What use would it be to the state and the people if the economy was driven to the verge of bankruptcy in the end?

The Sultan remained adamant. Oblivious to the protestations of his own Ministers and members of the court, he ordered the construction of the tower. Unable to accommodate the wishes of the king, the Ministers were forced to resign. As the *Misa Melayu* records:

> *Apabila sudah putus fikirannya (Sultan Iskandar), maka ditentukanlah pembesar-pembesar yang bertanggungjawab untuk membangunkan mahligai itu. (Tetapi) kerana terlalu pelik bentuk dan rupa mahligai yang hendak dibangunkan itu, hingga tiga orang pembesar yang kanan — Bendahara, Temenggung dan Menteri — terpaksalah meletakkan jawatan masing-masing, sebab tidak berupaya hendak*

menyempurnakan kehendak baginda yang luarbiasa itu.

With his critics conveniently out of the way, the Sultan was free to proceed with the mega-project. He finally got his wish when the tower was completed. The *Misa Melayu* describes the tower thus:

> *Akhirnya terdiri juga mahligai yang ganjil itu menurut bentuk dan rupa yang diangan-angankan oleh baginda (Sultan Iskandar). Mahligai itu sangat ajaib perbuatannya; belum pernah dilihat orang terdahulu daripada itu: kemuncaknya daripada perak bertatahkan emas dan permata budi manikam, tingkapnya daripada ijuk besi kursani* [khorasan steel, imported presumably at considerable cost], *dindingnya berturap dengan nilam kapur yang diselang-selang dengan cermin dan kaca. Di tingkat yang ketujuh terdapat balai peranginan yang dipenuhi dengan kisi-kisi sekelilingnya. Dan dihujung tiap-tiap kisi itu pula bergantung daun budi berbentuk empat segi. Apabila ditiup angin, berbunyilah daun-daun budi itu seperti bunyi buluh perindu, dan apabila digoyang angin dan disinari cahaya matahari, maka bergemerlapanlah rupanya dipandang jauh...*

The tower must have been indeed a spectacular object to behold. Its gilded and bejewelled peak could be seen for miles and the whistling and jingling sound of its bells and rafters could be heard all over the city. But while the tower and the complex of buildings annexed to it were

meant to be the pride of the people — the 'people's palace' in a sense — it soon became clear whose palace it really was:

> *Setelah siap mahligai itu, diadakan majlis doa selamat dan maulud. Dan pada esoknya berpindahlah baginda dengan segala isi istananya ke mahligai yang ajaib itu.*

The tale of Sultan Iskandar and his mega-project serves as a crucial reminder to us living in the present that leaders and rulers are, after all, mere mortals and some of them have unwieldy egos. The fact that the Sultan's demands and royal decrees could not be stopped or sidelined in any way is an indicator, if any was still needed, of the lack of accountability and transparency and a system of checks and balances in the feudal courts of the past.

This feudal culture of blind deference to authority came under criticism in the centuries that followed. When Malaya was fighting for its independence in the 1940s and 50s, one of the slogans that was used was '*Raja itu Rakyat, dan Rakyat itu Raja*' (The Sovereign is of the People, and the People are Sovereign). The mood of the time was such that many believed the feudal era was about to come to an end for good, and Malay political culture would be changed forever. The predominantly Malay, nationalist parties of UMNO, PKMM and PAS alike felt that a new era was dawning.

In the end, it seems that the *rakyat* have indeed become the new *Rajas*, but in the worst sense imaginable. Instead of overturning the feudal culture and practices of the past we have allowed it to return with a vengeance. With the ascendancy of UMNO in national politics, the feudal culture of Malay society has been re-invigorated and revived in no uncertain terms. Malaysia today is ruled according to a neo-feudal political culture just as hell-

bent on the cult of personalities and wasteful mega-projects justified in the name of national interests but undertaken at the whims of a powerful few. More than two and a half centuries later, the ghost of the egoistic Sultan Iskandar haunts us still.

3 | THE SULTAN WHO COULD NOT STAY PUT: THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF SULTAN ABU BAKAR OF JOHOR (PART 1 OF 3)

IN SEPTEMBER 1913, the British Imperial government decided to honour Sultan Idris Shah of Perak, who was regarded by the Colonial authorities at that time as the most amiable, accommodating and progressive among his brother-rulers[1].

It was decided that an investiture ceremony ought to be held to commemorate the event whereby the Sultan would be awarded the honour of the Knight Grand Cross of the Victorian Order (GCVO), the highest award ever conferred upon a Malay Sultan at that time. When told of this momentous decision, the British administrators who manned the helm of the colony and its protectorates went about orchestrating what was perhaps one of the most elaborate, overwrought and overstated spectacles played out during Malaya's Colonial era.

The editor of the *Times of Malaya*, Thomas Fox, was present throughout the sensational ordeal and he recorded the planning and organisation that preceded the event. In his report he stated that: "The idea broadly was to convey the impression that the insignia (GCVO) had come direct from the King of England to the Sultan in his palace at Kuala Kangsar. To achieve the desired theatrical

effect it was decided that the insignia would be transported over both sea (represented in this case by the Perak river) as well as land. Supporting this was a cast of several hundred Malay warriors (swordsmen, spearmen and the royal bodyguard); palace officials; flag bearers; *ulamas, qadhis* and *hajis* (religious functionaries); actors and other entertainers; schoolchildren; several dozen buffaloes; and a parade of seventy huge elephants.

Of great interest was the manner in which the procession was choreographed and the symbolic ideological message that was meant to be communicated to the Sultan and his people. As Fox noted in his commentary of events: "It was first intended to make the celebrations more elaborate... (After the riverside landing) the original suggestions allowed for an attack by rebel spearmen on the party bearing the insignia (led by the Colonial High Commissioner), *this being an acknowledgement of past fighting days, before the peaceful settlement of the country when life was held cheap and death (was) faced every hour of the day, when rapine and murder were rife and progress stifled... Days of semi-barbarism.*" (Italics mine)

The dramatic procession was attempting to re-enact the initial moment of intrusion and imposition of Colonial order (*"an acknowledgement of past fighting days, before the peaceful settlement"*). The GCVO thus symbolically embodied the very idea of order, peace and progress itself, while the High Commissioner and his army of Colonial administrators were the deliverers of that order. The Sultan and his people were in turn portrayed as the grateful recipients of this externally-imposed arrangement, rescued by the timely intervention of Colonial rule which delivered them from the state of all-out war "*when life was held cheap and death faced every hour of the day.*"

But the ceremony also demonstrated the fact that private, localised spaces no longer existed in the all-encompassing grasp of the Empire's Imperialist logic, its

order of knowledge, Orientalist discourse and construction of the native Other. Indeed, the entire ritual showed that even as far as the banks of the Perak River, amidst the lush, green tropical environment of Kuala Kangsar, the British imperial presence could not only be felt, but able to produce a direct and immediate effect upon the natives. So effective and absolute was this civilising influence of rationalised, ordered, modern Colonial rule that Fox remarked how "even the elephants behaved themselves with the utmost propriety."

In truth, long before he was deemed worthy of such an honour, the Sultan of Perak was already demonstrating signs of awe and respect for the British Empire, which the Colonial authorities noted with approval. As heir-apparent to the Perak throne he had visited the Metropole of the Empire, London, in 1884 and was 'favourably impressed' by the military and economic might of the global power[2]. The spectacle of Sultan Idris Shah's investiture graphically illustrates the manner in which the native Other was being brought into the discursive economy of the Colonial Order, albeit in terms which the subjugated native Other could not refuse.

This incorporation of the native Colonial subject was clearly a forceful one for it required the colonised native subject to be first reduced to an instrumental fiction, to suit the ideological needs of a dominant discourse that was about to reconfigure him. It was, in short, a spectacle which *incorporated* the native while *disabling* him at the same time by reducing him to the status of passive recipient. In this way the Anglophile Sultan Idris stood inert, seemingly paralysed in his exotic native splendour, to receive his knighthood from a global power which had descended upon the native land and 'civilised' it in turn. As he stood to receive the GCVO, Sultan Idris Shah was undoubtedly aware of the fact that he was receiving an

award from a superior political power that he could neither match nor resist.

By the time the staging of such spectacular events had become part of life in Colonial Malaya, the Colonial authorities had learnt their lesson well. Direct intervention in Malay affairs had led to costly resistance in the past. As with the rest of the Empire, the Colonial authorities in the Malay lands learnt that the most effective means of forceful intervention was that which was sweetened with gifts, be they in the form of opium and weapons or titles and trinkets. And the best of these weapons was the glib and self-effacing rhetoric of the Colonial authorities themselves, who would dress their policies of intervention, exploitation and domination with the unctuous platitudes of moral duty and the white man's burden[3].

But for this ideological fiction to work, a conception of the native with a particularly disabling deficiency had to be constructed. Twentieth century Colonial propaganda needed to conjure the notion of the disabled native in order to justify and facilitate the intervention of Western powers into his affairs. The problem that faced the architects of Empire in the Malay world was to find a place to locate this particular deficiency, for the Malay people did not seem particularly disabled in any respect.

The Malay world prior to the late 19th century was a highly-developed and sophisticated one. In the field of politics and trade, the Indon-Malay world was in touch with the rest of the globe from China to Europe. The awareness of their place and importance in the international economic system meant the Malay rulers were confident in their dealings with foreign powers. Malay-Muslim rulers such as Sultan Iskandar Muda of Aceh were still addressing European rulers such as King James I of England as their brother-rulers. In the field of letters and learning, the thinkers of the Malay world such as Buchara al-Jauhari were already developing political

ideas that were contemporaneous with, if not ahead of, the latest currents of thought in the Islamic, Asian and European worlds. The fact that the Malay-Muslim political treatise *Taj-us Salatin* existed nearly half a century before Hobbes' *Leviathan* would make it difficult for anyone to suggest that the Malays were in need of instruction in matters political, historical or economic.

But with the gradual loss of territory and crucial power centres such as Melacca to the forces of Europe, the Malay-Muslim powers of the archipelago gradually slipped into a process of slow degradation and decay. The Malay peninsula in particular was devastated as a result of the loss of Melacca, and from the 17th to 18th centuries it experienced a steady and seemingly-inexorable decline that resulted in countless civil wars, wars of succession and territorial conflicts. Economic stagnation took its toll on the rest of the Indon-Malay archipelago as beyond Malay waters the oceans of the world came under the heel of European fleets, thereby crippling the trading networks between Asia and the Islamic world[4].

In the eyes of the generation of British Colonial bureaucrats and administrators schooled in the ideology of modern Colonial-Capitalism, feudal Malay society was seen to lack the arresting weight of gravity imposed by a central supra-authority which would, presumably, have been used to introduce order and rationalisation to a decentred and inefficient system of rule and economic management. It was precisely this stereotypical picture of a decentred Malay society which entered the discursive and administrative framework of Colonial power in Malaya and came to dominate the Colonialist's view of the Malay race as a whole. At the edges of the Colonial gaze there lay the Malay *Kerajaans*, their *negeris* in perpetual disorder and economic decline due to their lack of a centralised administration, in want of a guiding hand to bring them together.

The encroachment of British Colonial rule into the Malay *Kerajaans*, first through the creation of the Straits Settlements (SS) in 1826, then the formation of the Federated Malay States (FMS) in 1896 and finally the Unfederated Malay States in 1909, was all part of a process of expansion of Colonial influence and authority. It was to reach its zenith in the post-World War years of the 20th century with the attempt to form the Malayan Union, which would have imposed a centralised, bureaucratic administrative system that would manage all transactions (economic as well as discursive/legislative) under the auspices of Colonial-Capitalist rule while conceding token autonomy to the traditional Malay rulers isolated in their *istanas*. In the wake of this process of intervention the rules, norms and laws of Malay society were reduced to empty formulae and impotent rituals, and the rulers themselves were reduced to serving as puppets manipulated by the British *dalangs*. In reality the Sultans' authority was only two-dimensional and worth as much as the baubles pinned on them by their *de facto* Colonial rulers.

The primary motivations behind the British incursions into Malay territory and affairs were neither missionary nor altruistic; they were instead motivated by the fundamentals of economics and *realpolitik*. By the late 19th century, the emerging world order was one where a handful of Western imperial powers were caught up in the political and economic race of empire-building. The opening of the Suez canal in 1869 meant that the economic stakes of Empire were getting higher. Prices for tin and other commodities found in abundance in the Malay peninsula soared. There was also the threat of new encroaching powers that were threatening the established British, French and Dutch interests in Southeast Asia. Germany and America were gradually emerging as world powers, as was Japan[5]. In the Malay archipelago, the British Colonial authorities and business community

worked hand-in-hand to ensure that British trade and investment would expand ever outwards, conquering new territories unhindered. The 1871 Anglo-Dutch 'Sumatra Treaty' gave the British business community yet another boost.

In the Straits Settlements, European (and particularly British) trading agents and entrepreneurs were demanding immediate intervention into the Malay Sultanates lest the situation there got beyond their control and opened the way for other foreign powers to take the advantage. Their demands to 'civilise' the Malay lands meant, as Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Andaya put it, "the adoption of English law, English government, and, as far as possible, the English way of life." Most importantly, the objective was to secure a total monopoly over the rights and privileges of exploiting the resources in the Malay lands before they could be taken away for good by competing Chinese merchants or other Western powers. This was particularly true after the announcement of the Selangor Tin Mining concession in 1873, which came at the end of the Selangor Civil War of 1866-1873[6].

Under British 'guidance' and management of the economy, other major changes to the political and economic culture of the Sultanates were introduced. The plural economic system where different areas of the economy were operated by different ethnic groupings was entrenched even further, until it crystallised into the form of a rationalised economic system which depended upon, and further intensified, ethnic and racial segregation in the Sultanates. The Chinese monopoly in the tin-mining industry soon gave way to Western (and in particular, British) dominance. Indian coolies were brought in to help build railroads and develop the rubber industry, while the Malays became increasingly relegated to agricultural production and fisheries. The few Malay entrepreneurs and developers who were left, like Datuk Kulup Mohd

Yusuf, the Datuk Panglima Kinta[7], were soon under pressure thanks to the intensified nature of competition for land and resources. By the 1890s there were still around 350 privately-owned Malay tin mines in the Kinta valley of Perak alone, but these were soon to be eclipsed by British- and Chinese-owned mining operations.

To ensure the efficient and peaceful management of this racially-segregated economic system, the British played the policing role of Colonial overlords in the Malay states as well, creating Chinese, Indian and Malay enclaves that kept the different ethnic groupings isolated along vertical cleavages of group-loyalty, while maintaining their patron-client bonds with each ethnic grouping in turn. All of this helped only to perpetuate the divisions of ethnicity, religion and race between the different communities, something that continues to haunt Malaysian society today.

So rapid had the extent of intervention grown that after the Federated Malay States were formally created in 1896, more administration than ever before was carried out by the British Residents in consultation with the Resident General, without any reference to the Malay Rulers or the State Council in practically all areas. By the time the Federation Council was created in 1909, it was obvious to all that the balance of power in British-Malay relations had changed irreversibly. And at the investiture of Sultan Idris Shah in 1913 it was the Colonial High Commissioner of the FMS, as head of the Federation Council and superior to the Resident General and state Residents, who conferred the award upon a Malay ruler in his own kingdom, who, by then, was obliged to listen and abide by the centrally-dictated 'advice' of the High Commissioner's junior subordinates.

By then, the Sultans of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang were left with little else to concern themselves with but the finer points of sumptuary laws

regarding courtly dress and protocol, or to meditate upon the eternal questions of religion, or reflect, in dignified splendour, upon their sorry lot in times that were rapidly changing beyond their control. Those who could afford to do so whiled away the remaining days of their fading glory by indulging in other imported Western pastimes like polo[8].

But despite the audacity with which it was carried out, the practical mode of Colonial intervention and penetration into the Malay lands and their affairs could not be conducted without a feasible *raison d'être*. To this end, Colonial scholarship and ethnography were brought into service to construct the much-needed stereotypical categories of the natives and Others which would presumably fit neatly into the logic of the plural economy being set up.

Such Eurocentric scholarship was not hard to come by in the latter half of the 19th century. In the field of Orientalist ethnography as well as Colonial fiction and propaganda, the Colonial order of knowledge was replete with fictional accounts of savage and backward Malays who were incapable of ruling themselves or lifting themselves out of their sorry state of affairs. Writing on the Malay Archipelago in 1869, the famous Victorian biologist and admirer of Darwin, A. R. Wallace, insisted that "the intellect of the Malay race seems rather deficient. They are incapable of anything beyond the simplest combination of ideas and have little taste or energy for the acquirement of knowledge[9]."

Elsewhere, the travel narratives produced by European men and women like Isabella Bird and Anna Leonowens were constantly reminding their readers back home of the degenerate and seemingly irredeemable lot of the Malays and Asians in general[10]. From the fiction of Joseph Conrad, for whom the Malay and his land was but a dark, negative counterpoint to his romantic ill-fated

European heroes, to the prognostications of Colonial officials such as Swettenham, Clifford, Windstedt, Hugh Low and others who could only foresee a future for the Malays under the glare of the sun of the British Empire that would never set, the Malays were condemned by the pen of author and bureaucrat alike. The description offered by Frank Swettenham, Resident and later High Commissioner to the Federated Malay States, sums up this Anglocentric picture of the Malay with all its over-simplifications and contradictions:

> (The Malay) is a *Muhammadan and a fatalist*, but he is also *very superstitious*. He is conservative to a degree, is proud and fond of his country and his people, venerates his ancient customs and traditions, fears his *Rajas*, and has a proper respect for constituted authority.... While he looks askance on all innovations, and will resist their sudden introduction. But if he has time to examine them carefully, he is willing to be convinced of their advantage. ...The Malay is, however, *lazy to a degree, is without method or order of any kind, knows no regularity* even in his meals and considers time as of no importance[11]. (Italics mine)

The reconstruction of the Malay race as a disabled one was thus part and parcel of the attempt to incorporate them into the Colonial framework of a plural economy that was serving the needs of an international imperial trading network at the time. In his work *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977), Syed Hussein Alatas chronicled the development of this discourse on the disabled and wanting Malay in the ideologically-loaded rhetoric of Colonialist

domination. The very idea of the 'Malay' as the native Other was reduced to rigid essentialist stereotypes.

Consequently, the British Colonial functionaries and administrators in Malaya conducted their affairs with the Malays and their rulers according to their own decidedly jaundiced understanding of Malay culture, politics and history. Having relegated the customs and religion of the Malays to another sphere beyond the concerns of Colonial politics and economic management, they then set about to devalue the culture, economy, history and socio-political achievements of the Malays as a whole by setting as the universal standard of all progress the development of modern, rationalised industrial-capitalism in the West. The Malays, invariably, compared disfavourably to these newly-imposed standards.

One of the consequences of Colonial-Capitalist rule was that it brought along the imposition of a static order of knowledge that zealously guarded the privileged status of Europeans as superior rulers, administrators and men of capability and agency before all others. The fact that this hierarchy of racial characteristics and pre-assigned roles invariably privileged the Europeans before the Malays and all others is aptly summed up by the British traveller Florence Caddy's glib remark: "The Malays will not work, and we in this climate cannot dig, but only direct the digging[12]."

With the development of Colonial ethnographic discourse on the Malay native, the fluid, shifting world of pre-Colonial Malaya was gradually arrested in every sense, epistemically as well as physically. The *epistemic arrest* occurred as the signifier 'Malay' was eventually reduced to essentialist terms, restricting its play and movement. At the same time the *physical arrest* of movement of the Malays was imposed via a network of restrictive legislation that came to regulate and police the allocation of land rights, property rights, etc.

Bureaucratic-administrative instruments like the census had effectively reduced the polysemic overabundance of the signifier 'Malay' by latching it to closed and totalised ethnocentric categories. And one of the most striking contrasts between 19th century and early 20th century Malaya was the marked decrease in the geographical mobility of the Malays after the institution of British rule, due in part to new Colonial legislation concerning land and property rights and entitlements. The net effect was two-fold: Colonial ethnographic scholarship reconstructed the Malays as a backward race of agriculturists and feudal serfs, while the newly-imposed Colonial legislation and regulations ensured that the Malay peasantry would be kept in precisely those areas of economic activity that were deemed compatible with their 'natural' Malay character: manual labour, farming and fisheries. This policy was justified in terms of 'protecting' Malay identity and their interests[13].

To the Colonial entrepreneurs and administrators whose job it was to govern and police the racially-segregated plural economy, the imagined differences in ethnic traits and predetermined behavioural patterns made it easier to govern the Asian groupings according to their perceived capabilities and weaknesses. So pervasive would these prejudicial categorisations of the Malays and other races become in the long run that the Colonial officials themselves would conduct all their subsequent dealings with the Malays, Chinese and Indians on the basis of these mistaken ethnocentric understandings. As the Colonial entrepreneur and tin-mining expert C. G. Warnford-Lock put it in his boorish terms:

> From a labour point of view, there are practically three races, the Malays, the Chinese and the Tamils. *By nature*, the Malay is an idler, the Chinaman is a thief

> and the Indian is a drunkard. Yet each, *in his special class of work*, is both cheap and efficient, *when properly supervised*[14] . (Italics mine)

While forever on the lookout for 'good' Malays (as well as 'good' Indians and Chinese) who lived up to their simplistic categorisations of the native Other, the Colonial officials of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States were nevertheless always keen to ensure that both the epistemic and socio-political boundaries in the tightly-regulated and strictly-segregated Colonial economy would be policed. The 'proper supervision' of the natives which the likes of Warnford-Lock so heartily recommended were in turn provided with the aid of both the carrot and the stick, translated in the Colonial context as a dose of opium and the threat of deportation, detention, imprisonment or exile.

However, there were sometimes the odd exception to the rule, and one of the first serious challenges to the newly-constructed Colonial order of power and knowledge would come from one of 'Nature's own gentlemen', who would prove to be more than a match for the High Commissioner and his exasperated Residents: Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor.

Endnotes

1. Sultan Idris Shah was installed to the throne of Perak in 1887. A few years before that the British Colonial forces had deposed the previous monarch, Sultan Abdullah. Before Sultan Idris, Perak was in a state of conflict as three different contenders for power were engaged in contest against one another: Sultan Abdullah, Sultan Ismail and Raja Yusuf. Sultan Abdullah was originally supported by the British who attempted to use him

as a pliable Malay ruler, but he later chose to rise against the British after his ill-fated decision to sign the Pangkor Treaty of 1874. It was this treaty that introduced the Residential system of indirect British rule to the Federated Malay States. Sultan Abdullah's chieftains revolted against the conditions of the treaty and one of them, Datuk Maharaja Lela, was held responsible for the killing of the first British resident, J. W. W. Birch. Datuk Maharaja Lela and a few of his followers were caught and hanged by the British while Sultan Abdullah was sent to exile in the Seychelles. Raja Yusuf was made the Regent, and eventually Sultan, by the British, despite his unpopularity with the people. In 1887 the regalia of state was passed on to Raja Idris who assumed the title of Sultan Idris Shah. The Sultan was very much indebted to the British and consequently much better disposed towards the 'reforms' brought by British rule.

2. Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, MacMillan Press, London, 1982. (pg. 227).

3. Foremost amongst the more sophisticated Colonial architects of indirect rule in Malaya was Frank Swettenham, who rose from the station of Colonial Resident to become the High Commissioner of the Malay states in his career. His general account of the process of British intervention in the Malay world is aptly summed up in his work British Malaya (1906), where he states that "when you take the Malay — Sultan, Raja, Chief or simple village head-man — into your confidence, when you consult him on all questions affecting his country, you can carry him with you, secure his keen interest and co-operation, and he will travel quite as fast as is expedient along the path of progress." (pg. 344). Contemporary scholarship will show, however, that while he served as Colonial Resident and High Commissioner, Swettenham was less inclined to consult the Malay rulers (much less the Malay masses) about anything. Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Andaya have

noted, for instance, that when he went about creating the Federated Malay States in 1896, Swettenham was curt and economical with the truth and the facts in all his dealings with the Malay rulers. They conclude that "it seems fair to say that the implications of this scheme were never fully explained to them (the Sultans). The longest discussion that Swettenham had with a Malay ruler took only four hours, and there was no consultation with the leading chiefs and princes". (Andaya, pp. 182-183).

4. J. M. Blaut notes that prior to 1492 there existed all over the world non-European 'proto-capitalist' trading networks and commercial centres engaged in the intensive exchange of goods, services and ideas that rivalled the patterns of exchange in the West. It was the Spanish and Portuguese expansion westwards and eastwards respectively that disrupted these non-European networks and redirected the flow of wealth and ideas towards Western Europe, thereby giving it an edge which it fought to conserve and exploit even further in the future. In this way a diverse array of networks of exchange were violently re-territorialised within another network centred around the metropolitan centres of Latin Europe and eventually Northern Europe. By the middle of the 19th century, the era of the independent Malay entreport state was coming to an end, and Malay kingdoms such as Aceh were feeling the brunt of the weight of competition from British, Dutch and French trading companies. [J.M. Blaut, *The Coloniser's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*. Guildford Press, New York. 1993].

5. The British Colonial authorities in the Straits Settlements were particularly worried about the possible threat of German influence in the Malay states. In a secret agreement with the Siamese made in 1897, the British agreed not to intervene in the affairs of the four northern Malay states under Siamese suzerainty: Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis and Kedah, provided

that the Siamese government guaranteed that they would not engage in any dealings with Germany or German companies seeking concessions and trade links there.

6. The Selangor Tin Mining concession was opened at the end of the Selangor Civil War. British forces promoted Tengku Kudin as the dominant ruler in the kingdom, and foreign investment began to trickle in. The Colonial authorities and business community in the Straits Settlements were keen to encourage further British intervention, out of fear that the City of London might start selling off concession rights to non-British competitors.

7. Datuk Kulup Mohd Yusuf, the Datuk Panglima Kinta, is regarded as the one who was responsible for opening up the Kinta valley of Perak for tin-mining operations.

8. In order to complete their British 'education', members of the Malay royal families were encouraged to take up the sports and leisurely pastimes of the British. The first Malay ruler to take up polo was Sultan Iskandar Shah of Perak, who in turn encouraged the young Tengku Abu Bakar of Pahang. The story goes that the challenge was posed to the young prince so that he may prove his worth and thus win the hand of Sultan Iskandar's daughter, Raja Fatimah. Under the supervision of Sultan Iskandar, Tengku Abu Bakar proved to be an able sportsman and eventually succeeded in both mastering the game and winning the hand of his beloved. Polo was introduced to the Sultanate of Pahang under most difficult conditions, where horses had to be transported over land and sea in barges and river-boats, and through the jungle before they arrived at their destination. The Royal Pahang polo club was formed in 1926, and it was the first all-Malay team to play against other polo teams made up of Westerners. Its line-up included members of the royal family and aristocracy such as Tengku Abu Bakar, Tengku Bendahara Mahmud, Tengku Abdul Aziz and Encik

Zamri, among others. It is not surprising that members of the Malay royalty in the Federated Malay States could find so much time to spare in such trivial pursuits, for by the turn of the century, increased British influence and intervention in their courts had rendered them practically useless in all other respects.

9. R. Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, MacMillan and Company, London. 1869. pg. 585.

10. I have argued elsewhere that the travel narratives produced by many of the female travellers and adventurers who came to Southeast Asia in the 19th century were constructed along the lines of the same racist paradigm and invariably portrayed the Malays (and other Southeast Asians) as degenerate, backward and in need of 'civilisation'. In this respect, the travelogues of women like Anna Leonowens, Florence Caddy, Isabella Bird and Emily Innes were no different than the ethnographic studies carried out by Colonial administrators and racial scientists in Europe. Their narratives display similar concerns with the 'plight' of the natives whose backwardness they claim to deplore, but which they can only conceptualise via the spectrum of half-digested theories of racial difference, social Darwinism and theories of native 'auto-genocide', which were also being employed to describe and explain the extermination and regression of other native peoples in North and Latin America, Africa and Australasia at the time. [See: Farish A. Noor, *Innocents Abroad? The Erasure of the Questions of Race and Power in Contemporary Feminist and Nostalgic Travelogues*, Journal of Southeast Asia Research, University of London. Vol. 5 No. 1. March 1997]

11. Frank Swettenham, *The Real Malay* in *Malay Sketches*. Bodley Head, London. 1895. pp. 2-3.

12. Florence Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya* (pg. 279).

13. Another interesting outcome of the Colonialist's preoccupation with 'protecting' the Malays was the way in which they constructed a logic of differentiation which separated the different ethnic groups according to their sense of 'national belonging' and 'national origins'. When the Malayan Civil Service was opened up in the 20th century to allow the entry of non-whites, those who were employed were preferably Malays. This policy of selective employment was justified on the grounds of 'protecting' the Malays, who were by then regarded as the natural, indigenous population of Malaya and who consequently were regarded as having special territorial claims to it, even though the real rulers of Malaya by then were the British Colonial powers. Non-Malays were rejected on the grounds that they were not 'naturally' entitled to such claims. Thus the Malayan Civil Service became yet another extension of the ideological apparatus of Colonial capitalism, a means of allowing the native population to police and monitor their own identities. Behind the pro-Malay policy of preferment also lay the belief in the essential link between the Malays and their place of belonging.

14. C. G Warnford-Lock, *Mining in Malaya for Gold and Tin*. Crowther and Goodman. London. 1907. (pp. 31-32).

4 | THE SULTAN WHO COULD NOT STAY PUT: THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF SULTAN ABU BAKAR OF JOHOR (PART 2 OF 3)

'NO, HE HASN'T GOT a flag, has he?'

Such was the initial reaction of one of the Duke of Sutherland's guests as the boat they were on came to dock at the capital of Johor Baru, seat of the throne of the independent Malay Sultanate of Johor, ruled by His Royal Highness Sultan Abu Bakar bin Ibrahim.

The bewilderment and surprise of the Duke's party was recorded by the British traveller and socialite, Florence Caddy, who was one of the guests on the tour of Malaya and Siam. Their encounter with Sultan Abu Bakar was perhaps all the more unique considering that it came at a time when every other Malay kingdom was on the retreat from the encroaching influence of indirect British rule. Sultan Abu Bakar, on the other hand, was not about to go on the defensive; instead, he met the British challenge head-on, in the same manner he greeted his astonished European guests with all the confidence and bravado they had come to expect only from other Europeans like themselves. Indeed, the Sultan would prove to be the most confounding obstacle that the Malay *Kerajaan* hurled at the advance of the British colonisers.

Compared to his other brother-rulers, Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor was a different case altogether. He used the

Orientalist discourse which configured his role and identity to suit his own needs in many ways. True to its contradictory and inconsistent nature, the Colonial order of knowledge that portrayed his race as one which was 'naturally' lazy and prone to pathological disorders (both real and invented), also happened to regard the Malays as 'nature's own gentlemen'. Ronald Hyam noted that in official circles, at least, 'Malayo-Muslims satisfied the canons of gentlemanly manliness' in a way that many other Colonial subject races did not. This was one disabling fiction which the Sultan turned to his advantage, and apart from living up to the reputation of a 'natural' gentleman, he would later prove himself to be quite a player as well.

To appreciate the extent to which he managed to thwart the ambitions of the British Colonial powers and turn their ethnocentric preconceptions against themselves, it is important to understand both the character of Sultan Abu Bakar as well as the socio-political circumstances of his eventful life.

Sultan Abu Bakar was probably the most Westernised Malay ruler of the Victorian era. As a boy, he had attended the Keasberry School for Malays in Singapore, whose missionary-founder had "made no concessions to the Muslim practices of his Malay pupils." (In other words, pork was regularly served and the teachers could not care less about the sensibilities of the Malay-Muslim students, no matter how royal they were). Thus from his early childhood he had experienced the uncompromising might of this foreign power which was infringing upon his homeland[1].

But a closer study of the complex relationship between the Court of Johor under the rule of Sultan Abu Bakar and the Colonial administration of the period reveals the extent to which Anglo-Malay relations at that particular stage in Colonial history (and at that particular level of Colonial social relations) was determined and informed

by notions of racial and class differences which both sides tried to deploy against one another.

Sultan Abu Bakar himself was a shrewd political player who was well-advised by his dedicated staff of chosen Malay-Bugis advisors, all of whom realised that Johor's independence (and the prestige of the Court of Johor) was a precious and precarious thing indeed. Recognition from his fellow Malay rulers was not to be taken for granted, and not willingly offered. Contenders and usurpers such as Tengku Alam were also close at hand and had to be watched constantly. The British, on the other hand, would only recognise his status as Maharaja (in 1868) and later Sultan (in 1885) when they were forced to do so after being successfully out-manoeuvred. The constant threat of British intervention, loss of solidarity and support from rulers of the neighbouring Sultanates, the fragility of his fledgling state and the prospect of being replaced by a contender were among the factors that shaped the Sultan's political outlook and guided his political designs both at home and abroad.

Sultan Abu Bakar realised that he would suffer the fate of his brother-rulers if he remained inert and did not try to anticipate the moves that would be made against him. There were two ways by which the Sultan could out-manoeuvre his opponents: The first was geographical and the second, discursive. He chose both.

As we have mentioned before, the modern Colonial state was eternally preoccupied with the problem of policing the ethnic and social boundaries that kept the natives outside the sphere of real political and economic power while keeping them in their appointed places at the same time. This meant that the natives were not only supposed to be kept within the allocated social status and roles, but needed to be kept physically confined to their allocated spaces as well. Native rulers were no exception for, worse still, they could afford the tickets for a luxury

cruise, which meant that their nomadic excursions could take them way beyond where other natives would dare (or were allowed) to tread.

Thus by the 19th century it was native rulers like Sultan Abu Bakar who came to represent the great Black Peril to the West. As sovereign native men in Western territory, they represented a threat to the highly stratified and tightly regulated hierarchy of race and class that the Colonial order was founded upon. The movements and activities of these sovereign natives threatened to demolish (or, worse still, ridicule) the attempts by the Colonial officials to maintain the strict social distinctions and racial hierarchies that kept Europeans and others apart[2].

At that time the activities and movements of the Malay rulers were orchestrated, and thereby policed, by the Colonial authorities, who handled protocol with the utmost care, adding to the already heavy restrictions placed upon them by Malay *adat* and the pecking order among themselves. But Sultan Abu Bakar insisted on travelling, and that too on his own accord and motives, which were often not in line with the wishes of the Colonial authorities who were trying to catch up with him.

For, unlike other Malay rulers such as Sultan Idris Shah, Sultan Abu Bakar did not wait for the British to descend upon his kingdom and pin medals upon his chest after they had effectively colonised it. Rather than allow himself to be won over by the poisonous gifts of the British, he travelled all over his kingdom, and the rest of the world, to collect his own gifts and to give in return. To win the hearts and minds of his people, he embarked on a series of internal reforms which eventually led to the pacification of troublesome regions such as Muar. He also courted the support of the few Malay kingdoms such as Pahang that chose to seek his help in the internecine conflicts that were tearing the Malay kingdoms apart.

His rambles at home did not save Sultan Abu Bakar from the unwelcomed attention of the British, and neither did he lose sight of the British. Though the Bugis Court of Riau had conferred upon Temenggong Abu Bakar the right to assume the title of Maharaja in 1868 (a right which it had hitherto reserved only for use by the rightful heirs of the rulers of Melaka), the far-sighted Abu Bakar could see that the greatest threat to his kingdom came from the British next door in Singapore. Even after he had proved his ability and support for the British Crown in the wake of the Perak uprising of 1874, the British Colonial authorities in Malaya were still inclined to intervene in the affairs of Johor and discredit its ruler whenever possible. When the Colonial office suggested that Maharaja Abu Bakar be made Sultan and the throne of Perak given to him as well, it was the Governor of the Crown Colonies, Sir William Jervois, who was the first to object.

From the very beginning Temenggong Abu Bakar realised that he would have to out-manoeuvre the Colonial authorities. To win support and recognition from abroad, the Sultan embarked on a series of transcontinental tours which took him from Japan and the Far East to the courts of England and Europe, always mindful of the fact that he was being observed and that his activities would eventually be reported back to the High Commissioner.

Not forgetting the other royal houses and courts of Europe, he traveled to France and had an audience with the Emperor, Napoleon III. On his return trip from Europe, he prudently stopped in Ceylon and inspected the Malay troops of the Ceylon Rifles in Colombo, making sure to remind them to remain loyal to the Crown of England and the Empire. In 1876, he turned his attention to Asia and the East, and began his travels with a visit to India where he managed to break the ice between the Prince of Wales and the Indian Princes (during the meeting

of the Grand Chapter of the Order of the Star of India), much to the former's relief.

To avert the most dangerous threat of all that was so precariously close, he sought an audience with the source of all his worries: the crown of England itself. His first visit to England was in 1866, shortly after he assumed the throne. On that visit, as Temenggong Abu Bakar, he attended gatherings organised for the Prince of Wales and was even presented to Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace. Such niceties would be repaid in kind, as he entertained the Prince when the latter visited Singapore in 1882.

On his second visit to England in 1878 Maharaja Abu Bakar brought with him Muhammad Ibrahim, son of the writer Munshi Abdullah. He was given another opportunity to visit the Queen, who had organised a State ball at Buckingham Palace. This was followed by another European tour with Paris and Vienna on the itinerary, earning him more recognition from dignitaries such as Prince Henry of Lichtenstein, which was again repaid in kind in the spirit of *noblesse oblige*. Prussia and Italy also conferred upon him the honours he so ardently sought.

Inevitably, such mutual pleasantries between fellow rulers earned Abu Bakar the chagrin of the Colonial administration back home, who wanted to keep the native ruler in his place. In 1880, the post of the Governor of the Straits Colonies was given to Sir Frederick Weld, and it was he who proved to be the most serious threat to both the Maharaja as well as the autonomy of the Kingdom of Johor. Haji Buyong Adil summed up their relationship thus:

> *Perhubongan Gebenor Weld dengan Maharaja Abu Bakar tidak-lah saperti perhubongan Maharaja Abu Bakar dengan Gebenor Cavenagh, Ord dan Robinson*

> *dahulu, ia-itu gabenor2 yang memandang tinggi dan bersahabat baik dengan Abu Bakar. Tetapi Weld memandang baginda sebagai sa-orang Raja Melayu yang chongkak dan agak tidak boleh di-harapkan;... Sebalek-nya, Maharaja Abu Bakar pun langsong tidak perchaya kepada Gabenor Weld itu. Nasihat2 yang di-kehendaki baginda berhubong dengan pemerentahan negeri, selalu-lah di-minta baginda daripada peguam2 di-Singapura*

Knowing that Governor Weld was bent on intervening in the affairs of his state as well as introducing a British Resident in Johor, the Maharaja decided to travel abroad in search for support once again. In 1881 he visited neighbouring Java, then under Dutch rule. 1883 saw him touring across China and Japan, visiting the court of the Japanese Emperor as well as the cities of Nagasaki, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Saigon, hobnobbing with the local as well as European elites who were keen to view this globetrotting Malay ruler. As usual, this was a source of concern and worry for the Colonial officials back home.

The Maharaja's third visit to England in 1885 was an attempt to avert the possibility of his kingdom being brought under the Residential system of indirect British rule[3]. As such, the Maharaja brought with him his most able advisors, such as Dato' Seri Amar Di Raja Abdul Rahman, and together they sought to play the Colonial Office against the Governor of the Straits Settlements. The gamble paid off and won him the recognition as the Sultan of Johor, an independent ruler of an independent State. The State Secretary for the British Colonies even went as far as assuring the Sultan that Britain would no longer press for the appointment of a British agent in the Kingdom of Johor, much to the disgust of

the frustrated Governor Weld back in Singapore. To add insult to injury, the Sultan consolidated his gains with a fourth visit to England in 1891-93, which ended with the ultimate *coup de theatre*: A stay at Windsor castle as a guest of the Queen herself and the friend of the Prince of Wales.

In 1893 he again travelled across Europe where he had the opportunity to meet the Kaiser of Germany, the Kings of Italy and Austria, and was finally met and decorated by Sultan Abdul Hamid of Turkey, who bestowed upon Sultan Abu Bakar the Honourable Star of Turkey, First Class. By then other Asian monarchs were also cognisant of his achievements: In 1894 the Manchu Emperor of China presented an award to Sultan Abu Bakar for his care of the Chinese merchants and workers in his kingdom.

His journeys at home and abroad had thus saved both Sultan Abu Bakar and his realm, at least temporarily. While his brother-rulers were being moved back and forth, propped up or exiled as pawns in a strategy of extending indirect British rule throughout the Malay lands, Sultan Abu Bakar had defied the architects of Empire by travelling beyond, where he was not meant to go. But the reforms he attempted both at home and abroad ensured that the discursive boundaries of Colonial-Capitalist ideology could not hold him either.

While his travels were intended to publicise both himself and the name of his kingdom, Sultan Abu Bakar realised that no amount of recognition could help him as long as his State was seen in the same light as the ill-fated Malay kingdoms that had succumbed to British intervention.

The Sultan was painfully aware of the enormous differences between the socio-political conditions of the Malay Sultanates and the British Straits Settlements, having been brought up in Singapore under the British flag. He had also seen how this advantage was used by the British

to gain an upper hand in British-Malay relations. Keeping the royal house in order was thus not merely an exercise in keeping up appearances: It was the only way to keep the kingdom intact and protect it from the British Colonial authorities who were more than capable of using the charge of 'native misrule' as a justification for intervening in Johor's domestic affairs.

Cognisant of the impending threat to his kingdom that came in the form of an increasingly wide disparity in terms of economic, administrative and military organisation, the Sultan embarked on a series of domestic administrative reforms designed to modernise his kingdom while retaining some of its traditional feudal Malay-Islamic character. He began to acquire that vital ingredient which Munshi Abdullah had deemed as the prerequisite of modernity and progress and which the British Colonial authorities had regarded as being beyond the grasp of the Malay race: knowledge and technical expertise. (Though what he did with that knowledge and expertise was in many ways a far cry from Abdullah's original plans for the reformation and reconstruction of Malay-Islamic society.) His domestic projects had managed to secure the loyalty of his subjects as well as the respect of his neighbouring brother-rulers. He tried to build upon these achievements by attempting reforms and innovations beyond his territory as well.

The Sultan was also more successful in courting and using the Chinese and other migrant communities in his kingdom than his brother-rulers. Unlike the Sultans of Selangor and Perak who were forced to turn to the British to help them quell the rise of inter-factional feuding amongst the Chinese secret societies, Sultan Abu Bakar managed to employ them to his benefit instead. He incorporated leading Chinese figures into his bureaucracy and even allowed the Ghee Hin secret society to function openly, in defiance of British warnings not to do so.

From 1866, with the help of European advisors, the Kingdom of Johor began to create administrative and institutional bodies such as those found in Singapore. A State Secretariat, Ministry of Finance, Treasury, Auditor's Office, High Court, State Printing House, and Departments for Public Works, Police, Statistics, Land Regulations and Education, were all introduced one by one.

The feudal and autocratic style of the Sultan himself was the one thing that was not reformed as part of this process of transformation, and true to the ways of the *Kerajaan* it was he who exercised total control over the shape and form of the reform of Johorian politics and society. Being very much at the centre of Johor's political affairs and management, it was inevitable that the development of the kingdom would be coloured by his values and lifestyle as well. Due to his Anglophile inclinations and Eurocentric lifestyle, Sultan Abu Bakar's reforms were not merely directed towards modernisation, but were in fact a process of Westernisation as well[4].

Sultan Abu Bakar's own 'liberal' approach to Islam was undoubtedly conditioned by his awareness and sensitivity to how the European Colonial powers had come to perceive Islam as being a possible threat and challenge to their growing hegemony in the world. In North Africa, West Asia and the Indian Subcontinent, Islam had already thrown up insurmountable obstacles to Western expansionism.

In the Sultan's own corner of the Malay world, Islam had served as a discourse of delegitimisation and resistance, not only to the corrupt rule of wayward Malay rulers but also to Western imperialism. The neighbouring Sultanate of Aceh in North Sumatra, under the rule of Sultan Ibrahim, had long been cultivating a close relationship with the Ottoman Empire in its effort to win support from the Caliphate in the fight against the

Western infidel forces[5]. Not to be left out, Sultan Abu Bakar also played his part in cooperating with his Muslim brother-rulers. In 1864, while still bearing the title of Maharaja, Abu Bakar sent to Aceh a prominent emissary from Hadramaut, Sayyid Abd-ar Rahman, who would later play many a crucial strategic and diplomatic role during the devastating Aceh-Dutch war of 1873-1912.

But within the confines of his own kingdom, forever under the envious gaze of the neighbouring British Colonial authorities, the Sultan was careful to keep the visible forces and influence of Islam at arm's length. While he took part in mediating between the Acehnese, British and Dutch powers during the Aceh War, he made it obvious to all concerned that his own kingdom would not come to the aid of the beleaguered Malay-Muslim Sultanate. While guerrilla warfare and blockades became the daily tribulations experienced by the Acehnese, the travails of the Sultan of Johor were of a more congenial nature: ballroom dancing and trips abroad.

So Westernised had the Kingdom of Johor become that by the time the fervent expansionist Sir Frederick Weld arrived to man the helm of the colonies, the Kingdom of Johor was almost as Westernised as the British colony of Singapore. Indeed, Adil (1971) notes that it was impossible for Weld to accuse Johor of being 'badly run' like the rest of the Malay states simply because in its administration, organisation and even its architecture it had become so very Western.

It is understandable that the Sultan should choose to modernise his kingdom by emulating the styles of the West and the British in particular. As Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Andaya put it, "*to many Malay princes it would have seemed that the cultivation of Western acquaintances and the adoption of a European style of living would make the difference between political success and relegation to the backwaters of power*". This was not only

the dominant perception in Malaya, but also in neighbouring Southeast Asian states. King Chulalongkorn of Siam and King Mindon of Burma were similarly hard-pressed to modernise their economies and armies under the pressure of Western intervention and competition. And the Meiji reforms of Japan had suggested that such reforms were indeed possible and beneficial if accomplished successfully.

However, it must be noted that the adoption of Western attitudes and platitudes alone did not save every single Malay ruler: Despite his open and cooperative relations with the British, Sultan Idris Shah of Perak was nonetheless stripped of all true power and reduced to a political instrument by the Colonial authorities. Even his attempts to take on the air of a 'Westernised' Malay ruler were met with condescension and disapproval by the likes of Isabella Bird, who preferred her native rulers to remain 'native' enough for her Victorian prejudices. In the end, the same fate lay in store for Sultan Abu Bakar.

Although he tried his best to anticipate the moves that were being made against him and his kingdom, going as far as embarking upon the modernising and secularising reforms that even the Colonial authorities would never have dared to attempt in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, Sultan Abu Bakar could not affect a radical change in the dominant imperialist metanarrative which configured him as a disabled native Other, albeit a sovereign one.

Ultimately, the Sultan's downfall did not come in the form of a political or military defeat; he was never deposed or sent into exile. Instead, the failure of Sultan Abu Bakar was due to the fact that working as he did from within the margins of a Colonial order of knowledge and power which configured Anglo-Malay relations, he could not hope to reverse the violent hierarchy which configured him, as well as his race and culture, as being weak and disabled.

Endnotes

1. Sultan Abu Bakar's ascent to the throne of Johor as Dato' Temenggong Abu Bakar Seri Maharaja Johor took place under somewhat complicated circumstances, aided in part by the British to whom he grudgingly owed his thanks. This long-standing relationship with the West and Britain in particular gave him an obvious advantage over his brother-rulers, many of whom were less *au fait* with both the norms and eccentricities of the Western lifestyle. Able to spruce up his appearance with whatever was *de rigueur* at the time, he made several journeys to the West and adapted his carriage to suit the vicissitudes of the times better than the more conservative Sultan Idris of Perak or the parochial Sultan Abdul Hamid of Kedah, for example.

2. By the late Victorian Imperial era these native rulers were moving to and fro between the Mother Country and the colonies with alarming frequency. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 only complicated things further, as it made their movements all the more easier. Once in the Mother Country there was no telling what they might do. The Indian monarchs, for example, had the embarrassing habit of choosing spouses whom the Colonial authorities were disinclined to consider as appropriate. The marriage of the Maharajah of Patiala to Florry Bryan was a major cause of scandal for the Colonial authorities. The marriage of the Rajah of Jind to Olive Monalescu had the same effect. Finally, Lord Curzon had to prevent the attempt by the Rajah of Pudukkottai to attend Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations in 1897 'because he was a young, extravagant man, and the powers-that-be feared his marrying a European woman'. Underlying these attempts to police and regulate the movements of the native monarchs was also the fear of cultural and racial contamination, for the prospect of mixed marriages and their hybrid progeny would render ineffective the demarcation of

racial and class boundaries that the Colonial functionaries had laboured for so long in the colonies.

3. During his stay in England in 1885-86, Sultan Abu Bakar prudently created the *Jama'ah Penasihat Johor* (the Johor Advisory Board) as his insurance policy against the machinations of the Colonial authorities closer to home in Singapore. The Board was made up of affluent and influential Englishmen led by the Sultan's close English friend, Lieutenant-Colonel William Fielding, who were sympathetic to his concerns and would lobby on his behalf to the Colonial Office in London. Adil notes that the *Jama'ah Penasihat* were also responsible for forewarning Sultan Abu Bakar's staff on any plans that were being hatched against them in London, as well as advising him on matters of state as well as administration in Johor.

4. In the field of education the Sultan's reforms were so Eurocentric and Westernised that they seemed more akin to the secularising reforms of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in the 20th century than to anything else that could be found in the Malay-Muslim world at the time. While the court of Terengganu under Sultan Baginda Omar (r. 1839-1876) and Sultan Zainal Abidin III (r.1881-1918) was trying to further entrench and enforce the standing of Islam in the kingdom's political, economic and social life, Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor seemed to be going in the other direction. In 1865 the Sultan opened a school with a curriculum that was based on an English model and it abandoned the use of Jawi (Arabic) script altogether. To the Governor of Singapore he had given his assurance (in 1863) that he had revised the Islamic code in Johor by making it 'more comfortable to European ideas.'

5. In 1850, the Ottoman Porte took the Malay kingdom under its wing as one of its protected vassal states, and Aceh in turn supported the Ottomans at their time of need during the Crimean War.

5 | THE SULTAN WHO COULD NOT STAY PUT: THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF SULTAN ABU BAKAR OF JOHOR (PART 3 OF 3)

DESPITE THE FACT that he had managed to penetrate deep into the inner sanctums of Imperial power and authority, Sultan Abu Bakar's entry, like that of the Malay race within the Colonial order of knowledge, was a disabling one. It reconfigured him in the exotic, caricatured terms of the pavonine Oriental sovereign so beloved of the Colonial propagandist and Orientalist writer alike.

After a prolonged period of contact with the West, tales of the Sultan's munificence and profligate splendour were widely circulated in both popular Victorian fiction as well as the official reports bound for London. When she visited his Istana in 1889, Florence Caddy noted for her readers' benefit that "the Sultan had bought in London the famous gold dinner-service made for Lord Ellenborough when Governor-General of India." His own demonstrations of largesse were invariably noted with great interest, and his behaviour, particularly when he overstepped the boundaries of Western protocol and decorum, were sibilantly reproached in newspapers and Colonial reports alike, thus adding to the image of the

wayward Asian despot whose state was in desperate need of intervention and 'protection'.

Even when he did try to emphasise the markers of difference between himself and his curious Western audience (for he was careful not to alienate himself from his own culture and public), the Sultan's insistence on emphasising his Malay and Islamic credentials won him little understanding but instead brought only raised eyebrows, muffled guffaws and the odd monocle popping out of an astounded eye-socket[1].

The late Victorian era, as we have seen, was one which regarded all natives as weak and feeble, while all Muslims were either fanatics or corrupted hypocrites. Being a sovereign native Muslim ruler did not alter these perceptions but amplified them instead. While no Malay ruler may have enjoyed the degree of contact with Europeans as Sultan Abu Bakar did, it would also be true to say that no Malay ruler managed to titillate the imagination of Westerners as much as he did either. Thus his entry into European high society, though unprecedented, was nonetheless a *succès de scandale* at best. At worst, it reduced him to a crude racist caricature of the incapable feudal Malay monarch.

The culmination of this ongoing struggle to define his persona led to the conflation of his native Malay and Islamic identities into the figure of the exotic Oriental despot, whose wealth and extravagance became both the object of official censure as well as Orientalist fiction and fantasy. The tales of exotic harems amidst the splendour of Johor were already being disseminated by writers like Florence Caddy. The Sultan's own exploits would add to the development of the image of the licentious native sovereign already being developed on his behalf, with one case in particular standing out from the rest: on November 6, 1893, *The Times* reported the court proceedings of a certain "Miss Mighell v. The Sultan of Johore."

More revelations were to follow, and soon the facts were brought under a most unfavourable light. Though she was never asked to give evidence in court, Mighell had managed to put a case against the Sultan on account of a breach of promise on his behalf. The court, and the public at large, was soon to learn that the two of them had first met in 1885 on the Sultan's third visit to England (when he had outwitted High Commissioner Weld) where he had introduced himself to her as 'Albert Baker'.

The implication was that Mighell had become Abu Bakar's mistress (assuming the name of 'Mrs. Baker' for herself) and that a promise of marriage was made but later unfulfilled. Since the promise was not kept, Gullick reported, 'Mighell sued for damages for breach of promise of marriage and for the return of a pair of diamond buckles, or their value.' Trivialised though the issues had become, the lurid details, once brought into the glare of public scrutiny, were enough to set the seal of disapproval upon the Sultan for good. Gullick adds that "Queen Victoria and her advisers, more straight-laced than the Prince of Wales, would not have welcomed the scandal. Prudently, the Sultan departed from London society."

What saved the Sultan from further humiliation and scandal was the groundwork that he had done earlier in 1885. By winning recognition from the British of his status as Sultan of Johor (an independent sovereign of an independent state), he had effectively won himself the privilege of immunity from the law as well, which had no jurisdiction over a foreign monarch.

While some observers like Gullick (1992) have argued that the outcome of the case was in itself a diplomatic victory for the Sultan, albeit a phyrric one, the overall impact of the Mighell case was to add to the increasing repertoire of vignettes and moral tales which spoke of the corruption of the East and the foreboding threat of the ominous Black Peril from abroad. The

sovereign status of Sultan Abu Bakar and the other Malay rulers were thus regarded as being of little worth, for they were still the rulers of the Malays, whose collective image as a race of lazy and backward natives we have already examined earlier. Despite his tireless diplomatic manoeuvres to head off the plots and stratagems planned against him and his State by the Colonial officials in Singapore, Sultan Abu Bakar had managed to win a string of battles, but not the ideological war in the end[2].

In 1891, when *Vanity Fair* decided to have a series of portraits of 'foreign monarchs', Sultan Abu Bakar made his final and lasting appearance in the cultured and literary circles of European high society. The caption beside his portrait read as follows:

> *He is something more than an ordinary Eastern potentate; for by occasional visit to Europe he has acquired much polish and some diplomatic skill; by the good application of which he has satisfactorily shaped himself into a gentleman. He is a pleasant-looking person, who farms out a number of monopolies, which include opium and gambling; yet though he can play a good game of billiards, he neither smokes nor gambles. He is quite an enlightened Prince; and being a firm ally of the British government, has often been decorated. He is an admirer of Western beauty: which he often summons to his Palace for its lavish entertainment.*

Such was the lot of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor. The decorations he received from the Colonial powers came not only in the form of gilded baubles and ribboned trinkets, but also in the form of the barbed literary

'adornments' bestowed upon his exotic image by the pen of Florence Caddy as well as the malicious critiques by his embittered enemies like Swettenham and Weld. The only independent Malay ruler of the only independent Malay state had been reduced to a caricature of the Anglophile Eastern potentate, slavishly enamoured by Western beauty and typically corrupt in his lifestyle as well as business and political interests. The fact that Britain itself was heavily engaged in the opium trade as well as other monopolies in the Malay lands was conveniently left out altogether.

In 1895, Sultan Abu Bakar died at the age of 60 of Bright's disease (a chronic inflammation of the kidneys) that was further aggravated by the onset of pneumonia while staying at Bailey's Hotel in London. His trip had been yet another attempt to win support and recognition of his rule, and he had brought with him his successor the Tengku Mahkota Ibrahim as part of his efforts to withstand any British incursions upon his kingdom after his demise. Two months before he passed away he introduced a new constitution for his kingdom which expressedly forbade the alienation of any of its territory to any other foreign power.

But none of Sultan Abu Bakar's moves could protect him from the prejudice of the Colonial administration itself. By the time of his last visit, his much-maligned reputation had already preceded him and had established a grip on the Imperial imaginary. Immediately after his death *The Times* was quick to remind its readers, in a disparaging obituary, of the 'possible financial embarrassments resulting from Oriental lavishness of generosity mingled with the more European qualities of his character', while the official historians and functionaries of Empire would record for posterity's sake every minute detail of his failings and misdemeanours[2].

The fact that Sultan Abu Bakar was probably one of the few Malay rulers who had constructed a native

bureaucracy which could effectively fend off the advances of the British expansionists while fighting within the increasingly restrictive terrain of Colonial relations were soon forgotten. Gullick noted that "among the Malay rulers of the period up to 1920, only the Maharaja (later Sultan) of Johor exploited the possibilities of playing off the Colonial Office against the High Commissioner."

Forgotten, too, was the fact that the Sultan had managed to rule for 33 consecutive years and that he had managed to thwart the expansionist designs of half a dozen High Commissioners and their staff in Singapore. Under the economic policies of Sultan Abu Bakar and his son, the Sultanate of Johor had proven to be the only Malay state that could withstand the immense competition from the Chinese and other migrant communities that had come to its shores.

At a time when "direct Colonial rule brought with it European racial theory and constructed a social and economic order structured by race"[3], Sultan Abu Bakar had proven that the Malay race, which was regarded as 'naturally' incapable of standing up to economic competition from Europeans and other non-Malays, could not only fend off the advances of competitors but also beat them at their own game if given half the chance.

In the end, however, Sultan Abu Bakar's achievements were easily dismissed and trivialised by the jaundiced gaze of a Colonial order of knowledge that could never acknowledge the achievements of the natives, while registering the vaunted triumphs of its own White Rajahs. Thus it was that Sultan Abu Bakar, the Malay ruler who had outflanked a furious Colonial Governor, would be remembered in the popular fiction of Empire as just another exotic Oriental despot corrupted by his culturally-determined 'native' characteristics and whose sovereignty was held cheap and laid low by his own fatal admiration of Western beauty.

Sultan Abu Bakar's heir, Sultan Ibrahim, would likewise suffer under the combined pressure of the entire Colonial establishment. He would not be spared any of the Residents' and Governor's excoriating slander either, which proved to be just another variation of the same racist theme. His attempts to play off contending Western powers against each other earned him the enmity of the new Governor Frank Swettenham, who thought that the upstart Malay ruler was getting 'too clever' for his own good' and 'lacking the good Malay qualities' of other obedient and pliable Malay rulers such as Sultan Idris Shah of Perak. After blocking all of the Sultan's initiatives and even taking control of the *Jama'ah Penasihat Johor* in London, the Colonial authorities managed to force the friendless Sultan Ibrahim to admit a British financial adviser to the Court of Johor in 1909. In 1914 he was finally cornered into accepting a British adviser who was answerable to the High Commissioner and Governor of the colonies in Singapore. Johor had finally come under indirect British rule, and this marked the end of the Kingdom's formal status as an autonomous Malay kingdom, though Sultan Ibrahim fought to preserve what little there was left of it right to the end[4].

The institution of the Malay *Kerajaan* had thus been defeated by the Colonial order of power-knowledge which permitted the native Other to enter its complex of power relations only as long as it lived up to Western ethnocentric prejudices regarding the weaker, inferior native races. The Malay *Rajas* and Sultans had learnt, in the most bitter and painful way, that while they were allowed to enter the club, they were nonetheless barred from becoming equal members. Among the Malay-Muslims themselves, only the reformists of the *Kaum Muda* were truly cognisant of Sultan Abu Bakar's achievements as a ruler. Years later the reformist thinker Syed Sheikh al-Hadi would write of Sultan Abu Bakar thus:

Does a rational man remember Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor because of his fine shirts, his imposing palace or his medals? No. He is remembered because of his glorious and honourable work in rescuing an Islamic state that had fallen into a wild tiger's mouth. He founded a government for his community and descendants. He kept his government independent during his lifetime, while many other rulers sold their states cheaply in crowded markets[5].

Endnotes

1. Gullick wrote that "European contemporaries of Sultan Abu Bakar, among whom he was generally well-liked, tended to emphasise the many Western elements of his regime and lifestyle. Yet in both respects he preserved a shrewd mixture of Malay tradition and Western innovation. He was strict in his observance of the Islamic ban on drinking alcohol. He was insistent on the observance of Malay custom when he deemed it appropriate." (See Gullick, *Rulers and Residents,* 1992, pg. 11)

2. Gullick, pg. 273. n.127. Gullick's extensive research revealed the extent of the Sultan's debts after his death in 1895. His personal debts were at a tune of £150,000 to £200,000. The Johor government was left with debts that had accumulated on his behalf as well; the costs of building and construction owed to the building company of Wong Ah Fook alone were around £500,000. To the Chartered Bank the Johor government owed another estimated £150,000 to £200,000. (Gullick, pg. 13. n. 125)

3. Charles Hirshman, *The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology, Sociology Forum, Volume 1, Number 2.* Cornell University, 1986, pg. 330.

4. Andaya notes that "in the last weeks of Johor's independence, Ibrahim showed that he was still his father's son. His final

acceptance of an adviser with extended powers was made with the proviso that certain privileges be maintained in Johor, such as the wearing of the Johor uniform and the preference for Johor Malays in government appointments. Something of that unique place gained for Johor in British Malaya has lingered to the present day." (pg. 200) It is therefore ironic to note that what little powers and privileges that the Crown of Johor had managed to keep for itself, such as the Johor Guard of Honour, have been taken away from it by the postcolonial Federal Government of Malaysia, after two major Constitutional crises.

5. Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, *Ash-Sharaf: Kemuliaan dan Kehormatan,* in *Al-Imam, II.8.* (4 February 1908). In Alijah Gordon, *The Real Cry of Syed Sheikh al-Hady.* MSRI, 1999, pg. 177.

6 | DR. BURHANUDDIN AL-HELMY AND THE FORGOTTEN LEGACY OF THE PAN-MALAYSIAN ISLAMIC PARTY (PAS)

This article was written in 2001, at a time when the conflict between UMNO and PAS was still very much a matter of national concern. Much of what has been written about the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) today has focused on the present leadership strata and the ideological orientation of PAS that was radically altered after the internal party coup of 1982. With the rise of the 'ulama faction' within the party, PAS experienced a radical shift in its discourse and tactics, opting for politics of authenticity and nostalgia which drew the party and its members towards an idealised Islamic past. But few have cared to point out that PAS's history is much more complex than it appears, and that during the 1950s and 1960s, it came close to being the only leftist-Islamist party in the country. This was due largely to the efforts of its leader then, Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy, who has to count as one of the most brilliant and articulate political thinkers and leaders Malaysia has ever produced.

MALAYSIA TODAY BEARS WITNESS to the struggle between two apparently irreconcilable forces: the conservative ethno-nationalists of UMNO and the equally

conservative Islamists of PAS. Most of us who became politically mature over the past two decades have come to accept this dialectical opposition between the two parties as a natural feature of Malaysian politics and we cannot even conceive of a time where things could have been different. But in fact they were.

It must be remembered that the history of PAS dates back almost as far as UMNO's. In fact, PAS grew out of an internal rift within UMNO itself, when members of the UMNO Bureau for Religious Affairs decided to break away from the party and form a political organisation of their own in 1951. During the first few years of PAS, many of its members carried dual membership to both UMNO and the new Islamist party. Its first president, Haji Ahmad Fuad, was both the president of PAS as well as an UMNO member.

In the early years fortune did not smile upon the fledgling Islamic party. It was so poor and under-resourced that for the elections of 1955 it could only field 11 candidates and provide them with the most rudimentary form of aid: posters and banners. Things only began to change for the better when the leadership of the party was taken over by Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy, the third president of PAS, in 1956.

Dr. Burhanuddin remains as one of the most brilliant thinkers and political campaigners in Malaysian history, yet hardly anything has been written about him. There are no monuments, parks or buildings named after this man, who would have become the first leader of Malaysia had the Japanese not surrendered so abruptly at the end of the Second World War and thereby forgoing their promise to grant independence to Malaya and Indonesia. Worse still, his own political party has not seen fit to reward the man for all that he had done for it.

This neglect of the legacy of Dr. Burhanuddin is understandable in the context of Malaysia, where history

is written by the victors for the victors themselves. Those who have fallen by the wayside like the recently departed James Puthucheary are often reduced to the margins and footnotes of history. The feudal culture of the ruling elite ensures that only those among the aristocracy and nobility will ever get a mention in the obituary columns of the press. But what is even more interesting to note is how and why the legacy of Dr. Burhanuddin has been neglected by members of his own party today. This becomes apparent only when we understand how different PAS was in the 1960s compared to its current avatar under the leadership of the *ulama*.

PAS in the late 1950s and 1960s was radically different from what we see today. This was largely due to the worldview of its president Dr. Burhanuddin himself. Set against the broader context of developments within the Muslim world at the time, the ideology and vision of Dr. Burhanuddin were very much in tandem with the developments of the world around him. This was an era when Islamist thinkers and leaders were contemplating a host of alternatives that lay before them.

Like many of the progressive Islamists of his generation, Dr. Burhanuddin had tried to graft together the streams of Islamist and nationalist thought with the intention of promoting a broad and universalist understanding of nationalism that went beyond the narrow confines of ethnocentrism and race-centred politics. Under his leadership, PAS developed into a radical Islamist party that was nationalist, anti-Colonialist and anti-Imperialist in its outlook. The party articulated concerns related to economic independence, the struggle against Colonialism and Western hegemony, as well as the need to promote a dynamic and issue-based form of popular, activist Islam.

The broad-based nationalism of Dr. Burhanuddin was one that was not anchored solely on the essentialist categories of race or politics of authenticity. He regarded

national identity and cultural belonging as historically determined and to be evolving categories that needed to be developed on a sounder foundation that was provided by religion and ethics. To this end, he embraced nationalism from an Islamist viewpoint, with the intention of creating an Islamist-nationalist ideology that would serve as a tool for both national liberation as well as cultural emancipation. It was this melange of ideological streams that gave PAS its complex and progressive Islamist philosophy while it was under the leadership of Dr. Burhanuddin.

His political philosophy stands in stark contrast to the position held by the leadership of the party today. The leadership of PAS had openly committed the party to the struggle for an Islamic state, but the party's president was a man who was grafting together elements of Islamist, Nationalist, Socialist and reformist thought which was in keeping with the intellectual current *en vogue* in the postcolonial world then. Unlike some of the more conservative *ulama*, Dr. Burhanuddin did not resort to the use of sanctimonious religious phrases or obscure esoteric terms to beguile his followers and opponents alike. Ahmad Boestaman (founder-president of the PRM) once described him as the only Malayan Islamist leader who did not use the language of the '*lebai kolot*' or '*fanatik agama*'.

Dr. Burhanuddin's practical approach to political and social struggles was one that placed human will and rational agency at the centre of the world. Human beings were for him the primary actors of history and his was a profane political universe where the conflict of power and interests was paramount. He was, like many other Islamist reformers and modernists of the 20th century, an Islamist who struggled in the 'here and now'. Unlike the more conservative and dogmatic Islamist thinkers of his time who continued to rely upon their invented traditions and

history of the 'golden age' of Islam, Dr. Burhanuddin's heroes and models were men of the day like President Sukarno of Indonesia and Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt. His notion of the ideal Islamic society and political order was also one that was rooted in the developments of the present: he looked to the Bandung conference and the pan-Arabic axis as models of political alliances rather than the Muslim community of Medinah during the time of the Prophet.

Unlike many other Islamist thinkers, Dr. Burhanuddin recognised the fact that the universalism of Islam had its limits. Although he promoted an understanding of Islam that was universal in its scope, the *Doktor* also acknowledged that it could not appeal to those who did not share or agree with its theological discourse. The universalism of Islam remained a *particular* universalism that could not be entirely reconciled with other universalist discourses like Communism, Socialism and Liberal Humanism. In such cases, negotiation with difference and alterity was the key to political action and hegemony.

Rather than concentrating on the differences between the ideological positions of the Islamists, Nationalists and Leftists, Dr. Burhanuddin preferred to stress the chain of equivalences that bound their projects together. This was why he was so successful in disseminating the message of political Islam to a broad audience that spanned the entire political spectrum. Dr. Burhanuddin's skills at negotiation also helped the party bridge the ideological gap between the Islamists and the Leftists of the *Parti Rakyat* and *Parti Buruh* as well. While Islamist thinkers in other parts of the Islamic world at the time were openly critical of other political and ideological systems (the leader of the *Jama'ati Islami*, Ab'ul Al'aa Maudoodi had declared in 1969 that 'whoever speaks about Socialism should have his tongue pulled out'), he

understood the practical need to form instrumental alliances with them.

Yet, despite his achievements in broadening and pushing forward the agenda of political Islam, Dr. Burhanuddin's efforts were checked by his untimely demise from the political scene. After his arrest and detention in 1965 under the Internal Security Act (ISA), his health deteriorated rapidly and he died soon after in 1969[1]. The reforms that had been put in place by him would be dismantled in the years to come by the manoeuvres made by the party's next president, Muhammad Asri Muda, between 1970 to 1982. Asri Muda's brand of ethno-nationalist politics which stood in defence of Malay political dominance and economic interests alienated PAS from the non-Malay and non-Muslim parties and organisations in the land. Thanks to his own megalomaniacal tendency to exercise total control over his party, Asri was finally rejected by the membership of PAS itself after a series of personal scandals and heated intra-party confrontations in 1982.

Since 1982, PAS has come under the leadership of a new wave of *ulama* and traditionalist Islamist leaders who have sought to redefine Islam in purist terms. Their own brand of revolutionary Islam, couched in terms of a discourse of authenticity which seeks to 'purify' Islam and Muslims of all unIslamic elements such as nationalism, humanism and secularism, has severed the link between the PAS of the present and the PAS of the past for good. The practical outlook of Dr. Burhanuddin, with his keen emphasis on dealing with the problems of the immediate present, finds no space within the theocratic discourse of the present generation of PAS *ulama* who continue to look to the medieval past for role models and solutions. Out of place and out of time, he remains as one of the most important figures in the development of Malaysian politics and Islam in the country, yet recognised by none.

Endnotes

1. Dr. Burhanuddin was, in fact, the second Member of Parliament to be detained under the ISA. The first was his long-time friend and comrade Ahmad Boestaman, then-President of the Parti Rakyat Malaysia. Both of them were accused of anti-Malaysian activities and Dr. Burhanuddin was also accused of collaborating with the Indonesian nationalists to overthrow the Government of Malaysia. He was also accused of trying to set up a government in exile abroad.

7 | FINE YOUNG CALIBANS: REMEMBERING THE KESATUAN MELAYU MUDA

This article was written in mid-2000, when Malaysian political leaders were warning Malaysian students not to get involved in party politics on campus. The University and Colleges Act, introduced in the mid-1970s, has effectively eliminated all political activity on university and college campuses all over the land.

THESE DAYS WE ARE TOLD time and again that the younger generation have no role to play in the process of political development in the country. Young people, and young students in particular, are reminded to keep their heads in their books and to let the older generation run the country. This is the 'natural' way of things, they tell us, and so it has been from the beginning of time. But was this really the case? Was there never a time when the younger generation were allowed to speak out?

History furnishes us with countless examples to the contrary. The French Revolution was built on the bodies of martyrs who never had a chance to while away their years in peaceful retirement. Men like Georges Danton, Camilles Desmoulins and Saint-Just were killed while in their twenties, and Robbespiere himself died in

his 30s. Later, Napoleon Bonaparte marched on Egypt when he was only 28. Even closer to home we have the examples of India, Indonesia, Burma and the Philippines, where the struggle for national liberation and independence was started by disaffected youth who had turned against their Colonial masters. The Colonial governments regarded these young upstarts as 'ungrateful wretches' who bit the hand that fed them, but they in turn justified their actions on higher principles of liberty and justice.

Oddly enough, we in Malaysia seem to have forgotten our own history as well. Malaysian politicians may argue that the younger generation have better things to do than to engage themselves in protest or reform movements, but they forget that the independence of Malaysia itself was fought for by a handful of young Malayan activists who put down their schoolbooks and turned to the world of radical politics instead. Like Caliban in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, these youngsters turned the ideological discourse of their masters against them and rose up in revolt.

In 1938, the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM, the Young Malays Association) was formed by a number of young Malay radicals that included Ibrahim Yaakob, Ishak Haji Muhammad, Ahmad Boestaman, Onan Haji Siraj, Abdul Karim Rashid and Sultan Djenain, among others. Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy, the future president of PAS, joined in 1939. Ibrahim Yaakob became the KMM's first president. Its vice-president was Onan Haji Siraj and its secretary Abdul Karim Rashid. Sultan Djenain was said to have served as the link between the KMM and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).

The *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* was literally that: a youthful organisation. None of its founder-members were above the age of 30. Both Burhanuddin and Ibrahim were 27, Ishak was 28 while Ahmad Boestaman was only 18

when they joined the movement. A majority of the KMM's members were products of British Colonial vocational education. They were mostly ex-students of the Sultan Idris Training College, Kuala Lumpur Technical School and Serdang Agricultural College.

The KMM's radical agenda was set by men who were articulate writers and propagandists for the nationalist cause. The movement's aim was to struggle for independence and to work towards closer links with the people of Indonesia. They envisaged the eventual creation of a vast Malay bloc which they referred to as *Malaya-Raya*, encompassing Peninsula Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, Borneo and the Philippines.

The elder generation of Malay feudal ruling elite viewed the KMM with utter contempt, playing it down as a 'flash in the pan' and a movement made up of undisciplined youths. But in many ways the rise of the KMM was itself a response to the decrepitude and inertia of many of the traditional institutions of power and rule in Malay society.

Under British rule, the self-serving feudal political culture of the Malay royalty and aristocracy was allowed to develop and prosper in many ways. In both British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, the conservative and traditionalist elites proved to be useful to the Colonial regimes. It was not only the Malay Sultans and the Indonesian *priyahi* nobles who lent their support to the Colonial establishment: the Islamists of the conservative-traditionalist camp did so as well. In both of these colonies, the forces of conservative traditionalism provided support for the Colonial governments against the growing tide of anti-Colonial sentiment that was slowly developing among the radical vernacular intelligentsia.

Fed-up with the sycophantic and venal attitude of their elders, the young radicals of the KMM decided to take matters into their own hands. With no financial or

political support from any other party, these youngsters launched their own nationalist movement to take on the might of the British Colonial Government, then the biggest and strongest Imperial power in the world.

The KMM radicals received their big break when the British Colonial Government was overthrown by the Japanese during the Second World War. For their part, the KMM had cooperated with the Japanese even before the Occupation by the Japanese Army. Prior to the Japanese landing, the KMM had used hostesses and bartenders to extract information from members of the British expatriate community; used aborigines to monitor the movement of British troops in the rural interior and locate their camps; and formed an 'intelligence branch' to compile information that was later fed to the Japanese prior to their landing. This information was fed to the Japanese intelligence services working under the *Fujiwara Kikan* (Fujiwara Office) that supervised intelligence-gathering for Malaya and Thailand. It was also through the assistance of the KMM that the Japanese military intelligence managed to smuggle a group of Acehnese militant nationalists from Selangor to Sumatra so that they could begin covert anti-Dutch operations in Aceh and the rest of Sumatra prior to the Japanese invasion.

With the remnants of the humiliated Western armies marched off to sweat under the yoke of the Japanese Army and the conservative Malay rulers humbled before their subjects, the Malay radicals found themselves at last in a world that granted them the freedom to dream aloud. They then busied themselves with the task of dismantling the Colonial structures around them.

After the Japanese had consolidated their hold on the Malay peninsula, Ibrahim Yaakob and the other leaders of the KMM were invited to join and lead the Japanese-sponsored native militias and armed forces, the *Giyugun* and *Giyutai*. Ibrahim was promoted to the rank of

Commander-in-Chief of the local militia. Meanwhile, other radicals like Ishak Haji Mohammad returned to their careers in journalism when given the opportunity. Together, the Malay radicals worked to promote a sense of common Pan-Malayan identity amongst their followers and supporters.

However, it soon became obvious to them that the piecemeal efforts by the Japanese to accommodate their demands were cosmetic at best. The Japanese ordered the disbanding of the KMM. Furthermore, it was obvious that the Japanese-sponsored Malayan defence units were in no way comparable to their Indonesian counterparts, either in terms of size or ability. The Japanese Military authorities also made it clear that the Malayan civil and paramilitary organisations were meant to play only a supporting role behind the Japanese military administration, and that the Malays were not to be given any real chances of proving themselves nor work towards their political independence. The different treatment given to the Burmese, Indian and Indonesian military units made it painfully obvious to the young Malay radicals that the Malay civil and paramilitary bodies had no real power or influence at all. So while serving in these organisations they covertly tried to further their political goals despite pressure from the Japanese military authorities to conform to the official pro-Japanese line that had been established.

Despite the constant monitoring of their activities, the Malay radicals still tried to promote their interests and goals throughout the Occupation. They spoke of the need for the Pan-Malay peoples to unite, and they tried to negotiate with the Japanese authorities in Japan itself for the unification of the Malay Peninsula with the rest of Indonesia, and their eventual independence.

In late July 1945, under the watchful eye of the Japanese Military Command, the Malay radicals were given the chance to form the *Kesatuan Rakyat Indonesia*

Semenanjung, KERIS (Union of Indonesian and Peninsula Malay Peoples), under the leadership of Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy. KERIS was made up by a number of ex-KMM members, although it also attracted the support of less radical nationalists like Dato' Onn Jaafar and Sultan Abdul Aziz of Perak. The dream of the radicals seemed to be within arm's reach when Ibrahim and Dr. Burhanuddin met the Indonesian nationalist leaders Ahmad Sukarno and Muhammad Hatta while they were in Taiping, Perak on August 12 that year. But this short-lived project was the closest that the Malay radicals ever got to establishing their cherished goal of reunification and independence for the entire Indonesian-Malayan peoples.

At the end of the war, Japan was forced to surrender Malaya back to the British, but on the condition that the colony would be a *domesticated* one. Ibrahim and his colleagues had been deemed unacceptable by both the departing and returning Colonial powers and, like Subhas Chandra Bose and U Ba Mau to whom he likened himself, Ibrahim was forced to leave his homeland on August 20, 1945, just before the British returned.

On August 17, 1945, Indonesia's radical leaders, Sukarno and Hatta, proclaimed the country's independence. The radical nationalists in Malaya, however, were forced to take a backseat once again as the returning British authorities made every effort to promote the traditional Malay feudal ruling elite at the expense of the nationalists and Islamists. In the years that followed, Dr. Burhanuddin would become the president of the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PAS), Ahmad Boestaman the president of *Parti Rakyat* (People's party) and Ishak Haji Muhammad would lead the *Parti Buruh* (Labour party). Ibrahim Yaakob would spend the rest of his days in exile in Indonesia, working to bring about the unification of the two countries.

Whatever may be said about the youth of Malaysia today, we cannot and should not forget the fact that such figures once existed in the past. The forgotten legacy of the KMM tells us a different story altogether, of a time when Malaysian youth were able and willing to question the circumstances around them even when it seemed as if all hope was lost.

8 | TENGKU ISMAIL AND HIS '*TUAN BRITISH*'

Malaysian politics in general and Malay politics in particular remains obsessed with the past. Practically every party in the country claims to have played a role in the nationalist struggle, though a closer reading of history will show that not all of the political groupings in the country were so inclined to confront the British Colonial powers then. This article was written in 2001.

IN A COUNTRY LIKE MALAYSIA where politicians and political parties suffer from a myriad of hang-ups about the past, it is easy to understand how and why so many political parties claim they have been part of the national struggle for Independence and development all the time. Just a few months ago we were treated to yet another open discursive conflict between the ruling conservative parties and the Islamic Opposition party over the thorny and embarrassing question of which side was the first to launch the campaign for Independence.

In the midst of this hullabaloo and furore, one only hopes that the politicians themselves would turn to the history books for a while. They will surely come face-to-face with painful realities that some of them may find difficult to stomach. For, like it or not, the fact remains

that the political organisations that led the way in the struggle for Independence in Malaya were from the (secular) Left. Among the first political parties to be formed in the country (both legally and illegally) were the *Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya* (PKMM) and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). These parties had their origins in informal activist groups like the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM) and the various trade unions and workers movements that sprang up in the 1930s.

The *arriviste* conservative parties that came on the scene later were not only much smaller and loosely organised, many were in fact led by the local royalty and aristocratic elite who were very much beholden to the British Colonial Government.

The fact that many of the local Malay elite were working hand-in-glove with the British should not come as a surprise. It must be remembered that under British rule, the self-serving feudal political culture of the Malay royalty and aristocracy was allowed to develop and prosper in many ways. In 1915, for instance, the *Majlis Ugama Kelantan* (Kelantan Board of Religious Affairs) was formed in the Sultanate of Kelantan. It came into being thanks to the initiative of the conservative Kelantanese elite led by the *Majlis Ugama's* president, Haji Nik Mahmud, who wished to gain some control over religious affairs in the State. But, dominated as it was by the Kelantanese elite, the *Majlis Ugama Kelantan* soon became a tool for aristocratic patronage and dominance. It focused its attention mostly on tax and revenue collection, via *zakat* contributions.

The *Majlis Ugama Kelantan* fulfilled some of its traditional duties as patron and benefactor to Muslim concerns like building mosques, *suraus* and religious schools, but its real aim was the perpetuation and reproduction of aristocratic power. It built a school for the male children of the Kelantanese elite, based on the

model of British Colonial schools. This was so that their children could later proceed to British Colonial schools and then enter the Colonial civil service. The dominance of the *Majlis Ugama* was resented by ordinary Kelantanese, who began to support the *ulama* and radical nationalists instead. Similar attempts at institutional reform in the other Malay kingdoms like Terengganu and Johor also ended up serving the interests of the ruling elite.

In both British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, the conservative Islamists and traditionalist elite proved to be useful to the Colonial regimes. It was not only the Malay Sultans and the Indonesian *priyahi* nobles who lent their support to the Colonial establishment: the Islamists of the conservative-traditionalist camp did so as well. The *Nahdatul Ulama* of the East Indies, for instance, had gone as far as proclaiming the Dutch colony as part of *Dar'ul Islam*, on the grounds that the welfare of the Indonesian Muslims was catered for and ministered by (Dutch-approved) *ulama* and *penghulus* who enforced the Shariah. While the traditional *ulama* of British Malaya never went as far in their support of the British Colonial government, they did play an active role in curbing the critiques that were increasingly being directed towards the traditional feudal elite by the radical vernacular Malay press.

In both these colonies, the forces of conservative and traditional Islam provided additional bulwarks for the Colonial Governments against the growing tide of anti-Colonial nationalism that was slowly developing among the radical vernacular intelligentsia. The Malay and Indonesian aristocratic elite's support for the Colonial powers were recorded on many an occasion. In 1939 the various conservative and traditionalist Malay organisations and movements held their first annual nationwide Congress in Kuala Lumpur. It was chaired by the conservative Malay leader Tengku Ismail bin Tengku Muhammad Yasis, who was on the editorial board of the Malay newspaper *Majlis*.

At one point, Tengku Ismail spoke to the assembled audience thus:

> *Pemerintah Inggeris itu adalah seumpama air. Orang2 tidak mengambil berat akan air kerana dimana2 ada air, tetapi kalau seorang sampai ke suatu padang pasir, air tidak ada, maka baharulah orang mengerti bagaimana baiknya, pentingnya dan mustahaknya air. Begitulah pemerintah Inggeris itu, andai kata kalau dia pergi dari kita, barulah kita rasa bagaimana baiknya pemerintah Inggeris itu kepada bangsa kita.*

Even by the standards set by other Anglophiles and sycophants of the conservative camp, Tengku Ismail's laudatory paean to the virtues of his Colonial masters must have staggered some of the members of the audience. The radical Malay nationalist Ibrahim Yaakob, who was also present at the gathering as an observer, noted that at least a couple of the leaders of the Malay leftist camp were so stunned by Tengku Ismail's shameless toadying that they were reduced to silence for once.

Like their Indonesian counterparts, the conservative Malay elite that was made up of aristocrats and members of the royal families such as Tengku Ismail were quite open about their support of the British Colonial Government. The Malay organisations that had sprung up between 1938 and 1939 were all led by conservative members of the traditional ruling elite who were themselves wary of the growing influence of Communism, Socialism and Islamic Reformism within their midst. Worse still was the prospect of being abandoned by the British Colonial rulers in the event of war breaking out and Britain being defeated by Japan.

At the 1939 Congress, the *Persatuan Melayu Selangor* (PMS, Selangor Malays Organisation) led by Tengku Ismail made it clear that they were fully behind the Imperial Government of Britain in the event of war breaking out in the Pacific. When the British Colonial Government began rounding up radical Malay activists like Ibrahim Yaakob prior to the Japanese invasion of Malaya, hardly a word of protest was uttered by the conservative nationalists. In fact, they expressed an even stronger determination to support the British: Apart from agreeing to contribute to the 'Lady Thomas Patriotic Fund', the PMS also suggested that a 'Spitfire Fund' be established to help Britain pay for more fighter planes to help defend the Mother Country of the Commonwealth. The other conservative Malay organisations agreed to this proposal, but their efforts came to naught as the Japanese *blitzkrieg* across Southeast Asia came so fast that the only planes that were airborne were Japanese *Zeroes*.

The big break for the Malay conservative elite came in the post-War years when a state of national Emergency was declared between 1948 and 1960. It was during this time that the PKMM, the Malayan Communist Party and the country's first Islamic party, the *Hizbul Muslimin,* were effectively wiped out, thus opening the way for the rise of UMNO and the MCA. Those conservative leaders who now rule the roost should always be reminded of the simple fact that their own position and standing in the country today is due to a number of variables that were outside their control. Had the war ended a different way, or had the radical nationalists been given a chance to defend themselves against the security apparatus of the British Colonial Government, Malaysia's history might have been more than a bit different than what we know today.

9 | IBRAHIM YAAKOB AND THE RISE OF THE MALAY LEFT (PART 1 OF 3)

Official Malaysian history has remained largely silent on the question of Leftist politics in the country. This is particularly so in the case of the Malay Leftist movement that appeared on the political scene from the 1930s onwards. While the history books record the rise and subsequent fall of the Malaysian Communist Party (albeit on terms that are stacked against it), official records and historiography have paid little attention to the crucial role played by the radical Malay Leftists of the 1930s and 1940s in the anti-Colonial struggle. It ought to be noted, however, that it was the radical Leftists and nationalists who first mobilised the Malay people against British Colonial rule, and that they were the ones who introduced the politics of nationalism and anti-Colonialism into the country.

A CURSORY OVERVIEW of Malaysian politics today might give one the mistaken impression that the local political terrain, and Malay politics in particular, is divided between two seemingly irreconcilable camps: that of the traditional ethno-nationalists on the one hand and those of the more conservative Islamist tendency on the other. True, there still exists the Democratic Action Party (DAP) which holds on to the dreams of the Socialist International.

And we must never forget the *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* (PRM, People's Party of Malaysia) and the protem *Parti Sosialis Malaysia*, both of which still bear their Leftist credentials proudly.

But the fact remains that in the wake of the Emergency of 1948 to 1960, the secular Left has, to put it mildly, been fighting on the ropes for its survival in this country. During the elections of 1964, the PRM and other Malay Leftist organisations were badly affected thanks to the anti-Communist hysteria that was whipped up during the confrontation with Indonesia. During this time many of the Socialist movements and organisations in the country were put under surveillance and control. Branches of the PRM and PBM (*Parti Buruh Malaysia*) were declared illegal and shut down all over the country.

It was during the elections of 1969 that the Malay-dominated *Front Sosialis* made up of the PRM and PBM was effectively wiped out, having won not a single seat. The 1969 elections marked the turning point when the Islamists of PAS emerged as the main opponents of UMNO and the political fortunes of the Malay Left began to decline. From then on, Malaysian politics was divided along the lines of three camps: the UMNO-dominated ruling coalition of conservative-nationalist parties, the Chinese-dominated Leftist Opposition led by the DAP, and the Islamists of PAS. The PRM, PBM and PSM have never won a seat in Parliament.

One is tempted to ask the obvious questions: what would the present be like if the Malay Leftists had not been so thoroughly wiped out by both the departing British Colonial powers and the newly-installed conservative Malay elite? Would the country have evolved in a different direction altogether? And would we be witnessing the discursive shift to the Islamist register in politics that we see around us?

These are obviously questions that cannot be answered satisfactorily by anyone, but there remain traces of Malaysian history that may yet prove useful when trying to answer such queries. For, among the many other sides of the Malaysian story that we seldom discuss, there happens to be the forgotten legacy of the pioneering Leftist-nationalists of the early 20th century, led by men like Ibrahim Yaakob.

It is perhaps ironic to note that the man who would one day become one of the leaders of the Malay anti-Colonial movement was himself a product of British Colonial education. Ibrahim Yaakob was a student of the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC), which was set up by the British Colonial authorities with the simple aim of creating a class of Malay functionaries and educationists who would help them maintain and manage the lower rungs of the British Colonial educational system in Malaya.

Set up in 1922, the College was named after Sultan Idris Shah of Perak who only nine years before was conferred the honour of the GCVO by his British patrons and mentors. While the Malay College of Kuala Kangsar (established 1905) was formed with the intention of creating a generation of English-educated Malay students of royal, aristocratic or noble background to man the middle and lower echelons of the Malayan Civil Service (MCS), the SITC had its own unique role to play within the logic of the Colonial-capitalist state.

The SITC, which was created as a result of the ethnocentric policy proposals of the Assistant Director of Colonial Education, R. O. Winstedt, was primarily directed towards the goal of reproducing the Western stereotypes of the pleasant, nimble Malay agriculturist or the rustic Malay schoolteacher who was meant to return to the villages to teach skills that were more in keeping with their 'traditional rural' lifestyle. To this task, one Filipino, four European, and nine Malay instructors had

been recruited to teach the students teaching methods as well as more 'traditional' skills like basket-weaving and gardening which were so beloved of the Colonial imagination.

The dyadic yet complimentary roles of the MCKK and the SITC corresponded to the divisive nature of the Colonial Government's strategy of division and containment of the Malays into clearly-demarcated and policed spaces, namely, the urban space of the Malay Colonial-bureaucrats and the world of the tradition-bound rural peasantry. The Colonial administrators were the most concerned to ensure that the fragile socio-political hierarchy they had created under Colonial rule and through the use of force was maintained indefinitely via the divisive educational system they had introduced. Right up to the eve of Malaya's Independence decades later, Colonial functionaries like Winstedt would still be holding onto the hope that British rule in Malaya could still be perpetuated if the threat of the vernacular Malay intelligentsia could be contained and the English-educated Malay ruling elite could be counted on to help the British stay in the country.

But try as they might, the Colonial authorities realised that as an instrument of Colonial domination and control, the system of Colonial education was not an entirely reliable one. The fears of the Colonial authorities proved to be well-founded for, in the end, the dyadic system of Colonial education did indeed let them down. While the MCKK produced a number of compliant Malay clerks and peons (of royal birth, no less) to man the middle and lower echelons of the Colonial bureaucracy, its sister-institution the SITC produced a generation of educated and conscientious Malay youths who came to see their plight from a different perspective. From this group of newly-conscious Malay youths a handful of radical young Malay journalists, writers, teachers and activists would

emerge, who would later become the founding fathers of the Malay radical nationalist movement. Among them was Ibrahim Yaakob, who proved to be more than just a difficult student when he turned away from basket-weaving classes at the SITC. Being denied the opportunity of being taught something really useful, Ibrahim opted for radical student activism instead.

The Malay youth who would one day prove to be one of the most vocal critics of both the Colonial and traditional Malay regimes was born in Temerloh, Pahang in 1911. He was a student at the SITC between 1929-1931.

During his time at the SITC, Ibrahim became involved with a group of Malay students who had been inspired by the wave of Pan-Malay nationalism that was sweeping across the archipelago from Indonesia. At that time, the nationalist 'bug' had struck throughout Asia and Southeast Asia, inspiring an entire generation of Asian youths whose heroes were men such as Sukarno and Hatta of Indonesia, Gandhi and Bose of India, and Aung San of Burma. Ibrahim was certainly not indifferent to these trends; as one of the founders of a student group called the *Belia Malaya* (Malayan Youth), Ibrahim began subscribing to Indonesian periodicals like the *Fikiran Rakyat* (People's Thought) and members of the *Belia Malaya* individually joined Sukarno's Nationalist Party (PNI, *Partai Nasional Indonesia*) which was based in the neighbouring Dutch East Indies.

It was at the SITC that Ibrahim met some of the friends and compatriots who would accompany him in the nationalist struggle in the years to follow like Abdul Karim Rashid, Hassan Manan and Isa Mohd. Mahmud. The presence of radical Malay teachers like Zainal Abidin Ahmad (Za'aba) and Harun Aminurrashid further contributed to the temper of the SITC. Although their vernacular education was decidedly inferior and wanting

in terms of its curriculum (Malay political and philosophical classics such as the *Taj-us Salatin* of Buchara al-Jauhari and the *Bustan as-Salatin* were not taught to them, while Western Socialist and Communist texts were strictly forbidden), their collective experiences at the SITC not only shaped the way they viewed the Malay world at that time, but determined their choice of solutions for what they came to regard as the 'Malay problem'.

After a somewhat lacklustre start, Ibrahim eventually found himself in Kuala Lumpur, the newly-created capital of the British-ruled Federated Malay States. By then the heated climate of the inter-War years was ripe for the emergence of radical thinkers and socio-political movements all over the country. Along with Abdul Rahim Kajai and Othman Kalam, Ibrahim served as one of the editors of *Majlis*, a metropolitan newspaper of some prominence based in the capital in 1938. In the same year he formed the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM, Malay Youth Union), which became the nucleus of the Malay leftwing-Nationalist anti-Imperialist movements that were to come. It would appear that Ibrahim's ideological and literary acumen had proven more useful than basket-weaving in the end.

The fact that many of the graduates of the SITC were at the forefront of the fledgling anti-Colonial movement proved that something had clearly gone wrong with the Colonial Government's strategy of containment and policing. Radicals like Ibrahim were an unstable phenomenon: they were the indigenous intelligentsia who clearly were not impressed by the ameliorating claims of the Colonial-Capitalist discourse, but they were not about to return to their villages with their heads bowed in disappointment and disillusionment either.

Rejecting both the paternalistic gestures of the British Imperialist power as well as the reactionary and defensive posture of the conservative Malay traditional

elite, these emerging radicals occupied the intermediary space between the two points that had been allotted to them: the urban Colonial administration (entry to which required a familiarity with Eurocentric discourses of modernity, Colonial-Capitalism as well as the English language), and the rural traditional administration (entry to which required precisely the opposite: the return to Colonial constructions of nativism, traditionalism and religious conservatism). Ibrahim and his colleagues were not prepared to enter either one.

Ibrahim was but one of thousands of Malays who was displaced and alienated thanks to the epistemic as well as political and economic injury exercised via the ideological reconstruction of the image of the native Other. His personal experience of migration to the metropolis was but one of thousands, which eventually led to the emergence of a previously unknown constituency: the urban-based Malays of the Colonial metropolitan centres who, for the first time, found themselves freed from the shackles of court and tradition of the *Kerajaans* and in an environment where they, too, were foreigners.

Working as a journalist and later editor for *Majlis* in the late 30's, Ibrahim would produce some of his own critical commentaries on the condition of the Malays under Colonial rule which would show that he was indeed the inheritor of a critical tradition going back to the *Kaum Muda* radicals of the 1920s. The critical articles and editorials that Ibrahim wrote were largely concerned with the condition of the Malays under Colonial rule and the failure of the British to protect the interests of the Malays in an increasingly-lopsided plural Colonial economy.

In 1938, Ibrahim helped to form (and lead) the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda.* The KMM was made up of like-minded young Malay radicals, was 'vaguely Marxist in ideology' and 'reflected both a strong anti-Colonial spirit and opposition to 'bourgeoise-feudalist' leadership of the

traditional elite'. Opposed as they were to both Colonial rule as well as the petty despotism of the Malay Sultanates, they called for the creation and return to the Indon-Malay world of pre-Colonial past, the dream of *Malaya-Raya*, (Greater Malaya) and a unified anti-Colonial struggle which brought together all the peoples of the Indon-Malay world and Asia. The members of the KMM engaged in meetings and discussions amongst themselves, comparing the condition of the colonised Malay lands to that of other colonies caught in the throes of anti-Colonial struggle. They argued for an end to Colonial rule as well the corrupt and enfeebled traditionalist order of the feudal Malay elite. Yet, as a fledgling youth grouping without the means to appeal directly and openly to the masses, the KMM's activities, though ambitious in its scope and radical in temper, were nonetheless comparatively muted in their effect. This proved to be both productive and frustrating for Ibrahim himself.

In the end, the stifling environment of Kuala Lumpur would force Ibrahim to leave once more. And it was here, on his journey across his homeland, that Ibrahim would come to see the glaring inequalities and injustice of Colonial rule laid bare.

After his impromptu expulsion from the editorial board of *Majlis,* thanks to the manoeuvrings of its new conservative editor Tengku Ismail, the Malay radical was forced to take to the road once more. Ibrahim decided to take the opportunity to travel across his homeland to assess the political and economic condition of the Malays of all the states, while also engaging in a number of covert underground activities, such as negotiating with the Malay rulers while preaching his ideology of radical nationalism to his supporters.

In 1941, with the tentacles of Imperial Japan slowly easing their way southwards between the islands of the Pacific, Ibrahim completed the first volume of his

work, *Melihat Tanah Air* (Surveying the Homeland). In it we find for the first time a comprehensive exposition of Ibrahim's political philosophy and strategy, which served as the basis of his dream of establishing the long-awaited *Malaya-Raya*.

In *Melihat Tanah Air*, Ibrahim's own account of how and why he decided to embark on his tour of the homeland gives us an insight into the way in which he perceived the problem of the Malay people and his emotional response to the Malay condition under Colonial rule then:

> *...hak kebangsaan orang Melayu jadi sangat lemah. Orang-orang Melayu menjadi bangsa yang tersingkir di luar bandar tidak ada di daerah perniagaan di tanahairnya sendiri. Hal inilah yang menimbulkan kesedihan hati saya melihat tanahair saya dan bangsa saya yang menjadi bangsa yang ditakluk dikuasai orang asing. Menjadi bangsa yang miskin tenggelam didalam kekayaan tanahairnya sendiri. Tak ubah seperti ayam mati kelaparan di kepuk padi. Perasaan hati inilah yang membawa saya berjalan melihat tanahair menjelajah Malaya yang belum dilakukan oleh orang-orang yang dahulu.*

He ended his travels in Singapore where, with the help of the Japanese funds, he would resume his career in journalism. He then intended to commit his thoughts and opinions to writing, but unfortunately only the first volume of his work would see the light of day. The second would be stopped by the British Internal Security Services who decided to detain the errant Malay journalist-activist during the opening stages of the Second World War in

October 1941, just before the unwelcomed arrival of the Japanese Imperial Army which would bring to a hasty conclusion the penultimate chapter of Britain's story of Empire.

Melihat Tanah Air was Ibrahim Yaakob's first serious attempt to understand and describe the economic and political malaise that had come to grip the Malays of his homeland. It offered precisely what the title of the book claimed it to be: a survey from the point of view of a Malay journalist of decidedly radical political complexion. But *Melihat Tanah Air* was written at a time when Ibrahim's frustration had to be restrained to avoid attracting the gaze of the Colonial censor, and his narrative had to be written with care. The socio-political circumstances surrounding the writing of *Melihat Tanah Air* also account for its two most outstanding features: one, Ibrahim's tendency to disguise his critique of British Colonial rule; and two, his inclination to harbour the belief that the traditional Malay elites were still capable of playing a role in protecting the interests of the Malays.

At this stage of his political development, Ibrahim still held the belief that the Malay rulers could serve as the protectors of the Malay community and their interests, provided their powers were not compromised in any way by Colonial intervention. It was this naïve and wishful belief that accounts for his comparatively positive observations of the state of affairs in the Unfederated Malay States of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu, where he felt that Malay customs and mores were still upheld with respect. He was particularly impressed by Terengganu, where he concluded that *'kuasa Sultan Trengganu lebih besar daripada kuasa semua Raja-Raja Melayu berkenaan dengan hal pentadbiran negeri masing-masing',* and it was on the figure of Tengku Omar of the Court of Trengganu that Ibrahim pinned his hopes for the revival of the Malay Sultanate of Riau-Lingga.

Although Ibrahim did include some criticism of the administration of some of these States (such as Kedah, where he observed the tendency to create a top-heavy religious bureaucracy and the comparative decline in the number of Malay youths, particularly girls, being sent to school), his survey failed to penetrate any deeper into the internal politics of the Unfederated Malay States then.

The potential critical edge of *Melihat Tanah Air* was therefore blunted by Ibrahim's own tendency towards self-censorship as well his hopes that the Malay rulers would, in the end, save the day for their Malay subjects. The true merit of the work, however, lies in his critique of the economic and political condition of the Malay masses which invariably implicated the British Colonial authorities as well as the Malay ruling classes. As far as the effects of rapid capital exploitation by the British and their politics of divide and rule were concerned, Ibrahim was acutely aware of the deleterious effects on the Malay masses in particular:

> *Sesungguhnya akibat membuka Negeri Melayu ini telah mendatangkan berbagai kesan yang membawa bencana kepada kehidupan Bangsa Melayu, oleh sebab desakan modal dan buruh daripada luar itu. Jadinya bagi umat Melayu negerinya meskipun dibuka akan tetapi oleh beberapa sebab yang tertentu tidaklah dapat mereka merasai nikmat tanahairnya sendiri. Diantara sebab-sebabnya ialah (1) Orang Melayu tidak mengerti cara-cara pentadbiran modal, (2) Orang Melayu tidak faham akan muslihat-muslihat yang datang dari luar, ialah oleh sebab mereka telah lebih lima ratus tahun ditindih di*

bawah kezaliman Kerajaan Raja-Raja dengan perperangan sama mereka sendiri.

Here we find the nucleus of Ibrahim's radical thought, the full potential of which would soon flower as he grew increasingly disillusioned with the British and the Malay rulers whom he once regarded as protectors of his nation. But with his arrest and detention by the British security forces in 1941, the first phase of Ibrahim Yaakob's political career had come to an end. The nomadic Colonial subject was brought to a temporary standstill, his work confiscated and none of his undercover plans and negotiations with the Malay rulers would come to fruition.

Despite these setbacks, Ibrahim's travels across the land had not been in vain. Having seen and experienced at close hand the desperate plight of the ordinary Malay workers and peasantry, he had come to the conclusion that the solution to the abysmal condition of the Malays under British Colonial rule had one radical solution: the expulsion of the Western Colonial powers from the region and the creation of *Malaya-Raya*, an idea which he would carry to the people in the years to come:

Pada masa yang akhir-akhir ini iaitu lepas daripada lima ratus tahun lamanya mereka (orang Melayu) menghadapi peperangan suadara hingga Semenanjung Tanah Melayu ini terbagi kepada beberapa puak yang bernegeri dan berlawanan diantaranya sendiri, maka pada masa ini mulailah datang cita-cita hendak bersekutu semula. Bukanlah sahaja di antara umat-umat Melayu dua juta di Tanah Melayu ini, tetapi dengan umat (rumpun) Melayu di Indonesia seramai enam puluh lima juta itu. Mereka ingin hendak bersatu berkerjasama

menggerakkan ikatan kebangsaan bersama menuju Indonesia Raya. Tetapi hari ini hanyalah satu perasaan sahaja baru dan sebahagian ramai dari pihak kaum pertuanan atau darah Raja-Raja yang masih memegang teguh dengan perasaan lamanya sangatlah menentang perasaan-perasaan baru hendak mempersatukan uman (rumpun) Melayu semuanya itu.

By the next time he found himself free again, Ibrahim's world was well and truly shattered beyond recognition. The Japanese Army's *blitzkrieg* across Malaya had shown that the *orang putih* was not invincible after all, and that the bayonet was the ultimate equaliser as it did not recognise distinctions of race and culture. With the remnants of the humiliated Western armies marched off under the Japanese yoke and the Malay rulers humbled, Ibrahim and the Malay radicals found themselves at last in a world that would grant the radical Malay intelligentsia the freedom to dream aloud.

10 | IBRAHIM YAAKOB AND THE RISE OF THE MALAY LEFT: THE BROKEN DREAM OF *MALAYA-RAYA* (PART 2 OF 3)

BY THE 1930s, the Malay Archipelago was being swept by the fervour of anti-Colonialism and ethno-nationalism. The world of Southeast Asia was open to developments abroad, and the nationalists of the region turned to India, China, Japan, Burma and Vietnam for inspiration. The heroes of the time were men like the Filipino martyr Jose Rizal, Subhas Chandra Bose, Ho Chi Minh, U Ba Mau and Aung San (father of present-day pro-democracy reformer and human rights activist Aung San Suu Kyi).

The Indonesian nationalists in particular, led by men like Sukarno and Hatta, were at the forefront of the move to oust the Colonial powers and reconstruct the political, cultural and social frontiers of *Nusantara*. To an extent, their Malayan counterparts in the Peninsula were likewise influenced by these ideas, and in the writings of men like Ibrahim Yaakob, Ishak Haji Mohammad, Ahmad Boestaman and Burhanuddin al-Helmy we encounter numerous references to the Malay world of the past. In time, they began to write and speak about the need to re-unite the peoples of the Archipelago under the banner of a unitary political entity called *Malaya-Raya*.

The dream of *Malaya-Raya* or *Indonesia-Raya* was not merely a nostalgic return to the past: it recognised the traumatic manner in which the Indon-Malay world had been torn apart by treaties and pacts agreed upon by foreign powers that had descended upon the Malay people and their homeland.

The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1826 and the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 had cut off neighbouring Malay kingdoms from each other, dividing *Kerajaans*, clans, and families alike. The Malay Kingdom of Patani, which was once part of the Malay world and known throughout the Archipelago as a famous centre of Islamic learning, was ripped away from the rest of the Malay Peninsula by the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909. (For its part in this sordid affair the Kingdom of Siam – later Thailand – was to suffer the problem of accommodating a hostile and unwilling Malay-Muslim population within its Imperial domain till today.) Likewise, the Anglo-Dutch treaty forcibly ripped apart the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, which had been regarded as 'two rooms in the same house', separated only by the corridor that was the Straits of Melacca. Suddenly, the Malay peoples found themselves no longer free to travel in their own homeland, thanks to the new political geography that had been imposed on them by foreigners.

What made the nationalists' dream of *Malaya-Raya* such a radical one was that it was truly unprecedented. Going beyond vague notions of Pan-Malayanism that had been articulated earlier by the first generation of Malay reformists, *Malaya-Raya* was a concept entirely new to Malay political discourse in that it grafted together elements of traditional and modern political discourse in a manner previously regarded as inconceivable. The conception of the Malay world, *dunia Melayu*, upon which it was premised was one that predated the arrival of the Western Imperial powers. It recognised none of the

artificial geopolitical boundaries drawn by the Western Colonial powers that had intruded in the affairs of the Archipelago. But the dream of *Malaya-Raya* also sought to reinvent and recontextualise the Malay world in the framework of a modern state structure, creating a unified, sovereign and independent Pan-Malay State that was united by bonds of language, culture, religion and tradition as well as a singular State apparatus.

The two main characteristics of the *Malaya-Raya* project were: (1) its conception of Pan-Malayanism which regarded all the indigenous Indon-Malay peoples as being of the same broad racial and cultural identity, and (2) its willingness to de-racialise the divisions between the different racial groupings between Malays and non-Malays by insisting upon a broader conception of Malay culture which encompassed the different cultural groupings of the Archipelago. It was this that allowed the Malay radicals to work with both the nationalists and radicals of Indonesia as well as the non-Malay left-wing and communist movements in Malaya. These features would remain as part of the Malay radicals' political agenda even after the Second World War.

While the war was still going on and the British Colonial troops were languishing under the yoke of their Japanese victors, the Malay radicals were busy trying to dismantle the Colonial structures that the British had been building for nearly a century. The Japanese Occupation gave Ibrahim and his fellow radicals the opportunity to develop and disseminate their ideas as never before, even though it was obvious that Japanese military rule was as harsh and restrictive as British Colonial rule had been.

After being released from detention in February 1942, the Malay radicals found that their fledgling political movement, the KMM, had been banned by the very same Japanese military establishment which claimed that it had come to help them 'liberate' themselves. Open

discussions on the question of independence and the public display of the Indonesian flag, the *Sang Seka Merah-Putih,* which had become the political standard of the Malay radicals as well, were also outlawed. Nonetheless, the Malay radicals were courted by the Japanese Administration and invited to play a prominent role in the development of Malay civic and paramilitary organisations which the Japanese hoped to use to help reinforce their rule in Malaya.

Having already tried to work with the British as well as the Malay royalty and aristocracy, Ibrahim found it easy to cooperate with the Japanese out of political necessity. The KMM had, in fact, already been assisting the Japanese covertly even before the actual invasion itself in 1941, as discussed in previous chapters.

After the Japanese had consolidated their hold on the Malay Peninsula, Ibrahim and the other ex-leaders of the KMM such as Ahmad Boestaman were invited to join and lead the Japanese-sponsored native militias and armed forces, the *Giyugun* and *Giyutai.* As the commander of the Malayan *Giyugun*, Ibrahim deliberately chose to refer to it as PETA, hoping to strengthen its ties with its (stronger) Indonesian counterpart. Meanwhile, other radicals like Ishak Haji Mohammad returned to their careers in journalism. Together, the Malay radicals worked to promote a sense of common Pan-Malayan identity amongst all their followers and supporters in all the movements and institutions that they found themselves working in.

However, it soon became obvious to the radicals that the piecemeal efforts by the Japanese to accommodate their demands were cosmetic at best, as we have seen in previous chapters. Thus, while serving in these organisations, the radicals covertly tried to further their political goals despite pressure from the Japanese Military authorities to conform to the official pro-Japanese line that they had established. In his work *Sedjarah Dan Perdjuangan*

di Malaya (1948), Ibrahim described how he and the KMM activists managed to set up 'socialist cells' and cooperative communes within the militarised state structure. One such cooperative venture was the 'Malay Farm' of Geylang, where the *'Kesatuan Melayu Muda memperaktijkan Sosialisme dan mengadakan peladjar2an kepada orang muda sebagai kader Sosialist, meskipun perkataan Sosialist tidak pernah disebut2nja tetapi praktijnja di Malay Farm Geylang itu adalah Sosialist'*.

Despite the constant monitoring of their activities, the Malay radicals tried to promote their interests and goals throughout the period of occupation. They continually spoke of the need for the Indon-Malay peoples to unite and they tried to negotiate with the Japanese authorities in Japan itself for the unification of the Malay Peninsula with Indonesia, and for their eventual independence. When such overt means of negotiation did not bear fruit, Ibrahim and his colleagues resorted to more covert methods, a reminder of his earlier days in the political underground.

In July 1945, under the watchful eye of the Japanese military command, the Malay radicals were given the chance to form the *Kesatuan Rakyat Indonesia Semenanjung* (KERIS, Union of Indonesian and Peninsula Malay Peoples) under the leadership of Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy. But KERIS never managed to get very far in its activities, due in part to the decline in fortunes for the Japanese army.

By 1944, the strained Japanese High Command was already contemplating the prospect of granting independence to Indonesia. The Malay nationalists were keen to see that independence was granted to the Malay peoples of the Peninsula as well. KERIS had a brief meeting with the leaders of the Indonesian nationalist movement, Sukarno and Hatta, in July 1945 in Taiping, Perak. However, the defeat of the Japanese ensured that KERIS

was not able to put its plans into action. Indonesia declared its independence unilaterally on August 17, 1945 and the Malays of the Peninsula were left with no choice but to continue their struggle while also supporting the newly-independent Republic of Indonesia against Dutch and British aggression. This short-lived project was the closest that the Malay radicals ever got to establishing their cherished dream of reunification and independence for the Indon-Malay peoples.

By Ibrahim's own account, he had, by then, become too dangerous for the Japanese as well. By the end of the War, Ibrahim and his colleagues had been deemed unacceptable by both the departing and returning Colonial powers, and was forced to leave Malaya on August 20, 1945, just before the British returned.

Caught up in the internal politics of the Malay nationalist groups at the wrong place and at the wrong time, by his own reckoning Ibrahim had missed his opportunity to leave Malaya with Sukarno and Hatta, who had been flown back to Indonesia just in time to proclaim its independence in August, 1945. By the time he arrived in Indonesia, the British were back in power in Malaya and the radical Malay nationalists had regrouped under the banner of the *Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya* (PKMM, Malay Nationalist Party of Malaya), under the leadership of Mokhtaruddin Lasso and Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy.

Despite this monumental setback, the dream of reuniting the Indon-Malay peoples of *Malaya-Raya* was yet to be consigned to the footnotes of history. But this dream was soon to be challenged by far more reactionary and conservative powers that would drown out the appeals and protests of the radical intelligentsia.

At the end of the Second World War, the Indon-Malay world was in a state of pandemonium. The return of the Western powers to Southeast Asia did not lead to

an immediate return to the *status quo ante*, but instead witnessed the shambolic redrawing of boundaries and frontiers which turned friends and allies against each other while bringing together warring sides that were previously engaged in an all-out contest for world domination. There were forces all around that strove to reunite and reorder the Indon-Malay world, but each had its own opinion of how that world ought to look like.

If such radical interpretations were required to reconfigure the world anew, there was hardly a shortage of radical thinkers to produce them. In 1946, Ishak Haji Mohammad wrote his book *Bersatulah-Sekarang* (Unite Now!), where he vociferously argued for the immediate reunification of Malaya and Indonesia. Two years later, a book entitled *Sedjarah Dan Perdjuangan Di Malaya* (The History and Struggle of Malaya) appeared in Indonesia. Its author was known simply as I. K Agastja, but a cursory glance at the list of biographical details in the introduction immediately made it clear to all who the mysterious author was: Ibrahim Yaakob.

By 1948 Ibrahim was living in exile in Indonesia, under the name Iskandar Kamel. The Malay journalist-turned-antiColonial activist had already identified himself as a '*nasionalis progressive*' (as opposed to the other camp of conservative '*nasionalis feudalist*'). The Indonesian editors of the *Sedjarah* would also describe him as an *Indonesian* (in the broadest sense of the term, meaning a true native of the Indon-Malay Archipelago) and claim that in his *nasionalis* veins flowed the blood of a *Bugis*. His transformation was partly a result of his 'adoption' by the left-wing nationalists of Indonesia as well as the outcome of his own political maturity and disillusionment with developments in Malaya then.

Once again, Ibrahim would put his frustration into words and turn to his pen, but this time his writings would be lent an even more radical character by the

changing geopolitical circumstances in the Indon-Malay world which would pit the former student of the SITC not only against the British Colonial powers but also a gamut of new foes and adversaries. Having left Malaya Ibrahim now found himself in a world that would soon be torn between what *Bung Karno* (Sukarno) would call the 'Old-Foes' (Older, Imperialist Forces) and the 'New-Foes' (New, emerging Forces) of the Third World.

But the transformation of Ibrahim Yaakob to I.K Agastja and the Malay activist to the *nasionalis progressive* was not merely a nominal metamorphosis: in the *Sedjarah* we find Ibrahim at his most critical and incisive, where the gentler style of the past had given way to sharper and more explicit condemnation of the machinations of the British Colonial powers. The journalistic style of his earlier works such as *Melihat Tanah Air* (1941) had given way to a more systematic-analytic approach and betrayed a deeper understanding of the problems facing the Indon-Malay peoples of the Archipelago then as well as the dynamics of domination and exploitation which had come to characterise the pattern and form of Colonial Malaya from the turn of the century onwards.

The earlier naive appeals to the British Colonial Government to protect the interests of the Malays were replaced by systematic accounts of how and why the British have managed to secure a grip on the economic and political infrastructure of Malaya through their betrayal of the Malays. Such instances of betrayal had been documented even in his earlier *Melihat Tanah Air*, where Ibrahim condemned the British for their propensity to label the Malays as lazy and backward according to their racist stereotypes of native races. This observation, which would be echoed by many postcolonial social scientists such as S. H. Alatas (who have argued that the economic and developmental policies of the British were in fact instrumental in the construction of the myth of the lazy

Malay and thus intrinsic to the process of marginalising the Malays from the economic, social and political arena of Malaya), makes another appearance in Ibrahim's later polemic:

> *Bagi mendesak kepada ekonomi orang Melayu dan melawan tuntutan2 orang Melayu supaya Inggeris menaungi akan keselamatan ekonomi Melayu itu, pihak Inggeris sendiri tidak sahadja membawa modal dan tenaga orang dari luar, tetapi telah mendjalankan da'ajah kepada dunia jang mengenai Malaya dan orang Melayu dikatakan-nja 'orang Melayu malas, orang 'tidak apa"dan lain2nja. Makin kuat tuntutan politik dan ekonomi orang Melayu; makin kuat pula propaganda Inggeris, hingga di-tjapkan orang Melayu malas, tidak layak bekerdja, belum masak (matang) untuk memerintah diri, dan lain2-nja. Kaum2 saudagar Inggeris memandang rendah dan hina kepada orang2 Melayu dan setjara tidak langsung menolak menerima Melayu-Indonesia bekerdja kepada fabrik2 atau perusahaan-nja, ketjuali sebagai ketjil... Dasar ekonomi Inggeris terhadap Malaya ternjata memeras setjara tidak langsung kepada orang Melayu dan orang Melayu hanja di-bukakan djalan membuat serikat2 desa, dan dibiarkan dengan perusahan kuno jang djauh dari madju tetapi makin hilang dan mati.*

But Ibrahim did not look at the economic and political condition of the Malays as if they existed in a cultural and political vacuum. In the *Sedjarah*, he located his analysis

in the context of a plural economy that had been constructed artificially by a foreign imperial power and where cleavages of race, class and national interests were clearly visible.

The net effect of this Imperial policy of 'divide and rule' was, as Ibrahim correctly pointed out, the construction of a political hierarchy in a cosmopolitan Colonial context where the interests and welfare of the British Colonial-capitalist class were held paramount and the rights of the non-White Colonial subjects (be they native Malays or migrant communities) were systematically compromised or played off against each other. In the long run, it was the ordinary natives who suffered most under this system of selective protection of political and economic rights:

> *Maka dengan perbuatan2 Inggeris mendjalankan dasar ekonomi jang tjurang terhadap orang Melayu, dengan sendiri-nja eknonomi Melayu mendjadi terlalu lemah; dan keadaan jang njata sekarang kekuatan ekonomi di-Malaya di-pegang oleh pemodal2 Inggeris, dengan sebahagian ketjil di-pegang oleh pemodal2 ketjil China dan India, mereka mendjadi agent Capitalist besar buat membongkar kekayaan Malaya. Hal-hal ini memang diatur oleh Inggeris untuk kepentingan politik ekonomi pendjadjahannja: iaitu orang Melayu pura-pura dipertahankan (di-naungi) hak politik-nja sebagai anak negeri tetapi di-lemahkan di-dalam ekonomi-nja, dan orang asing jang di-datangkan di-Malaya di-tolak akan tuntutan politik-nja, tetapi di-bebaskan di-dalam ekonomi, jang mana pada hakekat-nja Inggeris telah merampas*

Malaya dan hak bangsa Melayu dengan segala rupa tipu muslihat-nja jang sangat litjak dan litjin.

Gone were the days when Ibrahim's critique of British Colonialism in Malaya was tempered by his concern for upsetting the mores and sensibilities of the Colonial censor. In *Sedjarah Dan Perdjuangan*, not only the British Colonial authorities were condemned for their unjust practices and intervention in Malay affairs, but also the non-Malay petty capitalists as well as the traditional Malay *Kerajaan* and aristocratic elites for their complicity in the politics of divide and rule.

But Ibrahim's critical polemics were being drowned by the growing tide of conservative power in Malaya and the decline in the fortunes of the Malay Left. A few months after they took part in the First Pan-Malayan Malay Congress in March 1946, a dispute over the colour and pattern of the flag for the United Malay Nationalist Organisation (UMNO) served as the pretext for a walk-out that would take the Malay radicals of the PKMM out of mainstream Malayan politics and eventually rob them of their chances for political victory once and for all.

The decision to walk out of the Pan-Malayan Malay Congress would later prove to be a fateful one. For it was from that point onwards that the fate of the Malay Left was sealed, and in the decades to come the torch of Malayan nationalism would be usurped by a political force that had only begun to rouse itself: UMNO.

11 | IBRAHIM YAAKOB AND THE RISE OF THE MALAY LEFT: ABSENT FOUNDERS (PART 3 OF 3)

IN THE AFTERMATH of the Second World War, the radical nationalists of the Malay Left found themselves in a world turned upside down.

The returning Western Colonial powers performed yet another one of their customary U-turns by working with the very same Japanese forces who were their mortal enemies not so long ago. In Indochina the French Colonial forces actually worked with their Japanese prisoners in their attempt to contain the militant uprising by Vietnamese nationalists. Likewise, the Dutch and British sought the assistance of the Japanese to hold back the tide of anti-Colonial nationalism in Indonesia. In Malaya, the British turned the tables on their Communist allies of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), declaring them terrorists and bandits.

Political and ideological boundaries were shifting almost on an hourly basis, where today's friend could be tomorrow's enemy. Under such turbulent and variable circumstances, Ibrahim Yaakob felt that his best course of action would be to leave Malaya and join his fellow Nusantara counterparts in neighbouring Indonesia. For him, the decision to leave Malaya and resettle in Indonesia was not a betrayal of one country for another for the simple

reason that he regarded both as belonging to the same supra-national entity known as *Malaya-Raya* (Greater-Malaya). But while Ibrahim Yaakob was afforded relatively more freedom in Sukarno's Indonesia, the same could not be said for the radical leftists left behind in Malaya.

The rapid changes in Malaya in the wake of the War made it impossible for the Malay radicals to reorganise themselves and re-establish their links with the Malay masses. While they were keen to promote their own ideas and struggles, which were opposed to those of the conservative nationalists, the more radical elements of their political project (such as their tendency to view the politics of the *bangsa* in non-racialised terms and their sympathy with the principle of dissolving the traditional Malay Sultanate system) alienated them from the ordinary Malay masses who were still inclined to participate in communal politics within the traditional feudal framework of patronage and loyalty, which was embodied and defended by the more conservative nationalists. The few members of the Malay aristocracy who were inclined to support the radicals were themselves of equally radical disposition and some of them, such as Tengku Mahmud Mahyiddeen, either played down their noble ranks and titles or renounced them altogether instead of using their traditional power and influence as the Conservative elites were doing.

Increasingly out of touch and out of favour with the ordinary Malay masses, the radicals' attempts to forge instrumental ideological coalitions with the non-Malay Left that transcended the cleavages of race and nationhood were hopelessly out-of-sync at a time when race relations between the Malays and Chinese were at their lowest ebb. (As the confrontation with the Communists intensified, British intelligence and propaganda services went out of their way to develop the chain of equivalences between Communism and the Chinese community as a whole. This

effectively led to the demonisation of the entire Chinese community as potential Communist agents and sympathisers, and futher worsened the inter-communal relations between the Malays and the Chinese in the country).

With the lines of communication between the radicals and the masses cut, their leaders in exile or imprisonment and their organisational structure in tatters, the radicals of the PKMM were effectively destroyed. In turn, the Conservatives were sweeping into the positions of power that were slowly being opened up by the British who had begun to see the first signs of dusk in a corner of an Empire where once the sun would never set.

By 1948 Ibrahim was no longer a figure in Malayan politics. Having been absent from Malaya since 1945, Ibrahim (like many of the other radicals) was not able to contribute during some of the most critical episodes of the country's newly-emerging history, such as the Malayan Union crisis of 1946, which gave the Conservative nationalists the window of opportunity they had been looking for so long. 1948 would also see the beginning of yet another dark phase in Malaya's history: the state of national Emergency would be declared, which would become the death-blow to the *Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya* (PKMM), the *Angkatan Pemuda Insaf* (API) led by Ahmad Boestaman and the radical Malay Left.

The Emergency was declared on June 19, 1948. It lasted for 12 years and was finally declared over on August 31, 1960. With the declaration of Emergency, the Malay radical groupings were effectively wiped out. API was the first political movement to be banned (in 1947, before the Emergency), and its leader Ahmad Boestaman was placed under arrest in 1948 under the Emergency regulations. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was also banned in 1948, and its members went into hiding in the rural interior to carry out guerrilla warfare which would continue for years to come.

The PKMM was not banned, but with the arrest of many of its members and the increasingly restrictive measures imposed by the Emergency regulations, it ceased to function effectively in Malaya. Its leaders therefore decided to transfer the remaining membership of the PKMM to Indonesia and this was completed by 1950. Shortly after the move, the PKMM was officially proscribed by the British in Malaya.

Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy and Ibrahim had thus managed to save what little was left of the PKMM. In Indonesia, the PKMM was based at Jogjakarta, under the leadership of Ibrahim. The movement was renamed the *Kesatuan Malaya Merdeka* (Independent Malaya Union) and Ibrahim spent much of the years to come helping the Indonesians in their campaign to discredit the newly-created Malayan Federation under Tunku Abdul Rahman as a neo-Colonial entity.

But despite the constant flow of polemics that was being hurled at the emerging Conservative nationalists of UMNO, the UMNO juggernaut rolled forward regardless. The UMNO elites were drawn from the Conservative-Nationalist camp and from royal and aristocratic stock (its founder, Dato' Onn Jaafar, would be replaced by Tunku Abdul Rahman, a prince) and the pattern of Malay feudal politics would once again be set in place, albeit within new trappings, with the Malay aristocrats and nobility assuming the role of the protectors and patrons of the Malays. But this transition could only be achieved via the declaration of Emergency, from which would emerge a Malaya that Ibrahim could scarcely have imagined possible.

On August 31, 1957, under a state of National Emergency, the Federation of Malaya was born. Malaya therefore emerged in a situation where normal political practice had in fact been suspended. Malaya's Constitution, Judiciary and Parliament was based on the

British model, and its first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, was, appropriately enough, a Malay prince painstakingly educated at Cambridge. Dr. Ismail became the first Governor of Bank Negara, Tan Siew Sin was made the country's first Finance Minister and V. T. Sambanthan the first Minister for Public Works. The Malayan flag was raised for the first time in Kuala Lumpur and, a few hours later, in front of Malaya House in Trafalgar Square, London. The national anthem, *Negaraku* (My Homeland), was also played for the first time. The Federation of Malaya inherited the system of Parliamentary Democracy from Westminster, with a Constitutional Monarch as its head of state, something which the leadership of UMNO were keen to install. The country also inherited a strong and highly-centralised, top-heavy Federal Government apparatus where certain institutions, such as the Royal Malayan Police Force (RMPF), were stronger than others.

Post-Colonial Malaya was in many ways the child of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, who was one of the many sons of the philoprogenitive Sultan Abdul Hamid of Kedah (the Sultan fathered 45 children and had 92 grand and great-grandchildren). In his youth the Tunku was given a traditional royal upbringing and later sent to Cambridge to further his studies. Harry Miller, in his biography of the Tunku, noted that the Anglophile Tunku was more impressed by the image of Cambridge than anything else (pg. 38) and spent most of his time driving around in his sports car and attending horse races (pg. 41). His academic performance was of a poor standard, and he failed in his first examination to enter the legal profession 'because he found horse-racing and dancing more interesting than the law'. An Anglophile 'with enough English manners to pass for an English aristocrat', the Tunku was keen to ensure that Britain would remain close at hand to help secure Malaya's fragile new political

boundaries, and the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) was one of the first agreements he consented to, even before the Malayan Federation was actually given its full independence.

In the economic sphere, the Tunku's policies were basically a return to the Colonial policy. His main concerns were to ensure that Malaya's business links with the rest of the world were not severed and that foreign investment would continue to flow into Malaya's coffers. The conservative and capitalistic ideology of the Tunku and the rest of UMNO's elite in the 50s thus ensured that UMNO's brand of nationalism did not lead to drastic economic reconstruction in post-Independence Malaya.

Indeed, the departing British authorities had a lot to be thankful for: unlike Indonesia, who had nationalised all Dutch assets when it declared its Independence, the Conservative Government of the Federation of Malaya safeguarded the economic interests and investments of the British even after they had left. Harun Hashim, the representative of the Malayan Commission to London, toured the length and breath of Britain speaking to members of the British Conservative Party, inviting them to invest in the newly-independent country. The title of his talk was *'Malaya, My Country, My People and its Future'*. That the Malayan representatives felt the need to invite more foreign capital into Malaya at the time was seen as somewhat ironic, considering the fact that the level of foreign capital in the country was already high and most of the major industries (such as rubber and tin) were already in the hands of British monopolies anyway.

The Times of London reported the birth of Malaya with a resonant chord of approval. In particular, it pointed out the impeccable credentials of the conservative Malay leaders who, unlike the troublesome radicals of the Left,

had showed that they were of a decidedly more moderate and accommodating temper. It reassured its readers that:

> *Malayan nationalism had not been born out of conflict and there was not a single Malayan Minister who had ever spent a day in prison for sedition.* (*The Times*, August 31, 1957.)

Under the Government of the Malay conservatives, the dream of *Malaya-Raya* finally came to an end.

In Indonesia, Ibrahim found himself alone and powerless. His own fragile political organisation was soon swept up by the tide of events in Indonesia, where the first experiment with liberal democracy had come to its untimely end by the late 1950s. In time, President Sukarno, whom Ibrahim and the Malay nationalists had once admired so, began to show his true colours by declaring the need for 'guided democracy' and the concentration of power at the centre. Sukarno's ambitious nature eventually manifested itself when he elevated himself to the position of President for Life with the somewhat grandiose title of *Pemimpin Besar Revolusi Doktor Engineer Haji Ahmad Sukarno*. One by one, the men who had risen up with Sukarno, like Hatta and Sutan Syahrir, were eliminated and removed through the now-familiar mechanism of show trials, 'disappearances' or exile.

In the midst of these upheavals, the different political factions in Indonesia had little time or concern for Ibrahim and his band of Malayan nationalists who wanted to struggle for the reunification of Malaya and Indonesia. When the Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1963, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and the Indonesian nationalists went on the offensive. Goaded by Indonesian Communist leader Dupa Nusantara Aidit and the ideologues of the PKI, Sukarno's Government finally

declared a state of open confrontation against Malaysia, which became known as the *Konfrontasi*. During this period (1963-65), Ibrahim Yaakob aided the Indonesian effort as a propagandist for the Indonesian cause, calling for the reunification of Malaya with the rest of Indonesia. But by then it was already clear to all that Sukarno's dream of a Greater-Malaya was in fact nothing more than a desire for Indonesian hegemony in the region.

Ironically, Indonesia's open declaration of hostilities against Malaysia did not help the Malayan radical nationalists and Leftists, but only made their situation even worse: soon after the outbreak of the *Konfrontasi*, the Alliance Government of Malaya began yet another massive round up of politicians and activists among the Opposition. Those arrested and detained were Ahmad Boestaman (president of PRM), Ishak Haji Muhammad (president of PBM), Abdul Aziz Ishak (head of GERAM), Kampo Radjo, Tan Kai Hee, Tan Hock Hin, Dr. Rajakumar, Hasnul Hadi, Tajuddin Kahar and hundreds of others. Ahmad Boestaman was arrested in February 1963 and accused of supporting the failed Azahari revolt of 1962 in Brunei and working with Indonesia to bring about the destruction of the Malaysian Federation project. He went down in history as the first Malaysian MP to be detained under the ISA. Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy was the second MP to be detained under the ISA (in 1965). Many of the others were accused of being pro-Indonesian and Communist sympathisers as well. The crackdown on the Opposition parties in Malaysia continued even after Malaysia and Indonesia had agreed to a ceasefire on 23 January 1964.

In Indonesia, Ibrahim further developed his polemic against the politics of Neo-Colonialism which he saw taking root and being put in place by the departing Colonial powers all around the region and his homeland in particular. He warned of the coming phase of Neo-

Colonial rule where Britain might attempt to retain and strengthen its hold on Malaya through the creation of a universal Malayan citizenship and the promotion of a 'Europeanised' culture in Malaya which would lead to a 'semi-European State' as the final bastion of Neo-Colonial rule in the Third World. His criticism would continue to take on an increasingly polemical and bitter style, with the finger of accusation being pointed not only at the British Colonial presence but also those whom he regarded as their cronies: the migrant capitalist and labour classes, the forces of Western capital who refused to relinquish their grip, the indigenous feudalist and conservative go-betweens, and that new breed of collaborators of the Colonial enterprise: the Western-educated Conservative Nationalists led by the likes of the aristocrat Dato' Onn Jaafar (who in 1953 was rewarded for his services to the British Empire by being made honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire.)

By the time he completed his *Sedjarah*, Ibrahim had reached the point of maturity in his critical and polemical capabilities. At a time when the Malay masses were still largely locked in a feudal mindset which made them cling to their rulers and the British as their protectors and patrons, Ibrahim was one of the few Malay radicals who had come to realise that they were not only traitors to the Malay people, but were in fact its enemy. In the *Sedjarah*, he would describe the age of Colonial-Capitalism as the darkest period of the history of the Indon-Malay peoples. In his account of the conduct of the British in Malaya, he summed it up thus:

> *Bagi bangsa Malaysia (Indonesia), dan seluruh bangsa2 di-Asia Tenggara, Djaman Modal menguasai dunia adalah merupakan suatu djaman penuh dengan kepahitan, kemelaratan dan kehinaan; djaman jang*

menenggelamkan Kemerdekaan Bangsa kedalam Lautan Pendjadjahan iaitu didjadjah oleh kaum modal dari Eropah Barat. Atau dengan lain perkataan, 'Djaman Modal' adalah 'Djaman Kehinaan' bagi seluruh bangsa Malaysia (Indonesia-Melayu) jang wajib tidak dapat di-lupakan oleh kita seluruhnja. Oleh jang demikian, dalam menuruskan perdjuangan untuk merebut kembali akan kemerdekaan bangsa dan nusa bagi seluruh bangsa kita di Asia Tenggara wadjiblah (kita) menolak system kaum modal jang telah memeras, menghina dan menghilangkan kemerdekaan seluruh bangsa-nusa di-Asia tenggara. Dari kerana itu jang paling penting dalam perdjuanagan merebut kemerdekaan kembali ini, ialah menghapuskan system jang lama dan mendatangkan system jang baru jang sesuai dan lajak bagi kehidupan ekonomi , kepentingan politik, kehendak pergaulan masjarakat, dan kebutuhan dalam mempertahankan hak kemerdekaan bangsa dan nusa seluruhnja. ...Kita tidak mahu didjadjah, dan tidak pula mahu mendjadjah.

Ibrahim concluded his account in *Sedjarah* by returning to the beginning: that Malaya was always part of a broader geocultural entity known as the Indon-Malay Archipelago, *Nusantara*, and that was where her future lies as well. This was the grand political project he had discussed with Sukarno and Hatta when they had met in Malaya and it was this great idea that sustained his efforts during his years in exile.

But Ibrahim was no longer in Malaya to put these plans into action. The teacher-turned-journalist-turned-political activist was now living abroad, and with each day the political boundaries that were being drawn up between postwar Malaya and Indonesia were tearing the two countries further apart and taking him further away from the land of his birth.

Ibrahim would spend the rest of his days in exile in Indonesia, leading the tattered remnants of what was left of the PKMM after most of its leadership felt that no more could be done in Malaya. He eventually died in obscurity, and after his passing the memory of his life and work has been kept alive only by a handful of close friends and compatriots. The history books of Malaysia today have hardly anything to say about him, save that he was one of those Malay nationalists who had worked with the Japanese during the War and had helped light the flame of nationalism in Colonial Malaya in the now-forgotten past.

Ahmad Boestaman, Ishak Mohammad and Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy, all of whom remained in Malaya, tried to keep up their struggle in their own respective ways. Ahmad Boestaman remained in the world of Leftist Malay politics as the leader of the PRM. Dr. Burhanuddin would eventually rise to become the leader of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), and it was during his presidency (1956-1969) that the Islamic party developed its most progressive, systematic and coherent critique of Neo-Colonialism from an Islamist perspective. After his release from detention under the ISA, Dr. Burhanuddin died of medical complications that arose during his incarceration.

With the demise of the Malay Left, the geopolitical boundaries of the Malayan (later Malaysian) Federation would remain fixed where it was: along the very same lines drawn not by the Indon-Malays themselves but by the Western Colonial powers centuries before. Today, Malaysia and Indonesia remain separated according to the political

boundaries that were drawn up by the two Colonial powers — Britain and Holland — which signed the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824. The Malay world of *Nusantara* remains torn apart thanks to the realpolitik of ethno-nationalism. Thus was how the laborious and painful birth of Malaya was achieved: in the wake of the demise of its absent founders.

12 | HUMPTY DUMPTY POLITICS (OR, WHY SEMANTIC CONSISTENCY MATTERS IN GOVERNANCE)

This article was written in mid-2000, shortly after the elections of December 1999 when the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) gained control of the State Governments of Kelantan and Terengganu. Shortly after PAS gained control of the oil- and gas-rich state of Terengganu, the State Government was told that henceforth it would no longer receive the royalties paid to it in the past from the extraction of oil from its coastal oil fields. What followed was a long and tedious legal debate that continues till this day.

FOR A COUNTRY WELL-KNOWN for its anti-intellectualism and philistinism, we Malaysians can sometimes surprise even ourselves. The past few weeks have witnessed an ongoing debate over the question of political terminology and language in Malaysia. Not too long ago, the corridors of power in this country reverberated with accusations and counter-accusations of who was a *munafik* (hypocrite) and who was not. Then came the debate over which groups or parties fell under the category of 'militant Islamic threat'. Now it appears as if a new discursive battlefront has been opened, this time over the semantic

conundrum of whether the money paid to the State Government of Terengganu was really a matter of 'royalties' or *wang ehsan*.

Needless to say, this debate, like many other political debates in the country, will go on and on until the Malaysian public finally gives up on the issue and the interest in the matter dies a natural death. This has become the standard pattern in Malaysian politics over the past few decades, and it looks as if the trend is set to continue. The mainstream media plays its dutiful role of drawing the public's jaded attention to these controversies, but such interest proves to be in vain. In the end, the core issues themselves become obfuscated and lost in the labyrinth of officialdom and technocrat-speak.

The net result of it all, however, is of far greater importance than the particular issues themselves. For, what we have seen over the years is also a growing sense of cynicism and disbelief among the public about whatever the Government has to say. Any official proclamation – regardless of its content – is now regarded as part of the *wayang kerajaan*, the most damning judgement of all being encapsulated in one simple word which sums up the indifference of the general public: *Sandiwara*.

That the Government has painted itself into a discursive corner is obvious to observers and opponents alike. It is clear that many of the Government's latest policies have been reactive in response to the changing tide of public opinion in the country. Desperate to regain ground lost to its opponents – most notably the Islamic party, PAS – the Malaysian Government has even begun to intensify its efforts to Islamicise the country from above, and by doing so upped the stakes in the Islamisation race all over again.

Like all ruling elites with similar totalising and centralising tendencies, the ruling elite in Malaysia is keen to have their cake and eat it. They insist on forcing their

version of the truth on the people without allowing this official truth to be dissected, analysed and contested in the open. We are left, then, with what appears to be a private solipsistic political language that is meant to be the sole possession of the ruling elite themselves.

But as any philosopher of language will tell you, the notion of a private language has to be one of the biggest fallacies in the history of linguistics. There is simply no such thing as a private language where the meaning of words can be twisted, altered and set at will by the users themselves. One could of course turn to a plethora of examples taken from the annals of political history. But to keep things simple, we can start by reading Lewis Caroll's instead.

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice — the hapless heroine who, in the course of her adventures, encounters a host of colourful characters and experiments with all kinds of (mostly illegal) mind-altering narcotics — meets the rather unpleasant figure of Humpty Dumpty.

Mr. Dumpty, as readers of popular childrens' fiction all know, is one of the stock characters in children's nursery rhymes. But for those who have studied the philosophy of language (and those unfortunate enough to be forced to read Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*), the pugnacious egg-shaped misanthrope also happens to be the archetypal proponent of the theory of private language. In the course of their brief meeting (just before Mr. Dumpty meets his unfortunate and messy end), Humpty Dumpty tells the story of the fabulous Jabberwocky to Alice. It goes something like this:

T'was brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
and the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware of the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch."

Alice, of course, could not make sense of the gibberish that came from the mouth of Dumpty, esq. But her rotund host merely replied with the same answer that we have come to expect from many other authoritarian personalities: "I mean what I mean to say, and that is all." What Humpty Dumpty means to say here is that his words have a private meaning for him and him alone.

The point, however, is this: no such private language can ever get off the ground and function as a mode of communication as long as the speakers cannot agree on what is said and what is meant. For any language to work, it has to be public and must follow certain rules and normative procedures. Words only mean anything when their meanings are fixed — no matter how weak that fixity might be — and when there is consistency in their application. While all signs are founded on an arbitrary and contingent relationship between the signifier and the signified, these relations of signification cannot be entirely free and ever-changing. That would merely lead to nonsense, like the stuff we get from Humpty Dumpty, and some politicians these days.

Later on in the narrative, Humpty Dumpty meets his embarrassing end thanks to the laws of gravity which, thankfully, are not as arbitrary as his rules of meaning. We are never told what happens at the scene of the accident itself, but one could suppose that one of the reasons why all the King's horses and all the King's men could not put him back together again is because none of them could understand him for the simple reason that his use of language was never consistent. And one could add to that: serves the miserable sod right, too.

Messy endings do not just happen in fairy tales. Sometimes in real life, political fables can also end in a pathetic farce. This is often the case when dictatorships and authoritarian governments lose the support of the people for the simple reason that they have lied to them for too long. Authoritarian governments are particularly susceptible to this, as they have the tendency to make up the rules of the political game (including the linguistic rules, too) as they go along and change them at will.

The ongoing debate over the money owed to the Terengganu State Government is a case in point. For nearly a quarter of a century, the State Government has been paid what was then regarded as 'royalties' by the national petroleum company, Petronas. Suddenly, in the wake of the loss of Terengganu to PAS, we are told that the money paid to Terengganu was not 'royalties' after all, but really should be regarded as *wang ehsan*. So now the money to Terengganu will be channelled in other ways instead, which may include investment in (admittedly well-deserved and badly needed) infrastructural projects.

But this semantic shift is not simply a matter of changing letters or substituting one word for another. It also entails looking at the relationship between the Terengganu State Government, Petronas and the Federal Government in a different light. A mere semantic shift like this has a great implication for our understanding of this complex tripartite relationship, for it forces us to revise our understanding of the power relations, ties of obligations and responsibilities between all parties concerned. Words do matter in politics, and some words clearly matter more than others. This is one such example.

To change the meaning and use of words like this has a permanent and lasting effect on the political terrain of the country. It adds to the growing impression that politics in Malaysia is growing increasingly unstable, unpredictable and inconsistent. Inconsistencies in the

language of politics is a symptom of deeper inconsistencies in the practice of politics itself. And a messy political language betrays the presence of messy politics as well. No wonder, then, that the public's perception of Malaysian politics and what Malaysian politicians say has changed so much. The people simply do not believe in politicians anymore because, like Humpty Dumpty, the language they use has become unreliable and incoherent.

Is there a lesson to be learnt here? Can we profit from Humpty Dumpty's fall from grace? One is inclined to think so. If the Malaysian Government is in such desperate need to revive its image and recover its credentials, it is because so much of its hard-earned reputation has been squandered away over the past few years. Since the economic crisis of 1997 (and some would say much earlier than that), we have seen this Government floundering on practically every major political and economic issue, unable to come up with believable and intelligible answers that are at least consistent.

In such a climate of political uncertainty, Malaysians and the foreign investor community need to see signs of decisive change. The public craves for a politics based on certainty and truths – that is why so many people have instead switched their allegiance to the Islamist Opposition party who speaks the language of unambiguous and unshakable absolutes. One does not expect the Government to play the game of the Islamists and speak the language of God-centred politics. But one does expect the political leaders of the country to be able to speak in a consistent manner at least, without resorting to Orwellian devices of doublespeak and doublethink. As long as this does not happen, the credibility gap that the Government faces can only widen. And once we have come to that politically and discursively messy end, all the obsequious

editorials and laudatory paeans from the State's propaganda machinery will not be able to put the Government back together again.

13 | FEUDALISM'S ECONOMY OF EXCESSIVE VIOLENCE

THOSE OF US WHO HAVE READ our *hikayats* will recognise phrases like '*dicincang lumat tujuh ribu kali*', '*dicincang bangkainya sehingga hanya sebiji beras*', '*dibunuh sehingga mati tujuh keturunan*', etc. Such hyperbole seem to characterise the way of thinking in the past, in particular among the ruling elite who seemed to feel that their rhetorical pyrotechnics needed to match the greatness of their station in society.

Now one can only wonder aloud why an adversary would have to be chopped up seven thousand times until his corpse was shredded to morsels the size of a grain of rice, or why the poor unfortunate's family had to be wiped out to the point where they would never re-emerge again at least for seven generations. Surely after delivering the first well-aimed and well-delivered blow the victim would be dead and gone? Even taking into account the sudden loss of nerves or sheer incompetence, one would imagine that two or three blows would suffice. Why then the sheer excess of unrestrained, brutal and explicit violence?

Once again, these puzzles make sense only in the context of our feudal past. While the modern age is characterised by speed and efficiency – the assassin's bullet, the electric chair and the cyanide pill being the hallmarks of modern-day killings – the feudal era was characterised by public and highly visual displays of power. Power was

not understood in abstract, conceptualized terms: one had to show that one possessed power, and indeed this became an obligation in itself.

The feudal era was therefore a busy time for monarchs and rulers who constantly had to impress upon their subjects the fact that they had power and could use it. Hardly a surprise then that public killings and tortures were the order of the day. The spectacle of death, torture and killing became part of the running of the State itself, and the highly popular executions of enemies of the State were meant to have the reassuring effect of telling the people that someone was still in charge.

This was true almost everywhere in the world. In medieval Europe, rulers had their enemies hung, drawn and quartered. The Iranian Shahs had their opponents turned into human candlesticks and their heads stuffed with straw into macabre footballs. The Chinese emperors chose the delightful 'death of a thousand slices' while the Malay *Rajas* indulged in local traditional pastimes like immersing their enemies in boiling oil, impaling them on stakes or having them lick red-hot steel.

Some of us have been led into thinking that the feudal age is over and that we now live in the modern age thanks to the fact that we walk upright and carry cellular handphones. It does not take long for us to realise, however, that despite the material development in Asia there has been precious little cultural and civilisational development in the region and that much of Asia remains trapped in the feudal culture of the past. This combination of modern material development and antiquated cultural values has contributed to the creation of a neo-feudal culture which is around us today.

Proof that we live in such an environment was all around us during the 1980s and 1990s, when Asians were rushing heedlessly down the road to riches. We helped build our economies while strengthening the feudal bonds

of patronage in our respective countries. Today, Asians scream for reform but few of us care to remember the good old days when we helped line the pockets of leaders like Soeharto of Indonesia as we competed for contracts and investment opportunities.

This neo-feudal culture remained with us up to the economic crisis of 1997 and persisted in the aftermath. When the crisis struck and the public began to react to it, the nature of the reaction was shaped and directed by a political mentality that seemed to come right out of the *hikayats*.

That is why the uproar during the UMNO General Assemblies from 1997 seemed so familiar to those who have been watching the *Hang Tuah* and *Pahlawan* movies of the 1950s. What actually took place when the Deputy Prime Minister challenged the leadership of the UMNO party was nothing short of a palace coup, complete with its cast of nefarious characters, sub-plots, and plot twists and turns. The poison letters, allegations of sexual and financial misdeeds, the knives in the back, the media campaign both before and after the clash, were all the props of a typical feudal encounter between two equally antagonistic camps that had geared themselves up for war.

While many outside observers were quick to identify the two parties as being on ideologically different grounds (Anwar's *'reformasi'* camp being dubbed the modernists while Mahathir's establishment dubbed the conservatives), the fact remains that in terms of personal style, tactics and rhetoric, both sides had much more in common with each other than they cared to admit. The adoration of their leaders, leading to the creation of cults of leadership, was clearly seen on both sides. Despite the talk of social and political reform, the neo-feudal UMNO mentality was also evident among the ranks of some of the *reformasi* leaders themselves. The war, in short, was a

civil war between two Malay *Rajas* with their respective political armies in tow.

The fall-out from the UMNO crisis of 1997-98 was also normal by the standards of feudal politics. While foreign observers and media commentators stood by with their mouths wide open, wondering how such things could take place in 'modern' Malaysia, students of traditional Malay politics would have been able to tell you that it was all according to the script and that it was all bound to end in tears. In the feudal past, there were never peaceful transitions of power from one regime to another. If and when a take-over attempt was made, it was bound to lead to violence and death. The challenger knew that he was going against the protocols of the feudal State and that, like the *amok*, if he failed in his bid there would be no second chance. There were no prisoners of war during the feudal era: if you lost, you ended up dead along with your family, kith and kin; your village; *mukim* and all your followers. The 'seven thousand blows' that would crush you into 'grains of rice' and wipe out your family for seven generations would be delivered by the victorious side.

This was precisely what happened in the wake of Anwar Ibrahim's failed *putsch* against the Government, and the outcome was expected all along. The attempt to keep the man out of politics for good, destroy his fledgling political party, wipe out his support base and erase him from the annals of official history is very much in keeping with the neo-feudal mindset which tolerates no grey areas between friends and enemies.

Feudalism's economy of excessive violence has not been eradicated by the arrival of modernity; it has only been made more efficient and thorough. So while in the past the *Rajas* and Sultans had to spend time and resources to track down the conspirators who were working against them, the modern-day rulers of Asia just have to go through the websites to identify the parties that are either

for or against them. While in the past the use of public violence was necessary to keep the masses in line and remind them who was the *Raja*, the rulers of today simply have to threaten to investigate your private accounts, deny you contracts or withdraw your business licences.

Occasionally, however, the powers-that-be cannot help but revert to type and play by the old rules of the past. The temptation to go back to the time of the feudal kings must be strong indeed. So when Opposition politicians are arrested and detained they are not just kept under confinement, they are also beaten up and kicked around as well, to the point of nearly killing them in some cases. We may be shocked, disgusted and horrified when revelations of such atrocities come to our attention, but rest assured that all is well. For we are still living in a feudal political and cultural system where the values of the past, repugnant though some of them may be to us, have been well preserved against the ravages of globalisation and modernity.

14 | 'MALAYSIA BOLEH?' – PAS AND THE MALAYSIAN SUCCESS STORY

This article was written in late 2000. At the time, many political observers and commentators were still trying to make sense of the spectacular success of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) during the elections of December 1999.

LIVING AS WE DO in the post-economic crisis era, one would be hard-pressed to find examples of a Malaysian success story that has not somehow gone disastrously wrong.

Yet it was not too long ago that Malaysians were being told that there was nothing beyond the scope of their achievement. It seemed as if Malaysia, and Malaysians, were capable of anything. This wave of popular enthusiasm and collective fervour was embodied by the slogan *'Malaysia Boleh!'* (Malaysia Can Do It). Coming as it did during the closing stages of the 20th century, the slogan seemed to reflect a new-found confidence among the Malaysian public. It was as if after decades of self-contempt and lack of determination the people of the country had finally begun to rouse themselves for the future.

But like all narrative devices, the near-magical, fetish-like attraction and power of the slogan could be explained in a rational way. If *'Malaysia Boleh'* had any relevance and currency among the Malaysians themselves,

it was only because they had been told *'Malaysia Tidak Boleh'* for so long by their own leaders. In an acrobatic discursive twist worthy of George Orwell, Malaysia's political leadership suddenly declared that the nation – which had been diagnosed as backward, poor and lagging behind in the economic race – was suddenly awash with latent talent just waiting to be unleashed on the rest of the world.

But we need to remember that, earlier on, it was precisely the same powers-that-be who declared that Malaysians – and the Malays in particular – were chronically backward and subservient, and that there was a need for a 'mental revolution' in order to lift the people out of the quagmire.

It was during the early 1970s that the UMNO leadership published the book *Revolusi Mental* (Mental Revolution), edited by the then-Secretary-General of the party, Datuk Senu Abdul Rahman. The writers who contributed to the text of *Revolusi Mental* presented an image of the Malays as an inherently backward, ill-educated and pathetic race that was trapped in a dark world of superstition, blind deference to authority and lack of economic sense. They argued that nothing short of a radical mental revolution would be able to save the Malays from themselves – something that echoed an earlier text by a certain Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, whose prognosis of the 'Malay Dilemma' put the blame for Malay backwardness on a host of variable factors ranging from genetics to historical determinism.

The net effect of books like *Revolusi Mental* was that it gave the impression that the Malays were somehow unable to fend for themselves or survive in the modern world without the help of a patron-class of rulers. It also served as the ideological justification for a number of social and structural adjustment policies that came under the umbrella of the New Economic Policy (NEP). The long-

term result was the same: The neo-feudal ideology of patronage helped to create and reinforce the impression that the Malays were somehow unable to cope with change and development without the help of the State and the UMNO party in particular. The State's tutelage would then help lift the Malays out of their moral and spiritual morass, and eventually lead them to the blissful land of *'Malaysia Boleh'* with the ruling powers close at hand to watch over them. Or so they thought.

Today, it would appear that the once-popular theme of *'Malaysia Boleh'* is being contested on all fronts. Malaysians, it seems, are not all that impressed with what has passed as Malaysia's record of spectacular achievements so far. For some reason, the Malay farmers of the North whose incomes are diminishing do not seem all that overawed by Malaysians who choose to parachute over the North or South Poles. Likewise, the Malay fishermen whose harvest of fish are being depleted thanks to foreign competitors do not seem all that impressed with Malaysians who sail around the world single-handedly. And so on.

Lurking behind the scenes, however, is a success story that was given little if no publicity at all. By this we refer to the rise of a certain Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), the country's main Islamist Opposition party. Few, if any, local political commentators have cared to point out that the rise and development of PAS over the past 50 years happens to be one of the few Malay success stories of our time – and with no Government support either.

We need to remind ourselves of the fact that PAS began as a splinter movement that broke from the ranks of UMNO in the early 1950s. By then the divide between the traditional elite of UMNO – led by Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak – and the more conservative Islamist faction within the party was painfully clear for all to see. But it was UMNO who first helped bring PAS

together by organising a number of Pan-Malayan *ulama* congresses, in its effort to win support of the Islamists among the Malay nationalists as well as to pre-empt the possibility of an Islamist Opposition from emerging in the country.

The move eventually backfired, though, as the *ulama* and *imams* who attended the numerous UMNO-sponsored *ulama* congresses had ideas of their own. On November 24, 1951 they finally decided to break away from UMNO (though many of the early members of PAS held dual membership of both organisations).

During the first five years of the party's history (from 1951 to 1956), PAS was desperately poor in every respect. The party's first leaders — Ahmad Fuad Hassan and Dr. Abbas Elias — tried their best to run and manage the party on the most meagre of resources. At one point, the party could not afford even a typewriter, much less an office of its own. During this time, the party could not afford to pay any of its workers. Election candidates had to campaign on their own, and all they received were some posters and banners. There were no hotel receptions or big gala dinners — the leaders of the party slept in the homes of friends or in the mosques and *suraus* along their way.

Later, during the 1960s and 1970s, the party managed to extend the scope of its activities further afield. With the entry of Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy as the party's third president (and Dr. Zulkiflee Muhammad as the Vice-president), PAS began to win a little more support from the Malays of the Peninsula. Asri Muda was particularly important in this respect because he was the one who laid the groundwork for PAS's activities and membership networks in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu in particular.

PAS's ill-fated attempt to join the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) coalition during the 1970s taught the

leadership of the party one vital lesson: They could not rely on the help and support of the Government without compromising some of their ideological principles along the way. The net result of this encounter was PAS's graceless exit from the coalition and the eventual downfall of Asri Muda (who was then the fourth president of PAS). In the wake of Asri's demise, we witnessed the rise of the new *ulama* faction who took over the leadership of PAS by storm during the early 1980s and who have been at the helm of the party ever since.

Putting aside our own feelings and reservations about what PAS stands for today and what its political agenda might be (regular readers of this column will know what the writer thinks about PAS's stated aim of creating an Islamic state in Malaysia), there remain several important factors for us to consider.

It must be noted that the success of PAS is almost entirely its own. True, there have been times when the UMNO-led Government seemed bent of destroying its own image thanks to its inept political and ideological blunders, but this should not distract us from recognising PAS's talents. Like it or not, PAS has shown that it is possible for a Malay-based party to develop itself, expand its membership network and institutional support both at home and abroad, state its political demands (however problematic) and appeal to the support of the masses, without the advantage of having the institutions of State and Government at its command or being able to count on a political campaign fund totalling millions of Ringgit. While many of the other parties that were launched around the same time as PAS — like the *Parti Buruh* and *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* — have either folded or failed to develop a mass base and grassroots network, PAS has grown from strength to strength on sheer hard work and relentless determination.

Indeed, nowhere is this more evident than when one attends any PAS gathering or meeting. On the many occasions when I have covered PAS rallies and general assemblies, I could not help but notice how practically all the public services were undertaken by members of the party on a voluntary basis. During these functions, one encounters PAS stewards, traffic attendants, medical personnel, public relations officers, etc. — all working voluntarily for the sake of the party without asking for anything as a reward. If this is not an example of *'Malaysia Boleh'*, then one wonders what would fit the bill.

Conversely, one only has to look at the political rallies organised by the ruling parties of the dominant BN coalition to see where the politics of patronage is still at work. In most of the BN rallies I have attended and covered, I could not help but notice how members of the Malaysian police force were asked to direct traffic and help with the parking (perhaps to make sure that the cars of the VIPs would not be scratched). The food would be taken care of by the hotel's catering staff, while the hotel would also provide other services like ushering guests.

It doesn't take much intelligence for us to put two and two together in order to predict where this will all lead to. The success of PAS, as a predominantly Malay-Muslim party that has taken over two states in the Federation and which now happens to be the most powerful party in the Alternative coalition, should tell us that political success has more to do with braving hardship and surviving trials and tribulations than being spoonfed by political patrons. The success of PAS provides us with proof, if any was still needed, that the Malays are not some backward race of ne'er-do-wells who could never succeed in anything without the help of the State and the UMNO-led Government.

Should UMNO want to respond to the challenge of PAS, the way is clear: All it has to do is learn from the

success of PAS and emulate its virtues, instead of trying to out-Islamise the party and by doing so up the stakes in the Islamisation race in the country. UMNO will never win in the '*janggut* and *kopiah*' race. Even if it forced all of its members to don the *tudung* or grow beards, UMNO will remain in second position since PAS has made political Islam its main thrust and *raison d'être*. But UMNO can try to return to the days when its members fought for the development agenda without getting their fingers caught in the money-pot. Meritocracy, hard work, openness, accountability and transparency all remain as sound goals and political objectives that are still worth fighting for.

One thing UMNO must learn to discard is its own hollow propaganda about the 'worthlessness' of the Malays and the neo-feudal political culture that accompanies it. After all, one only has to look at PAS for proof that the Malays can thrive and prosper without living under the heels of their political *Rajas*. In this sense, it is PAS, and not UMNO, which proves that *'Malaysia Boleh!'*

15 | REMEMBERING THE OTHER FACE OF POLITICAL ISLAM: USTAZ ABU BAKAR HAMZAH RECONSIDERED

THE SILLY SEASON HAS COME EARLY this year. Over the past few weeks, the petty squabbles and hair-splitting disputes between PAS and UMNO have intensified even more, and once again Malaysia seems poised on the verge of yet another round of 'holier than thou' polemics.

Some of us have ended up being caught in the crossfire between the two sides, and during times like these being a liberal Muslim puts one on the 'endangered species' list very quickly indeed. After taking part in a few public debates and discussions on the thorny issue of the Islamic state and religious politics in Malaysia, I find myself being once again at the receiving end of a hail of nasty emails and letters sent by unknown and unidentifiable 'defenders of Islam' whose courage and bravado stops short of putting their real names on the barbed and venomous epistles they have sent to me[1].

Invariably, most of these nasty emails tend to say the same thing. The standard accusation is that I do not show 'enough respect' for the *ulama* and that I should be condemned simply because I do not subscribe to their belief that Malaysia should become a religious State where

people are stoned to death or have their hands and feet chopped off.

Before these accusations spread and gain further ground, allow me to state my position quite clearly and frankly: it is not the question of the Islamic State that worries me so much, but rather the use and abuse of religion by *ulama* and politicians for political reasons. Nor do I oppose the concept of the Islamic State *per se* — I happen to object to the intrusion of any religion into politics, be it Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism or whatever. It has always been my belief that the entry of religion into civic space will be a detriment to the democratic process and the secular principles upon which modern democracy is based. That is my personal opinion, and I am prepared to defend it both in private and public.

But what is worrying indeed is the fact that once again we see the supporters of certain religious parties and movements who are able and willing to use religion as a weapon against their enemies. When these people use Islam as a weapon to silence the comments and ideas of others and to label others as 'bad Muslims', we can see where this will all lead to.

The last time such a crisis took place was in the early 1980s when the leaders of the PAS claimed that theirs was the only true Islamic party in the country, and whoever did not support them was a *kafir* (infidel). This was a sad time in Malaysian history, as members of both UMNO and PAS tried to out-Islamise each other and accused the other side of being less Islamic than them. Both sides resorted to the use of a politics discourse of authenticity which framed Islam in crude essentialist and exclusivist terms that did little to improve the image and understanding of the religion itself.

The net result of this Islamisation contest between the two parties was that it helped to create a more

conservative, reactionary and defensive Muslim society that grew even more paranoid and helpless. Today, this helplessness and paranoia manifests itself in the over-zealousness of some members of the Islamic Opposition who seem to think that it is their sacred duty to defend Islam from external criticism, even if that criticism comes from well-meaning individuals and the intention behind it is not to demonise Islam but to condemn the abuse of the religion by some of its followers.

This misguided zeal, fuelled as it is by a zero-sum logic of dialectical opposition that pits Islam and Muslims against external enemies and threats both real and imagined, has also proven to be highly dangerous and counter-productive. Time and again, the project of political Islam has sealed its own fate when, Saturn-like, it devours its own sons.

One is reminded of the sad fate of Ustaz Abu Bakar Hamzah, the veteran PAS leader who criticised the tactics and behaviour of some of the PAS leaders and members in the 1980s whom he regarded as having gone too far. Ustaz Abu Bakar had served in PAS all his life and was committed to what he regarded as the true struggle of PAS, which was to show that an Islamic way of life was not contradictory to modernity and development, and that an Islamic form of politics was compatible with democracy and justice. But unlike the other PAS leaders who came after him, Ustaz Abu Bakar was not a product of traditional Islamist education, a factor which cost him dearly later when the *ulama* and their adoring followers began to question and challenge his religious credentials.

Ustaz Abu Bakar was one of the most prominent and vocal leaders of PAS during the 1970s and 1980s. An independent-minded thinker and activist, he offended the leadership of the party during the Asri Muda era (1970-1982) on many an occasion. During the 1960s and early 1970s, he rose within the party hierarchy and was elected

as the Head of the Youth Wing (*Pemuda PAS*) and made a member of the PAS Executive Committee. When PAS (still under Asri) joined the Alliance (*Perikatan*) Government in 1973, he was brought into the Government as a Parliamentary Secretary.

But Ustaz Abu Bakar opposed Asri's plans to bring PAS into the Barisan Nasional coalition. In 1974, he quit the party and stood as an independent candidate during the elections that followed (against a PAS candidate who was standing on a BN ticket). In 1976, he left the world of Malaysian politics temporarily and travelled abroad to continue his studies. He studied in several colleges and universities in the Middle-East and Europe, and returned in 1981 to take up a post as an academic at University Malaya. He then rejoined PAS with the help of PAS leaders like Ustaz Pak Nik Lah.

Soon after, Ustaz Abu Bakar turned against the leadership of his party again when the *ulama* faction led by men like Yusof Rawa, Nik Aziz, Fadzil Noor and Hadi Awang took over in 1982. In particular, he criticised the *ulama* for their overdue emphasis on loyalty and blind obedience to the religious elite. He grew increasingly worried about PAS's new tendency to put its faith and trust in the *ulama* exclusively and opposed the more extremist tactics employed by some of the new PAS leaders and members. He attacked what he regarded as the excessive dogmatism and fanaticism of PAS members (which he claimed were encouraged by the PAS *ulama* themselves) and criticised Yusof for his promotion of the *ulama* to such as elevated status[2]

When PAS began to accuse UMNO of being un-Islamic and of being 'bad Muslims', Ustaz Abu Bakar registered his protest in the strongest terms. He argued that this sort of intolerance had no place in Islam and that it was wrong for the *ulama* to use religion in such a blatantly political way to attack their opponents. He

condemned what he saw as the new fanaticism and extremism among PAS members. In one of his articles he wrote thus:

> *Memangnya perangai orang-orang PAS sekarang ini suka mengafirkan orang lain, suka pulau-memulau, suka rasa dirinya sahaja yang beriman dan bertakwa, sedangkan orang lain adalah kafir belaka. Perangai biadab seperti ini masih berleluasa dalam PAS dan para Ayatollahnya gagal membendung, malah agaknya mereka suka melihat anak buah mereka suka kafir-mengafir, pulau-memulau dan merasa diri mereka beriman tampa orang lain. Perangai jahiliah beginilah yang akan meruntuhkan perjuangan PAS*[3].

For his labours, Ustaz Abu Bakar was marginalised and silenced by his own party. By condemning the *ulama,* whom he called the new *Ayatollahs* of PAS, Ustaz Abu Bakar angered many of the younger members of the party, who in turn accused him of being a *kafir* (infidel) and *munafik* (hypocrite). In 1985, he was challenged by the young turks of PAS at the annual *Muktamar*. In the following year, his membership was suspended and he was forced to give up his posts within the party[4]. He continued writing for newspapers and magazines like *Mingguan Islam* and *Watan,* but his days in PAS were effectively over.

If PAS leaders and members could do this to one of their own members, how far would they go to attack others who do not belong to their party? The nasty emails and letters I have been receiving of late makes me think of the unfortunate Ustaz Abu Bakar, whose political career was cut short by the fanatics in his own party. His story teaches us one valuable lesson, which is still relevant:

Fanaticism — be it in politics or religion — will eventually devour everyone, including the fanatics themselves. The intolerance and close-mindedness of some supporters of the Islamist parties and movements in this country may one day do untold damage to our democratic culture. But not before all the liberal voices have been silenced once and for all.

Endnotes.

1. To the mysterious individual who goes by the name 'Mujahid Sebenar', I would like to point out that anthrax cannot be sent by email, no matter how hard one tries. I take it that the effort was carried out in the spirit of (albeit bad) humour.

2. See: Ustaz Abu Bakar Hamzah, *Mengakui Kebenaran Suatu Kewajiban. Watan*, July 21, 1988.

3. See: Ustaz Abu Bakar Hamzah, *Tidak Kenal Mata Hati Dan Ditimpa Perasaan. Mingguan Islam*, June 17, 1988.

4. Though he was branded a hypocrite and a traitor by his fellow party members, few of Ustaz Abu Bakar's critics cared to remember the fact that he was one of the few PAS leaders who had stood up to Asri Muda and who opposed PAS's entry into the Barisan Nasional Government (while Yusof Rawa and Nik Aziz had both accepted the offer and were even given prominent positions in the Government.) Unlike many other PAS leaders who rebelled against their own party, Ustaz Abu Bakar did not imitate the amphibian qualities of some politicians by jumping from his party to another even after his membership to PAS was suspended. The same could not be said of PAS leaders like Asri himself, Osman Abdullah and Nakhie Ahmad — all of whom joined UMNO in the end.

16 | HOW MAHATHIR BECAME 'MAHAZALIM'

I HAVE TO START THIS COLUMN with a health warning: Those who are not too keen on discourse analysis should stay away from the following article.

This month marks the 20th anniversary of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad[1] coming to power. After 20 years as Head of State, he happens to be one of the longest-serving leaders in the world. His ascendancy to the top of the political pyramid is of course something that most of us are familiar with by now. Most of us are also aware of the subtle and not-too-subtle plots and subplots that have been at work in this convoluted, and at times confusing, story of politics. Those who are more interested in the life and work of the man should turn to Khoo Boo Teik's excellent study of him and his ideas in *Paradoxes of Mahathirism*, which, in this writer's view, is the best book on the subject available[2].

The merit of Khoo's book is the fact that he differentiates between Mahathir the man and Mahathirism as an ideology and belief-system. This is something that most of us have simply ignored or failed to remind ourselves of with the passing of time. No doubt this tendency has been made worse thanks to the overpowering cult of personality surrounding the man, courtesy of the Ministry

of Information and the numerous propaganda arms of the State.

Now, discourse analysis is a multi-disciplinary tool which draws heavily upon other academic disciplines like philosophy, epistemology, linguistics, semantics, semiotics and literature. It should not be seen as a distinct discipline that renders the claims and findings of other approaches null and void. Our aim here is not to deny or question the approaches that have been taken by other writers like Chandra Muzaffar, Khoo Boo Teik, Syed Hussein Alattas and company. We do not claim that discourse analysis provides the only answers not found in historical or material-economist analyses.

But what we would like to do is supplement these findings with some of our own, as seen through the lens of a discursive approach. The questions at hand are these: if Mahathirism is distinct from Mahathir the man, then what are its primary features and how does it work? More importantly, how and why did it fail? (If it did at all, which is open for debate, of course.)

Khoo's study of Mahathirism identifies it as an ideology that attempts to graft together a number of elements, ideas and values within a totalised and self-enclosed discursive economy that was self-referential in many ways. Mahathirism holds certain key values and ideas like Progress, Development and Material Advancement as its 'transcendental signifiers' (that is, key concepts that were epistemically arrested and not part of the free-play of meaning and signification).

The development of Mahathirism was predicated on the belief that these key ideas and values were above and beyond questioning, making them frozen in time and speech in a sense. 'Development' became a good thing in itself, for its own sake. So economic progress, rationalism and certain 'Asian values' which invariably included feudalism[3].

The success of Mahathirism in its early stages was due to the fact that it managed to cobble together a number of important ideas that were part of the common aspirations of the Malaysian (particularly the Malay-Muslim) public at the time. Mahathirism worked by stringing together a common 'chain of equivalences' between progress, development, modernisation, economic advancement, self-determination, national sovereignty and modernist Islam. It worked by bringing together all these ideas within the rubric of a coherent thought and value system that imbued them with positivity.

Conversely, Mahathirism has its constitutive Other, the unwanted element that needed to be eliminated or confronted: Against a string of positive ideas and values stood a string of negative values that had to be rejected. These included the West, Communism, traditionalism, obscurantism, religious fundamentalism, Western liberalism and militancy. Thus, as an ideology, Mahathirism knew what it was and what it was not. The binary opposition between itself and the Other was clear.

Because the ideology of Mahathirism was intimately linked to the man himself, Mahathir became the embodiment of his own ideology. As mentioned earlier, the tendency towards personalised politics and cult of leadership was aided and abetted by those working in the media and propaganda agencies closely linked to the Government. In time, Mahathir became the living embodiment of his own set of beliefs that had taken on a life of its own.

The symbiotic relationship between Mahathir the man and Mahathirism the ideology was allowed to develop right up to the mid-1990s. The 1995 elections were, in this respect, a resounding victory for both: It was an endorsement not only of Dr. Mahathir himself, but also of the philosophy and worldview of the man.

Now, one thing discourse analysis teaches us is that signifiers have a tendency to 'slip' from their signifieds. This, in effect, means that words and symbols tend to have shifting meanings that are characteristic of the free-play of language. Indeed, it is because of this inherent tendency for signification to miss or slip that language gets off the ground in the first place and metaphors come into existence.

Were it not for this inherent tendency, the whole edifice of Mahathirism could never have been constructed. The vast and impressive columbarium of ideas and values that is Mahathirism was put together partly because of the way that the meanings of terms could be multiplied, shifted and grafted onto one another. This way, the signifier 'Mahathir' could be linked to other concepts like Modernity and Progress, thereby erecting the chain of equivalences that was Mahathirism.

So a feature of language is that it is never fixed in any way. Meaning and signification is always in a state of flux, and words develop numerous meanings as time goes by. Just look at how general terms like 'Islam', '*Jihad*', 'Democracy', 'Justice', etc. have evolved over time. These words retain some semblance of meaning despite the fact that they have been used and deployed in a number of ways, but it is this plastic nature of meaning that allows the words to have some sense in the first place.

Now, in the case of political discourse, words and symbols may change their meaning due to a radical crisis of dislocation which brings about a rupture in the old order of meaning. So when the French Revolution occurred, for instance, concepts like 'Justice', 'Liberty' and 'Equality' could be radically reinterpreted and invested with new meanings. In the Malaysian context, a similar break took place with the economic crisis of 1997-98.

The crisis effectively put into question the fundamental premises of Mahathirism itself. As the

economies of the East crashed in flames, the peoples of the region began to chant the litany of reform and revolution. Indeed, in the Indonesian, Thai and Korean cases the calls for reform were understandable, to say the least.

But in Malaysia what really sparked off the radical break from the past was not the economic crisis (for nobody would seriously think that Malaysia was in the same dire straits as Thailand or Indonesia), but rather the political in-fighting that took place within UMNO. After a failed *putsch* in his party, Dr. Mahathir removed his Deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, who had, until then, provided Mahathirism with one of the key elements that gave it its internal unity and coherence — namely, its Islamist credentials. What made matters worse was that, in the weeks that followed the arrest and detention of Anwar Ibrahim, the State security forces also took action against those who were seen as his principal supporters. The fact that most of those arrested were members of Islamist organisations like ABIM and JIM (and that the police were allowed to arrest protesters in places like mosques, which are widely regarded as a 'sacred precinct' by Malays) only served to erode the Government's Islamist image further.

The sudden loss of Anwar created not just a void in the sense of an empty seat at the Cabinet table, but also an ideological one. In the same way that Mahathir the man had been conflated with progress, development and economic well-being, Anwar was identified with Islam and Islamic credentials. The chain of equivalences that kept together the grand narrative of Mahathirism was torn asunder as it lost one of its most vital components.

This sudden break or rupture in the discourse of Mahathirism robbed it of its internal cohesion and unity. Suddenly, the master narrative no longer told a coherent story that made sense to the Malay-Muslim public. Mahathirism, which had grown much bigger than

Mahathir himself, was now about to experience a radical challenge from the outside.

With the arrest and detention of Anwar and a number of Islamist intellectuals and activists, a major break had been made in the discourse of Mahathirism. Dr. Mahathir was always known as a modernist who was against the forces of traditional obscurantism in Islam, and his Government's repression of the Sufi-inspired *Darul Arqam*[4] movement was a case in point. (Interestingly, it should be noted that UMNO's 'hammer' against the *Arqam* was none other than the Islamist activist-turned-UMNO politician, Anwar Ibrahim himself). But, despite his own controversial ideas about the path that Muslim society should take into the future, at no point was Dr. Mahathir seen as an un-Islamic leader – that only came about in the wake of the 1997-98 crisis, dubbed the Anwar Ibrahim Affair.

With the removal of Anwar and the arrest of prominent Islamist leaders, the discourse of Mahathirism was left open and vulnerable to attack from outside. In time, a new chain of equivalences was formed through the writings and polemics that came from a whole army of Islamist or Islamist-inclined politicians, activists, intellectuals and writers.

Elsewhere[5] I have looked at how the image of Dr. Mahathir has been re-invented at the hands of a number of local Malay writers like Mohd Sayuti Omar, Ahmad Lutfi Osman, Dinsman (aka. Shamsuddin Osman) and C. N. al-Afghani[6] But what is important to note is that from 1997 Mahathir was no longer linked to modernisation, development and economic progress. Finally, the man was being identified with a host of unsavoury evils considered repugnant by the Malay-Muslim community in particular. Nowhere was this process of discursive contestation more evident than in the field of vernacular Malay tabloid writing.

In Mohd Sayuti Omar's *Sumpah dan Airmata Reformis Bangsa* (1997), for instance, the author radically re-cast Dr. Mahathir as an anti-Muslim villain while Anwar is reinvented as the great *reformis-Mujaheed* fighting a *jihad* (holy war) for reform:

> *Harapan musuh-musuh Anwar apabila mereka menahan para mujahid itu, semangat reformasi tidak lagi berkembang dan mengarus di negara ini. Itulah yang mereka fikir. Tetapi perhitungan mereka itu silap. Mereka boleh menahan jasad para reformis itu. Namun semangat dan api jihadnya tidak bisa disekat. Semangat itu akan tetap mengalir dan bergelombang ke dalam diri sesiapa sahaja yang insaf dan sedar akan tanggungjawab kepada agama, bangsa dan negaranya. Reformasi akan terus bergerak... Harapan Anwar, seorang 'Anwar' jatuh akan bangkit seribu Anwar lain tidak sia-sia. Hari ini kita sudah dapat melihat dengan jelas, 'Anwar' bangkit dan berada dimana-mana sahaja. Orang yang menyebut tentang kezaliman dan ketidak-adilan wujud dimana-mana. Semuanya menuntut agar segala unsur-unsur Syaitanisme itu dibersihkan.* (Sumpah dan Airmata, *pg. 186*)

In Mohd Sayuti's *Talqin untuk Mahathir* (Last Rites for Mahathir) (1998), the author courageously straddles the boundary between prose and hysteria when he blames the Prime Minister for everything that has gone wrong within the country, including the water shortage, the environmental crisis and the unnaturally long draught season. Here we see Mohd. Sayuti's eschatological logic

reaching its apotheosis, where the figure of Dr. Mahathir is compared somewhat unfavourably to a host of popular un-Islamic villains such as the Pharaoh of Egypt and the Shah of Iran:

> *Jikalau kamu (Mahathir) seorang ahli sejarah dan pengkaji Quran; dikau akan bertemu dengan nama-nama seperti Firaun, Qarun dan Haman! Apakah dikau tahu apa yang telah jadi kepada mereka itu? Ketahuikah dikau kenapa Tuhan melaksana dan menghina mereka? ...Mereka itu makhluk yang kufur kepada Allah. Firaun mengaku dialah Tuhan. Qarun pula tamak haloba dengan harta dunia, yang mana akhirnya ia ditenggelamkan dengan hartanya sekali. Wahai Mahathir anak Wan Tempawan, kami bimbang nasib yang menimpa mereka, akan turut sama menimpa dirimu. Kami bimbang kehinaan yang berlaku keatas Shah Iran, Suharto dan Marcos akan berjangkit kepadamu... Ketahuilah oleh kamu bahawa peralihan sanjungan rakyat kepada mu adalah kerana kegagalan kamu dalam beberapa tahun terakhir ini. Bala yang menimpa negara ini adalah dalam tanggungjawab mu sebagai pemimpin.'* (Talqin Untuk Mahathir, *pp. 77-78)*

Mahathir the man, in the end, became overwhelmed by Mahathirism. In the same way that Mahathirism had been turned into an epic discourse of disproportionate achievements, so has it been overblown into a meta-discourse for all that is bad, wrong, un-Islamic and even 'Satanic' (to quote Sayuti) in Malaysia today.

Mahathirism is now equated with all that is wrong in the country, and Mahathir the man is now contemptuously labelled *Mahazalim, Mahakejam* and *Mahafiraun.*

The supreme irony of it all is that Mahathir has become overpowered by his own ideology. What is worse, as Mahathirism comes into question so does everything the man says as well. This makes it not only difficult to explain or justify what Mahathir (the man) says and does, but it also makes it near-impossible to defend him when he says something right.

Contrary to what the *mujaheed* reformists may have to say about him, the man is still capable of saying the right thing occasionally. When Dr. Mahathir says that Islam as a faith and a way of life cannot be reduced to empty rituals and cosmetic appearance alone, he happens to be right. When he says that Islam should not be an excuse for Muslims to flee from the painful realities of life, he also happens to be right. And when he says that the economic and political decline of the Muslim world and the underdeveloped South is due to the gross inequalities and deficiencies within the global financial architecture, he is also right.

But whatever the man says — even if he claims that two plus two equals four — is now dismissed as the words of the great *Mahazalim* who is cruel, tyrannical and unjust. More so than any political campaign, act of violence or public demonstration, it is this concept of *Mahazalim* that has done more damage to the image and standing of Mahathir in the eyes of the Malay-Muslim community who would otherwise be his natural constituency. (Hardly a surprise, then, that he now turns to the Malaysian public as a whole to broaden his appeal and reach out to new audiences).

But even as the State-controlled media tries to manage the image of Dr. Mahathir — to the point of force-feeding the captive public with his *kata-kata emas* (golden

nuggets of wisdom) on an hourly basis – the charm of the old spell has been broken. Mahathir the man allowed himself to be identified with Mahathirism the ideology, and the fate of the man is now inextricably linked to the fate of that ideology as well, which today is besieged by an army of angry and frustrated radicals who can only see traces of *kezaliman* and *Syaitanisme* in whatever is handed to them.

And that, in the final analysis, is the real tragedy of Mahathirism.

Endnotes:

1. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was born in Seberang Perak, Kedah in 1925. In his youth he was drawn to the Malay nationalist struggle and wrote extensively on Malay-related issues and concerns in the local press using the pseudonym 'Che Det'. By then he was deeply worried about the state of the Malays in the British colony and their economic and political future should the country be granted their independence from Britain. He studied medicine at the King Edward VII College of Medicine at University Malaya, which was then based in Singapore. After graduating he practised medicine at his MAHA clinic in Kedah before becoming an active participant in Malay politics. In the 60s he was widely regarded as an outspoken radical who condemned both the ineffectiveness of the Malay elite as well as Chinese domination of the Malaysian economy.

2. See: Khoo Boo Teik, *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995.

3. The feudalist outlook of Dr. Mahathir was clear from the very beginning. In his controversial book *The Malay Dilemma* he wrote that: "In itself the feudalist inclination of the Malays is not damaging. It makes for an orderly and law-abiding society. People who could follow and observe an unwritten code of behaviour are easily made to observe the written laws of a country. People who accept that a society must have people of varying degrees of authority and rights easily make a stable

society and nation. A revolution in such a society is unusual unless led from above. A feudal society is therefore not necessarily a dormant or retrogressive society. It can be a dynamic society if there is dynamism at the top. But when the top fails, or is preoccupied with its own well-being, the masses become devoid of incentive for progress." (pp. 170-171), and: "Even feudalism can be beneficial if it facilitates changes. ...The political Rajas of today can therefore institute change if they themselves are willing to change." (pg. 173).

4. The *Darul Arqam* Movement was formed by Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad in 1968. It began as a study group among Muslim scholars and reformers, many of whom were university lecturers, academics and students. In time, it evolved into a Sufi-inspired alternative lifestyle movement that was very much centred around the personality of its founder. Its activities were based at the Madinah Al Arqam Saiyyidina Abu Bakar As-Siddiq, Sungai Pencala, near Kuala Lumpur. The movement's aim was to create an alternative model of an ideal Islamic society that was organised and managed according to the standards and norms set by the Prophet Muhammad and his *Sahabah* (Companions). The movement grew in size until its membership reached tens of thousands. Its followers dressed and lived according to Ustaz Ashaari's interpretation of the *sunnah*: the men wore green robes and turbans while the women wore black *hijab* all the time. [For a detailed analysis of the *Darul Arqam* movement, see: Chandra (1987), Jomo and Shabery Cheek (1992) and Husin Mutalib (1993).]

5. See: Farish A Noor, *Constructing Kafirs: The Formation of Political Frontiers between the Islamic Opposition and the Malaysian Government during the 1998-1999 Political Crisis in Malaysia*, in Angelika Neuwirth and Andreas Pflitsch (eds.), *Crisis and Memory in Islamic Societies*, Orient Institute of Beirut, Beirut, 2000.

6. See for example: Mohd Sayuti Omar, *Sumpah dan Airmata Reformis Bangsa* (Oath and Tears of the People's Reformer) and *Talqin Untuk Mahathir: Nepotisme dan Qarunisme Alaf Baru*, (Last Rites for Mahathir: Nepotism and Cronyism in a New Era); Ahmad Lutfi Othman, *Layakkah Anwar Ketuai Reformasi?* (Is Anwar Fit to Lead the Reform?) and *Anwar: Skandal Seks atau Konspirasi Politik* (Anwar: Sex Scandal or Political Conspiracy); Dinsman (aka. Shamsuddin Osman), *Gawat: Gagalnya Formula Mahathir* (Meltdown: The Failure of Mahathir's Policies) and C. N. al-Afghani, *Rakyat Semakin Matang* (The People Have Awoken).

17 | HOW THE MEDIA WAR WAS LOST

THE RECENT STUDY BY Kumar Ramakrishna on the life and times of C. C. Too (Too Chee Chew) — undoubtedly Malaysia's most efficient and notorious propagandist and psy-war expert – sheds light on a subject that has hitherto been badly neglected by contemporary Malaysian historians and political scientists alike[1]. Kumar's short but in-depth analysis of one of the men who led the country's psy-war operations against the Communists during the Emergency has managed to fill in many of the blanks that have been left unattended, and the author should be praised for his efforts. Thanks to Kumar, we now have a clearer picture of what was really going on behind the scenes during those tense and difficult years in the 1950s and 60s when Malaya (as the country was called then) seemed to be on the frontline in the Cold War between the Eastern and Western blocs.

Kumar's portrait of C. C. Too is an honest and unflattering one[2]. The man in question is described as an overbearing, arrogant, pompous and brutish egomaniac who was nonetheless a genius in his field. Kumar reveals Too's early flirtation with Communism, the reasons for his eventual turn towards the British Colonial authorities and how he rose up the slippery ladder of success until he eventually became the Head of the psychological warfare

unit of the State's security apparatus in postcolonial Malaya.

The study also provides the reader with a brief overview of how the state security apparatus was put in place by the British Military Authority (BMA) in the years that followed the Second World War. Those of us who thought that instruments like the Internal Security Act (ISA) were introduced just before the British left should think again. In fact, the BMA were already laying the foundations for a modern state security system — complete with surveillance, interrogation and counter-insurgency branches — in the late 1940s and early 50s. The Emergency Information Service (EIS) was set up in 1951 with Hugh Carleton Greene as its Head[3]. (Hugh's brother, Graham Greene, later wrote a number of short stories about foreign agents in Asia, and much of it was inspired by what was happening in Malaya then). Not long after that, the Psychological Warfare Interrogations Centre (PWIC) was set up at the behest of the then-head of operations in Malaya, General Gerald Templer[4].

Thus, to say that Malaysia has of late turned into a police state would be to make a historically inaccurate remark. The fact is that the instruments and practices of a police state were already well in place in British Malaya long before it became independent. The British military and Colonial officers who were put in charge of running the country after the War (like the Commander of British forces and Director of Operations in Malaya, Lieutenant-General Harold Briggs[5]) were hardened soldiers who had served in several military campaigns and were no great fans of popular democracy. So efficient was the state security services then that it managed to attract the best minds in the country — and C. C. Too was certainly one of them.

But while it cannot be denied that the British Colonial personnel who were in command of the country

in the 1950s were of a decidedly martial demeanour, it has to be noted that the style of governing they employed varied considerably. There were those like Briggs and Templer who favoured the 'shoot first, ask questions later' approach when dealing with the Communists in the jungle. Thanks to these men, the countryside of Malaysia is still littered with the forgotten graves of innocent civilians who were summarily executed for being suspected Communist agents or sympathisers. (And like most war criminals, Briggs and Templer were allowed to get away scot free).

However, Briggs and Templer did not get their way all the time as there were others who preferred a more subtle and sophisticated approach to tackling the problem of the Communist insurgency. Here, the men in charge of the psy-war division were seen to have their way in the end. Men like Hugh Carleton Greene and C. C. Too insisted that if the war in the countryside was to be won, the answer lay not in the random search-and-destroy missions against Chinese villages and rural folk. Such tactics, they argued, merely alienated the Chinese peasantry and further intensified their sense of distrust against Government forces.

The solution, they said, lay in the skilful use of propaganda and information. Kumar notes that Hugh Greene had laid down the basic rules in the use of propaganda and information in counter–insurgency and psychological warfare:

- The government's news reporting had to be based on facts and the truth. He argued that the public would only read the mainstream press and believe in whatever it told them if it was seen to be factual, objective and unbiased. No amount of propaganda would work if the public did not believe in the facts and

figures that were given to them, and if even one item of news was inaccurate or slanted in any way then the entire mainstream media would be discredited and nobody would read or listen to it anymore.

- The news reports had to respect the intelligence of the reader. Greene understood that the easiest option for the reader or listener was not to read the newspapers or to turn off the radio. In the end, it was the audience who decided what they wanted to listen to, and they had the final say. To insult the intelligence of the audience with trivial stories or biased reporting was the best way to alienate them and drive them to alternative sources of information, which meant the Communists at the time. Greene therefore counselled his operatives to be delicate and sensitive to the sensibilities of the audience at all times.

At the heart of the matter was the question of credibility. Men like Greene and Too understood that governments could only retain control of the situation as long as they possessed credibility. This meant that the Government itself had to be believable and that whatever Government spokesmen or politicians said had to sound credible as well. True, honest and fair reporting was the way to victory and the best way to win the battle for hearts and minds. News had to be straight and factual, nor personalised or openly biased in any way. Once the Government had earned the respect and trust of the people, half the battle would have been won and it would be able to get its

message across to the audience. Failure to gain credibility, on the other hand, meant the loss of the war itself.

In the end, the facts of history proved that the psy-war experts who were working in the background were right. While the gruelling war in the countryside continued, it was the operatives of the Malayan intelligence services who managed to win over the support of ordinary people and ensured that the MCP's lines of communication and support were cut. When the Merdeka Amnesty was announced by Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1957, hundreds of Communist guerrillas deserted their units and surrendered. By the end of 1958, Chin Peng, head of the MCP, was forced to disband the armed units and this effectively brought an end to the Emergency.

Reading Kumar Ramakrishna's study of Too forces one to make comparisons between the Malaya of the past and Malaysia today. In particular, one cannot help but compare the use of the media by the State in the 1950s and 60s with the use of the media in Malaysia during the 1980s and 90s.

When the Emergency was at its height, the Malayan (and later Malaysian) authorities saw the need for an independent and free press. None of the major political parties were given the chance to take over local newspapers or exercise direct control of the local mainstream media. Up to the 1970s, newspapers like *Utusan Melayu, Sin Chew Jit Poh* and others were independent organs that had their own agendas, which were sometimes at variance with that of the Government's.

However, all this came to an untimely end in the 1970s when the major ruling parties began to buy up stakes in the major newspapers in order to have a direct conduit to the people. The net effect of these take-overs, however, was that they created the impression that the press was no longer free and independent, and that newspapers (and later television channels) were mere

mouthpieces of the State and particular political parties and politicians.

From the 1980s onwards, we witnessed the blatant use (some would say abuse) of the mainstream press by certain political parties and politicians in the country for obviously political reasons. The mainstream Malay vernacular and English press were utilised to the hilt during the constitutional crisis of 1983, the UMNO split in 1987, the second constitutional crisis in 1991, the internal UMNO *putsch* in 1993 (when Anwar Ibrahim's faction ousted the then-DPM, Ghafar Baba), the economic crisis of 1997 and the second major split within UMNO in 1998. Needless to say, the papers have also been used extensively in all the major elections since the 1970s, and the Malaysian public has seen just how 'objective and unbiased' it can be during these occasions.

During this time, the cardinal rules of psy-war that were laid down by men like Greene and Too seem to have gone out of the window altogether (Too had retired by 1983). For the past few decades, we have been witnessing the emergence and development of an increasingly politicised and partisan Malaysian mainstream media, where newspapers and television channels are openly used to promote and popularise the image of particular politicians and political parties in the country. The newspapers seem more inclined to report what is happening in the kitchens of Malaysian politicians than what is happening in the streets of the cities or in the villages. Speeches by political leaders are reproduced verbatim, without even the slightest attempt at critical analysis or enquiry. Investigative reporting has given way to hagiography. And instead of critical reportage the public has been fed a stream of flimsy cover–ups (beginning with the BMF scandal in the 1980s to the ridiculous stories surrounding the assault on the ex–DPM while he was in detention in 1998).

The Malaysian press today seems to be divided into two categories: the mainstream papers that have become mouthpieces of the major political parties, and the tabloid gutter press that grows increasingly obsessed with fads and fashion, the lifestyle of celebrity stars and the private lives of others. Though no systematic survey has been carried out to ascertain the level of credibility that the press has among the public, the circulation figures themselves speak volumes: in the wake of the 1998 political crisis, sales of local dailies plummeted to hitherto unheard-of levels. Meanwhile, the sales of Opposition party newspapers, books by local Malay political commentators and NGO publications have soared. So have the number of readers for the so-called 'alternative' web media.

What does all this point to? It doesn't take a genius to note that something has gone seriously wrong with the mainstream media in the country, and it doesn't take a genius to spell out the long-term effects if this situation is allowed to continue unchecked.

While the powers-that-be in the country today lament the fact that the people no longer read the papers, watch TV (unless it is for rap music or Bollywood films) or listen to the radio, they should also spend some time asking themselves why the people have turned away. Here, the fundamental principles of psy-war as laid out by Greene and Too come to mind: whether they like to admit it or not, the owners and managers of the mainstream media (and by this we mean the political parties that have indirect control over the papers and television channels) have to recognise that the media no longer works as a medium of communication, for the simple reason that it has lost that one vital ingredient that takes so long to cultivate, and yet is so easy to lose: credibility. And if the media war has been lost, who have they got to blame, but themselves?

Endnotes:

1. For a fuller account of the life and work of C. C. Too, see: Kumar Ramakrishna, *The Making of a Malayan Propagandist: The Communists, the British and C. C. Too.* In *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (JMRAS), *Vol. LXXIII, Part 1*, June 2000 (pp. 67–90).

2. Too Chee Chew (better known as C. C. Too) was born on March 31, 1920 in Kuala Lumpur. His family was originally from Hainan province, South China, and his father was a staunch nationalist who supported the Nationalist movement back in the mainland. Too's grandfather, Too Nam, was a close associate of the Chinese Nationalist leader Dr. Sun Yat Sen. During his early childhood, Too was sent to Chinese vernacular schools in Kuala Lumpur, but his family decided to allow him to complete his education in the British Colonial educational stream and Too was sent to Victoria Institution (VI) and later Raffles College in Singapore. During his schooldays Too proved to be an exceptionally gifted student and he was attracted to the activities of the predominantly-Chinese Communist movement in Malaya. Ramakrishna (2000) claims that Too was secretly involved in the activities of the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Union (MPAJU) during the early 1940s and that he even met with the leader of the MCP, Chin Peng (pg. 73). But by the end of the Second World War Too was no longer persuaded by the Communist's ideological struggle and he decided to work with the British Colonial authorities instead. Too joined the Emergency Information Service (EIS) in February 1951 and was given the task of producing anti-Communist propaganda for the British Colonial authorities. When General Templer set up the Psychological Warfare Interrogation Centre (PWIC) in March 1953, Too transferred his activities there. When Malaya gained its independence in 1957, Too was awarded the *Johan Mangku Negara* (Defender of the Realm) award by Tunku Abdul Rahman. Too was then given the task of heading the Psychological Warfare Section of the Government of the Malayan Federation – a post he held for 27 years until he finally retired in January 1983.

3. The EIS was set up in March 1951 and its first head was Hugh Carleton Greene. It was then based at Bluff Road, Kuala Lumpur, and its main aim was to provide anti-Communist

propaganda that would be distributed by the mainstream media services in the country. The Colonial authorities felt at the time that the Malayan Radio and Film Unit was not doing enough in its effort to contain the spread of MCP activities and influence among the public, and that there was a need for a more subtle approach to the conflict by employing the use of psychological warfare. Greene laid down the basic rules of psychological warfare and propaganda in Malaya, which were then learnt and practised by his disciple and co-worker, C. C. Too. Greene argued that for the anti-Communist propaganda to be effective it needed to be factual, relevant and not provocative. Rather than attack the Communists outright, Greene preferred to win them over with promises of safe conduct and fair treatment. Ramakrishna notes that "the EIS had three main objectives: to raise public confidence in the Government and increase the flow of information from the public to the Police; to attack the morale of the members of the MRLA and *Min Yuen*; and to drive a wedge between the leaders and followers of the MCP so as to encourage defection among them." (See Ramakrishna, 2000, pp. 76–77).

4. The PWIC was set up by General Templer on March 18, 1953 and it was first based at the Central Police Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. The head of the PWIC was A. D. C. Peterson, who was appointed Director-General of Information Services and personally chosen by Templer himself. Peterson's task was to conduct studies into how and why the Chinese were supporting the Communists in Malaya and to identify ways and means to stop this flow of support. Peterson managed to streamline the activities of the various information and counter-insurgency operations in the country, and eventually centralised all of these activities under the PWIC. But Peterson was also known to harbour the belief that such work should be carried out by Western intelligence officers and local operatives should play only a supporting role. This led to a clash between him and Too, who eventually resigned in protest. (Too was subsequently re-employed in 1955 and he remained active until 1983). (See Ramakrishna, 2000, pp. 79–80).

5. Lieutenant-General Harold Briggs had previously served as the Commander of the British 5th Division in Burma and had been the GOC there after the Japanese surrender. He was sent to Malaya by London to take over military and counter-insurgency operations in the country. Briggs drew up a master

plan designed to pacify the countryside by wiping out the lines of communication and bases of support for the MCP and its guerillas. The plan called for the forced resettlement of Chinese villagers into policed camps and detention centres. Those who were thought to be sympathetic to the MCP were deported back to China. The plan drew considerable criticism from the Chinese community for the way that it reinforced the impression that most Chinese were communist supporters. It also led to the re-drawing of racial boundaries between the Malays and the Chinese, and in the long run it contributed to the polarisation among the races in the country. As a result of the implementation of Briggs's plan, the presence of the Chinese in rural areas diminished considerably.

18 | 'HOLY TERROR' ALL OVER AGAIN?

This article was written in early 2000, shortly after the spectacular arms heist in Grik, Perak by a shadowy organisation called the 'al-Ma'unah'. In the days and weeks that followed, the mainstream media in the country was rife with speculation that the al-Ma'unah group was a religious militant organisation linked to the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), a claim which PAS denies till today.

THE RECENT ARMS HEIST by a number of men dressed up as army officers in Grik, Perak has finally ended, after a tense stand-off in the jungle and the killing of two hostages as well as the wounding of several security personnel. In the wake of the debacle, many Malaysians have been wondering aloud about what really happened during the four days following the heist. Even the mainstream media in the country has been vocal for once, calling for transparency and accountability on the part of the Government, the Minister of Defence and the Head of the Police.

From the meagre crumbs of information gathered so far, we know that the men concerned were led by an ex-army officer who was also a member of a local *silat* (martial arms) group called *al-Ma'unah*. The mainstream media has been quick to point out that the group performs all kinds of spectacular activities like 'ritual burning' of

its members, 'bathing in boiling oil' and other supernatural hi-jinks like 'psychic attacks' and 'mental defences'. (In fact, there is nothing unusual about all this. Most, if not all, *silat* associations in the country claim to practice such outlandish things anyway).

But more disturbing to note was the comment by Lim Kit Siang, Chairman of the DAP party, who raised the question of whether the whole operation might just be a decoy, part of a plan to implicate some of the Opposition parties with the arms heist. For now, the police claim to have possession of important documents that they think will help uncover the true intentions of the group. No links have been made with any of the Opposition parties in the country — yet.

However, those with a keen memory may well recall that not too long ago there was an attempt to implicate members of a certain Malaysian Islamic party with the activities of so-called Islamic fundamentalist extremists and militants who were said to be poised on the verge of a violent revolution in the country.

In 1980, members of the Islamic party PAS were accused of being involved in a shadowy militant organisation called the *Pertubuhan Angkatan Sabillullah*. This happened after the Kedah farmers riots on January 23, 1980 when thousands of Malay farmers demonstrated against the Government in Alor Setar. The demonstration was against the Government's proposal to introduce a forced savings scheme through a coupon system. The scheme proved unpopular with both pro-UMNO and pro-PAS farmers, who demonstrated and demanded a 10 Ringgit increase in the price of rice. The Kedah State authorities responded by calling in the armed forces, Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) and Police Field Force (*Polis Hutan*) to disperse the demonstrators and arrest their leaders. By the end of the demonstrations 90 farmers had been arrested.

In the days that followed, the Government launched a media attack against PAS, claiming that the party's leaders and activists had masterminded the demonstrations. Seven PAS leaders, including a PAS State assemblyman, were arrested. The Government claimed that *Pertubuhan Angkatan Sabilullah* was behind the violent riots. The mainstream media then began to claim that 'subversive Islamist elements' were planning to launch a campaign of violence and terror in the state. During the roundup of activists and leaders, the PAS *ulama* Ustaz Othman Marzuki was arrested and accused of masterminding the Pertubuhan Sabilullah. The fact that this shadowy militant movement happened to have the same initials as the Islamist party (i.e., PAS) meant that both were being tarred with the same brush. PAS leaders argued that the whole story had been cooked up by the media and that this was a blatant attempt to demonise the image of Islamist movements in the country.

On October 14, 1988, PAS was once again in the headlines. After a massive security operation codenamed *Operasi Kenari*, 31 members and supporters of the party were rounded up and detained under the Internal Security Act.

Ops Kenari 88 was launched after a series of confrontations between members of PAS and UMNO as well as the Government's security and intelligence services in the states of Kedah and Perak. After the violence and bloodshed of the Lubuk Merbau and Memali incidents, tension had developed in Kedah in particular. Local PAS members claimed that UMNO leaders were looking for a convenient pretext to declare a state of Emergency in the state, or to use the ISA to neutralise the party in Kedah. Things came to a head when disputes arose about the activities that were taking place at the PAS seminary, *Muassasah Darul 'Ulum*.

The *Muassasah Darul 'Ulum* was one of the centres of PAS *tarbiyyah* (educational) activity in Kedah. By 1988 it was well-known to a large number of young PAS members and supporters from all over the state. In October that year, the police Special Branch in Kedah were receiving complaints from UMNO members about the activities taking place in the *Muassasah*. It was alleged that members of Pemuda PAS were gathering a stockpile of arms that were hidden under the floor of the *Muassasah*. The Special Branch was asked to investigate the matter, but they encountered resistance from PAS members. Scuffles broke out when the police tried to enter the building by force. When the police were finally given permission to enter the *Muassasah*, they found that the floor was actually covered with cement. It was obvious that there were no weapons to be found.

The members of the state security forces and Pemuda PAS were both worried that the situation might escalate into another violent encounter like the one in Memali. Local PAS leaders like Ustaz Halim Arshat and Ustaz Othman Marzuki arrived on the scene to clarify matters with the police. Nonetheless, a tight and visible security presence was maintained. When the situation failed to improve, the Chief Minister of Kedah intervened by asking the head of the state's *silat gayong* (martial arts) organisation, Cikgu Majid Mohd Isa, to go to the *Muassasah* and assess the situation. When the Cikgu arrived on the scene, he declared that the state security forces had over-reacted and warned them not to stir the hornet's nest. Cikgu Majid and the PAS members then organised an impromptu martial arts contest and demonstration, which led to hundreds more people (mostly young men) congregating at the *Muassasah*. The whole chaotic affair ended when the police closed down the *silat* performance and ordered the crowd to disperse. None of the allegations

against the PAS members housed at the *Muassasah* were proven.

Shortly after the incident, a number of other accusations were made against PAS members. After a recreational centre at Sik was burned down, the authorities were quick to put the blame on PAS 'militants' whom they accused of trying to disrupt the UMNO *Semarak* rally scheduled to take place in the town. PAS members were also accused of wanting to seek revenge against the State Government after the *Muassasah Darul 'Ulum* affair. The police and Special Branch responded by cracking down on the PAS activists in the State immediately by launching *Operasi Kenari*.

Between October 14 to November 10, the security forces apprehended 31 members and supporters of PAS in Kedah and Perak. Six pistols were found, along with three hand grenades, various explosive devices and ammunition. The entire operation took over 28 days and its cost was estimated at RM500,000. Among those arrested and later detained under the ISA were Mohammad Rus Jaafar, Shahrul Fuadi Zulkifli, Shamsul Bahrin Shaari and Shamsul Kamal Jamhari. They were all prominent PAS activists and members of the youth division of the party.

What was even more interesting about the entire operation was the way the members of PAS were depicted in the official press and mainstream media. Those accused and detained were described as *mujahideen* militants who were planning to start a campaign of 'holy terror' in the state. In the same way that other PAS leaders had been linked to shadowy Islamist militant and terrorist organisations in the past – such as the *Pertubuhan Sabilullah* and the *Jundullah* movement during the crises of the 1980 Kedah farmers riots and nationwide crackdown of 1987 – PAS members were once again being cast as Islamic terrorists and militants who were a threat to national security and racial harmony in the country.

The net result of the whole operation was that it intensified the confrontation between PAS and the UMNO-led Federal Government, and painted the conflict as a battle between the forces of militant Islam against the State.

More than 20 years after the riots in Kedah, it seems that yet another wave of Islamic fundamentalism is about to hit the country. Just who these mysterious 'Islamic fundamentalists' are remains an open question. That the Malaysian public has been kept in the dark about the entire episode in Grik does not help to bolster confidence. The Opposition parties in particular are worried that this whole episode may presage something even bigger, with greater consequences for all. The Government could do itself a favour by coming out with the truth, even if it may be embarrassing to some senior politicians in the Cabinet. However, judging by the pattern that has been set in the past, the signs of the present do not augur well for the future.

19 | HEY! WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE PERMATANG PAUH DECLARATION?

AS THE 'BIZZAROMETER' DROPS well below zero and the tenor of Malaysian politics shifts once again, all we have seen and heard over the past few weeks would give the impression that this country was made up of only Malay-Muslims. The headlines have been dominated by the concerns of this single community more than anything else, and instead of focusing on politics and economics as adults are wont to do, we have instead been immersed in the debate over the Islamic state, the dangers of bikinis and swimming pools, who has been sleeping with who (and what, where and when) and whether rape victims should be punished if they cannot produce their rapists and witnesses in court (a rather obscure and incomprehensible requirement, taking into consideration the fact that few rapists would hang around the scene of the crime and few 'morally upright witnesses' would stand and watch a woman being raped without coming to her aid).

Yet, not too long ago, in a country not too far away, we were all talking about this thing called '*reformasi*'. There was much ado about the need for reform, to break free from the simple essentialist categories and oppositional dichotomies of conventional Malaysian politics, and the need to confront old prejudices and outdated stereotypes.

Most importantly, there was talk of the need to create – for the first time — a truly inclusive and all-encompassing national political arena and public space where all races and religious communities could come together and work towards a truly multiethnic and multireligious Malaysia.

For all its faults, Malaysia has achieved a lot over the past half a century. The country that was thought to be a potential tinderbox ready to explode turned out to be one of the most stable in the ASEAN region, albeit thanks to a set of somewhat archaic and repressive laws that have been used (and abused) many times over. Thankfully, unlike our neighbours Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Burma, Vietnam and Cambodia, the Malaysian Government has always been in the hands of civilians and not generals and colonels. That helps a lot, too.

But Malaysia still has a long way to go, and we have yet to create a truly inclusive national consensus where all the races and religious communities feel at ease and a belonging to the nation. The national narrative of any country has to aim towards mirroring the diversity within it, not to simply allocate slots for communities, shoving some of the lesser-privileged ones to the subaltern category of the exotic Other. Nations are imaginary entities (to quote Ben Anderson's phrase) and the national imaginary has to be one that we can all identify with. This becomes impossible when one group dominates the rest and the national narrative is reduced to the monologue of the one against the other.

The radical dislocation brought about by the 1997-98 economic crisis was seen as an opportunity to break away from the past and interrupt the narrative that had been dominant and dormant for so long. We all thought that the time had come for us to transcend the parochial communitarian politics of the past, and work towards a new national consensus for the future.

This was, in a sense, the gist and spirit of the now-forgotten 'Permatang Pauh Declaration'[1]that was

made in September 1998 by none other than the ex-Deputy Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim. The declaration set out the goals and ideals of what later came to be known as the *reformasi* movement. At the outset, the movement was an instance of broad-based politics in Malaysia. It attracted anyone and everyone who felt alienated and marginalised by the dominant political culture of the country. The fact that so many flocked to its cause — students, activists, academics, workers, professionals, businessmen and people of all races and religions — suggested that here was the opportunity to create a pan-national rainbow coalition that would bring Malaysian society together.

The ideals of this movement were universal and fundamentally humanistic. As the declaration itself stated, its inspiration came from the "Quranic injunction which urges striving towards betterment AND inspired by the Asian traditions". Thus, it did not privilege one religion over other cultural and belief systems (see endnote) Its goals were likewise broad and inclusive. Rather than create a theological state where one religious community would come before others, it sought to "encourage renewal for the individual and for society" as a whole.

But then things got complicated when the political parties got in the way. The adoption of the *reformasi* movement by the Opposition parties in Malaysia — PAS, PRM, DAP and, later, Keadilan — meant that *reformasi* became a political project and election vehicle instead. The one party that was meant to transcend this — Keadilan — tried to bring together these various groupings in society and this was reflected by its multi-ethnic composition. (Many then felt that it was the Gerakan of the 1990s).

Politics, however, is less about ideals and more about tactics and strategies. It is about votes and seats, money and power. As the parties within the Alternative Front bickered over seats and constituencies, the ideological

differences between them came to the fore. In time, the coalition simply fell apart when it was obvious that the two dominant parties, DAP and PAS, could not see eye-to-eye over the thorny question of the Islamic state. While PAS is right in saying that it is not being hypocritical in its demand for a religious state led and ruled by Muslims, one could also understand why the secular DAP would have problems with that. The rest is history.

But as the country groans and heaves towards the next general election, the Malaysian public remains divided and uncertain. What compounds this uncertainty is the fact that the Alternative alliance is no longer an all-encompassing one, and no longer reflects the wishes and aspirations of the people as a whole. So the choice that stands before us is hardly a choice at all, and the Malaysian public is still waiting for the paradigm shift that was promised not too long ago.

What is more, PAS now claims that the man who started the ball rolling with the *reformasi* movement may not even be their choice for the post of PM should the Opposition succeed (*Ketua Parti Yang Menang Majority, Jadi PM, Tak Semestinya Anwar: PAS,* Malaysiakini, May 30, 2002). Does this mean that there will be more than one candidate from the Opposition parties for the post? (Bearing in mind that PAS is undoubtedly the backbone of the BA, it is safe to guess whose candidate will be preferred.) So where has the *reformasi* bandwagon gone to? Or was it always a Trojan horse that was meant to lead us to the well of the Islamic State?

Lest it be forgotten, the massive vote swing to the Opposition in 1999 was a wake-up call for the powers-that-be, to get its act together and address the grievances of the Malaysian public as a whole. I have always thought that this was never a vote for an Islamic State or any form of theological leadership in the country: The Malaysian public did not want to replace one set of rulers with a set

of *mullahs*. What we were looking for was a way out of the political impasse that had led the country to a state of deadlock and was burying all its dirt under the carpet.

Ironically, it is the powers-that-be that have begun to act (albeit slowly). Cosmetic though it may seem, the UMNO party has begun to reform itself from within. The Opposition, on the other hand, has failed to get its act together and instead seems to be engaged in a backroom struggle for leverage and hegemony against one another. Rather than cobble together a viable and working coalition that can actually bring together the disparate demands of Malaysia's plural society, they have gone back to their old communitarian agendas and one party in particular has jumped back on the old 'holier than thou' bandwagon.

History will look back on this period as yet another failed attempt by Malaysian society to reform and redeem itself. We desperately need to get out of the rut of our own making, and evolve to a higher plane where the concerns of race, ethnicity and religion can be reconciled by a greater politics of national consensus. But this opportunity now seems lost, and only a handful of historians remember the laudable goals of the Permatang Pauh Declaration. We have sacrificed our ideals and dreams to the altar of political expediency. Shame on us all.

Endnotes:

1. The Permatang Pauh Declaration:

- Being conscious of the Quranic injunction which urges striving towards betterment; And inspired by the Asian traditions, which all encourage renewal for the individual and for society; And acknowledging that Malaysia is in the grip of a terrible crisis and requires recourse to its inner strengths in order to rise again, We the citizens of Malaysia of all cultural and religious backgrounds are determined to launch a movement for comprehensive reform:

- A reform movement shining with a light radiating from aspiring and pure hearts; from the awareness that man is truly noble and free, with rights and responsibilities, that it is a sacrilege to abuse and denigrate any man or woman, to bind and restrict any man or woman without following the due process of just laws;

- A reform movement to establish justice for all, the weak and strong, the rich and poor, to preserve the institutions and processes of law from the defilement of graft and abuse of power;

- A reform movement to sanctify the power of the people through democratic means, for democracy is an imperative: man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary;

- A reform movement that champions economic justice, one that advocates fairness in economic growth and distribution so that the rich do not get richer at the expense of the poor, for the world has enough for everyone, but too little to satisfy everyone's greed;

- A reform movement to eradicate graft and abuse of power, to strip the opulent and greedy clique of their power to manipulate the market;

- A reform movement to reinforce a dynamic cultural identity, where faith in our noble cultural traditions is intact, but there is openness to all that is good in all traditions;

- A reform movement to launch the Malaysian nation into the information age and the borderless world, encouraging wisdom, self-assurance and openness towards a global friendship based on the principles of truth and justice.

- We launch this reform movement as a peaceful movement, in accordance with the spirit of the Constitution and in observance of the principles of the rule of law. The hour has come. Unite for Reformasi.

Permatang Pauh, 1998.

20 | 'PROGRESSIVE ISLAM' WON'T BE BORN BEHIND BARS

This article was written in October 2002, shortly after the deportation of the American Muslim student Ahmad Ibrahim Bilal (who was studying at the International Islamic University) from Malaysia to the United States at the request of the US Government. The American Government was then taking unilateral steps to initiate a war against Iraq, on the grounds that the Government of Saddam Hussein had to be toppled to bring about a regime change that was more open and amenable to Washington's interests and designs on the Arab world. The international media was then on the lookout for examples of 'moderate Islam' to set as a counter-example to the stereotypical image of 'militant' and 'extremist' Islam that had gained currency after the attacks on the US on September 11, 2001.

BY NOW, MOST OF US SHOULD REALISE that the upcoming attack on Iraq — following swiftly from the bombing of Afghanistan by the so-called 'international alliance' led by the powers-that-be in Washington — is just the prelude to a worldwide conflict that will probably last 10 to 15 years. The ascendancy of the United States of America as the world's undisputed leader and sole superpower will be the end result. What makes the

situation all the more deplorable is the fact that the rest of the world seems to be suffering from a major testicular deficit. The balls seem to remain literally in John Wayne's court, and we are forced to watch helplessly as our leaders sell us out for posterity.

From the outset, September 11 was going to be a disaster for the rest of the world, and the Muslim world in particular. At time when practically every single Government in the Muslim world is facing a credibility crisis (due to their own deplorable human rights records and economic dependency on the West), the aftermath of September 11 has forced Muslim leaders and Governments to take sides. In every single case, they have erred on the side of caution, at enormous cost to their standing in the eyes of their own populations. Washington, in turn, has exploited this gulf of interests to the maximum, pitting Muslim leaders against their own restless populations, who are still waiting for that oft-lauded paradigm shift that political Islam was meant to offer but holds back still.

So the announcement that Ahmad Ibrahim Bilal, an American student accused of being involved in 'anti-American activities', will be sent back to the US to face American 'justice' brings little cheer for those of us who had hoped that Malaysia might actually make a difference in the battle for hearts and minds that is going on around us today. Thus far, 63 individuals have been rounded up and detained as part of the 'war against terror' that has landed gracelessly on our shores. In an effort to receive the coveted title of 'moderate Muslim state' that Washington is handing out like gilded baubles these days, Malaysia – like the rest of the Muslim world – joins in the race to ingratiate itself to the Western powers to make sure that we do not get into the FBI and CIA's bad books.

But it is precisely here that the contradiction lies: In the neo-Cold War climate created in the wake of September 11, States and regimes with the most appalling

human rights records can actually gain kudos and earn the honorific title of 'progressive moderate Muslim state' by allying themselves to the West (not to mention their invested business interests). Never mind the fact that those arrested have been detained under draconian laws that do not respect the rights of ordinary citizens, or that in some countries those detained have also been 'questioned' using tactics and methods that can only be described as barbaric. All that matters is that the States concerned do as they are told and round up all of those who have fallen foul of US political, economic and military interests the world over.

If you listen hard enough, you will be able to hear the global concert of silence all around you. During the days of the Cold War, when human rights and political conditionality were the bargaining chips in the clash between the Western and Eastern blocs, religious freedom was used as a weapon by the Western powers in their ideological war against the Soviets. The rationale then was that the West was more open, democratic and civilised because it allowed for freedom of belief and expression. The evil Soviet empire was that nasty place where religious and political differences were frowned upon and often regarded as a criminal offence.

These days, the tables have been turned. In the neo-Cold War scenario, the West is cast as the final bastion of instrumental rationality, and those who hold on to convictions (particularly religious ones) are deemed a threat to world peace and civilisation.

Thanks to the hegemonic grip of the US on the rest of the world, Washington is able to call the shots and set the tune for the concert that follows. In Malaysia — as in Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and every other country with a significant number of Muslims in it — arresting and detaining Muslims on the charge of being possible terrorists or supporters of terrorism is now acceptable practice. While

human rights groups and observers continue to bemoan the fate of political prisoners (and I am not suggesting here that their fate should not be a matter of concern for us all), hardly a squeak of protest has been made with regards to the thousands of Muslims who have been arrested, detained, interrogated, denounced and even liquidated the world over as part of the global 'war against terror'.

While this is happening, those Muslim States with the highest arrest scores have inched their way up the 'moderate Islam' ladder, earning brownie points as they cosy up to the American establishment. Fearful of losing much-needed foreign investment and tourist dollars, these States are falling over themselves to prove just how moderate and progressive they are, by arresting as many Muslims as possible, in many cases without even the slightest shred of evidence save what has been handed to them by the US intelligence sources.

Notwithstanding this pathetic attempt to curry favour with the US, the fact remains that moderate and progressive Islam will not be born behind bars, and it will certainly not thrive and prosper under repressive and dictatorial conditions. While some Muslim States and Governments may think that by arresting the 'bad Muslims' they have earned for themselves the title of 'good Muslims', they need to be dissuaded of the notion rapidly.

The bottom line is that the neo-Cold War logic of today pits all Muslim states against the rest of the world, and that there is no such thing as a 'good Muslim State' in the eyes of the hawks of the US, only domesticated and compliant Muslim leaders who can be manipulated to serve the interests of Western military and economic powers by playing the role of Uncle Tom.

If Malaysia wants to earn for itself the title of 'moderate Islamic state', then its leaders as well as its society would do well to remember a few simple facts:

Any form of moderate and progressive Islam will only have credibility if it originates and proceeds from the premises of Islamism itself, and not according to the ready-made recipe dished out by Washington. In fact, due to America's deplorable record on human rights (this is the same country that supported the Shah of Iran, the Generals Soeharto and Zia 'ul Haq, and Ferdinand Marcos, and was responsible for the death squads in Central America, remember) one could argue that any endorsement from Washington would spell the kiss of death for any truly progressive Muslim State, Government, leader, movement or intellectual.

Secondly, no school of progressive and moderate Islam will ever get off the ground unless and until it commits itself to some of the fundamental tenets of justice and universal humanity that is at the core of Islamic ethics. How can any moderate or progressive Muslim State, Government or intellectual defend their standing unless they are also committed to human rights, democracy, civil society and the fundamental freedoms of individuals?

No Muslim Government can claim to be an example of moderate Islam at work if it continues to arrest and detain its citizens under various internal security acts without giving them the right to a fair and open trial where they can defend themselves. And no Muslim leader can speak up for the rights of Muslims or condemn the fundamental structural inequalities in the world today unless he or she is also prepared to grant the same rights to the citizens under his leadership.

But, sadly, the world today is run according to the logic of realpolitik, and in politics consistency counts less than goals and objectives. Despite its claims to the contrary, neither the US Government nor its allies seem interested in addressing the root causes of terror in the world, which have everything to do with the ever-growing

cleavages of power and wealth that divide the world and tear it to pieces.

America's own record in promoting human rights shows that it hardly merits the label of being consistent. This is the Government that has condemned the human rights abuses in Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran while remaining blissfully oblivious to the abuses of human rights in countries like Israel, Saudi Arabia and its bevy of crony States elsewhere. This is the Government that tells the rest of the world to consume and pollute less, while walking out of the Kyoto summit and defending the right of US citizens to gorge on more food than they need, buy bigger cars than they need and pollute more than they should.

Thus far, political Islam has failed to make even a dent in the armour of the US hegemon as it lumbers forward, juggernaut-like, on its march towards its manifest destiny. The reason for this is that Islamists themselves have failed to come up with an alternative paradigm that could radically critique and challenge the premises upon which US/Western hegemony is based.

Political Islam exploded on the global scene in the 1970s with the promise of a brave new world where the inconsistencies and contradictions of the old era would be exposed and done away with for good. But instead of the birth of a genuinely new world order, we have witnessed only the resurgence of a reactionary and defensive form of Islamism couched in terms of a politics of authenticity and nostalgia where Islamists seem to be more obsessed with moral guardianship, sartorial norms and the policing of thought.

Looking at the developments in Iran, Pakistan, Sudan, Egypt and here in Malaysia, one might be forgiven for thinking that what drives these Islamists is their obsession with the tightness of women's jeans or students making out in the dark on campus. Both the Muslim States

and Opposition movements seem more concerned with trying to use Islam as a discourse of social control and policing, rather than harnessing its critical potential by turning it into a discourse of social emancipation. The promised critique of the dominant political and economic paradigm has yet to make its mark, or if it has, then its arrival has gone unnoticed by most.

Now, more than ever, the truly progressive and moderate face of Islam must show itself. In the Malaysian context, this would mean developing a new voice of Islam that is committed to universalist and humanitarian principles that would critique the abuse of power both at home and abroad.

It would mean a school of Islamic thought that is prepared to take up issues and concerns like democracy, civil society, gender politics and economic justice under its wing. It would also have to be a school of Islamic thought that consistently condemns the machinations of power on the global scene, and exposes the ways through which the workings of geo-politics has an immediate and deleterious effect on domestic politics.

This is a task that has to be taken up by society as a whole; by politicians and laymen, regardless of their racial, ethnic and religious identities. In short, if Malaysia really wants to present itself as a moderate and progressive Muslim State then the first thing it has to do is turn itself into a real democracy, to show that Islam is indeed compatible with the values of a progressive, liberal and pluralist age. It can start by repealing the ISA and releasing prisoners held under detention without trial by the laws and regulations that bind us to the decidedly un-moderate and un-progressive Colonial past. Moderate Islam will never be born behind bars.

21 | GUTTURAL NONSENSE: SHAHNON AHMAD'S 'MUNTAH'.

Shahnon Ahmad,
'Muntah' (Vomit)
Pustaka Reka Press, Kubang Kerian, Kelantan, 2000.
173 pgs. Price: RM 12.80 (US 3.25) paperback.

THE BRITISH FILM DIRECTOR Peter Greenaway produced and directed the film *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and His Lover'* as the era of Margaret Thatcher came to a close. The film told the story of an ill-fated encounter between a cultured and mild-mannered intellectual and a crass and brutish thug-turned-businessman, Mr. Spinker. The British audience was appalled by the violence and obscenity in the film, but Greenaway's excuse was simple: His film was meant to reflect the decline of Britain at the end of nearly two decades of Thatcher's rule, and if the film was obscene and revolting it was simply because life in Thatcher's Britain was just as bad. The weakest point of Greenaway's film was that it went over-the-top as usual. Both intellectually and aesthetically, the film tried to do and say too much and what eventually spilled forth was an overblown caricature of life in Britain at the time. Greenaway's failure lay in his lack of economy and subtlety. As a result, the message failed to reflect the reality of

things. The audience left the cinemas thinking 'the bloke's gone mad, he has.'

Maverick artists and intellectuals are not confined to Britain only. Here in Malaysia, we have an abundant supply of them as well, except that some have become more prominent and influential than others. One example of a prominent and highly-respected intellectual who has recently taken a turn for the worse is the celebrated *Sasterawan Negara*, Shahnon Ahmad.

Shahnon is a familiar figure among those of us who have studied and read contemporary Malay literature. Practically every student of Malay literature in both local and foreign universities and colleges have heard of him and read his works like *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* and *Rentung*. During the late 1970s and 1980s, Shahnon was also one of the pioneers of another genre of Malay writing: the Islamist or *dakwah* novel that became the fad of the times then.

Of late, however, Shahnon has produced works of controversial, if not questionable, quality. Not too long ago, he grabbed the attention of the Malaysian public thanks to the controversy that raged on about his infamous book, *SHIT*. Shahnon's *SHIT* was written as the Anwar Ibrahim crisis reached its peak and the Malay community in particular found itself split between two mutually antagonistic and irreconcilable camps — the Islamist-reformists supporting the ex-Deputy Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, and the Conservative-nationalists who stood behind the Government of Dr. Mahathir and the UMNO party. Shahnon identified himself with the former and cast his lot accordingly.

Coming at a time when the Prime Minister's and the Government's credentials were at their lowest, Shahnon's *SHIT* was a 'gastronomic' broadside designed to smear the reputation of the leaders of the country and the establishment. Though he maintained throughout that

the work was a piece of fiction, the fact that the central character in the novel (a lump of excrement, no less) was called PM @ Pukimak left his readers with little room of doubt as to who he was referring to.

The problem with Shahnon's *SHIT*, however, was that it literally hit the fan and ended up going everywhere and nowhere at the same time. A rambling, confusing and seemingly endless narrative of more than 200 pages, it was an exercise in bad taste of unprecedented proportions. The book was a great hit and sold thousands of copies, but in the end many of those who actually had the stomach to read it to the final unsavoury conclusion could only ask aloud "What was that all about?" This was for the simple reason that it was, in the final analysis, a bad novel. Shahnon's artistic and literary capabilities could not save him from the fact that he had written something which, in the end, made little sense and shed even less, if any, light on the subject of the crisis in the Malaysian political system. Shahnon's fans may have been happy to join him in his gastronomic assault and they may have shared his sense of toilet humour, but *SHIT* remained a poor choice for intelligent (or at least intelligible) political analysis, and it was a weak foundation for any sort of political critique.

Now the Malaysian public is told to brace itself for another offering expelled from the bowels of Shahnon's imagination. His latest work is called *Muntah* (Vomit) and defies our expectations by being even worse than the earlier work.

Muntah, thankfully, is not a drawn-out narrative about vomit. It is, however, a long narrative about a certain political leader named Paduka Maha @ PM who leads the 'Amanu' party. The narrative covers a day in the life of this PM, who resides in a magnificent marble palace in a city called Putra Tak Jaya. Coming close to the end of his life, PM reflects upon all that he has done and rests upon the

laurels of his (now-faded) glory. The picture that Shahnon draws is an explicit, repulsive and gory one: Shahnon has PM whiling away his hours in a private chamber where he stands naked by himself, surrounded by mirrors so that he can admire his own body. In this private chamber, PM laughs, cries, screams, dreams and pines for a future where all his wishes and dreams are fulfilled. In between his pathological fits of madness and delirium, his mind passes over other subjects such as his domination of the people, persecution of his enemies and relationship with his wife.

Shahnon does not spare the PM or his readers. His description of PM is about as explicit and crude as anything that we can expect from the author of *SHIT*. Shahnon seems to relish describing the withered and wrinkly body of PM in particular. At one point he even describes, in excruciating detail, PM trying to urinate in his private toilet:

> *Dia (PM) ketawa riuh-rendah seorang diri sehingga terasa nak kencing puas-puas. Lalu kemaluannya dijelirkan keluar sepanjang yang terdaya dan dihulur ke tandas yang berlantai batu marmar serta yang berwarna-warni dengan lukisan-lukisan berbagai bunga... Air hancing dari kemaluannya melilih keluar dengan lambat sekali walaupun diterannya penuh kekuatan, hampir sama lambat dan sama sesak nafasnya yang keluar masuk melalui kerongkongannya yang berbalutkan kulit-kulit seribu keredutan itu.* (pg. 19)

PM, for Shahnon, is a figure of decay and decadence. The narrative is littered with (somewhat repetitious and lengthy) descriptions of PM's ailing and decrepit body which he tries to hold up with all his strength.

Shahnon's PM is a man who is about to meet his destiny, aware of the fact that he is no longer loved by the people. Yet, in the course of the narrative, Shahnon has PM surrounded by his loyal army of cronies and retainers: Ministers, *ulama*, academics, writers and journalists who slavishly do his bidding and cater to his schizophrenic whims.

The narrative finally ends with PM reflecting on his life, achievements and fate. Aware of the fact that he is now free to do as he pleases after he has eliminated all opposition in the country, Shahnon's PM breathes a sigh of relief and self-satisfaction. His eyes blind to the realities around him, PM is satisfied that he is indeed good, just and kind to all. As Shahnon puts it: "*Dadanya tetap lapang.*"

To enumerate the weaknesses and faults of the book would take too long. As a work of literature, the novel fails on many counts. Shahnon points out in his introduction that writing is no easy task and spontaneous writing is even more difficult. At one point, he notes that most of his ideas come to him in the morning after his daily jog, to which one can only add that perhaps he should have jogged a bit longer. *Muntah* remains as repetitive, self-referential, poorly-structured and clumsily written as the earlier *SHIT*. Its main weakness is that it is not an interesting book to read — surely a major fault in any work that aims to be a parody intended to lampoon those in power.

But apart from its artistic and aesthetic failures, there are many other reasons why the book is problematic.

For a start, in *Muntah* we find Shahnon going back to his earlier theme of the betrayal of the Malay race. Those who have read his earlier works like *Ranjau* and *Rentung* will know that Shahnon was one of those Malay writers who blamed the non-Malays in the country for the marginalisation of the Malay race. For many of the writers

of this generation, the theme of 'Malays in danger' has been a recurrent motif. Here in *Muntah*, Shahnon once again returns to his pet theme of the Malays being betrayed by external foes and enemies – except in this case the enemy without happens to be none other than the PM himself.

Apart from lengthy descriptions of the rotting body of the PM, Shahnon also describes him as an outsider who is not really Malay and whose main political agenda was to enter the Malay community so that he could eventually rise to the top and dominate it. At one point, Shahnon has the PM saying thus:

> *"He! Aku bukan Melayulah. Bagaimana aku boleh menjadi wira Melayu yang ultra kerana aku bukan berbenih Melayu. Dia (PM) hanya menjadi Melayu, jadi ultra Melayu, jadi pelampau Melayu kerana memang agendanya selama ini pun hanya untuk memperalatkan bangsa yang keparat ini. Hanya untuk memperkakaskan bangsa ini. Hanya untuk mengerbaukan dan melembukan bangsa yang kononnya digah dan dislogankan sendiri sebagai bangsa yang tidak akan hilang di dunia ini."* (pp. 21-22)

Here, it is difficult to see how Shahnon, the author who once pioneered the so-called Islamist or dakwah literature in the country, could reconcile his universalist faith with the narrow racial chauvinism that is so clearly evident in the book. Couched as it is in terms of an essentialist understanding of Malayness and Malay identity, Shahnon's discourse of racial purity based on blood and belonging clearly excludes PM from the Malay fold. To hammer the

point home, Shahnon has PM do the speaking for him in one of his rabid soliloquies:

> *"Aku (PM) bukan dari keturunan bangsa ini. Darahku bukan sama dengan darah mereka. Keturunanku bukan sama dengan keturunan mereka... Kononnya aku ini keturunan Kerala yang hanya layak menjual nasi kandar di simpang-simpang jalan. Bukan aku sudah lupa cacimaki dan cacihamun mereka dengan carutan yang berbagai menghina keturunan mamakku ini, tapi kini sedarlah mereka bahawa yang memimpin dan sekaligus menjajah uratsaraf, jiwa dan roh bangsa mereka ini hanya seorang anak keling yang pada suatu masa ketika dulu pernah tebar roti canai di simpang jalan raya."* (pg. 28)

Just what and how the so-called *mamaks* and *anak kelings* would react to Shahnon's writings is anyone's guess. It is clear, however, that Shahnon's Islamist orientation stops at the borders of the Malay race.

Apart from his negative depiction of PM as the racial outsider who has come to colonise and dominate the Malay people, Shahnon also seems to be equally contemptuous of the Malays themselves. If such a leader like PM could come to power in the country, he argues that it is due to the weakness of the Malays themselves who were willing to be ruled by others. Here lies the other major problem with the book, namely the evident self-loathing and contempt that Shahnon directs towards himself and the Malays in general.

Shahnon presents a bleak and depressing picture of the Malays as a race that is gullible, emotional, weak and easily domesticated. In his own words:

Begitu mudah PM songlap bangsa ini melalui kepimpinan mereka yang begitu mudah diliukkan oleh pujian demi pujian. (pg. 87)

Dalam detik-detik yang indah ini jugalah PM terasa amat bertuah kerana dia dijadikan PM kepada satu bangsa yang mudah diternak. PM cukup yakin bahawa dia akan jadi PM sampai bila-bila walau seluruh rakyat bencikannya. (pg. 103)

"Sememangnya aku (PM) telah mengkaji mentaliti mereka semenjak dahulu lagi... Dan bangsa keparat yang kononnya tak akan hilang di dunia ini bersedia menelan dan mengunyah apa saja maklumat tak kira yang palsu atau yang karut. Setiap maklumat ditelan dan kemudian diberak-berakkan begitu sahaja. Memang benar selama ini aku mengunta, mengkerbau, menglembu dan mengkeldai bangsa yang keparat ini. Begitu mudah menjajah bangsa yang keparat ini... Bangsa ini bukan tahu mengikut telunjuk sendiri. Bangsa ini hanya tahu ikut telunjuk orang lain." (pg. 108)

It is sad to see how the author who was once regarded as one of the clearest voices in the Malay milieu has turned against his own people, culture and history in a fit of hysterical anxiety. Shahnon's condemnation of the Malays as a race of blind and thoughtless followers also rings hollow considering the man's own past affiliation to a religious cult (now proscribed) that preached total obedience and blind reverence to its spiritual leader. Yet, Shahnon sees fit to condemn the Malay race *in toto* in this

narrative of his, which speaks volumes about the man himself and where his career is heading.

Reading Shahnon's *SHIT* and *Muntah* reminds one of the late Dennis Potter who, in his later life, has become increasingly paranoid, depressive and pessimistic. Potter's works were travesties of his earlier writings and they painted a sad and miserable picture of an artist who had lost his skill, desperately lashing out at the world around him while indulging in fits of self-pity and self-loathing. Shahnon, too, seems to have lost his skill and is desperately hitting out at all the things that he feels is wrong with the country — real or imagined — with everything he has left. Ironically, Shahnon himself has lost sight of the realities around him, very much like the PM he derides in his narrative.

In summing up, one could only say that *Muntah* is a 'fitting' follow-up to Shahnon's earlier *SHIT*. Both works deserve the titles given to them, an anomaly in these days of false advertising. Those who choose to read *SHIT* and *Muntah* will get precisely that, nothing more and nothing less. Sadly, for the rest of us who have to live in the real world, political, economic and social problems still require practical and realistic solutions. Shahnon's latest writings clearly fall into the category of paranoid, narcissistic ranting where the reader is invited into the private hell of the author. Unfortunately for him, many of us would probably prefer to stay out of Shahnon's ethnocentric and exclusivist private world and fight our battles in the real world outside.

This is perhaps where Shahnon has failed us the most. Having written so much about the plight of the Malays over the years, his latest works are a betrayal to the Malays of the highest order. Coming at a time when the Malays are in need for a clear voice and practical solutions, Shahnon has offered them only contempt and abuse dressed up as parody and satire. That *SHIT* and

Muntah have appeared on the Malaysian literary scene tells us a lot about the state of affairs in the country. But even then, surely the people deserve better. *Muntah* is, and remains, sad and pathetic.

22 | THE CROAK OF DESTINY

Crossing The Waves: A Biography of Ibrahim Ali
By Zainal Epi.
Published by Trade and Industry Media, Johor Baru, May 2000.
211 pages. RM20.00 (hardback)

IBRAHIM ALI IS NO STRANGER to any of us by now. The man who was detained under the ISA in 1987 for his part in raising the political temperature of the country was recently in the headlines once again, this time for organising yet another combustible Malay gathering. (Where, of all things, the leadership of UMNO became the target of popular frustrations.) With friends like these, some might say that UMNO doesn't need enemies — and indeed, some of UMNO's real enemies probably regard him as their best asset.

It had to happen someday, and it finally has. At long last, a rare, brave soul has summoned the courage and literary skills necessary to write what has to be the masterpiece of the era: the biography of Ibrahim Ali. The author in question is none other than Zainal Epi, and this writer for one believes that the man deserves the highest honour of the land — perhaps elevating him to the same status as the author of *SHIT*, Shahnon Ahmad.

Malaysia now has two bright stars in its constellation of literary sages, and we should all be thankful. The gem in question is entitled *Crossing the Waves*, and Epi himself notes that it is an appropriate title for the subject that he has chosen to address.

Why was this book ever written? Was it necessary at all? What infernal motives could have compelled the writer to put pen to paper? These are questions that remain unanswered, and we shall probably never know. But Zainal himself remains adamant and unrepentant. He notes that his was an attempt "to analise (sic) with rational mind Ibrahim's actions" (pg. 96) and that "*Crossing the Waves* is not a book about politics or a love story" (pg. 15). The book, in fact, is about "a normal human being with high ambitions." (pg. 15)

But surely Zainal is being too modest about his subject. For Ibrahim Ali is far from an ordinary man, and perhaps we can all be grateful for that. Being one of the few politicians in the country who has changed parties more frequently than anyone else is a rare privilege and honour, and it is this that adds to the charm and uniqueness of Ibrahim. As Zainal notes: "Ibrahim is called with so many names (sic). Frog by friends and foes." (pg. 20) "He does not need ushering and pushing to be recognised. Mention his name and they will remark: 'Ah, that man who jumps from one party to another, like a frog.'" (pg. 20)

The portrait of Ibrahim Ali that Zainal paints is one of a frustrated genius who is misunderstood by all. It is this enigma, this riddle of a man who does not stay still long enough in any party, and who continually hops across political boundaries, that Zainal hopes to understand: "To think of it, who is this man Ibrahim Ali in reality? His political record is full of dirt and some good too." (pg. 22).

Some clues can be found in Ibrahim's personal history. Zainal spends some time talking about the

relationship between the man and his father. Indeed, when we begin to understand what kind of family background Ibrahim Ali had, we may well come to have a better understanding how and why he evolved to become the sort of person he is.

Courage, according to Zainal, is something that one has in one's genes (pg. 67) and apparently Ibrahim Ali's family had quite a lot of it. (This may also account for his party-hopping tendency, though Zainal is silent over the question of whether Ibrahim Ali's political behaviour is genetically-determined). Ibrahim Ali's late father, Ali bin Muhamad (popularly known as Tok Gawa), "was one fearless village chief and also sort of a 'gangster'." (pg. 69). Zainal points out that Ibrahim's father had even slapped a policeman once (pg. 70) and was feared by friends and foes alike. (Those were the days when civilians could slap policemen and not vice versa). So tough was Ibrahim's father that both PAS and UMNO wanted him on their side, in their effort to win control of the state of Kelantan. These endearing qualities have now been passed down to the fortunate son, Ibrahim: "Looking at Ibrahim's face and character, one will see similarities between the father and son" (pg. 73).

Even as a child Ibrahim was already showing leadership potential: "He was already a leader when he was a young kid. He loved being a leader in every game they played. He was a fearless boy. He had physically fought with eight people against him alone" (pg. 74).

Ibrahim's early days in student politics showed just how much he was his father's boy. In the chapter bearing the prosaic title 'Campus Hero', Zainal recounts how Ibrahim and his fellow Malay-Muslim students would go around patrolling the campus (of ITM), checking up on others to make sure they would behave themselves and not indulge in immoral activities behind closed doors (pg. 55). This was the time when Ibrahim was part of the

Malay-Muslim student movement, and like-minded groups like ABIM were busy protesting against the Government for not implementing policies that were more aligned with Malay communitarian interests. Ibrahim demonstrated his concern for the maintenance of proper Malay-Muslim manners by kicking one of his friends who was caught indulging in indecent behaviour (pg. 56).

Ibrahim entered the world of politics at the same time as his contemporaries through Malay student unions and organisations like ABIM. A contemporary of Anwar Ibrahim (another fiery student leader known for making loud speeches), Ibrahim entered politics in the 1970s after he was released from detention under the ISA (he was detained, incidentally, along with Anwar). His first big opportunity came when he led the demonstrations against the PAS leader Asri Muda during the Kelantan crisis of 1977-78. As a result of the demonstrations, the Federal Government of Hussein Onn was able to declare a state of Emergency in Kelantan and install an UMNO Chief Minister soon afterwards. Ibrahim then joined the BERJASA party of Muhammad Nasir, who was then the arch-rival of Asri Muda, President of PAS.

But Ibrahim was not destined to stay long in Nasir's BERJASA. The world of politics was, for him, a shifting terrain that had to be negotiated constantly. As Zainal puts it: "politics itself lacks stringent laws such as religious laws" (pg. 116). This suited Ibrahim quite well, as "he has never dreamt of being (a politician) and therefore has never follow (sic) any ideology on politics" (pg. 78). In 1981, he made his first political hop from BERJASA to UMNO. But Ibrahim's hop turned out to be a boon for him, and many more were to follow: "That is Ibrahim Ali, the frog turned prince. He jumps but into a pot of gold" (pg. 26).

In the years that followed, Ibrahim would make his presence felt on the Malaysian political scene by his

spectacular political acrobatics. He hopped from BERJASA to UMNO, then from UMNO to Semangat '46, then from Semangat '46 back to UMNO. During these troubled years, while the careers of other mortal politicians met their untimely end, Ibrahim Ali's star continued to rise. It seemed as if the man was truly blessed by fate: "What more can one ask from Allah the Almighty if one is fated to be like him" (pg. 21) asks Zainal, in a rare moment of reflective understatement.

But for Zainal, Ibrahim was always a leader blessed with a sense of higher purpose and meaning in life which transcended the mundane world of *realpolitik*: "Ibrahim was viewed as a leader with an Islamic soul" (pg. 55) and by jumping from one party to another he was continuing "his *jihad* or holy war in the field" (pg. 37). At one point, Zainal even compares Ibrahim Ali's constant jumping from one party to another with the famous *hijra* (migration) of the Prophet Muhammad himself: "Migrating can open one's mind, exposes one to other cultures and in a way part of the strategy to expand one's experiences (sic)" (pg. 119.). Such is the moral calibre of this misunderstood prodigy, who has only received the abuse of the uncharitable rabble around him.

The aim of Zainal's book is nothing less than the rehabilitation of Ibrahim Ali, the 'people's hero' who has been so badly misunderstood by his adversaries: "It is not fair to compare him with others who have reached the top levels. The comparison is just like comparing the perfect with those that are handicapped" (pg. 40).

Against the tide of bile and venom that has been thrown in Ibrahim's direction, Epi points to his redeeming qualities: "He is shrewd at raising a particular issue, to popularise himself" (pg. 44). And potential employers should take note of the fact that "Ibrahim is a very dedicated and loyal worker" (pg. 44).

Ibrahim is also the embodiment of true Malay feudal politics at its best. A great believer in helping the masses, he is always there to share a cup of tea with them, while discussing personal matters like business contracts and concessions: "Ibrahim's office in Kuala Lumpur is always packed with people seeking help. The kind of help needed ranges from clearing summons right up to lobbying for big projects to the Prime Minister (sic)" (pg. 74).

The final word should go to Zainal himself, who has carved his own niche in the world of Malay journalism and literature thanks to this novel offering. His laudatory paean to the politician of amphibian qualities sums up the manifold distinctions of the Ibrahim Ali we have all come to love: "Many love to hate him and many hate to love him but many cannot do without him and just as many cannot ignore his existence." (which leaves very few people left, one supposes). "He does not make waves or headlines but he is news. Whatever he does is news, whatever he talks is news, whom he meets and whatever he does is news. ...He is remembered for his contributions and his non-contributions (sic)" (pg. 19). On this point Zainal could not be any clearer: "A Legend in his own right? Probably" (pg. 20).

As a book which offers us a rare insight into the convoluted mind of a highly complex and controversial figure who up till now has only been approached with barge pole in hand, Zainal Epi's *Crossing the Waves* is the first of its kind (and, some might hope, the last). His own justification for writing the book offers little solace to those who have had to review it: "I hope this book can be a reference for all of us when confronted with a man named Ibrahim Ali." (pg. 16). (So the next time you confront the man, make sure you have the hardcover copy with you). To sum up: a one-off timeless classic that will hopefully remain unique. A must for one's friends and enemies alike.

23 | PIGS AND DOGS, EVERYONE

Anjing by Shahnon Ahmad.
Published by Pustaka Anak Sik, Kampung Banggol, Kedah, June 2001.
103 pages. Price: RM8.00.

Babi by Ibrahim Ali.
Published by Koperasi Anak Pasir Mas, Kelantan, 2001.
103 pages. Price: RM 8.00.

THE REVIEWER'S LOT IS OFTEN an unhappy one indeed. And this is particularly true for those of us who have to read through the political writings in this blessed country of ours. There are times when one feels like knocking together the heads of Malaysian politicians so that they see some sense, and this is one of them. Having read Shahnon Ahmad's *Anjing* (Dog) and Ibrahim Ali's *Babi* (Pig), one can only come to the sad conclusion that there is no limit to how low Malaysian politics can sink. Now that the toilet of Malay literature is overflowing with masterpieces like *SHIT* and *Muntah* (Vomit), Malay politician-writers have begun to build a zoo of dogs and pigs as well. One waits with bated breath (and closed nostrils) for the next putrid offering from these two great statesmen of our time.

To ask the question which book is worse would be superfluous. Both are equally bad, and that in itself is an accomplishment of sorts. But there has to be some order in the midst of this chaos, so it is my unpleasant task to introduce to the reader the first of these two toilet-reading masterpieces.

Anjing was written by the ex-academic-turned-PAS politician and Member of Parliament Shahnon Ahmad. Like his previous works *SHIT* and *Muntah*, Shahnon's *Anjing* is basically a rambling and incoherent narrative that is broken down into a series of short vignettes, each of which purports to contain an obscure moral message of some kind.

It is clear that this is strictly reading for the in-crowd: The stories will make no sense whatsoever to anyone who is not familiar with the local political scene and the various persona who make up the cast of the *wayang kulit* (shadow-play) of Malaysian politics. Courageous defender of truth and justice that he is, Shahnon never mentions any of his targets specifically. They all come under various pseudonyms and disguises like *al-Kataki, Paduka Maha*, etc.

At times, Shahnon comes close to saying something actually interesting. The short story *Ikan Kecil Yang Tak Tergamak Dijamah* is meant to be about a national leader who is alleged to have raped an under-aged girl in her teens. One wonders who that could possibly be, but the bold Shahnon stops short of revealing who the person is. In another story (*Al-Kataki*), Shahnon lampoons the amphibian antics of a certain politician who has the tendency to jump from one party to another. Again, the reader is left clueless as to the real identity of the person in question, as Shahnon never mentions the name of his subject. And so the stories drag on and on, and we are left with these tiresome jibes and backhanded accusations that are so common in the world of the Malay *wayang*.

Not long after the publication of *Anjing*, the ex-BERJASA, ex-Semangat '46 politician-turned-UMNO leader Ibrahim Ali put his pen to paper and came up with *Babi*. He admits that his masterpiece was inspired by the work of his rival Shahnon. (The two books, incidentally, are almost identical in appearance. Both have the same typesets, fonts, layout, etc. except that Shahnon's book has a yellow cover while Ibrahim's is green. And Shahnon's has a picture of a rather cute puppy on the cover while Ibrahim's has a full-frontal portrait of a somewhat over-endowed porker).

Like Shahnon's work, Ibrahim's book is basically another long-winded, tiresome and aimless narrative that is broken down into a number of short chapters. In them, he gives various accounts of different types of swine, and it is clear that the barbed references are directed towards particular figures in the Opposition. He spends considerable effort ridiculing a certain *babi miang* (amorous pig) who was caught in a somewhat compromising situation in a certain room '121' (you know who you are, sir). More bile and venom is spilt on other *babis*, including the *babi muda, babi tua*, and *babi nyanyuk*. But like the intrepid Shahnon, Ibrahim the Fearless is likewise unable or unwilling to openly name the people he is talking about.

Reading *Anjing* and *Babi* consecutively is a painful exercise which merits the highest medal of honour and bravery. The same cannot be said of those responsible for writing them, who should be charged with crimes against humanity.

The most disappointing thing about the books is that they show too clearly that Malaysian politics – and Malay politics in particular — remains all sound and fury, signifying nothing. That Malaysian politicians can write such drivel while they are meant to be running the country is a shame and an insult to the people who voted them to

power. That their superiors could allow them to continue wasting their time (and ours) is an indictment on the lack of political wisdom and leadership in this country. It is no exaggeration to say that in any other country, no politician worth his or her salt would have the guts to show his/her face in public after writing such nonsense. But here in Malaysia, they are promoted to even greater heights instead.

For that reason at least, both *Anjing* and *Babi* deserve closer reading and analysis. The books (if one could call them that) themselves have no literary merit whatsoever, but they nonetheless serve as vital indicators of a political culture that has seriously degenerated and gone off the rails. In them we find no sound political analysis or rational critique, but they reveal the mindset of Malay politicians who seem to think that politics is a game best played with their drinking buddies from the local *warong* around the corner.

Here is coffee-shop politics taken to the highest level and normalised as part of mainstream political discourse. Malaysians may continue to wonder aloud about how a racist hairdresser like Pauline Hanson could rise to such prominence in Australia. They should look no further: Ibrahim and Shahnon are two local homegrown examples of mediocrity elevated to genius in a country where the banal is regarded as extraordinary.

The mediocre touch, which is now *en vogue* among so many Malaysian leaders, is clearly evident in both *Babi* and *Anjing*. In the chapter entitled *Katak Tidak Berdosa Dengan Sesiapa* (Frogs Have Never Hurt Anyone), Ibrahim extols the virtues of the amphibian critter to whom he has been most closely identified:

> *Kalau ia manusia, katak boleh diamanahkan menjadi hulubalang yang setia dan tempat pemimpin meletakkan*

> *kepercayaannya untuk mendapat maklum balas yang ikhlas dan jelas.* (pg. 55)

Setia (Loyalty) is obviously the key word here, being one of Ibrahim's main selling points all the while. (The problem, perhaps, was not the fact that he was loyal, but that he was loyal to too many leaders of too many parties). And as for the claim that the loyal frog is always the one who receives and passes on reliable feedback from the masses, one is tempted to ask Ibrahim what kind of reliable feedback he received and passed on during the last elections, when he himself lost his seat in Kelantan.

But these petty foibles obviously do not get in the way of Ibrahim's rapier-like intellect. For him, the main attributes of the frog are cunning, guile and the knack for political survival. As he points out:

> *Baik-baik fikir untung juga jadi katak. Mana tak untungnya, dalam air boleh duduk, di daratpun boleh hidup. Dimana-mana ada makanan. Yang indahnya dia dapat tengok macam-macam. Pasalnya dia kecil. Nak pergi ke satu tempat ke satu tempat, dia hanya melompat.* (pg. 57)

Here is the traditional Malay understanding of politics in a nutshell. Bereft of all pretence to ethics, morality, purpose or ideology, it is about political survival pure and simple. Ibrahim's laudatory paean to the frog speaks volumes about his own understanding of politics, rooted as it is in a neo-feudal mindset which sees loyalty, pragmatism and all manner of chicanery as positive attributes. Like that other wily jungle denizen *Sang Kancil* who epitomises the mentality of the *untermenshen* who would stoop to anything to conquer, Ibrahim's idealised frog stands for the ideal Malaysian politician who would

do anything to get to the top, without letting rectitude or moral values get in his way.

A bleaker picture is painted by the more morose Shahnon, who spends much of his time blasting away at the conceit of others as well as his own people these days. In *Anjing,* Shahnon describes contemporary Malaysian politics as a free-for-all where *"politik terkini menghalalkan apa cara pun asalkan matlamat tercapai sudah"* .(pg. 40)

Needless to say, Shahnon's primary targets are the leaders of the opposite political camp (UMNO and the BN). Like Ibrahim, he too bemoans the absence of moral scruples in Malaysian politics, but he too offers no rational analysis or concrete solutions to it. Rather, Shahnon spends much of his time and energy lamenting the fact that the Malays in particular have become a domesticated race of *anjing* (dogs) who have lost their bark and bite, and who are lorded over by the great *Paduka Maha.*

In the final chapter of his book, Shahnon launches yet another fiery tirade against the contemporary Malay, whom he claims has lost his roots, the will to fight and resist, and the will for independence. The Malays are, for him, a race that is easily domesticated and manipulated (*"mudah diternak, boleh diperkakaskan, sangup diperkudakan"* pg. 97). The great *Maha* whom he despises so, on the other hand, is portrayed as an almost God-like being with seemingly infinite powers:

> *"Dia hanya duduk kukuh-kukuh di atas singgahsananya yang gagah persona itu dan di situ dia cuma memetik jari atau hanya menjueh mulut sebagai isharat perintahnya. Sudah banyak kali dia hanya memetik jarinya saja. Dan dalam sekelip mata, tampa banyak helah dan sebab akibatnya, jadilah apa sahaja yang dihajatnya"* (pg. 99).

It appears that in the eyes of Shahnon, the domestication of Malaysians and the Malay race in particular is complete. The great *Maha* merely has to snap his fingers and reality is transformed according to his will. The masses can no longer resist, but merely follow his beck and call meekly.

But such a pessimistic view begs the simple question: Does Shahnon mean to say that Malaysians — and Malays in particular — are so servile that one man alone can domesticate them all? If this is so, what role is there for rational agency and the process of social change and evolution? Do power-relations, cleavages of class and divisions of power have anything to do with this dismal state of affairs? Such a simplistic and dismal view of the present demands an intelligent justification, but one is not forthcoming in this book that contains little else but Shahnon's morbid fascination with decay and social collapse.

All in all, both *Anjing* and *Babi* make for interesting (though depressing) reading for social scientists and/or the unemployed who have nothing better to do. The books reveal more about the mindset and values of the authors themselves, and should therefore be read in that light. They teach us nothing new about Malaysian politics, since most jaded Malaysians are already painfully aware of the fact that ideology and moral values went out of the window a long time ago. But they do show us how and why Malaysian politics has not been able to evolve over the past few years, and why even after the great brouhaha over the *reformasi* and other trendy fads, we have not been able to take this country beyond square one.

Malaysian politics — and Malay political culture — being what it is, it will take much more than the rabid imaginings of Shahnon Ahmad or Ibrahim Ali to bring about a radical paradigm shift in the way that this country is run. If anything, the two latest books from them show that the search for a new form of politics hasn't even begun.

24 | UP THE CREEK WITHOUT A VOTE

Getek by Megat Junid bin Megat Ayob.
Orient Press, Seri Kembangan, Selangor, 2000.
157 pages. Price: RM10.00 (paperback)

MEGAT JUNID BIN MEGAT AYOB has to be one of the saddest politicians in the country today. The reader does not have to take my word for it — the man says it himself in his latest book entitled *Getek* (which we are told means 'sick of it' in the Perak dialect).

Written in 2000 just a few months after his UMNO was badly mauled at the 1999 general elections, Megat's *Getek* reads like a drawn-out and bitter diatribe against the members of his party and his own graceless fall from power. With his usual flair for the colloquial, Megat sums up his lot thus: *"Sekarang kita jatuh terduduk. Dari kerusi Menteri hinggakan taraf YB pun lesap. Tinggal telor dua biji, terhoyong-hayang kesana sini. Orang tak peduli kita, kitapun tak peduli orang"* (pp. 80-81). To sum up: *"Sedih"*.

The cover of the book has a picture of Megat paddling away in a canoe all by himself. The photo was taken while Megat was visiting the flooded areas near Kampung Pematang Pelanduk — it was one of the last duties he performed as a Member of Parliament and

Cabinet Minister before he lost his seat and his position in the Cabinet after the elections. Finding himself up the creek with no votes, Megat had ample time to reflect upon the factors that led to his rise and fall in the turbulent world of Malay politics.

His own account of his early childhood is just as sad as the rest of the narrative. It is clear that Megat was not one of the fortunate few who happened to be born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Born in Kampung Padang near the Perak river to a family that was desperately poor, Megat had a firsthand experience in the realities of rural life from the very beginning. His father was a rubber smallholder who died when he was young and his mother was forced to fend for him and the rest of the family against seemingly insurmountable odds. Despite these difficulties, he managed to get himself into the local educational system and eventually made his way to University Malaya (UM). After graduating he became a schoolteacher, and it was there in the field of local vernacular education that he first met the man who would later become his political mentor and patron, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (who was then the Minister for Education).

In 1976, Megat became one of the political secretaries to Dr. Mahathir, along with Aziz Shamsuddin. From then on, he worked his way up the political ladder until he eventually became a member of the Cabinet himself, holding a portfolio in the Ministry of Home Affairs.

But those who expect a detailed account of the daily process of running the State and managing the Government will be disappointed. This is a book written by a dejected man and Megat is not one to waste his time on trivial details about State-management and Government. No, the book is all about how fed up and sick to death he is with life, politics, the lot.

Why is Megat so fed up with life? Well, for a start, his major gripe is that the party he has come to know and love has been taken over by a bunch of corporate high-fliers. Megat complains again and again about the new corporate culture that has come to infect the UMNO party from within, and which has led to the diminishing of its original values and ideals: *"UMNO kini dikuasai oleh orang-orang korporat. Orang yang banyak duit... UMNO kini dikuasai oleh mereka yang tamak, berlagak sombong dan mementingkan diri sendiri"* (pg. 63).

UMNO, for Megat, has become a party that is intimately linked to the culture of money politics and this he claims has been the case as far back as the 1980s: *"Walaupun secepat kilat UMNO Baru dilahirkan, yang berlandaskan UMNO asal, namun budaya politik wang sudah menjadi amalan ahli-ahli UMNO... Keghairahan politik wang ini berterusan"* (pg.59).

Fans of the now-deposed DPM, Anwar Ibrahim, may not be too happy to know that Megat's book also exposes the ways in which money politics was used by Anwar's factions in UMNO: "*1993 bila Anwar (Ibrahim) nak rebut jawatan Timbalan Presiden dari Pak Ghaffar, wang ringgit yang menjadi penentu. Di masa yang sama team wawasan dicanangkan. Lebih ramai yang main wang. Politik wang bukan sahaja pemberian wang tunai kepada perwakilan. Tetapi dilakukan dalam berbagai-bagai bentuk. Ketua bahagian atau Timbalan Ketua bahagian yang dapat elaun buta dari firma-firma tertentu... Ada yang dibawa melancung keluar negeri. Tempat yang popular adalah Hadnyai dan Medan"* (pp. 59-60). Not all the bribes came in the form of free tickets to tourist traps in the region. For the more religiously-inclined members of the party, a more *kosher* form of bribery was also provided, in the form of a free, all-expenses paid trip to Mecca: *"Tapi bagi mereka yang hendakkan jawatan yang lebih tinggi, ialah umrah di Mekah Mukarramah"* (pg. 60).

But what is equally interesting to note is the fact that Megat's description of his own work and activities as an UMNO MP seem to suggest that nobody is immune to the ills he decries so: *"Selama 17 tahun saya menjadi wakil rakyat, elaun ahli Parlimen saya tak pernah cukup. Tiap-tiap bulan saya kena tambah dengan punca lain"* (pg. 47). Just how Megat managed to supplement his income so that he could appease his constituents remains one of the many unanswered questions in the text.

Here we see the main contradiction that has been the weak spot of UMNO from the beginning. Critics of UMNO's feudal culture are not few and far between. One of the most vocal critics of the UMNO system was none other than the Prime Minister himself, who attacked the party leadership for its abuse of power in his book *The Malay Dilemma* that was published in 1970. But the very same UMNO leaders have been unable to break away from this culture of patronage and dominance once they come into power, and Megat seems to be no exception. The paternalistic culture of Malay feudal politics that he and other UMNO leaders embody and practice incurs an economic cost — and more often than not it eventually translates into the form of money politics that they all openly condemn in public.

But the contradictions do not end there. What is also interesting about Megat's book is that it shows the feudal mindset at work and how it lays bare feudalism's own twisted logic.

Megat, like many other UMNO leaders, has called on the Malays to break free from their mental chains of bondage and servitude to custom and tradition. Since the 1970s, when the new administration of Tun Abdul Razak introduced the so-called 'new way' (*arah baru*) and 'new realism' (*realisme baru*), UMNO has been trying to break the traditional mindset of the rural Malays which they blamed for the economic and political backwardness of the race as a

whole. The book *Revolusi Mental* (which was edited by the then-Secretary General of UMNO, Datuk Senu Abdul Rahman) became the blueprint for the new Malay that UMNO wanted to create[1]. Aggressive economic development policies were used to radically alter the socio-cultural terrain of the Malay countryside as well[2].

But all the while, UMNO could never give up its role as the mentor and guide for the Malays, and this paternalistic attitude has seeped into the party all the way up to its leadership strata. Nowhere is this more evident than when Megat speaks about his own place and role in the UMNO leadership hierarchy and of his love and devotion for the man who became his political patron and master: he openly admits that throughout his political career he had *"mengikut, bertugas dan mengabdikan diri dengan Dato' Seri Mahathir bin Mohamad"* (pg. 96).

Proof of Megat's unfailing loyalty and deference are found in abundance all over the text. When asked by Dr. Mahathir to help Anwar win the seat for the Ketua Pemuda UMNO post in 1982, Megat complied without question: *"Saya tak kata apa. Ini arahan boss. ...Arahan mesti dipikul"* (pg. 104). This same loyalty was shown to other UMNO leaders who eventually stepped above him in the pecking order of the UMNO party, too. When Anwar later became one of the key players in UMNO, Megat showed his loyalty and obedience to Anwar as well. In one of the chapters he recalls how he had helped Anwar unseat Ghafar Baba in the leadership struggle within UMNO in 1993 (pg. 107)[3].

In the end, however, it was Megat's blind and unquestioning loyalty that cost him his seat in the Parliament. In the lead-up to the last election, he was ordered (again, by his boss, Dr. Mahathir) to give up his seat at Pasir Salak for another candidate. At the constituency of Parit he met his end and his 25-year career in politics was terminated. Yet, despite all this, Megat

remains adamant and unrepentant to the end, his fidelity and devotion to Dr. Mahathir secure despite the fact that he was 'sacrificed' by his own boss.

Here again we see the internal contradictions within UMNO coming to the surface. Megat acknowledges that UMNO has suffered most at its own hands and that the party is its own worst enemy. Practically every major defeat and crisis suffered by the party (and the 1999 election results are no exception) has been due to the feudal political culture of the party itself, which merely breeds incompetence, greed, corruption and abuse of power. In an interesting passage, Megat even recounts a private discussion he had with the Prime Minister where the latter stated that UMNO leaders should not stay in power too long, for otherwise they may turn into *"war-lords"* (pg. 74) and *"gangsters"* (pg. 77).

But the sad and frustrated Megat is unable to do anything about this, partly because he appears to be blind to the contradictions that are staring him in the face, and partly because as a member of the ruling elite he was also part of the problem.

Megat doesn't shy away from these difficult and embarassing facts, and for that reason *Getek* is actually an interesting read for those who wish to get a glimpse into the mind of an UMNO leader at work. Unlike the hagiographies that have been written by the scores of mercenaries and hack writers that crowd the coffee-shops of KL these days, *Getek* is obviously something that has been written from the heart and by someone who has considerable experience in the field. Coming from someone who has obviously nothing left to lose (and maybe even less to gain), Megat's desperate appeals for unity and a change of head that litter the text have a particularly poignant aftertaste. At one point he practically begs for UMNO to change in order to save itself from itself:

UMNO tidak akan berjaya mengharungi badai pemerintahan negara dengan jayanya, terutama dimasa-masa muka. (Rakyat) mesti serakit dengan kita. Mesti seperahu dengan kita. Sekapal dengan kita. Jika kita mahu melayarkan kapal pemerintahan kita dengan jayanya bagi menentukan masa depan bangsa, agama dan tanahair kita terjamin. Kesalahan besar kita mengenepikan mereka, memulaukan mereka. Apatah lagi menyakiti hati mereka. Bukan UMNO sahaja rugi, tetapi negara dan masa depan bangsa akan tergugat. Marilah kita berfikir panjang atas perkara ini. UMNO bukan kepunyaan segelintir orang Melayu sahaja, tetapi dipunyai oleh setiap insan Melayu di negara ini' (pg. 72)

The weaknesses of the book are therefore the weaknesses of the subject and the party he writes about himself. If the arguments in *Getek* fail to make sense, it is mainly because UMNO itself does not seem to make sense anymore these days. *Getek* is therefore a symptom of an ontological problem that strikes deep into the heart of UMNO and its *raison d'être*. The party that was set up to save the Malays has now become the one thing that is keeping them down. The alternative of an Islamist party that calls for an Islamic State remains an unacceptable and frightful one for many. The Malays, like Megat Junid himself, remain floundering around looking for a new *harakah* (vehicle), a new form of politics that can rescue them from themselves. But in the meantime, all of us, high and low, rich and poor alike, remain where we are — floating up the creek without a paddle.

Endnotes

1. The book *Revolusi Mental* was edited by Senu Abdul Ahmad, then Secretary-General of UMNO. The *Revolusi* was a collaborative effort between a number of Malay academics, statesmen and journalists. It consisted of a number of essays which basically diagnosed the condition of the Malay race as being somehow incapable of meeting the demands of development and modernity. Interestingly, the authors have laid most of the blame of the fundamental nature of Malay culture itself, by arguing that the Malays' traditional agrarian way of life was not conducive to economic development and prosperity. (Thereby echoing the distorted image of the Malays as being an indolent and unproductive race developed during the era of British colonialism). The Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas later criticised the work in his book *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977). He argued that the *Revolusi* was fundamentally directed towards promoting the ideology of the ruling elite, which was liberal capitalism and the philosophy of possessive individualism. He concluded that "the book, which is a chaotic amalgamation of sound common knowledge of no depth, and absolutely ridiculous inferences, is perhaps the most naive, the most simple and the least well-defined philosophy of capitalism, while claiming to represent the modern and indigenous philosophy of the Malays" (pg. 149).

2. For a more thorough analysis of the dynamics of socio-political change and conflict in the setting of the Malay rural interior, see Shamsul A. B.'s *From British to Bumiputera Rule* (1986). Shamsul's study examines the complex internal politics of the *Mukim* of Kampung Chempaka, Selangor, which were further intensified thanks to the political in-fighting between the two main Malay political parties contesting against each other in the district in the post-Colonial years: the Conservative ruling party UMNO and the Islamic Opposition party, PAS. The antagonism between UMNO and PAS in the post-1957 years led to further divisions within the rural community of the district and the villages within it. Shamsul notes that "from the beginning UMNO was perceived as the political party which belonged to the official-entrepreneur class" (pg. 237) and as such naturally attracted the loyalty of the wealthier landowners and small businessmen of the district. PAS, on the other hand, won the support of more peasants and farmer-settlers in the area. PAS's success in establishing itself in the

district by the late 50's attracted the attention of the UMNO-led Government which then proceeded to isolate and punish the area by depriving it of funds and investment. The district was declared a 'black area' and denied rural development projects (pg. 239). In the end, the Federal Government managed to win over control of districts such as these by the combined use of force and persuasion. By depriving Opposition-controlled areas of development funds, they effectively isolated and marginalised such areas, and through the use of Emergency regulations (to detain and neutralise Opposition leaders) and offering financial inducements to more cooperative members of the communities, the Government eventually won over the support of some of the more recalcitrant districts and villages. Local leaders were also promoted to positions of power and authority via the *wakil rakyat* (people's representative) system, thereby creating new spaces of political contestation on a local level where the Federal Government can play a decisive role as patron and protector. [Shamsul A. B, *From British to Bumiputera Rule: Local Politics and Rural Development in Peninsula Malaysia,* ISEAS (Institute for Southeast Asian Studies), Singapore. 1986.]

3. By the end of the bitter campaign, Anwar Ibrahim had received 117 nominations from the UMNO delegations and branches. Ghafar Baba was forced to pull out of the contest altogether.

25 | A LONG AND DIFFICULT JOURNEY: THE LIFE OF YUSOF RAWA REVISITED

Permata Dari Pulau Mutiara: A Biography of Haji Yusof Rawa by Mujahid Haji Yusof Rawa. Warathah Haji Yusof Rawa Sdn. Bhd. Angkatan Edaran Enterprise, Shah Alam, Selangor, 2001. 176 pages (text in Malay). Price: RM15.00 (paperback).

THOUGH A NUMBER OF BOOKS have already been written about the life and times of the fifth president of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Ustaz Haji Yusof Rawa, this latest contribution manages to add new light on the personality of the man. That *Permata Dari Pulau Mutiara* does so is hardly a surprise: The book was written by Mujahid Yusof Rawa, the son of the man himself.

Though the book does not cover much of the intellectual development of Yusof over the years[1], it does provide many interesting and important insights into the personal life story of the man who was once described as the 'giant killer' of PAS. As he's writing of his own father, The author could be forgiven for his occasional lapse into sentimentality and emotionalism. Nonetheless, it is in his

account of the early childhood of Yusof and his entry into PAS that we gain the most interesting facts.

Yusof bin Abdullah al-Rawa, who was popularly known as Pak Yusof, was born in Penang on May 8, 1922. Like the third president of PAS, Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy, Yusof's family also came from neighbouring Indonesia. His father, Abdullah Mohamad Noordin al-Rawa, was an immigrant from Rawa (near Padang) who harboured a deep distrust of the British and Dutch Colonial regimes in Malaya and Indonesia. Like many migrant families at the time, Yusof's parents decided to settle in the British Crown Colony of Penang where Abdullah established a printing and publishing business called the *Maktabah Haji Abdullah Nordin Arrawi*. In Penang, Yusof's family finally settled in the Rawanese settlement known as Kampung Rawa (close to Masjid Melayu), and he was born in his family home at Lebuh Aceh.

Penang was then a busy cosmopolitan that was home to a number of indigenous and migrant communities. The Malay-Muslims in the colony were very much aware of the local and international developments in the Muslim world at the time: The Aceh war in neighbouring Sumatra was a major political event that was always a favourite subject for discussion. Other developments abroad such as the collapse of the Caliphate in Turkey and the development of the Caliphate movement in India were also brought to the attention of the Penangites.

Another important factor which shaped the worldview of Penangite Muslims was the fact that Georgetown was a port city of considerable importance then (as now). Penang was the embarking point for the thousands of Malayan and Indonesian Muslims who were travelling to Mecca on the yearly pilgrimage, and the area around Lebuh Aceh and Masjid Melayu was known as

the 'mini Mecca' where pilgrims, religious teachers and traders would congregate. Yusof's family business was strategically located in the Malay settlement of Masjid Melayu, placing him at the centre of the Malay-Muslim universe of the time. (pg. 7)

During his childhood, Yusof was first sent to study at the Sekolah Melayu Jalan Carnavon. From there he proceeded to the Sekolah Chaurasta. His secondary education was at the Government English School and then the Penang Free School (which had produced other prominent Malay nationalist leaders and politicians like Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country's first Prime Minister). By then Yusof had demonstrated his abilities in the English language and his prospects in the British educational stream were good. The future president of PAS dreamt of becoming a lawyer and entering the Malayan legal service, but his father was unhappy with the kind of secular education that his son was receiving. His strict disciplinarian outlook and orthodox approach to religion convinced him that his son was being Westernised by the Colonial education he was receiving at school. As Mujahid points out, for Haji Abdullah, Western education was intended primarily to turn Muslim students into apostates and infidels (pg. 8). Finally, Yusof's father decided to send his son abroad to take up Islamic studies at the *Ma'ahad Al-Fallah* in Mecca.

In Mecca, Yusof found himself in an environment that was worlds apart from the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Penang. Having grown up in a society where social interaction (including interaction between the sexes) was more commonplace, Yusof was struck by the rigid and conservative atmosphere of Arabian society which had come under the sway of the Wahhabi school of thought.

Cut off from his friends and family, Yusof had little else to do but study. At the *Ma'ahad* he studied Arabic along with religious subjects like *us'ul al-fiqh, tafsir, tauhid*

and Islamic history. He graduated with honours, receiving the *Ijazah Thaqasur al-Deeni*. Despite his academic achievements, Yusof was unhappy with the environment around Mecca. The only occasion where he and his friends could fool around was when Mecca experienced a flood due to freak weather conditions. Yusof and his friends took the opportunity to swim around the *Ka'abah* and used the main arch before the *Ka'abah* as a diving board — something which did not amuse the native Meccans. (pg. 21).

It was also in Mecca that he experienced for the first time the racism of the Arabs towards Malays and other non-Arab Muslims. On several occasions, he found himself involved in petty conflicts and brawls with Arab youths who taunted the non-Arab students in Mecca. (pg. 21)

By the early 1940s, he was ready to return to Malaya but his departure was interrupted due to the advent of the Second World War. The war had a tremendous impact on the life and trajectory of Yusof. The tragedy of the conflict was brought home to him when his father was killed during a Japanese bombing raid on Penang.

As a result of the conflict in Asia, Yusof was forced to remain in Mecca and continue his studies. This turned out to be a stroke of luck, for it allowed him to make contacts among the Arabs and develop further his knowledge of Islam. He eventually made friends with an Egyptian merchant by the name of Hosni Gamal who hired him as a clerk in his company. Impressed by Yusof's ability to read and write in English, Hosni Gamal then promoted him to the post of translator and trade representative to his company. It was through Hosni Gamal that Yusof managed to travel all over the Arab world, visiting countries like Egypt and Lebanon.

Through his business contacts, Yusof took his first tentative steps into the world of Arab-Muslim politics. He came to know of prominent Islamist intellectuals like

Muhammad Abduh and Hassan al-Banna through his meetings with Egyptian and Lebanese traders and activists.

Though it remains unstated in Mujahid's text, it is interesting to see just how the exposure to external variables helped shape Yusof's understanding of Islam and Islamist politics. Coming as it did at a time when the Muslim world was in a state of political crisis and when the Muslim *ummah* was divided along the lines of race and nationalism (something he experienced himself while living in the Arab states), Yusof was deeply concerned about the need to create a sense of common identity and belonging among Muslims that would allow them to transcend their political, cultural and racial differences.

When he took over the presidency of PAS in 1982, this became one of the main goals of Yusof and the new generation of *ulama* leaders within the party. In an attempt to overcome the gulfs of race, ethnicity and class in his own society, Yusof initiated a number of projects such as the Chinese Consultative Councils (CCCs), that were meant to help PAS reach beyond its traditional Malay-Muslim constituency.

Yusof also re-oriented the party and attempted to turn it into a body aimed at religious renewal and education. His aim was to create a new brand of politics, Islamist in its foundations but non-racial and non-ethnic in its approach. Religious education via *tarbiyyah* and *usrah* classes through the *madrasah* network was thus seen as the key to PAS's future success.

Today, PAS owes much of its success to Yusof, whose impact has outlived his own involvement in politics in many ways. If PAS no longer speaks the language of race or ethnocentric politics, it is partly because of the internal purges and reforms brought about by the man who wanted to reinvent the party from within. Some of these efforts have borne fruit — such as the elevation of three Chinese Muslims to key positions within the

Executive Committee of the party and PAS's declaration that it will build a Chinese mosque in the state of Kelantan, just to show that it no longer thinks and behaves as a Malay-centric party. But for such projects to bear fruit and yield concrete results, much depends on the willingness and ability of PAS leaders and members to adapt themselves to the ever-changing political terrain of the country. One thing is sure though: Qualities like imagination and adaptability were clearly in abundance as far as Yusof was concerned.

All in all, *Permata Dari Pulau Mutiara* is an interesting book that illuminates many of the darker areas of Yusof's past which has been kept out of the glare of public enquiry so far. An important work in its own way, it should be read by those who have a keen desire to understand more about the complex and interesting history of the largest Islamist party in Malaysia today.

Endnotes

1. For a comprehensive account of the intellectual formation and ideas of Yusof Rawa, see: *Memperingati Yusof Rawa* (Remembering Yusof Rawa), edited by Kamarudin Jaffar, IKDAS Press, Kuala Lumpur, 2000.

PART TWO

Identity Politics, Contested Histories, Normative Religion and Public Ethics (or The Lack Thereof)

MALAYSIA, LEST IT BE FORGOTTEN, happens to be an artificial construct. Like many other postcolonial societies, Malaysian society is the by-product of a long and complex historical process that involved the different (and often competing) agendas and interests of various political actors and agents. The colonial period witnessed the creation of a plural society where racial and ethnic divisions coincided with religious, political and economic cleavages. These divisions were in turn exploited to the full by both the colonial authorities as well as the local elites — but at a tremendous cost to nation-building which remains problematic till today.

This uneven and divided society in turn was built on a pre-colonial proto-state where social divisions and power differentials were strictly enforced within an order of knowledge and power that had become canonical and binding after centuries of feudal rule. The coming of Islam was dubbed as a 'momentous event' that was meant to herald the arrival of a radically new order, but keen observers of Malaysian politics and political culture will know that despite the semantic, nominal and sartorial shifts that came over time the pre-Islamic elements of the past endure still, particularly in the area of politics and governmentality. Malaysian society remains feudal to the core, while the trappings of modernity and religion provide the garbs of change and progress on the level of surface phenomena.

Living as it does behind a curtain of masks, Malaysian society is therefore understandably obsessed with the question of identity. Just what Malaysia and being a Malaysian means remains an open and contested area of enquiry. Even before the declaration of independence in 1957, the political parties and social movements in the

country were engaged in a process of rethinking the past and the present. Not all of this rethinking has been a critical process however: A deconstructive auto-critique of some of the most basic foundational premises upon which the collective narrative of the Malaysian imaginary is long overdue, but there are few signs that Malaysian society is able or willing to embark on such an enterprise. We remain a society that is happy with its instrumental fictions and politically expedient self-referential stories. As such narratives become normalised and hegemonised, certain aspects of Malaysia's past (such as its pre-Islamic heritage, the diverse histories of non-Malays/Bumiputeras in the country and the contribution of women to Malaysian history) have been conveniently relegated to the margins.

What complicates matters even more is the way in which Malaysian politics remains trapped in oppositional dialectics where ethnic, religious and communitarian interests predominate. Even the attempts to forge a new form of non-sectarian politics has largely failed, due to the fact that such prejudices and myopia have become entrenched for so long.

The distortion of politics and social life has been made worse by the discursive shifts that have taken place in Malaysian society. Thanks to what has been called the 'Islamisation race' between the ruling UMNO party and its arch nemesis PAS since 1982, Malaysia has experienced the steady but relentless encroachment of religion into both the public and private spheres. In contemporary Malaysia today, religion in general and Islam in particular has become the dominant framework within which all forms of social interaction including politics, economics, government and the media takes place. So absolute is religion's hold on Malaysian society today that there is no private space that is radically exterior to its economy of social control.

That this could take place in Malaysia, a country that began with a secular democratic constitution in 1957 is not as surprising as it may sound. For Malaysia, like many other developing countries in the South, also happens to be a nation where religion remains a vital factor in daily life and constitutes the basis of identity for millions of its citizens. Religion has also been deployed and utilised instrumentally by various political parties, social organisations, NGOs and opposition movements both as a discourse of legitimation as well as a discourse of delegitimation. It is this double-edged character of religious discourse, replete with its vocabulary of absolutes, that has made it such a useful tool for both statist elites as well as opposition groups in the country and elsewhere.

I for one still believe that the discourse of religion can and should be harnessed for the loftier goals of social, political and economic emancipation. The experience of Southeast Asia, from Burma to the Philippines, has shown that in the hands of enlightened progressive thinkers and activists religion can serve as a vehicle for social change, democratisation and the promotion of fundamental human rights. But left in the hands of the demagogues and ideologues, religion will undoubtedly be used and abused as a communitarian, exclusivist discourse that serves the ends of a politics of sectarianism instead.

To open the doors of interpretation and to make religion available to all rational, thinking citizens has to be the goal of any progressive religious movement. But in the climate of present-day Malaysia this is proving to be increasingly difficult, as I have learnt from my own bitter experiences. Many of the articles written for *Malaysiakini.com* were intended to remind us of the positive potential that lies in religious discourse still, and to warn us of the dangers when the discourse of religion falls into the hands of the Pharisees in our midst.

26 | THOMAS DE QUINCEY AND THE MALAY FROM NOWHERE

One of the most problematic — and some would say sensitive — issues that remain taboo in Malaysian society today are the early history of the Malaysian peoples. The Federal Constitution of 1957 laid down the foundations of Malay identity in clearly political terms, stating that a 'Malay' was someone who spoke the Malay language, practiced Malay culture and abided by its norms, and was a Muslim. This identification of Islam with Malayness made Malay identity a religious identity as well, complicating an already complex and often confounding political and social environment replete with competing communitarian demands. It also reduced Malayness to something that was culturally essentialist, though it left no clues as to what 'Malay culture' and 'Malay identity' really was. Rather than accept and celebrate the fact that Malay identity was complex, overdetermined, fluid and evolving, the Federal Constitution's precise but ultimately impoverishing definition of Malay identity invariably reduced Malayness to a stock definition, reminiscent of the colonial categories of racial identity and difference during the 19th century. This piece was written in early 2001, and a longer version was presented at the International Malaysian Studies Conference at the National University of Malaysia (UKM) that year.

FOR THE UNIVERSAL FRATERNITY of drug fiends, decadents and university drop-outs who make up the vast army of the world's unwashed and debauched, Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*[1] has to be one of the greatest works of literature to grace their mouldy shelves. Indeed, when the book first came out it was heralded as a classic of its time — for both the best and worst of reasons.

The Confessions of Thomas de Quincey still reads like a rambling narrative of a madman driven to the peaks of ecstasy and the depths of despair. Written in the earlier half of the 19th century (while Europe was slowly coming to terms with its first truly European war, occasioned by Napoleon's dreams of Empire), de Quincey's book was a testimony to a lost generation of European youth who already realised that the myth of European civilisation was nothing more than an illusion underpinned by oppression, violence and the horrors of everyday life.

More so than any other book it its time, it also captured the multifarious shades of the opium addict's sordid and lonely existence. De Quincey himself was a dropout of the highest order. Kicked out of Oxbridge because of his debilitating habit that was slowly eating up both his sanity and his health, he was forced to send himself into a wretched exile in the dingier quarters of London and later to other lonelier towns that dotted the English isle.

De Quincey's confessions reveal the true portrait of the opium addict, long before the likes of William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg ever put their fevered imaginings down in writing. He was, for many, the grandfather of the beatniks and the hippies— though his life was not nearly as comfortable and easy as it was for those latter-day hash fiends who enjoyed the luxury of having hip parents with packed bank accounts who could always bankroll their offsprings' degeneration.

But before the prudes and fanatics among us start screaming and accusing me of glorifying a man who was, in the final analysis, a victim of his own addiction, let me point out a thing or two. *The Confessions* of Thomas de Quincey also happens to be one of the most erudite and accomplished works of English literature ever. The narrative, jumbled and confused though it may seem, is a treasure trove of historical facts and vignettes about life in England and Europe at the time. It was truly a timely work of art in that sense. Where else would you get a commentary on Ecclesiastes, a critique of Grotius, a critical commentary on the virtues of Renaissance art, a multi-sided debate on the virtues of traditional Islamic historiography vis-à-vis orthodox Christianity, a discourse of the true nature of tragedy and a treatise on humankind's lot, all interspersed with vivid and explicit descriptions of the ecstasy and anguish of drug addiction? No mere junkie was our man de Quincey.

De Quincey's laudatory paeans to the pleasures (and subsequent pains) of opium should therefore be read against this backdrop of social, political and cultural upheaval taking place in England and Europe at the time. *Rage Against The Machine* could have taken a few pages from de Quincey's book and applied it to their own shallow analysis of the ills of postmodern society. Against the empty promises of universal brotherhood and the fraternity of men and women, the nihilistic de Quincey argued that it was in the basest reality of drug addiction that we are all equal:

> *Oh, just, subtle and all-conquering opium! That, to the hearts of rich and poor alike, for the wounds that would never heal, and for the pangs of grief that tempt the spirit to rebel, bringest an assuaging balm — Eloquent opium! That with thy potent rhetoric*

stealest away the purposes of wrath, pleadest effectually for relenting pity, and through one night's heavenly sleep callest back to the guilty man visions of his infancy,and hands washed pure from blood;- O just and righteous opium! That to the chancery of dreams summonest, for the triumphs of despairing innocence, false witnesses and confounding purjury, and dost reverses the sentences of unrighteous judges.

Opium, in short, was for de Quincey the only poison-remedy to the ills of a society driven base and corrupt by itself. It was the asylum of the lonely and the oppressed, the downtrodden and the marginalized. False though its promises may be, it was the only escape for many. In his deranged and idle wanderings and fantasies, de Quincey could at least find momentary refuge from a world that was evil, degraded and corrupted from what it once was. It was the final equalizer that brought high and low, rich and poor down to the same level of the basest humanity. (Today we have Karaoke instead, which equalises both the gifted and the criminally untalented in a medium of universal mediocrity.) Cold comfort for one who was thoroughly sicked by life in a sick world.

Now one of the most amazing encounters in the Confessions of Thomas de Quincey takes place at an inn that he was living in while on his nomadic travels across the English countryside. In his own words:

One day a Malay knocked on my door. What business could a Malay have to transact among the recesses of the English mountains was not my business to conjecture, but possibly he was on the road to Seaport, about forty miles distant.

This mysterious Malay (whose name we never learn) happened to chance upon the same inn that de Quincey

was staying in that night. The inhabitants of the inn were just as surprised as de Quincey, and all were in a state of panic, not knowing how to greet this extraordinary stranger. The servant girl, 'who had never seen an Asiatic before', was dumbfounded by the sight of the solitary Malay who spoke no English. (Needless to say, her knowledge of Malay was hardly any better). As the crowd stared at the Malay (who only stared back), it was left to de Quincey to break the ice.

De Quincey himself admits that his only knowledge of the Oriental languages were the Arabic word for barley and the Turkish word for opium. Not much help under the circumstances, but at least he had to courage and common sense to realise that what stood before him was a human being with ordinary human wants and needs. He therefore saw to it that the Malay was given food and a place to sleep for the night — while the rest of the inhabitants of the inn slept, no doubt, with their loaded muskets close at hand.

When it became clear that the Malay had had his rest and was about to leave, de Quincey offered him a token gift in the form of a lump of opium. What happened next is best recounted by the author himself:

I was struck with some little consternation when I saw him suddenly raise his hand to his mouth, and bolt the whole, divided into three pieces, at one mouthful. The quantity (of opium) was enough to kill some half-dozen dragoons, together with their horses, supposing neither bipeds nor quadrupeds were trained opium-eaters. I felt some alarm for the poor fellow, but what could be done? I had given him the opium in pure compassion for his solitary life, since, if he had traveled on foot all the way from London, it must

have been at least three weeks since he could have exchanged a thought with any other human being... The mischief, if any, was done. He took his leave and for some days I was anxious; but, as I never heard of any Malay being found dead on any part of the slender road between Grasmere and Whitehaven, I became satisfied that he was familiar with opium.

Malays were tougher fellows (or chronic adicts) those days, obviously.

Now de Quincey's encounter with the mysterious unnamed Malay from nowhere has to be one of the more curious vignettes found anywhere in English literature. From this one encounter alone we learn so much about the Malay world then. That the Malay was travelling by foot on his own across England is proof of the fact that the Malays were really an international people who were used to travelling abroad.(Yet another salvo to be fired against the Orientalist school that claimed that the Malays were really a sedentary people). That he could have made the journey on his own also shows that he was an independent free agent who was free to exercise his own will. He was not stopped or prevented from travelling and staying wherever he wanted, and he travelled with all the confidence and bravado of a man with his own sense of purpose, identity and destiny. Who this Malay might have been, we will probably never know- but one fact remains: He did cause a stir in that little inn tucked in between the hills of England.

Now the rest of de Quincey's narrative plods along at its own inebriated pace. His bouts of rabid addiction, anxiety, fear, depression and moral collapse take their toll and as the days wear on his health deteriorates further and further. His days grow shorter as his nights grow

longer, and in the darkest hours of the night he is tormented by nightmares and visions of paradise. The stage is set for de Quincey's next encounter with the Malay from nowhere...

Later in the text, de Quincey recalls a particularly troubling and powerful dream he has, where he sees a vision of the mysterious Malay once again:

This Malay — partly from the picturesque exhibition he assisted to frame, partly from the anxiety I connected with his image for some days,- fastened afterwards upon my fancy and that upon my dreams, bringing with him other Malays worse than himself who ran am-muck (sic) at me, and led me into a world of nocturnal troubles... That Malay has been a fearful enemy for months. Every night, through his means, I have been transported into Asiatic scenery... Southern Asia, in general, is the seat of awful dreams and associations. As the cradle of the human race, if on no other ground, it would have a dim, reverential feeling about it... The mere antiquity of Asiatic things, of their institutions, histories, above all their mythologies- is so impressive that to me that the vast age of the race and name overpowers the sense of youth in the individual... Man is a weed in those regions. The vast empires, also into which the peoples of Asia have always been cast, give a further sublimity to the feelings associated with oriental names and images...

The author goes on to describe the strange and fascinating images that were conjured up by the Malay in his dreams.

His mind wandered to wondrous landscapes, filled with the most exotic forms of jungle growth, huge and wonderful temples, beautiful idols and strange customs. The Malay served as the trigger which unleashed a flood of images that literally overwhelmed the dreamer himself: De Quincey was blown over by images of Shiva, Vishnu, spirits, Gods and demons. He felt himself crushed by the weight of Asia in its entirety.

De Quincey, had, in other words, experienced what has been terms the return of the repressed. In his nightmares we witness the encounter with the modern European subject and the exotic Asian other. The unnamed and unknown Malay stands before the Englishman and makes him feel puny and 'weed-like'. De Quincey admits that he could only have a 'dim, reverential feeling' about Asia and what it represents. The Malay, on the other hand, embodies a huge culture and civilisation, and interestingly, the Malay for him is also the inheritor of all the cultures and civilizations of Asia. He is, for de Quincey, the embodiment of the great cultures and civilisations of India, Southeast Asia and China. He is at once primordial and timeless- he carries with him a history that spans four millennia (while Europe was then merely an infant civilisation barely learning to crawl and already too drugged up to walk properly). The Malay, in short, was Asia embodied, with all its past, its depth, its hidden mysteries and unknown horrors.

Now back to our friends the prudes. There will, no doubt, be those who think that books like Thomas de Quincey's deserve only to be thrown into the fire or at best recycled as toilet paper. I will not dwell about such misplaced sensibilities as it would be both tiresome and counter-productive. I have already tried to show that it is much more than the mere confessions of a drug addict: The Confessions of Thomas de Quincey was (and remains) a classic of its time for the simple reason that it spoke of the anxieties and fears of its generation. It is one of the

most honest (and painfully difficult) portraits of the lost generation of the early 19th century, and the author will go down in history as the one man who had the guts and will to describe his own failings as well as the failings of his culture and his generation.

But for us in Malaysia today, Thomas de Quincey's encounter with the mysterious Malay from nowhere is of special importance as well. For what the encounter reveals (and this is really underscored in de Quincey's paranoid and nerve-wrecking nightmares) is the antiquity of the Malays.

The Malays, for de Quincey, were among the oldest people of the world. It is clear that for him the Malay is someone whose history pre-dates that of Europe's.

Today, Malaysia is also grappling with its past. Like de Quincey, we too are overwhelmed by our history and the politics of writing that history. We dream of placing ourselves at the forefront of the developing world, and of presenting Malaysia as the one country that encapsulates and accommodates all the cultural variants of Asia.

But for this to happen, we need to learn a lesson or two from the unknown (and forgotten) Malay of the past. Lest it be forgotten, Malay culture and history is so deep, so rich and so vast only because the Malays of the past were themselves the inheritors of the traditions from all of Asia. Today those of the Islamist tendency want to erase this pre-Islamic past, claiming that Malay civilisation only came into being with the coming of Islam. Some of them who are even more shortsighted and close-minded have gone one step further, claiming that it was Islam that made the Malays civilised (as if we were all savage animals before that!) That such prejudice can rear its ugly head at all is already a shame for all of us who call ourselves Malays. But for such puerile nonsense to creep into the hallowed halls of academia makes a mockery of the educational system of the country, and reduces our history to nothing.

The encounter with the unnamed and unknown Malay of the past should therefore remind us of what we were and what we have lost. Malay civilisation, like all civilisations, is a hybrid amalgam of many civilisations. We were Hindus and Buddhists before, and before that we were pagan animists who lived at peace with nature. The coming of the great religions — Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam- and the arrival of new modernist schools of thought should not be seen as distinct episodes that keep our histories apart. Instead they should be seen as layers of civilizational acculturation that have added depth to our collective sense of identity, who we were, who we are and who we want to be in the future. Thomas de Quincey may have been unnerved by the arrival of the unknown Malay who triggered the return of the repressed in him. (Such things do happen after a bad trip) But we need not fear our past and the unknown. We would be able to face the future with much greater confidence if we could admit our own internal heterogeneity and complexity, rather than continually trying to deny the past and to homogenise the present into one flat, monolithic discourse of sameness.

Endnotes

1 For this essay I have used the edition of Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* published by the Folio Society of London, 1948.

27 | HOW THE "PENGHULU SHAITAN" BROUGHT ISLAM TO THE MALAY WORLD: THE MIRACULOUS COMING OF ISLAM TO THE MALAY WORLD ACCORDING TO THE HIKAYAT MERONG MAHAWANGSA

The arrival of Islam to the Malay archipelago has to rank as one of the greatest instances of peaceful inter-civilisational dialogue in human history. Unlike the experience of other missionary religions elsewhere, Islam's entry into the Hindu-Buddhist Malay world of Nusantara was marked not by conflict but rather by discursive engagement and adaptation. This is clearly evident when we read the Hikayats (epics) of the time, which demonstrate this process of intellectual and discursive engagement and adaptation at work. The early Muslim missionaries and Sufi mystics did not adopt an exclusive and confrontational approach to the Malay peoples whom they wished to convert: rather, they opted for the inculcation of the universal values of Islam into the pre-existing social and cultural framework, helping to 'Islamise' Malay society from within and from below. Today, we are still left with the Hikayats of this bygone age, which point to the heterogeneity and hybridity of that initial moment of inter-civilisation contact. The Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa remains a classic

in the annals of Malay literature, and ought to be read from such a perspective.

ISLAM'S *PENETRATION PACIFIQUE* INTO the Malay world brought about lasting changes and altered the socio-cultural landscape of the Malay peoples, but the process itself was highly complex and gradual. What is more, the arrival of Islam to the region was not through force of arms, but rather via a process of accommodation and acculturation where the local genius of the people of the region shone through.

But it also has to be remembered that Islam's arrival to the Malay world took place during the pre-modern era when subjects were not encumbered with a dialectical understanding of the Self and the Other. The world was not mapped out along clearly demarcated lines that divided between races, ethnicities and religions.

The first few centuries after Islam's initial landfall witnessed a rich and stimulating exchange between the new creed and the dominant ideas and belief-systems in the region — Hinduism, Buddhism and paganism. It was during this period that these different worldviews (each with universalist claims of their own) came into close proximity with each other, and were made to interact. Hardly a surprise, then, if the art and culture of the time reflected the hybrid and indistinct character of the moment.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the *corpus* of traditional Malay epics (*Hikayat*) that were written between the 14th to 17th centuries. Emanating from the gilded world of the court, these *Hikayats* reflected the splendours of the past as well as the certainties of the present. It is in the *Hikayats* that we see the changes that were taking place in the Malay world thanks to the arrival of Islam and — not long after that — Western culture.

One of the more interesting themes that pops up time and again in the *Hikayats* is the question of the arrival of Islam. In texts such as the *Hikayat Patani, Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai, Hikayat Syah Mardan* (*Hikayat Indera Jaya*), *Hikayat Inderaputera, Sejarah Melayu* and others, we come across different myths and legends that tell of the coming of Islam to the Malay world in terms that can only be described as marvellous and fantastic. The use of such narrative devices is not in itself all that surprising or irregular. After all, Islam's arrival was not an everyday event: it brought about a major paradigm shift in the Malays' understanding of themselves, who they were and where they were located in the universal scheme of things. A new order of knowledge was being erected in place of the old.

But to suggest that Islam's arrival led to a complete and radical break from the past would also be twisting the facts of history a tad too far. For it is equally obvious that while Islam's impact was permanent, so was the presence of the pre-Islamic Other. This co-mingling between the past and present is something that comes across very clearly in many of the *Hikayats* we know. One such text is the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, which is sometimes known as the Kedah Annals[1].

Like many other *Hikayats*, the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* is a highly eclectic piece of writing. Various linguistic, cultural and religious currents flow through it and the reader cannot help but listen to the chorus of different (at times competing and contesting) narratives that operate simultaneously. The main characters are a motley crew of rootless individuals: Merong Mahawangsa is the admiral of the fleet from the kingdom of Rum (Byzantine) that set off to the East so that the Prince of Rum may wed the Princess of China. He is, we are told, the descendant of mortals and demigods (*Indera* and *Dewas*). The opening episode of the *Hikayat* has Garuda

(the winged steed of the Hindu God Vishnu) conversing with Nabi Sulaiman (Solomon), a prophet of the Semitic tradition. Merong Mahawangsa finds himself stranded on the island of Langkapuri[2] after his fleet was destroyed by the Garuda, who had made a bet with Solomon that he can stop the coming marriage and in doing so thwart the will of Allah.

Thus, from the outset it is clear that the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* is a highly complex tale pregnant with different cultural influences. The presence of Hindu, Buddhist and pagan influences is clear to see, but the text was clearly written at a time when Islam had already taken root in the Malay world[3]. One of the main questions that the text tries to address, albeit in an oblique fashion, is the coming of Islam to this already fertile and over-determined world saturated with floating signifiers.

According to the *Hikayat*, Islam arrives in Kedah at the time of Raja Phra Ong Mahawangsa, whose reign is described as decadent and excessive. Like all good pre-Islamic rulers, the Raja is a dipsomaniac and sybarite who obeys only his own will and desires. An epicurean at heart, he leads a debauched and licentious life and pays little heed to the duties and responsibilities of State. (An easy thing to do when the coffers of State happen to be yours as well). Kedah then is described as being in a state of moral decay and financial ruin. The stage is thus set for Islam's timely arrival.

But Islam's arrival is not explained in accurate historical terms. Rather, the author of the *Hikayat* utilises the narrative device of an instrumental fiction instead. The *Hikayat* presents the coming of Islam through a complex and long-winding narrative that introduces a new character by the name of Sheikh Abdullah al-Yamani from Baghdad.

According to the *Hikayat*, Sheikh Abdullah was a wise and learned Muslim scholar. He had spent his entire life learning about religion and the law (*Shariat*) of Islam.

But after mastering all that was to know, he desired to understand the nature of Evil and wished to meet the Devil himself. The Sheikh turned to his teacher (Sheikh Abdullah Tua) for advice, who in turn instructed him to meditate under a tree.

As he was meditating, the Sheikh was approached by none other than the 'Chief of the Devils' (*Penghulu Shaitan dan Iblis*). The *Penghulu Shaitan* offered to show Sheikh Abdullah the ways of evil, provided that the Sheikh abide by his rules and never intervene when the Devil does what the Devil has to do. The Sheikh agreed, and they set off together. The Devil instructed the Sheikh to hold on to the end of his staff, and they both became invisible.

The *Penghulu Shaitan* took the Sheikh on a journey across time and space. They crossed several continents and the Devil showed the Sheikh how he wrecks havoc in the world: he sows doubt, fear and hatred in the hearts and minds of men, encourages murder and vice, starts numerous wars and conflicts (including marital conflict when he teaches the eight wives of a rich merchant how to poison their husband and make him impotent so that they could have affairs with other men) and so on.

Finally, they ended up in Kedah at the court of Raja Phra Ong Mahawangsa in Langkasuka. They arrived at dawn, just as the royal boozer was rousing from his slumber and recovering from a hangover. As the Raja reached for his cup of alcohol, the Devil pulled up his sarong and started urinating in the royal chalice. When the Sheikh asked why the Devil did that, the Devil said that all alcohol had traces of his urine in it. The Sheikh, obviously concerned about the niceties of courtly protocol, objected to the Devil's action and asked him to stop relieving himself in such an ungentlemanly way. On hearing the Sheikh's protest, the Devil concluded that their contract was over as the meddlesome Sheikh had failed to

live up to his promise to stay silent throughout their journey together. He pulled away his staff as he departed and the Sheikh immediately became visible again.

Caught unawares, the inebriated Raja was shocked to find an Arab standing before his bed. He asked the Sheikh to explain how he got there. (The reader is not told how a *Sheikh* from Yemen could speak Malay, but suspension of disbelief is one of the prerequisites of fiction). After hearing the Sheikh's story, the Raja was convinced that he was telling the truth and declared that he would convert to Islam – a religion which forbids its followers to drink the Devil's urine (be they peasants or Kings). He summoned his court and as soon as his four Chief Ministers arrived he addressed them thus:

> *Hai saudaraku keempat, adapun beta suruh panggil saudaraku keempat ini, maka adalah pagi-pagi hari ini orang pun belum lagi jaga dari tidurnya, maka datanglah tuan Sheikh Abdullah anak negeri Yamani dibawa oleh Syaitan Iblis datang keperaduan beta sekali. Maka segala hal ehwal kerja kejahatan itu sangatlah gemarnya. Maka terlihatlah oleh tuan ini, maka ketakutanlah. Maka tuan itu pun ketingalanlah susur kelambu beta, inilah yang menyuruh kita sekelian isi negeri Kedah ini membawa Shariat agama Islam yang diturunkan Allah ta'ala pada Nabi Muhammad Rasulullah hamba-Nya lagi pesuruh-Nya, ialah Nabi yang akhiru'l-zaman.*(pg. 102)

True to his word, the Raja converted to Islam (and was henceforth known as Sultan Mulzalfal Syah), stopped drinking the Devil's brew and embarked on a radical

interior design programme when he smashed every single idol in the palace (and the rest of the kingdom). But outward displays of new-found piety aside, the entire conversion episode in the *Hikayat* is worthy of closer analysis.

It is interesting to note that it is Raja Phra Ong Mahawangsa who stated that the coming of Islam to Kedah was thanks to the Devil himself (*"Datanglah tuan Sheikh Abdullah anak negeri Yamani dibawa oleh Syaitan Iblis"*). In this single line is contained a host of hugely complex and intricate questions of a theological and philosophical nature: the relationship between Good and Evil, the ambiguous character and status of the Devil who represents both valuable knowledge and all that is contrary to Goodness at the same time, and the necessity of Evil itself. Such questions have been at the heart of Islamic as well as Christian theological debates for centuries, and similar questions were asked by Christian theologians in the middle-ages who argued that Evil was a necessary component of Virtue, without which the latter could not by definition exist.

The Devil is also presented as someone who possesses knowledge (forbidden though it may be). What is more, it is the knowledge of the Devil that makes the Sheikh's own knowledge complete, thereby underwriting the idea that the Other is always a constitutive Other and a necessarily condition for the fulfilment of the Self.

The relevance of the conversion episode to our concerns today is that it also shows how the arrival of Islam was post-rationalised by Malay-Muslim thinkers and writers in the past. The story of Sheik Abdullah's miraculous journey with the Devil collapses the boundaries of time and space, and by doing so disrupts both the geographical and epistemological orders of the time. The equivocal status of the Devil — as both messenger and impish miscreant — adds to the ambiguity of Islam's

arrival even more. Can goodness come out of something that is bad? Can a deed remain virtuous if the means employed were less than so? And can the Devil help to do God's work?

These ambiguities (and many more like them) are forever recurring in the *Hikayats*. Unlike the dull and frozen texts of modern-day Islamist ideologues and preachers, the thinkers who penned the *Hikayats* were individuals who understood the complexities of their age. The ambiguity within their texts reflected the ambiguity of their times, but rather than erase these difficulties they emphasised them instead. They lived not in a world with fixed and impenetrable borders, but rather one where identities remained shifting, open and fluid.

Perhaps the most remarkable difference between the *Hikayats* and the writings of present-day Islamists is the way that they deal with the pre-Islamic past. While it is clear that in the *Hikayats* the pre-Islamic past was being post-rationalised in terms of the Islamic present, there was less of the tendency to demonise the past or to relegate it to a secondary, inferior register. The authors of the *Hikayats* seemed to possess a deep sensitivity to their past, and were acutely aware of the fact that history is vulnerable to the critique of the present. The dead cannot defend themselves against the penetrating gaze of the living, and in the *Hikayats* the ways of the past were treated with a degree of respect that is absent today.

Numerous examples of such sensitivity to the pre-Islamic Other can be found in the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*. At one point, for example, the reader is told that the days when human beings were in contact with the elements, spirits and the forces of nature are long gone. Human beings no longer speak with the animals and spirits in the forest:

> *Pada tatkala itu segala binatang tiada boleh berkata-kata kepada zaman itu, kerana yang bernama Nabi Muhammad Rasulu'Llahu salla'Llahu 'alaihi wasallam itu sudah dizahirkan Allah Subhanahu'wa ta'ala kedalam dunia ini.*(pg. 44)

But as the passage above shows, the demise of the old world was brought about by the arrival of a new message — Islam — that spoke to the world as a whole. In other words, the *Hikayat* does not deny that in the pre-Islamic era the world of animals and human beings overlapped and that mortals could speak with animals and spirits[4]. But what it does say, in effect, is that with the coming of the Prophet Muhammad there was no longer a need for human beings to speak with animals as God's final messenger had finally arrived. (And the animals could get back to what they were doing.) The *Hikayat* does not abjure the miraculous character of the past, but merely posits the claim that Islam's arrival was the latest and the last of these miracles.

A similar point is made when the *Hikayat* discusses the impact of Islam on the teachings and beliefs that came before it:

> *Maka jadi bersalahanlah daripada umat nabi yang dahulu-dahulu itu daripada karamat Kitab al-Quran, habislah hilang hikmat dan ubatannya segala orang yang dahulu-dahulu itu daripada laduni, yakni yang terbang di udara dan yang melata di bumi, di dalam laut dan daripada segala ilmu sihir, yakni ilmu yang ghaib-ghaib daripada yang tiada diketahui... Dan segala hikmat dan ubatan orang tua-tua yang dahulu itu tiadalah menjadi guna,*

demikian lagi seperti iktikad yang tiada kebetulan itu seperti orang tua yang dahulukalanya yang menyembah berhala yang diperbuat yang boleh berkata-kata, atau tiada dapat berkata-kata seperti pohon kayu yang disembahnya, dan seperti matahari yang disembahnya dan seperti binatang yang disembahnya...(pp. 77-78)

Here the *Hikayat* presents Islam's arrival as the final seal of knowledge and truth that effectively makes the beliefs of the past redundant. But once again the *Hikayat* does not rob the teachings and beliefs of the past of their intrinsic value to the people who believed in them. The beliefs of the previous generations (*"segala hikmat dan ubatan orang tua-tua yang dahulu"*) have merely been superseded by a new wave of ideas that are relevant to the needs of the present. Just as it made sense for the previous generations to hold on to their order of knowledge (*"ilmu sihir, yakni ilmu yang ghaib-ghaib"*) so does the new order of knowledge that is Islam make sense for those living in the present. Again we see that the *Hikayat* does not draw a sharp and exclusive boundary between the past and present. In a rare leap into epistemological relativism, the *Hikayat* concedes that each epoch has its own truth and that the truths of the past should not be judged by the standards of today.

It was against such a backdrop that texts such as the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* were written. The complex process of Islam's arrival to the Malay world which was narrated therein was treated with a subtlety and finesse that one cannot find in the comparatively crude and unsophisticated texts of present-day Islamist ideologues, who can only think of Islam and Muslim identity in dialectical terms that divide between 'us' and 'them' with precious little in between.

While the more dogmatic Islamist intellectuals among us today may think of these *Hikayats* as bordering on the blasphemous and heretical, they were, nonetheless more honest and open in their approach to the lingering questions that remain with us. In the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* we read of the encounter between Islam and the pre-Islamic past that was negotiated with care and sensitivity. In two particular instances – Garuda's plot against the King of Rum which fails and leads to the creation of Langkapuri and the Devil's role in bringing Islam to Kedah – we see that the pre-Islamic and un-Islamic elements have played a crucial role in the historical drama of the Muslim kingdom itself. The 'Other' to Islam here is a constitutive other, without which Islam's own identity would be effaced.

By presenting the Other in such an ambivalent light, the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* has tried to show that identities are never fixed but relational and that the enduring presence of the Other is a prerequisite of identity itself. Though such respect for and sensitivity to the pre-Islamic and un-Islamic Other may be absent in Malaysian society today (cut up as it is by modern-day categorisations of identity and difference), it is nonetheless important for us to remember that the early Muslims of the pre-modern Malay world understood the importance of such differences. More than any other period of Malay-Muslim history, it was the early period of Islamisation that witnessed an ethics of inter-civilisational dialogue at work, and for that reason we owe more to the *Dewas* and *Rajas* of the *Hikayats* than we may care to acknowledge.

Endnotes:

1. There are many different editions and versions of the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, but the one edition that can easily be found in local bookshops is the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* edited by Siti Hawa Salleh and published by Penerbit Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1970 (2nd ed. 1991).

2. The location of Langkapuri is an important one. The reader is told that it is the land where Seri Rama and Raja Hanuman (of the *Ramayana* or *Hikayat Seri Rama*) once lived. But Rama and Hanuman have long since left and only the Garuda remains – as the last trace of the Hindu era of the past. Garuda therefore represents the final trace of the Hindu era, and the dialogue between Garuda and Solomon represents in narrative form the complex dialogue between Hinduism and Islam.

3. The *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* was probably written during the first half of the 17th century. It was written around the time when legal texts like the *Kitab Undang-Undang Pelabuhan Kedah* (1625) made their appearance and after Kedah was defeated by Aceh (in 1619) during the wars over the monopoly of pepper production in the region. By the 18th century it was well known in all the Malay courts of Kedah and Penang. (Hawa Salleh, 1991, pp. lviii-lix)

4. It is clear that the *Hikayat* accepts that in the pre-Islamic era mortal beings could communicate with other living entities like spirits and animals. The opening dialogue between the Prophet Solomon and Garuda is an example of this form of dialogue at work, and Solomon seems to act as God's public relations officer when he engages in a dialogue with the Garuda who obviously hails from the Hindu era. But with the arrival of Islam (brought about by the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), these channels of communication are rendered redundant as God has appointed his final messenger and representative on earth.

28 | SUGAR BABY LOVE

YEARS AGO SOME OF MY elder relatives were humming the tune 'Sugar Baby Love' which was a hit in the 1970s. They were nostalgic about the days when they were studying at University Malaya, where the tune was a hit. But on second thought, one should not be too surprised if 'Sugar Baby Love' was a hit in the campus of UM then, for many other things were trendy as well. During my own short stint as a lecturer at UM, however, 'Sugar Baby Love' was definitely not on the menu. Apart from the fact that the song hails from the Jurassic age, many of the students I came across would probably regard the *Carpenters* as 'decadent yellow culture' and consign 'Sugar Baby Love' to the same fate. For someone who prefers to listen to *Massive Attack* or *Rage Against The Machine* early in the morning traffic jam, the staple diet of *Raihan* and other *Nasyid* bands that was on offer in campus was decidedly off-putting. Still, this is what tolerance of alterity and difference means in a real-life context and one cannot talk about accommodation of Otherness without practising it oneself.

Life on the campus at UM (and other universities in the country) has not always been like it is today. Those of you who have parents, aunts or uncles who had studied in the local universities in the 1970s should whip out the old albums and look at the photos in them. I have always

found it both amusing and interesting to see how my uncle and aunt (both of whom are now decked out in contemporary Malay-Muslim garb, complete with *janggut* and *tudung*) were dressed in the 1970s. That was a time when the students of UM, UKM and other institutions of higher learning were dressed in denim jeans, short skirts, T-shirts, hippie beads and all manner of psychedelic paraphernalia. They were also a bit more active then— on weekends they organized demonstrations against government corruption, US dominance in the Middle East, the conduct of the Americans in Vietnam and Japanese economic hegemony in East Asia. Flags were burnt, embassies were picketed and graffiti painted all over the place.

Those who do not have the luxury of having parents or relatives who studied in the local universities in the 1970s can either borrow some from their friends or look for the book *'Bersama Anwar Ke Penjara'* by Kamarazaman Yacob, who was one of the student leaders who took part in the massive student demonstrations in the 1970s and who was sent to Kamunting detention centre along with Anwar Ibrahim, Syed Hussein Ali, Lim Mah Hui, C. C. Yong, Ibrahim Ali (yes, the Ibrahim Ali) and others. In the book one can have a glimpse of campus life in the 1970s and there are plenty of interesting photographs of Malaysian students showing that they were not the 'lazy, indolent natives' that some of their own leaders claimed them to be. One also catches a glimpse of a rather groovy-looking Hishamuddin Rais leading a demo and a rather dull photograph of a certain Ibrahim Ali when he was head of the students union of ITM.

Of course all of that came to an untimely end when *'Operasi Mayang'* was launched in 1974 and dozens of student leaders were rounded up and arrested. The heated tenor of campus student life subsided somewhat as new laws were put into place by the Ministry of Home Affairs

and the Ministry of Education. (The Minister of Education at the time being a certain politician by the name of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad). The NEP, awards and sponsorships to *Bumiputera* students, and the politics of patronage gradually redirected the tide of student anger and frustration, forcing them back to their schoolbooks and studies instead.

Under such domesticated circumstances, campus life evolved at its own slower pace and the changes that took place from the 1970s to the 1990s were less dramatic — though some would say more important in other respects. The baggy trousers, mini skirts and short pants gave way to *tudungs* and *shalwar khameezes*, as Malay and non-Malay students grew more conscious of their ethnic and religious differences.

Thanks to the encroachment of a new kind of national politics, oriented around the issues of race and religion, campus life became fragmented and polarised as well. Costume and dress came to serve as boundary markers that denoted differences of belief and values, and drew the dividing line between communities. By the time I was teaching at UM not so long ago, not once did I come across a mixed couple of different races among the students. (Though as one of the lesser academic *ghurkas* forced to teach classes late into the night I did come across many couples in the dark who were close together in the literal sense. Worried parents can rest assured that their children were at least dressed modestly while engaged in heavy petting).

The other thing I noticed during my time at UM was just how much religion and religious discourse in general had come to penetrate and shape the discourse of the students in general. By this I do not just mean the tunes of *Raihan* played at full blast in the dormitories, but also the language used by the students themselves in their interaction with each other and fellow students. There were those who refused to learn certain subjects or

read certain books because they felt that the ideas contained in them were 'un-Islamic' or against their personal beliefs. Then there were those who kept referring to other students as 'those outside our community' or 'unbelievers', etc. I could not help but wonder if the earlier generation of Islamist student leaders like Anwar Ibrahim and co. ever realised that their activism would one day lead to the creation of such students in the campuses of the country.

Today the Malaysian government has grown increasingly worried about what it calls the growth of 'fundamentalism' in our universities. True, the nominal signs of such a phenomenon are there — students are more concerned about apparent difference between their various cultural and belief systems and they are even protesting about having to live with students of different religious backgrounds. If they protest against the government or certain political leaders, their polemics are invariably peppered with themes such as 'Satanic Government', '*kafir* rule', etc.

But much of the blame for this must also go to the Malaysian government itself, which has systematically domesticated campus life thanks to laws and regulations such as those introduced by the amendments to the University and University Colleges Act (UCCA) in 1975. It is precisely because the students have been cooped up and closeted both physically and mentally that there is so little room for debate and exchanges to take place on campus. In such a claustrophobic environment, only the most narrow-minded can survive by sticking to what they know best. An atmosphere of intellectual repression and intimidation serves only to restrict the boundaries of knowledge and experimentation, thus opening the way for demagogues and pedagogues who exploit the situation even further.

Furthermore the intensification of the use of religion and race by student leaders and student organisations today merely reflects the form of communal politics that is being practised by the dominant parties in the country. What is happening in the campuses is therefore a mirror of Malaysian society itself, but a mirror which also magnifies its contradictions and uncertainties to an extent that is uncomfortable for many.

My own view of student bodies that use and exploit the religious and communal differences between the students is similar to what I have to say about the political parties that resort to the same shallow and self-serving tactics. Such a form of sectarian politics, be it on campus or the national political arena, does not really serve us well and invariably stands in the way of creating broad-based instrumental coalitions that are based more on ideological principles rather than exclusivist beliefs. The politicians of the country are hampered in their efforts to get out of the trap that they have created for themselves— look at how difficult it has been for UMNO to bring into its fold *Bumiputeras* who happen to be Christians, for instance.

But students need not fall into the same trap if they are able to establish a degree of critical distance between themselves and the political system of the country. They can still try to forge alliances and coalitions that revolve around non-exclusive themes such as the environment, development, economic and human rights, etc. To do this, however, means that they will need to look beyond the narrow confines of their own specific communities and constituencies. And if they still cannot agree on every aspect of their collective aspiration and struggle, they can at least hum 'Sugar Baby Love' together.

29 | PHARISEES AT MY DOOR

This article was written in late 2000, after the arrest and subsequent release of a number of Muslims by the state religious authorities of Selangor (JAIS) for working in a public entertainment venue that served alcohol. In the media circus that followed, some of those who were caught were even accused of 'insulting Islam' by choosing to work in, or patronise, an establishment that served non-halal food and beverages. The basic right of a citizen to eat, drink and/or work wherever he or she wants to was, of course, conveniently left out of the discussion.

NOW THIS IS THE SORT OF ARTICLE that is not meant to offend anyone, but is bound to end up annoying most if not all. For that I apologise from the beginning and this piece should come with a health warning that reads: 'Not for the literal-minded or bigoted'.

I have to confess that after reading the letters that have been sent to *Malaysiakini.com* and the rest of the mainstream media over the past two weeks, my own faith in the sensibility and maturity of the Malaysian public has been shaken somewhat. Much of this has been due to the furore that followed in the wake of the arrest (and later release) of a number of Malay-Muslims (mostly

women) by the Selangor religious authorities (JAIS) earlier in June.

I will not go into the details of the matter. Suffice to say that all of those who took part in this exercise of moral policing are to blame. The JAIS footsoldiers who detained these women on the grounds that they were 'insulting Islam' ought to be censured for their own self-righteousness and zeal. UMNO and the ruling parties of the BN coalition ought to be blamed as well for their own part in trying to out-Islamise PAS and to up the stakes in the Islamisation race in the country. For me the only ones who are free from blame were those who happened to be in the restaurant at the time, and whose 'crime' (read sin) was nothing more than sitting in a poorly-lit environment paying large sums of money for their meals. If they paid extra to be entertained by transvestites, then I can only feel even more pity and remorse for them.

The most depressing thing about this whole episode was the way that the Malaysian public reacted to it. Looking at the letters that were sent to the press, one gets a snapshot of a cross-section of Malaysian society and what it thinks. The picture is not all that rosy.

For a start there were the Malay-Muslims who were apologetic about the action taken by JAIS and the government. There were those who claimed that these people were indeed 'insulting' Islam by being in such a place and doing what they did. Then there were those non-Malays and non-Muslims who claimed that the whole thing was exaggerated by press and its evil minions; and that the matter should be left to the Malay-Muslims alone. Non-Muslims, they insisted, should not interfere in things that are not their concern or their business. I beg to differ with all of these views and I would like to make my own stand on the matter.

Firstly, a word to my fellow Malay-Muslims. Let us, for once, get to the heart of the matter. The erosion of

moral values and the breakdown of Muslim society today is not simply due to transvestites singing karaoke or couples sipping Coca-Cola laced with Bacardi in restaurants. The erosion of moral values that is taking place in Malaysia, as in the rest of the Muslim world, has more to do with the way in which Muslim societies have been taken over by market-oriented cultural and economic practices that have commodified social relations and turned practically every aspect of their societies into marketable goods. As a result, everything from healthcare to education, public security to the media, have been reduced to commodities that can be bought, sold and valued according to market prices. In such an environment, there is simply no room for moral values, ethics or spirituality to develop. The ones at fault here are the Muslim elite themselves, and this includes our own governments and leaders.

To persecute a number of working women (and men dressed up as women) is a classic case of persecuting the weak while the powerful get away scot-free. It also happens to be a typical example of how Muslim governments, under pressure from their own Islamist opposition at home, try to bolster their own Islamic credentials by launching ostensibly Islamic campaigns to promote Muslim interests in the country. Surely the Malay-Muslims in Malaysia can see this by now?

As a result of this incessant contest between UMNO and PAS to out-Islamise each other, we are now witnessing the steady encroachment of a particularly rigid and bureaucratic form of Islam in the country. Already Malay-Muslims have to go through a gamut of bureaucratic hurdles in order to do even the most basic of things, like get married. We have to sit for 'marriage classes' so that — like morons — we can be taught how to talk to each other, how to smile to each other and how to eat together respectfully. (My own 'marriage class' was a pathetic affair that lasted three days and all I learned was the benefit of

strawberry flavoured condoms. The *Ustaz* also compared making love to playing football in such a ridiculous way that I now understand how the Malaysian football team could lose to Laos nil-6).

After all these so-called Islamic reform programmes and Islamisation measures, are we any closer to creating an Islamic society? We may be wearing more *tudungs* and sport more *jangguts*, but do we, as modern Malay-Muslims, have better manners, drive safer, pollute less and consume in a more discriminate manner? Are we more immune to the evils of consumerism, corruption, money politics, or neo-feudal cults of leadership? Have we overcome our baser instincts that manifest themselves in the form of racism and prejudice?

The only thing we have done is to open the way for a top-heavy religious bureaucracy. There is no reason why the work done by these religious bodies and authorities cannot be done by other non-religious (re. secular) bodies that serve the Malaysian public as a whole. Senior citizens, homeless folk, abandoned orphans and beggars can be taken care of by aid workers of the State who need not come from the same religious or cultural background. Frankly, if I needed financial or medical aid at any time, I don't care who gives it to me as long as it is done impartially and with sincerity. An injection feels the same whether it is given by a Muslim or non-Muslim doctor.

Now I would like to address the non-Muslims who have, over the past few weeks, come to the defence of the Pharisees of the State. Reading letters and comments like 'This is a Muslim matter. Leave it to them and let's not get involved' really makes me wonder how close (or far) we are to the goal of nation-building. There are times when I wonder if we even live in the same country. To claim that whatever happens in the Muslim community is a 'Malay' issue that that it does not concern anyone else

would be the peak of indifference and neglect dressed up as respect for cultural diversity.

The fact is that Islam — and all other religions for that matter — is too important to be left to one ethnic constituency alone. Let me put the point across in another way. Let us suppose that in Malaysia today there happens to be a Hindu or Buddhist party. (Why not? There is already an Islamic party). Now let us suppose that the leaders of this fictional Hindu party then begin to tell members of the Hindu community that they cannot do this or that; that they cannot eat or drink with non-Hindus because the rest are 'unclean' or that they can be spiritually contaminated somehow. Now let us suppose that the members of this fictional religious party then begin to raid restaurants, offices or homes to root out those 'deviant', 'hypocritical', 'secular' Hindus who have strayed off the right path and to bring them back to their narrow and exclusive interpretation of Hinduism. How should the rest of us non-Hindus react to such a situation?

I for one would be appalled if such practices were taking place in the country. To me it would be a clear sign of a group of zealots trying to manipulate the universal discourse of Hinduism (or Buddhism, Christianity, etc.) and turn it into a sectarian, exclusivist creed instead. The long-term effects, as far as inter-religious and inter-communal relations are concerned, would be catastrophic as well. Do I have a right to express my disagreement here? Do I have a right to defend my 'liberal' Hindu friends who want to maintain their open, pluralistic lifestyle which is cognisant of the realities of Malaysia today? I think so.

So on the same terms, why can't non-Muslims in Malaysia understand that some of us Malay-Muslims prefer to think for ourselves and live out our religious lives on our own terms rather than be directed by others? I go to the mosque and pray because I want to, not because some religious official tells me that God is going to fry me in

hell if I don't. I want to live out my married life on my own terms, without some well-meaning but clueless *Ustaz* telling me that my sex life can be compared to a game of football. And for whatever mistakes I may make, I am prepared to face the consequences both here and in the hereafter without them intervening on my behalf, supposedly 'for my own good'. As a rational, believing Muslim, I choose to act according to my own rational agency and free will.

Now all that I have said so far is of course loaded and biased on my own terms. There will invariably be those who will condemn me for being 'too liberal' a Muslim or too open to other cultures, religions and lifestyles. But I also urge my critics to look around them and recognise the fact that they live in a multiracial, multi-religious and multicultural Malaysia where there is much more to be gained by opening our minds and hearts than by keeping them shut. Through such inter-cultural contact there are bound to be moments of friction, difficulty and uncertainty. (Ironically, the cross-dressing transvestites who were arrested by JAIS seem to embody the perilous ambiguity of multiculturalism itself). Nobody said that living in a multicultural society was going to be easy.

But it must be remembered that such ambiguity and uncertainty are also potentially productive and fruitful: They force us to question some of the most basic and fundamental understandings about ourselves, our identities and who we are. Contact with other religious communities and cultures force us to be more open, supple and accommodating of difference and alterity. In time we learn to negotiate the differences between us. If, in the process, some old habits and prejudices get thrown away, then that would be even better. As the contemporary Sudanese Muslim thinker Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im puts it in his book *Towards an Islamic Reformation*: "*The*

toleration of unorthodoxy and dissent is vital for the spiritual and intellectual benefit of Islam itself." To that I can only add, *'Alhamdulillah*!

30 | YA RAHMAN! YA RAHEEM!

This article was written in mid-2001, shortly after a heated public debate that was sparked off by a concert scheduled to be held in Kuala Lumpur. The concert featured a number of prominent Bollywood stars, including the hugely famous Shah Rukh Khan. Before the event, a number of university-based student movements – mostly aligned to the Islamist opposition – called for the cancellation of the event. Despite the protests (or perhaps because of it), the event was eventually held before a packed audience.

REGULAR READERS OF *MALAYSIAKINI.COM* will no doubt be familiar with the contentious debate that raged on for a while over the 'Bollywood' concert that took place in Malaysia not so long ago.

In the weeks before the concert, a heated and open debate took place both on the campuses of the country and in cyberspace, when those who were both in favour and against the event were allowed to come to the fore and express their opinions. A number of student organisations took the stand that such a performance would corrupt the morals of society. Many of those who opposed

the concert came from the Islamist camp who took the view that such entertainment was essentially immoral and un-Islamic. This author was one of those who took the stand that the concert should be allowed to take place — despite the fact that he still doesn't know who Shah Rukh Khan is.

In the event, the concert was staged — despite the brouhaha that surrounded it — and those who wanted the 'bra-clad dancers of India' to be kept out of the country were foiled in their attempt to have the performance cancelled. What was interesting for me, however, was the tide of hate emails that I received during this period for my defence of the concert itself: Nearly 40 in the space of one week — a record by my own humble standards.

My intention here is not to belittle or abuse those who have taken the time and trouble to put finger to keyboard to abuse me. This is one of the occupational hazards of anyone who wants to establish a presence in cyberspace and who wants to push his own socio-political agenda — something that I do not apologise for. Nor would I simply dismiss the criticisms of those who argued against the position that I and several others took at the time. Those who disagree with our stand are perfectly entitled to do so, provided that they are open-minded enough to have room for the contrary thoughts and views of others. This has to be one of the cardinal rules of any working, open, tolerant, democratic system that accommodates pluralism and difference.

What did strike me, however, was the tone of the hate mail sent to me during that period. Going through the letters again and again, I could not resist the trap of 'applied philosophy' and in the end I found myself systematically dividing and categorising the mail I received. This was, for me, philosophy at work and I was attempting nothing short of a discourse analysis of the abusive mail sent to me.

The findings of this short, though far from pointless, exercise were quite interesting. Of the mail I received and the ones that were posted on various websites, I found that the criticisms could be broken into three main categories:

There were those that basically said: 'You are secular in orientation and because you do not come from a traditional Islamist educational background you should not speak or write about Islam'.

The second category of insults had a more sinister tone to it, and they could be summarised as 'You are condemning the Islamist position, and so you are in league with the enemies of Islam.' From this a chain of equivalences was quickly formed which put me in the camp of the evil, satanic government of Malaysia, Western secular powers, the debauched media moghuls of Bollywood and so on.

The third, and by far the largest category, however was the one which basically stated that I was offending their Islamist values and as such I was bound to go to hell forever. There were at least three emails that gave lengthy descriptions of the torments that awaited me in *Neraka* (hell) in excruciating detail. The hairs of the back of my neck stood on end reading this stuff — not for fear of what might happen to me later on, but more out of concern for what is presently happening in the minds of some of the more zealous defenders of the faith in this country.

The point that needs to be stressed is this: That after fifteen centuries of Islamic civilisational development, we Muslims still seems unable to think of a benevolent God that is forgiving and merciful. We cannot help but imagine our God to be a violent, almost malevolent entity that routinely throws his subjects into the boiling pits of hell so that they can be tortured for infinity. How ironic that is, when we consider that practically every important thing that Muslims

do in their daily lives begins with the formula: 'In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful'. Has Islam always been like this? The answer, thankfully, is simply no.

This is not a statement of preferences or wishful thinking either. Historical evidence shows quite clearly that there was a time in the history of Islam where the Muslims' understanding of faith and God were quite different from what it is today. We need not go very far in search of such evidence. We can find it right here, in the soil of the Malay archipelago itself.

Lest it be forgotten, the coming of Islam to the Malay archipelago has to be one of the greatest civilisational developments in the Muslim world. Unlike the spread of proselytising religions in other parts of the world, Islam's entry into the Malay world was passive and gentle. Yet this *penetration pacifique* brought with it socio-cultural, political and ideological changes that were monumental in their consequence and import. Islam had effectively broken the monopoly of the *ancien regime* of the *Kerajaan*, ruled as it was by the *Rajas* and *Dewarajas* who were literally Gods on earth. In time, Islam introduced notions and values of individualism, humanism and rational agency to a society that was stultified and static. It gave new life to a people who had till then come to accept their political situation as final and given.

The secret of Islam's success then lay mainly in the way that it was taught and spread among the people—and the agents who were responsible for its dissemination. These were the Sufi mystics who had come from the Indian subcontinent (home of Bollywood, remember) as well as the local Sufi scholars and preachers who had adapted Islam to the immediate needs of the social terrain they found themselves in. They realised that the Malay peoples, who had lived so long under the paralysing tyrannical yoke of their *Rajas* and *Dewarajas*, were ready and yearning for change.

The Sufis also understood that such an oppressed people would never leave their way of life for another that was equally if not more oppressive than the one before. And so the Sufis adapted, and adopted their teachings for the audience they had before them.

Islam, during the 13th and 14th centuries, was very much a personal creed of love, humanism and individualism for the Malays. Sufi mystics like Sheikh Hamzah al-Fansuri, Sheikh Albul Rauf al-Fansuri and Sheikh Syamsuddin as-Sumatrani were at the forefront of propagating this new faith that radically challenged the political and social status quo, but in a gradualist manner. There was never the option of preaching by the sword and their God was one who the ordinary Muslim could relate to in an intimate way. They taught that love was the way to God and that denial of the world was the key to salvation. There was no talk of worldly power, of domination or conquest, or the obliteration of one's enemies.

In Sheikh Hamzah Fansuri's *'Kitab Fi Bayanil Qulub'* for instance, the Sufi mystic elaborates upon the intimate relationship between the believer and the God she/he seeks. It is clear that this relationship is one based on love, renunciation of the egoistic self and the desire to know the absolute Other:

Bagi kau pandang kapas dan kain,
Keduanya wahid asma'nya lain.

Wahidkan hendak zahir dan batin,
Itulah ilmu kesudahan main.

Jika kau kenal dirimu bagi,
Elokmu itu tiada berbagi.

Hamba dan Tuhan daim berdamai,

Memandang diri jangan kau lalai.

Kenal dirimu hai anak dagang,
Menafikan diri jangan kau sayang.
Seolah istbat bagi pasang,
Supaya mudah engkau datang.

For Sheikh Hamzah, it was clear that the path to God was one that the individual had to tread alone. Yet the path remained open, and the motivation to go on that journey of discovery was based on love, not fear.

How different is the situation for us today in Malaysia. The rise of the sacred intelligentsia known as the *Ulama* has led not only to the emergence of a social hierarchy within Islam, but also the inexorable ossification of the Muslim mind. Today the *Ulama* stand before (or rather above) us as the defenders of the faith whose authority cannot be denied or questioned. And even when it has become patently clear that some of these esteemed and venerable 'men of learning' are mere mortals with very human failings and tendencies — ranging from their thirst for power to their inability to control their sexual urges — we still cling on to every word they say as if these were pearls of wisdom from heaven itself.

Thanks to the *Ulama*, we now live in a country where the development of Islam has become uneven and erratic. The functionaries of the religious bureaucracy continue to come up with new laws and restrictions that invade the most private spaces of Muslim lives — while telling us that theirs is an open and tolerant religion. Islamist activists continue to call for separate, exclusive spaces in society, while preaching the idea that Islam encourages interaction and engagement. And the defenders of the Islamist project talk about their open-mindedness, while sending out warnings to those who do not follow

their line that they will be condemned forever in hell, as victims of a vengeful, unforgiving God.

Yet this need not be the way for Islam to thrive and prosper in Malaysia. The forgotten legacy of the Sufis and early missionaries, who spoke of the need for a different form of Islam that was open, tolerant and premised on the salvation of the individual can still be made to work in this society if it is allowed to come out into the open. The task of reviving this other tradition of Islamic learning falls on the shoulders of those progressive Muslims liberals and lay intellectuals who remain outside the constricting walls of officialdom and religious dogma. They can help to remind us that there is another way of looking at Islam, and another way of understanding our role in society vis-a-vis non-Muslims as well as ourselves. And we can still believe in a God of love and mercy — *Ya Rahman! Ya Raheem!*

31 | SEX AND THE ASIAN WOMAN

This article was written in early 2000, shortly after a scandal broke out in the Malaysian media after the somewhat saucy revelations made by the popular Malaysian star Ning Baizura in her interview with FHM magazine. In the weeks that followed, Ning was targeted and vilified by the more conservative sections of the Malaysian press as well as those magazines and websites linked to the more conservative elements of the Opposition. Few of her critics were inclined to respect her right to freedom of speech and expression, and fewer still were able to deal with the actual issues raised by her in the interview.

IN THE PAST, this column has looked at the other aspects of Malaysia from a historical perspective. I would now like to touch upon a recent controversy instead. By this I refer to the much-publicised mini-scandal that erupted in the wake of the 'intimate confession' made by the Malaysian star Ning Baizura to FHM magazine. Some of you may wonder why I have decided to write about this after the event has passed for so long. The reasons are two-fold: Firstly, I cannot bear to appear topical, and secondly I also happen to be one of those old-fogey types who had no idea what or who this Ning Baizura was. Considerable academic research had to be undertaken before pen was put to paper, finger to keyboard.

And so it happens that a Malay-Muslim woman spoke at length and in some detail about her private sexual fantasies. In the wake of the interview and its release, Malaysian society and the Malay-Muslim community in particular found itself reeling with shock and disbelief. That a Malay-Muslim woman could have sexual fantasies was bad enough. That she actually spoke about it in public was even worse.

The response from the local vernacular Malay media was sadly predictable. The conservative Malay mainstream press went on a rampage, accusing Ning of trying to get cheap publicity. Never mind the fact that these papers were themselves trying to score points in the cheap publicity race in order to recover from the losses incurred due to the recent mainstream press boycott organised by the Opposition parties.

But equally interesting was the response from the alternative Opposition media and the popular Islamist press in particular. Going through the now-terminated *al-Wasilah* magazine, I could not help remark on how similar the tone of the Islamist press was to that of the mainstream media's. Both were equally conservative, damning and, in the final analysis, shallow and nonsensical.

Al-Wasilah's coverage on the issue included moralising sermons about the need for Malay-Muslim women to maintain good conduct and proper decorum in public (in order to keep up the image of the *Ummah* before the penetrating gaze of the *kafirs*), and blanket condemnations of the West for being the real culprits behind the moral decadence and decline of our pure and wholesome Asian society.

In one of the feature articles in *al-Wasilah*, a local Malaysian academic spoke about the matter at length and offered her own astute observations on the issue: Admitting the fact that some thoroughly immoral women do

sometimes fantasise about 'stars' like Shah Rukh Khan (another star I am not familiar with), she nonetheless pointed out that such fantasies amounted to *khianat tasawurri* (imaginary infidelity) against their husbands. Needless to say, this is a sin and is strictly frowned upon.

The Malaysian academic then added that those who went around talking about sex and their sexual fantasies are obviously the products of decadent Western culture (where a lot of sex takes place, apparently) and that this was not abnormal in the West where models parade around naked all the time. It reminded me of an Iranian *Mullah* who claimed that in the West people walked around the streets naked all year round — obviously he had never been to London or Berlin in the winter.

The cherry on the cake came when the same woman academic concluded that by talking about sex in public, Ning Baizura had insulted not only her religion but also her race and culture. These are the times when I can no longer tell where the boundary lines between PAS and UMNO lie.

Throughout the Ning Baizura affair, most of the pundits failed to note one very simple thing: that behind the façade of the ever-docile, willing and proper Asian woman lies the other woman who happens to possess rational agency, free will and personal desires. She may desire to go out to work while her husband stays home to take care of the family. She may desire to leave her home and travel around the world. She may desire to leave her legs unshaven, and save the money she would have spent on cellulite creams to order pizzas instead. She may desire to put a collar and leash on her lover and spank his butt for misbehaving. Or she may genuinely desire to get married, settle down and have five children. Once in a while, she may even have the desire to have sex with several men before breakfast. No amount of self-righteous posturing, moralizing and bible-bashing will ever be able

to alter that reality for the simple reason that repression itself is a recognition of the thing to be repressed. We can only repress what is already there within us, and the more we repress it the more we confirm its belligerent existence.

In this sense, the real crime committed by Ning Baizura was not that she spoke about her sex life or sexual fantasies. Her mistake, if we can even call it that, was to admit to the fact that she was a gendered being with sexual potential who was not regulated by social norms and conventional values. In this respect, Ning's public 'confession' brought into the open something which was meant to be hidden and kept inside, relegated to that other Malaysia whose existence we do not admit.

Even worse, Ning's public 'confession' managed to destroy the façade of respectability (and it was always just a façade, in any case) that kept intact the fragile consensus over what could be spoken of and what could not. Being a traditional Asian society that prides itself with laudable 'Asian values' like hypocrisy, routinised repression and double standards, it is understandable that some of us would not be too happy to know that our wives, girlfriends and daughters might harbour such licentious thoughts like those morally decadent women of the evil West. Ning's open declaration of sexual autonomy, assertion of her sexual rights as a woman and open admission that she likes sex have shattered the near-ossified idea that Asian women are merely the objects of sexual desire for men without having sexual desires of their own.

Like it or not, Ning Baizura's interview with FHM has brought into the open the fact that Asian women actually have sexual fantasies. To suggest, as some of our conservative counterparts have done, that this is all due to the nefarious machinations of Western media moghuls or the gnomes of Zurich is to return to the mode of denial all over again.

The reality is that Asian women have sexual fantasies, have always had them and will continue to have them as long as they have bodies that function reasonably well. A close look at the history of Asian art and literature will tell you that women have always played a crucial part in defining the nature and content of sexuality in general – and not always as passive recipients of male attentions. If Ning Baizura's confession was such a shock to so many people, it can only be a sad reflection of how repressed and hypocritical we have been about ourselves and to ourselves all along.

Finally, before anyone jumps the gun and accuses me of trying to promote, justify or glorify such 'immoral' acts, I would like to reiterate the main point of this article: sexuality is a part of human nature and it happens to be one of the defining features of the sentient human being.

The fact that we fantasise is proof of the fact that we possess rational agency, imagination and free will. Of course, this does not mean that all our fantasies are necessarily wholesome or even interesting – and some of us are quite happy to settle down with a good book and a mug of horlicks. But our sexual fantasies, like our dreams of a better life, a brighter future, a freer society and a just world, also happen to be a door to an alternative world that we all need. We need such fantasies to remind us of the possibilities that are always there before us, should we choose to exercise our free will and fight for them. Suppression of such wishes and longings merely leads to a vicious circle where even the purest of desires can ultimately become twisted beyond recognition. Hardly a surprise then that 'deviants' tend to emerge in the midst of the most repressive and conservative of societies.

Ning Baizura's interview and the revelations that came forth have forced Malaysian society to look at itself and take stock of some of its most basic moral assumptions. It raises crucial questions about our values, beliefs and

who we are. Some of these assumptions have been seriously challenged, and a good thing that is, too, for the simple reason that they were based on erroneous premises that were also hollow and weak. We may not welcome such radical interventions into our moral and epistemological universe, but these things are bound to happen for the simple reason that such contingencies are beyond our calculation and control. Thanks to Ning, our nights will never be the same again. This writer, for one, is grateful for that.

32 | PORN AND THE SHEIKH

For some reason (which may not seem too obscure to some observers), religion and sex seem to be the most popular topics in the Malaysian media and the vernacular tabloid press in particular. The control and policing of sexuality has become a major feature of governmentality in Malaysia today, with religious officials and 'moral guardians' given the power to transgress into the private space and private lives of ordinary citizens – ostensibly for their own good and the welfare of society at large. But Malaysia also happens to be a country where the underground market of pornography is rife, as any streetwise punter will tell you. Few commentators have cared to point to the link between the two, which must surely exist: In any repressed society ordinary individuals will invariably be forced to seek other means and avenues to release their tensions and fulfil their repressed desires. That this is so commonplace in Malaysia today is a sad reflection of the conservatism that has taken root and entrenched itself in the popular imaginary. This article was written in mid-2001.

ONCE AGAIN, sex is in the headlines. The news that distributors and purchasers of pornographic VCDs and DVDs can and will now be prosecuted has no doubt sent shivers down the spines of the curb-crawling denizens of Malaysia. Those who inhabit the *demimonde* of the porn

industry are no doubt cursing their luck, and the fact that, in its effort to bolster its own religious credentials before the electorate, the government has decided to strike out against them in particular.

Perhaps the only people who are truly relieved by this move are those concerned parents who have of late been worried that their pirated copy of *Snow White* or *101 Dalmatians* may contain more than they bargained for. It may be trendy for those of the post-structuralist school to deconstruct the persona of Snow White herself and to claim that underlying the whole story is a sublimated sub-plot which involves sexual repression and unspoken desire. But to suddenly find Snow White undressed and in the company of several men who certainly do not look like dwarves is another thing altogether.

Then there are those who are hungry for American propaganda and who just cannot wait to get home to watch their own bootleg copy of *Pearl Harbour* or *Independence Day*. Imagine their consternation and surprise when they are instead confronted with the image of humping couples in various compromising positions five minutes into the Hollywood epic, which has turned out to be more wooden than most.

But there are, as always, many other interesting developments, twists and turns to this latest moral campaign on the part of the powers-that-be.

The bottom line is that this latest move has just as much to do with economics as it has with morality. Malaysia of late has been hammered by the international media and foreign multinationals for not doing enough to control the spread of illegal DVDs and VCDs. This is also true for the pirated computer software which one can get easily over the counter anywhere in the country, and needless to say Malaysia's new friend Mr. Bill Gates does not appreciate the Malaysian interpretation of popular subaltern *laissez-faire* economics. Indeed, in many ways

the economy in Malaysia is so free of any real regulation that one can get almost anything one wants, provided that one has the money and the street sense to know where to get it. The economic crisis of 1997 has only broken down the established barriers even further, making it even more easy to get one's hands on any product, good or service.

Those who would like to defend the porn industry as a form of artistic expression or an aesthetics should also disabuse themselves of the fallacy. Pornography today is nothing more than an appendage of the capitalist system and the production and sale of porn is nothing more than an industry. Furthermore, the porn industry is not being run by painted '*madames*' in their clandestine *boudoirs*, but by boring accountants and sales managers instead. Art went out of the window a long time ago (along with eroticism and taste) and all we are left with is the MacDonalisation of the media. Contemporary porn is just as crass, crude and unsophisticated as any of the junk that comes out of Hollywood these days, except that its production costs are much lower (and the returns much higher, relatively). The international business community is understandably ticked off by the fact that video and VCD pirates are robbing them of the profits that they would rather keep for themselves, and that is where the pressure for regulation and control is really coming from.

But the fact that Malaysians consume porn at all is something that nobody has raised, and no attempt has been made to ask the simple question: Why?

It may sound like a cliché to state that repression breeds desire, but it is also a truth nonetheless.

Malaysia, as we all know, is an Asian country with the purest of Asian values. Sex, of course, is something that none of us really wants to bring out into the open because it is regarded as taboo. Talk of sex and sexuality is strictly off-limits and there are quite enough moral guardians among us to remind us that it is not allowed.

We balk at the thought of revealing our private lives and fantasies, for the simple reason that these subjects have remained consigned to that private sphere and that other Malaysia that we never seem to want to acknowledge.

But as long as this complex and highly emotive subject is not brought out into the open and treated with the intelligence and respect that it deserves, should we be surprised by the developments of late? The mad rush for porn in all forms — DVDs, VCDs, video and in cyberspace — is proof that there are millions of Malaysians who think about the subject of sex and sexuality all the time. The fact that they are not allowed to bring this out into the open only forces them to go underground and this is why so many of them have resorted to pornography.

The worse thing about this is that it merely leads to even more repression and the distortion of reality itself. Contemporary commercial porn, lest it be forgotten, is a fantasy that has nothing to do with reality. The porn actors/actresses themselves are unreal figures made up of silicone and plastic and they bear no resemblance to the rest of us who have to live with warts, cellulite and receding hairlines. By forcing people to turn to such unreal fantasies, our own fantasies and desires become twisted by unreal and unrealisable wants and desires. Far from bringing us closer to where we want to be, contemporary 'industrial' porn merely takes us further from the truth and by extension, ourselves. In the end we become slaves to the Barbie-doll figures of *Baywatch* (or if you happen to be into anorexics, Ally Mcbeal).

Even more surprising is the fact that Malaysia today has become a society that seems incapable of dealing with the subject of sexuality and sexual relations in a mature, adult and sensible way. Yet this was once a part of the world where sex and sexuality were intimately bound with the culture and civilisation of its people, and where sexuality

was treated with respect (almost reverence) as a sublime act that was carnal and spiritual at the same time.

Centuries of civilisational development in the Malay archipelago testify to the existence of a complex cultural and belief system that incorporated sex and sexuality into the framework of existence and being in the world. What is more, sexuality (in all its forms and orientations) was brought out into the open in works of art and literature such as the *Hikayat Panji Semarang*[1]. Perhaps the last person who had the courage and audacity to bring up the subject was the great reformist and modernist thinker, Syed Sheikh al-Hadi. For his efforts, the Sheikh was summarily branded a peddler of pornography by the esteemed *Ulama* instead.

Syed Sheik al-Hadi[2] has to be one of the most important figures in the political, cultural and literary landscape of Modern Malaysia of the 20th century. Thankfully a highly informative book about the life and times of the man and his ideas has been published at last by the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI)[3].

Throughout his life Syed Sheikh al-Hadi championed the cause of modernisation and reform of his own society. He sincerely believed that the Malay-Muslims had to be saved from the combined onslaught of secular modernity (imposed on them by the Colonial powers) and the reactionary traditionalism of the *Ulama* themselves. The Malays, he felt, were caught between two equally repressive and distorting systems of values that ultimately warped their own sense of identity, self-pride and subjectivity. The British Colonial establishment wanted to turn the Malays into modern Europeans while the *Ulama* wanted to turn them into pseudo-Arabs instead. Al-Hadi lamented the fact that neither modernisation nor traditionalism had led to the creation of independent subjects who were aware of their own free will and rational agency.

For Al-Hadi, Islam — or rather his interpretation of it — was essentially a system of values and beliefs that opened the mind and worldview of the subjects themselves. He saw in Islam a means to liberate individuals from their personal fears and prejudices, irrational beliefs and backward practices. Islam was also for him a belief system that was opposed to all forms of oppression and inequality, and as such he used it as a discursive weapon to critique the prevailing power structures at the time — which included the patriarchal system of his own society. At the centre of his worldview was the rational subject who was the master of her/his own destiny and the engine of progress. Man was the motor of history, he argued, and the development of society depended on the will and capabilities of the human subjects themselves. In order to develop an open and progressive society, one therefore had to nurture the open-minded and progressive subject.

Apart from his stress on modernisation and development of Malay and Islamic studies, al-Hadi's views on women were also radically different from that of the traditionalists and conservatives of the time [4]. He argued in defence of women's education and equal rights, and constantly brought up the topic of women's welfare in his magazine, *al-Ikhwan* as well as his two novels. *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* and *Hikayat Puteri Nurul'ain*. Though most of us have not heard of either of these texts, copies of them do exist in the libraries if one looks for them hard enough. What is even more interesting was the storm of protest and outrage that was stirred as soon as they were published.

The *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* (otherwise known as *Setia Ashek Kepada Ma'ashoknya* — The Fidelity of the Lover to Her Beloved) revolves around a young Malay woman who was forced to marry her cousin at her family's request. Her family chose to ignore the fact that she had fallen in love with another man, Shafik Effendi. Faridah is forced to undergo the marriage but remains faithful to

her beloved by refusing to consummate it. In the end, the lovers are united despite the obstacles placed before them by their families and society. Read in the light of today's present realities, the storyline itself may seem tame and even dull in comparison. But one must remember that during its time, it was the first of its kind.

Hikayat Faridah Hanum was perhaps the first piece of modern Malay literature to feature a woman as its central character. What is more, the character of Faridah Hanum herself is one that is endowed with personality, agency and purpose. She is not some passive subject who merely reacts to the environment around her. In the novel al-Hadi was laying great stress on the need for individual rights and freedom of choice. Faridah Hanum herself stands for his ideal of the modern progressive Muslim who is not bound by custom or tradition and capable of exercising rational agency while remaining true to his/her religion and moral values.

But what was really scandalous at the time was the fact that Syed Sheikh al-Hadi had also painted a portrait of a Malay-Muslim woman who had a sexual will and a sexual life of her own. The fact that she consciously and deliberately foils the advances of her own husband (in order to be able to consummate her affair with her lover) meant that she was a woman who was choosing her sexual partner on her own terms. It is clear that for al-Hadi a woman's body was her right and her possession, and that no man had the right to force himself on her. Faridah Hanum's great 'crime' (if you could call it that) was that she wanted to choose her own lover and that she demanded the right to enjoy her sexual relations with him on terms that were of her own choosing. Her defiance of her first husband (who was forced on her by her family and society) takes the form of sexual resistance — something that was regarded as taboo then (and now, for that matter).

The novel widely scandalised the conservatives of the time. The *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* was condemned as 'licentious' and even 'pornographic' and 'obscene' by the traditional *Ulama*, for the simple reason that it featured episodes where the heroine was in close proximity (*khalwat*) with another man (Shafik Effendi) who was not her relative. The *Ulama* claimed that al-Hadi had opened the floodgates for immorality and decadence, and that young Malay-Muslims (and the young women in particular) would be misguided by his ideas. Nonetheless, in his work al-Hadi presented Faridah Hanum as a Muslim woman who was capable of making moral decisions on her own and was thus the embodiment of rational Islam itself.

That the *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* could have been condemned as pornographic during its time is proof that society's moral values are relative and that they evolve and change. Today, most of us would probably lump it together with the run-of-the-mill 'Mills and Boons' genre of literature for adolescents. But at that time the *Hikayat* itself was referred to as 'that pornographic book' which deserved to be consigned to the flames.

The real and lasting impact of the text however, is that it raised crucial questions about our relationship to our bodies, our sexuality and our sexual relations with others.

For despite the barbed and malicious condemnations that were heaped on him, al-Hadi's great service to society was to raise questions that it did not dare ask of itself. The root of the conundrum is this: Do we regard sexuality as something sinful and dirty or something that is essentially pure and good? Is sexuality a matter for the private individual or is it a concern of society at large? At what point is the invisible line between the public and the private sphere drawn?

These questions remain of crucial importance for us, living as we do in an age of thought police and 'morality

squads' who are given the right to spy on us behind bushes with infa-red cameras and binoculars. We need to ask such questions at a time when the state is clearly using sexuality (or rather the charge of sexual misconduct) as an excuse to come into our houses late at night to check on our private behaviour. We need to raise these issues at a time when public censure (more often than not mobilised on the basis of popular fears and prejudices) is being used to demonise certain gender groupings and gender minorities in the country.

It is clear that in Syed Sheikh al-Hadi's writings, sexuality is a private affair for the individuals concerned. And it is private because for him at the root of sexuality lies love — in whatever form — which is grounded in ethics and the ethical relation with the Other. That is why Faridah Hanum does not allow herself to have sex with her husband as a 'matter-of-fact' routine of married life. She resists him and withholds herself because she treasures and values her sexuality and her sexual life enough to reserve it for the man she truly loves. Her consummation of her relationship with her true lover is therefore sexual and emotional at the same time.

Sex here is something to be taken seriously and treated with respect, but 'respect' in this sense is not understood in terms of close-mindedness and prudishness. It is clear that Faridah Hanum not only loves her beloved, she also desires him. Sexual desire and emotional attraction therefore go hand in hand in al-Hadi's novel, and the sexual act is seen as a means of expressing that emotional longing.

To get back to the problem at hand today: Now if pornography has become such a 'problem' in Malaysia, we need to ask why this is the case. If so many Malaysians have become consumers of porn, it may well be because they happen to enjoy it. And if porn is enjoyable, then one could say that it is because that is what it is meant to be in the first place. Pornography is meant to titillate and

excite, in the same way that deserts are meant to taste delicious and medicine is meant to cure you. But it must be remembered that pornography also has its limitations, and that we should not delude ourselves with it.

That Malaysians have become passive and idle consumers of porn is hardly a surprise considering that we have become passive and idle consumers of junk in general. Our 'miraculous economic development' has merely led to the creation of a junk-food culture that is painfully evident in the food we eat, the awful movies we watch, the boring commercial music we listen to and the plastic featureless architecture we construct and inhabit. So why should it surprise anyone that so much porn is being consumed in the country, since this lazy and overweight nation is already living out a vicarious existence glued before the TV set and watching hours of nonsense every single day anyway? If porn is a form of vicarious entertainment, so is everything else on TV. The fantasies of porn are just as far removed from reality as the fantasies we get on regular TV on a daily basis. (Anyone who disagrees on this point should tell me how *Xena the Warrior Princess* can have relevance to our daily lives, particularly when we are stuck in one of KL's famous traffic jams).

But the worst thing about all our media fantasies — be they sexual or not — is that they draw us further and further away from the realities of human life and the interpersonal contact that is so vital to our very being as human subjects. The danger of porn is that it allows us to slip into fantasies instead of allowing us to turn our own fantasies into reality. In the same way that nerds who watch those action movies end up living out their fantasies in their heads and not in real life, porn takes away our ability to dream and fantasise and instead translates it into a market-oriented pre-packed and industrially-produced commodity instead.

A society that cannot go beyond porn is therefore a society that has failed to evolve. It is a society that cannot transcend the physical act of sex in order to reach the higher plane of sensuality and the erotic. It is a society that does not see that sex and sexuality is the way to love and commune with the Other.

This was the root of the problem that Syed Sheikh al-Hadi was trying to address, albeit in a somewhat simpler way (by today's standards). What he was trying to show was that as rational, sentient and moral beings we have the right to be aware of our bodies and to enjoy them. Moreover, as moral and rational beings we also have an ethical responsibility to our partners in our sexual relations with them. To want pleasure for ourselves also entails the responsibility to give pleasure to the Other as well. Making love therefore is a physical but also moral act, and there is a complex ethics of relationship with the Other at work during the act itself.

But how can any of this get off the ground if, as a society and as individuals, we are still at a stage where we cannot differentiate between sex and love, sex and eroticism, sex and sensuality? As long as we can no longer see the differences between these categories, then I would argue that as a community we are suffering from a deep emotional and psychological crisis that goes beyond mere questions of epistemology. And that is a far greater problem that our so-called 'moral guardians' of society have chosen to ignore altogether.

Endnotes:

1 I have mentioned this text before in some of my earlier articles, but it bears repeating again. The '*Hikayat Panji Semerang*' is a classical Malay text which tells the story of the Javanese hero Panji and his exploits in the ancient Malay archipelago. The tale is littered with numerous moral vignettes, but also

numerous references to '*cinta sejenis*' between same-sex couples. There is a fairly reliable edition by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) which was published as part of a special series of Malay classical texts (*Hikayat*).

2 Syed Sheikh Ahmad al-Hadi was born on 22 November 1867 in Kampung Hulu, Melacca. His father, Syed Ahmad ibn Hasan ibn Saqaf al-Hady al-Ba'alawi, was a *Peranakan* Arab of Hadrami descent. In his youth he was adopted by Raja Ali Kelana of the Sultanate of Riau. He later studied in Mecca, Beirut and Cairo. At al-Azhar university he came under the influence of the Egyptian reformist thinker Muhammad Abduh. Along with Sheikh Mohamad Tahir, Sheikh Mohamad Salim al-Kalili and Haji Abbas Mohamad Tahar he started the reformist magazine *Al-Imam* in 1906 in Singapore. On 4 February 1908 he opened the *Madrasah al-Iqbal al-Islamiyyah* in Singapore. Between 1909 to 1915 he served as an attorney at the Shariah court of Johor Bharu. But in 1915 he decided to leave the post in order to return to Melacca and open a *Madrasah* there (along with Haji Abu Bakar Ahmad), which came to be known as the *Madrasah Al-Hadi*. However the Malays of Melacca were not happy with his teachings which they regarded as too radical and controversial at the time. In 1919, he moved to Penang in order to open another *Madrasah*, the *Madrasah Al-Mashoor*. The *Madrasah* was perhaps one of the most famous of the radical 'reformist' *Madrasahs* of the colonial era. In 1927, al-Hadi left the teaching profession and opened the Jelutong Press in Penang which became one of the leading reformist publishing houses in the land. The Jelutong Press published his translation of the Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*) of Muhammad Abduh as well as a host of other important reformist articles and books.

3 See: Alijah Gordon, (ed.) *The Real Cry of Syed Sheikh al-Hady*. Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI), Kuala Lumpur. 1999.

4 See: Lenore Manderson, *Women, Politics and Change: The Kaum Ibu UMNO of Malaysia 1945-1972*. East Asian Social Studies Monographs Series, Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1980. (Pp. 20-21).

33 | REMEMBERING FARIDAH HANUM

FARIDAH HANUM WAS a Malay-Muslim woman who was trapped by both the circumstances of the present as well as the traditions of the past. An independent-minded woman living in the 1920s, she was nonetheless hostage to traditional notions of ideal womanhood and proper moral conduct in society. Forced to marry against her wishes by her family, she found herself in a loveless marriage to her own cousin that was never consummated. In her private world she cultivated her love for her beloved, Shafik Effendi. After numerous trials and tribulations, she finally managed to break out of her seemingly hopeless domestic situation and marry the man she truly loved — but not without challenging the combined forces of religious orthodoxy and traditional values first.

But don't bother trying to look her up in the annals of Malaysian history. She isn't there. For Faridah Hanum was a fictional character who was born of the fertile imaginings of Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, one of the leading reformist and modernist thinkers of the region during the turn of the century.

Syed Sheikh al-Hadi wrote his famous (some would say infamous) novel *Hikayat Faridah Hanum,* or *Setia Ashek Kepada Ma'ashoknya,* in 1925 while he was living in Penang. The novel was an instant success, and proof of that came when many parents began naming their

daughters Faridah Hanum all over the country. Though much of the novel's contents would be regarded as tame by today's standards, during its own time it was the controversy of the year. Like Kassim Ahmad's *Hadith* (1986), Al-Hadi's *Hikayat Faridah Hanum* had the *ulama* and *imams* of the Malay Sultanates boiling over. The *Ulama* condemned the book as 'obscene' and even 'pornographic' because it featured episodes where Faridah was in close proximity (*khalwat*) with her beloved. They denounced the author as a man who was bent on corrupting the minds of Muslim women and the young.

What made matters worse was the fact that the author was the notorious 'moderniser' and leader of the *Kaum Muda* (Younger Generation) radicals. (al-Hadi was often referred to as the '*Khalifah Kaum Muda*' or '*Khalifah Kaum Wahhabi*' by his enemies). Along with other reformer-modernists like Sheikh Tahir Jalaludin, Al-Hadi had been 'contaminated' by the modernist-progressive ideas of other 'disreputable' thinkers like Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. These Malay and Peranakan Muslim modernisers who had travelled to places like Cairo had brought back with them dangerous ideas about improving the practice and teaching of Islam in the Malay world – something the traditional *Ulama* and conservative Sultans did not take to very well. Even more dangerous were their new-fangled ideas about individual rights, and women's rights in particular.

If we were to attempt a close reading of the *Hikayat Faridah Hanum,* is does become clear how 'dangerous' the ideas of Al-Hadi must have been to the *Ulama* then. For in the novel it is Faridah Hanum herself who comes across as the embodiment of the rational, progressive and modern Muslim who is capable of exercising her/his own freedom of choice and rational agency. When she is told to bow to the will of custom and tradition, she is the first one to raise the question: Why?

Al-Hadi also presented a picture of Faridah as someone who was capable of exercising moral judgement on an individual basis. Despite the fact that she finds herself alone with her beloved (something which had the *Ulama* hot under the collar) she retains her modesty and self-respect. Her decision not to consummate the marriage to her cousin also demonstrates her ability and determination to retain control of her body and sexuality. These themes were all regarded as taboo at the time, as the thought of a woman demanding control of her own body and sexuality was anathema to most of the conservatives then.

But the merit of al-Hadi's novel, and his entire modernist-reformist enterprise, was that it brought to the surface the internal contradictions, double-standards and hypocrisy that had taken root in the Malay-Muslim world by then, thanks to the manoeuvrings of the *Ulama*. For despite the fact that Islam had guaranteed the personal freedom of the individual, these freedoms were gradually eroded and compromised by successive generations of religious leaders who sought to gain monopoly over the discourse of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and law (*shariah*) for their own benefit. In the process, a pseudo-clerical order had been introduced into the Muslim world where before there was none, and all at the cost of the rights of the ordinary Muslims. At the bottom of the heap was the mute figure of the Muslim woman who was regarded as fundamentally weak and in need of constant protection and supervision, first by her family and later by her husband.

Writing in the magazine *al-Ikhwan* (The Brethren), al-Hadi argued that the improvement of the lot of women was crucial for the survival of the nation in the future:

> *The improvement of a woman's intellect is a necessity for if her mind is weak, her self-worth will diminish, which is what is happening in our society today. The woman's present function to simply give birth and to bring up her offspring is no different from that of other female species in the animal kingdom.*

And if the condition of women was so deplorable then, al-Hadi placed the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the men in the community:

> *We men have prescribed a narrow sphere of activity for women. We have restricted their function to that of producing children and apart from that we expect nothing more from them since we presume that they are not fit for any kind of work! As a result men have no desire to obtain the help of women in their profession or any other work...*

A devout believer in the principle of universal education, al-Hadi, like the other Muslim modernists of his time, was determined to break the monopoly of the *Ulama* over Islamic discourse and cultural practice in order to re-open the doors of *ijtihad* (individual interpretation) once more. Invariably, he found himself at odds with the defenders and custodians of orthodoxy and dogma themselves, the *Ulama*. His sustained critique against the traditional religious establishment of the time took the form of polemical essays, pamphlets and novels like *Hikayat Faridah Hanum*.

Today, Malaysia finds itself still in the throes of this perennial struggle between Modernisation and Conservatism, change and stasis. There are those who claim

that the *Ulama* have done a service to Muslim society by preserving the tradition of Islamic thought and learning over the centuries – something which we do not disagree with. But the defenders of religious orthodoxy must also admit that dogma has the tendency to ossify and obstruct the dynamics of change and natural evolution of society as well.

Had it not been for the effort of these modernists and progressives, the fate of the Malay-Muslim people who were living under the traditional order of knowledge might not have changed at all. It was they, the despised and rejected 'modernisers' and 'innovators', who appealed to the Malay-Muslims to leave the ways of the past. It was they who insisted that the realities of colonialism and Western domination could not be countered with magic spells, sacred talismans and holy relics pedalled by counterfeit saviours. And it was thanks to them that the Malay-Muslims began to organise themselves into economic cooperatives, mutual help groups, chambers of commerce and, eventually, political parties (both radical and conservative) that came to the fore in the wake of the Second World War.

So spare a thought for Faridah Hanum. Fictional though she may have been, she presented the women of her generation with a vivid picture of what might be, and the shape of things to come.

34 | THE OTHER FACE OF BUDDHISM: AUNG SAN SUU KYI AND THE BUDDHIST STRUGGLE OF LIBERATION

AUNG SAN SUU KYI, the head of the popular Burmese/Myanmarese Democratic (NLD) opposition, is once again in the news. After being put under house arrest for years, the Nobel Prize winner and leader of the Opposition has finally been allowed to leave her home and venture out into the streets to meet her loyal supporters and followers who rallied to her cause more than a decade ago. The Government's suppression of the Opposition via the use of violence has not been able to dampen the spirit of the Opposition: If anything, it has only made them even more determined to regain their democratic rights and liberty as a people.

Indeed, one thing that cannot be denied is the fact that the successive military regimes that have ruled Burma/Myanmar since 1962 have never been able to secure the loyalty and support of the nation as a whole. Even though they have tried their best to trace their political lineage to the founder-father of Burma/Myanmar Aung San[1], the generals in Yangon have not been able to translate the foundational ideals and principles of the Burmese

liberation struggle into a popular discourse that speaks to the masses.

Burma today remains as divided and fragmented as ever before, and perhaps the only factor that has kept the country united has been the use of force and the continued attempt to unite the people against the imaginary threat of subversive forces within and without the nation. Since the coup by General Ne Win in 1962, Burma's population has been forced to live at the point of a bayonet and the country's isolation from the rest of the world (brought about by the closing of the country's borders by the junta in the same year) has kept it out of the global current of change and reform.

Yet one amazing thing has to be taken into account, and this is the fact that since the 1960s the ruling military junta has tried its best to maintain its hold on power through its own reading of the dominant religio-cultural discourse in Burmese society: Buddhism.

Practically every major military leader in Burma has tried to justify the imposition of martial law and the curtailing of public freedoms through a reference to Buddhism. When it first came to power in the 1960s the army even went as far as trying to develop an ideology of its own which it referred to as 'Buddhist Socialism'. (Reminiscent of Muammar Ghadaffi's own attempt to forge together the ideas and values of Islam, Socialism and Militarism which eventually led to the publication of Ghadaffi's infamous 'Green Book'.) These ideas were encapsulated in the official government text, *The Burmese Road to Socialism* that tried to graft together the essential ideas and values of Buddhism, Socialism, Burmese culture and traditions as well as the martial ethos of the armed forces. General Ne Win himself became one of the leading exponents of this hybrid ideology, and he was patron to a number of international Buddhist conferences. At the peak of the State's deliberate campaign to use the discourse of

Buddhism to suit its ends, the leaders of the junta went as far as sponsoring the construction of more than 20,000 pagodas and stupas all over the country.

Under military rule, Buddhism was also presented as a quietist religion and way of life that sanctioned the depoliticisation of society. The government presented Buddhism anew, as a religion that preached tolerance, forbearance and stoicism, but also one that discouraged political opposition and resistance to the state. In a bizarre twist of logic, Buddhism's inherently pacifist outlook was exploited to the full by a military elite who wished to use Buddhism as a means to domesticate and pacify the masses instead. According to its interpretation of Buddhism, Buddhists were meant to obey their rulers, remain loyal to the state and concentrate only on social services and public duties deemed 'safe' and 'uncontroversial' by the authorities: The net result desired was to turn Buddhists into some kind of sheep.

The Burmese experiment shows just how religion can and has been used (and abused) for political ends by ruling elites. The Burmese attempt to use Buddhism as a discourse of political legitimation is certainly not new and not unique to the world. Buddhism was, after all, the ruling ideology of state in the traditional kingdoms of Siam, Kamboja, Laos and elsewhere. The monumental structures of Angkor Wat in Cambodia (built, one might add, by a Buddhist Malay ruler from the Patani region named Suryavarman) spoke of imperial grandeur and a thirst for power — all communicated via the use of Buddhist discourse. The face of the Khmer ruler Suryavarman the Seventh, which stares at you from practically all corners of the Angkor monument speaks volumes about the imperial state's desire for control and dominance: The Buddhist God-Kings were the equivalent of Orwell's 'Big Brother' at the time, watching their subjects and

monitoring their movements in a panoptic state that left no room for private life and dissident thoughts.

Burma's isolation from the rest of the world from the 1960s onwards also meant that the younger generation of activists, students and liberal-democrats had little inspiration from elsewhere; they were kept in the dark about the developments in Europe, when students and workers took to the streets in 1968. Likewise Burmese students were oblivious to the political turmoil in the ASEAN region in 1974, when students in Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and Malaysia rose up against their respective governments.

But Burma's isolation also meant that the activists were able (some would say forced to) turn to their own traditions and values as a source of inspiration. In time, the desire for democratic change and reform was expressed through the very same discourse that the military junta used to justify its own existence: Buddhism.

The democratic reform movement in Burma borrowed heavily from the discourse of Buddhism and utilised it as a tool for the delegitimation of the military government. Here we see again how religion, as a discourse of legitimacy, can also be turned around and used as a discourse of delegitimation. As was the case in Latin America and the Philippines, where Catholicism was used as a liberation theology to mobilise the masses, the democratic movement in Burma sought to base their struggle on the very same foundational principles and values of the dominant religio-cultural discourse of the nation.

As the Japanese scholar Mikio Oish[2] has argued, "in many ways, the struggle of Aung San Suu Kyi for democracy and human rights in the country since the 1990 State Law & Order Restoration Council (SLORC) crackdown on the NLD is inspirational. It shows how an individual and a leader in Asia could harness the traditions and spiritual beliefs found in the country's culture and

history and employ them to their fullest potential in the struggle against oppression and tyranny. What is remarkable about Suu Kyi's struggle is that she evaluates Myanmar both by its own traditional standards, embedded in the teachings of Buddhism, and by the principles which form the kernel doctrines of civil society, which are to a large extent exemplified by Western societies. Her struggle shows that there are many things that the SLORC and certain other governments in Asia can do without and should discard from their political baggage, while at the same time absorbing wholesome virtues and practices that have been part and parcel of their countries' social beliefs since time immemorial."

When the military regime finally opened the way for some form of limited democracy to emerge, the frustration and anxiety that had been pent up for decades finally came to the surface. When elections were announced in 1988, an unprecedented 280 political parties were registered almost overnight. What made things complicated, however, was the fact that by then the junta's policy of divide-and-rule had already helped to fragment the country's population considerably, and this was reflected by the emergence of so many political parties — most of which were small and catered only to their own specific ethnic and religious constituencies. The breakdown of the political process and the junta's brutal suppression of political movements that came soon after did little to improve things and only delayed the inevitable collapse of the junta itself.

Today Burma seems to be moving in the direction of democracy and reform once again. Doubtless even the most die-hard among the military rulers must realise by now that Burma/Myanmar can no longer remain isolated and cut off from the currents of globalisation that have brought the world together. Whether the democrats and liberals will be given the chance to assume control of this

divided country remains a question at this stage. But one thing is certain: The experiment with political Buddhism has shown that Buddhism cannot simply be reduced to the stereotype of a quietist religion or way of life that preaches isolation and withdrawal from the world. The Burmese case shows just how Buddhism can be turned around and deployed as a discourse for social and political activism, and how it can serve the ends of democracy and liberation as well.

Endnotes:

1 It is one of the kinder ironies of history that the founder-father of independent Burma, Aung San, was assassinated in 1948 almost as soon as the country achieved its independence. Aung San was killed when a hand grenade was lobbed into the assembly hall where he and some of the other Burmese nationalist leaders were speaking. Due to his early removal from the political arena, Aung San was never given the opportunity to rule the country and make the same mistakes like his contemporary President Sukarno of Indonesia. (It must be remembered that both Sukarno and Aung San were, in fact, military leaders.) Since his untimely death, his image has been used by practically every Burmese nationalist and military leader who have sought a seal of legitimacy for their policies. During the post-1962 era of General Ne Win, the image of Aung San was one of the most popular and powerful public icons in the country. Aung San was also given an other-worldly aura and in time a halo of mysticism was attached to the man. The portrait of Aung San in a heavy military greatcoat (worn while he was in London) adorned the walls of government offices, schools and homes— but his appearance in Western dress made him appear even more remote and transcendent than ever before. It is interesting to note that when his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi began her democratic movement, the image of Aung San was also brought to the fore on many occasions. Like Benazir Bhutto (whose father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was killed by the military regime of Zia ul Haq), Aung San Suu Kyi's political success was due in part to her adroit manipulation of the image and legacy of her father.

2 See: Mikio Oishi, *Aung San Suu Kyi's Struggle: Its Principles and Strategy*. Published by the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), Kuala Lumpur.

35 | VENUS AT THE GATES: ASEAN ART IN SEARCH OF A HOME

This article was written in the middle of 2000.

THE BORDER GUARDS and customs officials examined the bricks one by one. They looked into the bucket, knocked on the planks, tapped the metal sheets; but they still could not figure it out. Why would anyone want to transport a pile of bricks — each one wrapped individually — instead of buying the same material on the other side of the border? As soon as the ensemble of bricks, planks, metal sheets and (one) bucket made it across the frontier, the border guards and customs officials on the other side raised the same questions. The installation could not get through. The Venus of Bangkok was stuck at the gates.

The 'Venus of Bangkok' actually refers to a piece of installation art that was designed by the recently-deceased Thai artist Montien Boonma. Those who want to have a look at it should go over to the exhibition '12 Asean Artists' that is currently being held at the Balai Seni Lukis down Jalan Tun Razak. Montien's piece defies literal description. What it does, however, is capture the essence of beauty in the modern city in objective form. One look at it will tell you that the artist has managed to communicate the complex relationship between aesthetics and urban modern existence. But the border guards (on

both sides of the frontier) were not convinced — despite assurances by the show's curator Valentine Willie — and the Venus of Bangkok came close to missing the exhibition altogether. Similar concerns to Montien's were touched upon by the other artists who are featured in the exhibition as well — which includes names like Heri Dono of Indonesia, Georgette Chen of Singapore, Latiff Mohidin of Malaysia and Elmer Bolongan of the Philippines.

The problematic entry (and subsequent exit) of the Venus in and out of Malaysia and Thailand shows just how hard it is for us to define what exactly is contemporary Asean art these days. More than three decades after the formation of Asean, we still don't have an idea of what Asean art is, and what it should look like. The fact that the Venus of Bangkok was stopped at the border is doubly significant — it also shows how so much of good contemporary Asean and Asian art happens to be regarded as coming from the margins and is therefore of liminal status. We remain unhappy and uncomfortable with contemporary art that reflects our immediate concerns. If the border guards were worried about Venus, wait till the artists of the region begin to produce pieces that reflect the anxieties, paradoxes and contradictions of Asean in the post-'97 crisis era. No doubt many of those pieces will end up being detained as well.

But it is not just contemporary art that gets such a bad rap these days. Just a few kilometers down the road is another exhibition of equal importance. Hosted by the Badan Warisan Malaysia and curatored by Waveney Jenkins, the exhibition entitled 'The Spirit of Wood' which features the work of two hugely important contemporary Malay woodcarvers, Nik Rashiddin Nik Hussein and Norhaiza Noordin, has been plagued by its own host of gremlins and bugbears.

The 'Spirit of Wood' exhibition aims to do one very simple thing: To explain the philosophical underpinnings of the traditional Malay view of wood and

the place of wood in the complex cosmological framework of Malay civilisation. The exhibition features some of the most beautiful and important pieces of Malay woodcarving that is still in the country, as well as some of the work of these two contemporary carvers.

The reaction of the some of the punters to this exhibition has been baffling to say the least. For generations Malaysians have been educated to think of Malay woodcarving as a simple handicraft fit only for the decorations of banks and the tourist market. The traditional understanding of wood, which bordered on a complex pseudo-science in itself, is now long gone.

So when the exhibition was finally put together and presented to the Malaysian audience, quite a number reacted by saying, "But this is just for decoration! How can woodcarving be an art?" Apart from being a terribly condescending and insulting thing to say to any woodcarver who has spent his entire life learning his skills, such a response also flies in the face of common sense and history. Woodcarving happens to be one of the earliest forms of art in most civilisations. Along with stonework and masonry, woodcarving has to be one of the original forms of great art in human history. It is just our fault if we are negligent when it comes to learning about our own past.

The tale of these two exhibitions shares parallels in many respects. Be it the Venus of Bangkok or the *pintu gerbang* (arched doorway) of the royal palaces of Patani and Kelantan, many of us still do not know what falls into the category of art and what doesn't. One of the major reasons why this is so in so much of contemporary Southeast Asia is that we have allowed our common understanding and appreciation of art to wither and wane away in the postcolonial years. Rapid development fuelled by the inflow of dollars has contributed to the erosion of the art-loving public and the rise of the art-buying elite

instead. The clammy hands of politics and politicians have hammered the last nail in the coffin of good taste as well, as local artists have been compelled to produce works that can only be described as propaganda — be it in the service of the ruling elite (who love buying portraits of Presidents and Generals bedecked with medals and ribbons) or the urban-based *arriviste* statist-*bourgeoisie* (who seem to be able to consume the idealisedscenes of idyllic settings with relish).

The bottom line of it all is this: Asean art, like Asian art in general, has to be first and foremost the art of its own people. Art is only true if it comes from the subject that it purports to speak of, mirror, depict or critique. Pictures of Prime Ministers, Kings and Presidents are not art. Neither are mass produced pieces of handicraft junk for the tourist market. The former are simply propaganda while the latter are clichés.

Art needs to reflect or represent some aspect of reality as seen through the eyes of the artist. Here we can excuse the artist for her/his perspectivism which is, after all, common to all of us. But what we cannot excuse is the pretender who claims to speak the truth when she/he is really trying to find the audience with the biggest wads of cash in their wallets.

Those who wonder where all the Asean artists are need not go very far in search of them. These two exhibitions, based in KL, have brought them to us instead. The problem is that the Malaysian public (and the Asean public at large) may still find it difficult to accept their work as art. Yet art it is, warts, buckets, bricks and all. It is up to us to open our eyes and hearts and recognise the fact that these works capture the realities of the past and present around us. Until we do, Venus will remain at the gates and Asean art will still be looking for a home.

36 | ANOTHER BLOW TO MALAYSIAN HISTORY

The erasure of history has become so commonplace in Malaysia. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed years of large-scale urbanisation, rapid economic development and industrialisation, but at an enormous cost to the social fabric and collective memory of the Malaysian people. In the mad rush for foreign investment and 'mega-projects', historically important buildings and monuments were torn down to make space for multi-storey shopping malls and industrial parks. Apart from the damage done to the natural environment, Malaysia's rapid development has also incurred a permanent cost to the historical and social topography of the country. This article was written in early 2001, when the Bukit Bintang Girls' School (BBGS) was faced with the prospect of impending demolition.

MALAYSIA, LIKE ALL developing countries, has an ambiguous relationship with its past. We are a developing nation that is desperately trying to carve a niche of our own in the international arena. Decades (if not centuries) of struggle have brought us before obstacles of all sorts. In our efforts to industrialise and modernise the economy, we are often thwarted by the nefarious wrongdoings of other, more developed countries that continue to insist that theirs is the only model to be emulated. The

Orientalist biases that remain in the global arena relegate us to the margins of world history, and our achievements are often consigned to the footnotes.

In many cases we see how these inherent inequalities have pushed developing countries into the corner. We retreat back into forms of parochialism, native essentialism and the politics of authenticity — all in an attempt to show that we too have a history to be proud of. In some instances these flights into the past can conjure up weird and even repugnant notions of what a purely authentic Asian past may be like.

But like it or not, one thing we cannot afford to do is deny the complexities of our past. Our recent history is invariably bound up with colonialism and contact with the West. This encounter has had mixed and interesting results. Colonialism brought along with it many questionable developments, but also many positive changes.

The spread of open and free public education was one of the better results of the encounter between East and West. This led to the creation of a number of institutions of learning like the Malay College of Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC), St. John's Institution, Victoria Institution (VI), the Convent School of Bukit Nanas and the Bukit Bintang Girls' School (BBGS). Ironically, the Europeans had built such colleges and institutions which spurred on the reform activities of a number of Malay-Muslim thinkers like Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, prompting them to then build a number of modernist-reformist *madrasahs* (like the Madrasah al-Hadi in Melaka, and the Madrasah al-Mashoor in the Penang that was later destroyed).

So the news that the BBGS is about to be destroyed for the sake of commercial development can only arouse a sense of loss and sadness for those of us who are concerned about preserving our precious links to the past.

BBGS was founded in 1893 by European missionaries in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur. It was later moved to Bukit Bintang Road, where it is presently located, in 1930. Unlike the elite colleges that were built for the sons (and never the daughters) of the *Rajas* and Sultans, the BBGS was meant for the daughters of the poor as well as the rich. The school's motto was *'Nisi Dominus Frustra'* – Without God, All is in Vain.

The BBGS played a crucial role in the education of young women in Malaysia for nearly a century. Built at a time when Malaysians were reluctant to send their daughters to school (for fear that they might be educated, of all things), it provided one of the very few opportunities for young women to enter the space of modern civil society. And whatever we think or say about the politics of colonialism then, it cannot be denied that the school's founders had managed to make a positive and lasting contribution to the development of this country.

It is therefore ironic to note that their contribution to Malaysia's development has been rewarded with this: The school is now to be torn down for the sake of 'development' (at a time when the entire region is drowning in a tide of over-development in commercial infrastructure). Students of BBGS have now been relocated to a new building, purportedly a 'Smart school' in Cheras which is intended to encompass other schools as well. The name of the new larger school is Seri Bintang. So not only is BBGS being demolished physically, even its name is to be erased from the annals of Malaysian history.

BBGS, MCKK, SITC, VI, St. John's – these are names that have been etched in the collective memory of generations of Malaysians. (I myself was educated at St. John's). Any attempt to remove or destroy these buildings for the sake of what may come in the future cannot possibly compensate for the trauma of losing the past.

Should this development go ahead (and most likely it will), we would have dealt another blow to the effort to preserve the history of this country. Perhaps in time all these schools will be relegated to the backwaters of the past as well. And in the void left by their absence, we would have built only new and featureless tabernacles dedicated to the new religion, Capitalism, instead. How sad it is to see a country like Malaysia — which continues to present itself as a wellspring of heterox cultures and histories — reducing itself to a mere suburb of Los Angeles with its homogenous malls instead. The school song of BBGS, which soon will pass into memory, echoes the values of an age that may one day become extinct. And that can only be a loss for all of us Malaysians:

BBGS, we pledge to thee,
Our love and toil in the years to be,
When we are grown and take our place,
As loyal women with our race.
Teach us to bear the yoke in youth,
With steadfastness and careful truth,
That in our time, thy grace may give,
The truth whereby the nations live.

37 | OF (MISGUIDED) PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Being a traditional Asian society that prides itself on its laudable 'Asian values' — which, incidentally include the values of blind deference to authority, submission to power and the inability to stand up for one's rights — Malaysian society often reflects the moral norms and mores of the region as a whole. Sadly, talk of ethics and morality seldom gets as far as a critique of political economy or the structures of power and governance in the land. Over the past few years, Malaysia has witnessed a number of 'moral campaigns' against certain political leaders. The tabloid press has been particularly adept at tearing to shreds the reputation and credibility of prominent individuals, and raking in huge profits while they do so. But the bottom line is that while the personal has become political in Malaysia, politics itself remains a sacred precinct that has escaped the scrutiny and critique of the media in general. This article was written in 2001, at a time when the reputation of a young up-and-coming politician in the country was being attacked by the tabloid media.

GOSSIP-LOVERS TAKE NOTE: It's the 'look under the sarong' season again, as the tabloid press in Malaysia goes into overdrive with lurid stories and exposés into the private lives of politicians and prominent members of the public.

Once more, the society that prides itself on its 'Asian values' is keen to show the world what these values really are: Sell your story (and your soul) to the Devil in the media and make a few bucks in the process — then get on your high horse and shout to the world: "Lo and behold, the champion of public morality!"

That individuals can go to the press to talk about their private affairs with others — real or imagined — is bad enough. What is worse, this repressed society of ours seems to swallow this puerile nonsense with relish, and shouts for more. If ever we needed proof of how low we can sink, it is this. What compounds the situation even further is the fact that such garbage is then dressed up in the garbs of moral discourse, as if this thin veneer of respectability can ever disguise the fact that what the tabloids sell today is nothing more than cheap sensationalism and pornography dressed up as journalism.

All of us are guilty here: The Malaysian public is guilty of consuming such sensational material on a regular basis; the media is guilty of producing and disseminating it; and the public figures themselves are guilty of providing the hacks with the cruddy raw materials for their dirty work. But the fact that Malaysian public figures can resort to such attacks on each other says something else about this society of ours, which would be of interest to scholars of human relations and sociology.

It shows, for instance, the value we attach to self-pride and our public image. And it underscores the fact that for many of us our public image is more important than inner substance and content itself. What matters most is to look good in society — and 'looking good' is often couched in terms of an understanding of 'Asian values' and what being a good 'Asian leader' should be. Invariably, such values tend to be socially conservative and traditional.

That is why public appearances count for so much in Malaysia as it does in the rest of Asia. Asian leaders

look good if they seem to embody the conservative social values that they themselves propagate. Never mind the fact that some of these values can be downright reactionary in many cases. Patriarchy, a conservative deference to tradition and customs, and the odd authoritarian streak among political leaders are often looked up to. It doesn't matter if Asia has produced some of the worst mass-murderers, genocidal killers and unscrupulous demagogues the world has seen: These qualities (if one could call them that) are easily forgiven as long as one is seen as being 'respectable' by society's own skewered and uneven standards.

The generals who ran the show in Burma, for example, were more than happy to order the killing of students, unionists, social activists and opposition members. They promptly 'atoned' for their sins by paying huge bribes to religious institutions and went on the odd pilgrimage to a shrine or two. Likewise President Soeharto was more than prepared to order the persecution of thousands of people in his own country; he 'paid' for his sins by building mosques and religious institutions all over Indonesia instead.

This is not to say that their opponents were any better. The sad fact is that Asian societies have become so inundated by moral and pseudo-religious discourse that even the opponents have played by the same rules. Rather than criticising the policies of their own governments, they too have played the game of 'look under the sarong' and tried their best to discredit their opponents by pointing out vices and human failings.

All in all, this vicious cycle of acrimony and slander has done nothing to improve the economic and political lot of ordinary Asians themselves. Politics in Asia — from India to China — has been overtaken by gossip and scandal instead. Unable to understand the need for a sustained and intelligent critique of power and its workings, Asians

have resorted to a simplistic cultural critique of society and its failings instead[1]. We lay the blame for the social, economic and political breakdown we see around us on moral issues rather than economic and political ones, which I would argue have always been the primary factors for the decline of many societies.

One other point is worth recounting as we sum up: As mentioned earlier, this culture of slander and hate-mongering has become the norm in what is often called a traditional society steeped in its much-lauded 'Asian values'. But we must also remember that Malaysian society is supposed to be guided by the values of its religions as well, and Islam in particular.

It is particularly distressing to note that all of this is happening at a time when Malaysia is supposed to be experiencing the process of Islamisation from above and below. We continue to delude ourselves with the claim that our social development and progress have been guided all along by the positive and praiseworthy values of Islam.

But what kind of Islamic society, and what sort of Muslims, would indulge in the sort of muck-raking that we have seen in this country over the past few years? The media's shameful treatment of the ex-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, whose personal life was scandalised and made a subject for public enquiry, comes to mind. So does the case of the highly controversial attacks on the leader of the Puteri UMNO wing, whose personal life was brought under the glare of the tabloid press recently.

Even if an individual is guilty of the sort of charges that have been levelled against these leaders, what right do we have — as mortals ourselves — to assume the moral high-ground over them and abuse them in public so? What right does anybody have to publicly humiliate and slander anyone who has not even been given the chance to defend his or her reputation in a public arena? And what could

such scandals hope to achieve, short of selling trashy tabloids and magazines best left to the most frustrated, maladjusted and immature members of society?

How can any Muslim society abide by such practices, which go against the principles and values of Islam itself and which clearly caution Muslims against the use of such scandals as weapons to demean and humiliate their opponents? As the Islamic scholar Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi himself has noted: "The extremist readily accuses people and quickly passes judgement contrary to the generally accepted norm of 'innocent until proven guilty'. He considers a person guilty the moment he suspects him of something. He jumps to conclusions rather than looking for explanations. The slightest mistake is blown out of proportion; a mistake becomes a sin, and a sin a mortal sin. Such a reaction is a stark violation of the spirit and teachings of Islam which encourages Muslims to think well of other Muslims, to try and find an excuse for their misbehaviour and to try and help them improve their words and deeds[2]."

Qaradawi goes on to add that: "A Muslim is not even allowed to publicise the minor mistakes and faults of others, or become blind to their merits." But such an attitude is clearly absent from this so-called 'Islamic' society of ours, and the constant eruption of private scandals made public is proof, if any was needed, that ours is a society guided by the values of profiteering, conceit, hypocrisy and self-righteousness more than anything else. Rather than hold our heads up high, we should bury our heads in shame instead.

Endnotes:

1 A good example of such cultural critique at work can be found in the Islamist polemics against the Moghul empire. By the 19th century, many Indian Muslim scholars were

desperately trying to explain how and why the Moghul era in India came to its untimely and graceless end. The more conservative scholars among them pointed to the moral failings of the Moghul rulers themselves, whom they claimed were laid low by their own personal vices and moral failings. This sort of cultural critique has become very popular among Islamist intellectuals in Asia today, who fail to see that the real reasons for the collapse of Muslim power in India and the rest of the Muslim world have more to do with the workings of international politics and economic relations. If the Moghul empire was finally brought down, it was mainly because of the internal structural contradictions within the empire itself: It was overstretched and decentralised, with a top-heavy bureaucracy that was centred more on the life of the court. (As was the case of imperial France before the French revolution). This led to uneven development, incoherent policies and a weakening of the sovereignty of the state. The net result was an empire that could not sustain itself economically and militarily, and which was subsequently exposed to external economic competition and political threats.

2 Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Islamic Awakening: Between Rejection and Extremism*. First published in Arabic in 1981. Republished in English by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), Cairo. 1991. Reproduced in Charles Kurzman, Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1998: (pg. 202)

38 | WHIPPIN' TIME AGAIN

Malaysian laws allow for punishments that include the death penalty and whipping. It is ironic that while the 'moderates' among the country's socio-political elite continue to criticise the Hudud *law proposals of the Islamic party PAS on the grounds that punishments like cutting off hands and feet, and stoning to death are barbaric (something I happen to believe as well), they have failed to see how prison executions and whippings are every bit as savage and inhuman. Yet this is a society that lives with its contradictions on a daily basis, and many ordinary Malaysians still seem to think that whipping or executing criminals will get to the root of criminality itself. This article was written at a time when the debate over whether sex offenders should be whipped in public was raging in the local media. It was written in mid-2002.*

MALAYSIA AND MALAYSIANS never cease to amaze. In this wonderfully complex and confusing society of ours, contradictions come flying at you at a rate of one a minute, or even faster on better days. One of the most paradoxical things about our society is the way we deal (or rather, not deal) with the question of violence.

Malaysia's political parties, NGOs and social movements continue to moan and groan about the level of violence on our television screens and cinemas — and

quite rightly so. We complain about the effects of violence on our children, worried about the possibility that they may somehow be affected by what they see and turn into psychopaths. Time and again we read and hear of reports by NGOs about the increasing levels of violence that the Malaysian public is exposed to, such as the number of simulated killings, rapes, accidents and acts of random violence that spill from the TV sets into their living rooms.

Yet the very same social movements and political parties see no problem whatsoever when calling for the most violent and public forms of punishment on those whom they regard as criminals. Not too long ago, the country was rife with talk of whipping for illegal immigrants who have been caught in the country[1]. Never mind the fact that many of these 'illegals' were probably forced to come to the country for the simple reason that they could not find work and a decent life in their own countries. Never mind the fact that many of them were also probably trying to escape political persecution and a life of chaos and instability where they came from. The crowd bayed for blood, and our local media was full of talk about how these 'illegals' should be whipped and scarred for life. Nothing whips up a frenzy like a bloody good whipping, it seems.

Whipping is now back in the picture again. This time round, the main recipients of such public justice will be sex offenders and those guilty of incest and rape. Already we have seen how the various political parties and interest groups have come to the fore, each trying to outdo each other with outlandish proposals to resolve the problem. As the 'debate' spirals out of control, it has become increasingly difficult to see the line that is meant to separate the Government from the Opposition: Across the political and social spectrum, the call for violent public punishment can be heard.

What complicates matters is the way in which the whole issue of domestic rape, violence and incest has been politicised as well. While some groups claim — somewhat outlandishly according to a skewered logic that is difficult to comprehend — that it is 'excessive' religiosity that is somehow 'responsible' for these crimes, others have opted for an equally bizarre and twisted line of argument, claiming that such violent forms of punishment are the only cure for these problems. What is actually a serious and complex social phenomenon has become hostage to politics once again.

Lest I be misunderstood, allow me to point out that in no way do I condone or belittle incest and child abuse. These are heinous crimes indeed, made all the more so by the simple fact that more often than not the victims themselves tend to be the most vulnerable members of society. The children who have been abused thus are often traumatised for life, and made to feel 'guilty' for their part in their own abuse. Often a vicious cycle is initiated: Those who are abused are themselves turned into abusers in later life. The real question when addressing the problem of child abuse and incest is therefore not simply to punish the abuser, but to understand the nature of the crime in order to break this cycle of violence.

But this can only happen when we look at domestic violence, rape and child abuse in its proper social context and ask ourselves the difficult and embarrassing question: Why does a society like ours — which prides itself on its conservative values — produce such phenomenon in the first place? And is there something about the nature of our society that breeds this sort of mentality?

One obvious feature of our society — like many Asian societies — is its conservatism. Ours is a society propped up by the institutions and norms of Patriarchy, where children are taught from an early age to have blind respect and obedience to their parents. We still have not

evolved a discourse of rights and entitlements that endow our children a sense of identity, dignity, autonomy and rights. Is it a surprise, then, that when children are abused by their elders they feel they have no right to speak up for themselves and defend their rights and their bodies?

Unless and until we develop an understanding of rights that encompasses the whole of society, including children and the weakest sections of the populace, such practices are bound to continue unhindered. Parents will still continue to think that their children are an extension of themselves, and feel that they have the right to decide what to do with them. (In many cases, parents in Malaysia still decide what professions their children should take up in later life, and educate them accordingly. If children can't even choose their path in life, what hope is there for them to decide what they can and cannot do with their bodies?)

The root of the problem is therefore social, and not individual. While it is the individual perpetrator of violence who is at fault, each individual is also a reflection of the society he/she inhabits and is a product of. To suddenly turn on the criminal and punish him violently in public with punishments like whipping is a convenient way for us — society — to abdicate our own responsibility. But we cannot and should not be let off so easily. Such public punishments are a way for society to alienate and exteriorise 'problematic' individuals from their midst. But the real problem is far more complex, and it rests within society, and not just the individual.

Those who call for public punishments like whipping, amputation and beheadings have probably never seen such public acts of violence before. Being both an academic and a human rights activist, I have the unfortunate 'honour' to say that I have. The worst thing about such public punishments is not the violence itself, but the fact that there will always be a crowd to watch

them. What is worse, in so many recorded cases, the crowd actually enjoys them.

History is full of examples of mobs who seem to be drawn to violence. In the days before violence was normalised and made routine thanks to the popular media, crowds would gather to watch the hanging of criminals, the whipping, stoning, drowning and burning of witches and the execution of political dissidents. This still happens today, in countries like China and some Arab states where political dissidents are often shot in public before an appreciative crowd.

But if watching violence on TV and in the cinemas has a negative effect on the viewers themselves, one can only imagine the amount of psychological damage that is done to people who watch real prisoners being whipped, tortured and killed.

Violence dehumanises us and diminishes our capacity for empathy and identifying with the Other. To normalise violence and make it a routine public procedure merely mechanises the process even further, making public violence a matter-of-fact phenomenon that is almost comparable with going to watch a movie. Yet the spectacle of public violence (be it in the form of torture and executions or even violent sports like boxing) also brutalises the society that takes part in it. What makes the spectacle of public violence even more unpalatable is the sight of hundreds of ordinary people lining up to watch it, as if it was some kind of 'show'. But that, in effect, is what public punishments really are — stage-managed and orchestrated events that are meant to attract large crowds who are keen on public displays of pain and suffering. (For what kind of morally-upright individual would willingly go to an execution or public whipping to watch and gloat at the punishment of someone else, no matter how guilty the person might be?)

Public executions and torture have also been an effective tool used by States and Governments to domesticate the public. It serves as an open forum for social catharsis, where the public is allowed to vent out its anger at the state and redirect it against some individual. In cases of political executions, those killed are often innocent people themselves — unionists, intellectual dissidents, student activists, religious minorities. Yet the crowd does not care about these technical and legal niceties, as long as blood and bodies are on show.

One of the few governments that consciously took punishment away from the public sphere and made it a private affair was the revolutionary government of post-'79 Iran. As Darius Rejali has shown in his book *'Torture and Modernity'*[2], the ideologues of the Iranian revolution were revolted by the public displays of torture and violence that typified the corrupt and brutal regime of Shah Pehlavi of Iran. They understood that the Shah was using such public displays of violence as a means to control and domesticate society, making them accustomed to routine state violence and oppression. For the Islamist intellectuals of the Iranian revolution, crime and punishment was essentially a process of reform and re-education. This they did by making punishment a private affair and trying to correct the psycho-social aberrations of the criminal himself. Thus contrary to the demonised image of Iran today, the Iranian system was actually more humane and caring.

This is where we have singularly failed in Malaysia and the ASEAN region as a whole. In our search for scapegoats and convenient targets for our own inherited and self-inflicted ills, we often turn to others instead. Today the trope of the 'domestic child molester' (real though he/she may be) has become the bogeyman of our society. The outburst of moral condemnation and near-hysterical calls for public retribution really show how we, as a society,

cannot come to terms with the weaknesses and contradictions within ourselves. In our mad rush to cast the first stone, we have forgotten the fact that violence and abuse in our society today is a problem shared by all. It was we who made this society what it is, with its junk pop culture of cheap sensationalism and pornographic violence. If child abusers and rapists run amok all around us, we need to ask ourselves, who created the climate for them to thrive in the first place?

Endnotes:

1 It was reported recently (24 May, 2002 NST, *Immigration Warns Illegal Immigrants Again*) that a mandatory punishment of 12 months jail and whipping will be meted out on all illegal immigrants once the Immigration Act 1953 is enforced. Once gazetted, the law will allow immigration officials to stop and detain illegal immigrants coming into the country. Those found guilty will be whipped, and this applies to even first-time offenders. Similar laws exist in Brunei and Singapore.

2 See: Darius Rejali, *Torture and Modernity: Self, State and Society in Modern Iran*. Westview Press, 1994.

39 | WHY HUDUD? (WHY NOT?)

After its victory in the elections of 1999, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) redoubled its efforts to push for the imposition of Hudud *punishments and* Shariah *law in the states under its control. PAS's critics and opponents claimed that the form and content of PAS's* Hudud *laws were problematic and questionable to say the least, and that the* Hudud *punishments themselves (which included cutting off hands, whipping and stoning to death) were barbaric and cruel, as well as contrary to the fundamental principle of justice within Islam itself. Few observers cared to understand or explain the reasons behind the appeal of* Hudud *punishment and* Shariah *Law, however. This article was written in mid-2002.*

ONE OF THE BIGGEST and longest-running controversies that PAS has gotten itself into is the question of *Shariah* law and the party's stated aim of implementing *Hudud* punishments should it ever come to power in the country. This controversy goes back to the 1990s, when PAS first tabled the Kelantan Hudud Bill after it came to power in the state and elected *Tuan Guru* Nik Aziz Nik Mat as the Chief Minister.

PAS has never been short of supporters for its Hudud Bill. It has also not been short of opponents, many of whom criticised the Bill and the party's approach on a number of grounds. PAS's political opponents labelled the Hudud Bill a 'political gimmick', while women's groups

attacked it on the grounds that it was discriminatory towards Muslim women. The Hudud Bill was also one of the main causes of the internal divisions within the beleaguered *Barisan Alternatif*, and ultimately became the reason why the DAP chose to break away from the tenuous instrumental coalition. The tabling of the PAS Hudud Bill, first in Kelantan and then in Terengganu, has therefore incurred a considerable political cost to PAS.

Though PAS's opponents have lamented the party's inability and reluctance to compromise on the *Hudud* issue, it should be noted that the Malaysian case is far from unique. Other Islamist movements and parties have tried to force their way in implementing their own versions of the *Shariah*, with varying degrees of success. In Pakistan, Islamist parties like the *Jama'at-e Islami*, *Jamiat'ul Ulema-i Islam* and *Jamiat'ul Ulema-i Pakistan* managed to move the State apparatus closer to the *Shariah* by simply shifting the discursive centre of Pakistani politics towards the Islamic register. In other countries like Nigeria and Sudan, the introduction of *Shariah* law led to heightened conflicts within the Muslim community itself, as well as inter-religious conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims.

To expect PAS to surrender the *Hudud* gauntlet would be *naïve* to say the least. As we have seen, PAS, as a political party schooled in the mores and norms of political contestation, knows that the *Hudud* issue is one of the best tools it has at its disposal. Operating with the full knowledge that the UMNO-led Government has never and probably will never compromise on this highly sensitive and emotionally-loaded issue, PAS has been able to use *Hudud* as one of its most effective weapons to weaken the resolve and tarnish the Islamist credentials of the Government. The beauty and utility of PAS's Hudud Bill (at least up to 2002 before *Tuan Guru* Hadi Awang rose to become its president) is that it would never come to pass. (PAS's leaders probably suspect — rightly — that the

Federal Government will never allow a PAS State Government to actually implement any of the *Hudud* punishments, which ironically saves PAS from the embarrassment of having to actually chop off hands and feet, as well as whip and stone people to death in public.)

From a political scientist's point of view, the *Hudud* issue has to be one of the most effective discursive and ideological tools that PAS has had in its formidable arsenal. Due to the pivotal status that the *Shariah* occupies in the economy of Islamic theological-legal discourse, *Hudud* has been elevated to the status of the 'holy grail' of many an Islamist movement. Many Islamist parties today locate and identify themselves according to their commitment to the implementation of *Shariah* law. (The question of whether their respective experiments with *Shariah* actually live up to the ideals and principles of justice and equity that is so important to Islam invariably lags further behind).

In the midst of the controversies that have overtaken many Muslim societies today, the question of how and why *Shariah* has become so popular has been completely overlooked. Lest we forget, *Shariah* is not a new development in Islam: Its formulation dates back to the beginnings of Muslim civilisation itself and it was developed during the golden age of Islamic civilisation to the level of a sophisticated science. It should also be noted that for centuries *Shariah* was not seen as a crucial element that would somehow fill the psycho-social void within the Muslim *Ummah*: The Ottoman dynasty, for instance, managed to thrive and prosper for seven centuries with a clear and neat division between religion and state at its core. The offices of the *Vazir* (Prime Minister) and *Sheikh'ul Islam* (Head of the Religious Community) were both under the control of successive Ottoman Sultans who kept their feet in both worlds. Likewise, in Moghul India, Islam served as the mainframe upon which the Moghul empire was constructed, but this was also a Muslim dynasty that

compartmentalised itself into distinct secular and religious spheres. *Shariah* was never an issue in either of these cases.

The demand for *Shariah* should therefore be located in the moment when Muslim societies began to experience their political, economic and cultural decline. It was during the late 19th century that the demands for religious revival and Muslim solidarity were first heard in the Muslim world. It was the Muslim modernists and reformers who first brought *Shariah* back to the centre-stage of Muslim politics, seeing it as the remedy for the social ills of Muslim society and presenting it as the framework for the new Islamist project they proposed for the future. (While the traditionalist Muslims were quite happy to live with the division between religion and state that was introduced by the Western Colonial powers as it suited their own interests perfectly well.) The Muslim modernists and reformers saw in the *Shariah* a ready-made discursive economy that could be effectively utilised to create organic linkages with the Muslim polity, which would in turn pave the way towards political mobilisation and the creation of modern political movements. Many of those who turned to the *Shariah* as a vehicle for political organisation found that their efforts did not go unrewarded – in time, a host of Islamist parties and movements all over the world emerged, with many of them openly committed to a return to the *Shariah* and the reconstruction of the Islamic State.

The other factor that has contributed to the growing demand for *Shariah* is the failure of many postcolonial Muslim states, a factor that has often been bracketed out of the discussion by *Shariah*'s opponents.

For what is often forgotten is the fact that for millions of ordinary Muslims the world over, *Shariah* not only has the stamp of legitimacy on it, it is also a legal system that has had a direct and relevant impact on their lives. In many of the predominantly Muslim Colonies of

the West, the division between civil and religious law meant the creation of local *Shariah* and/or customary courts where justice was delivered immediately. Muslim peasants and workers from Morocco to Indonesia did not have to travel all the way to the Colonial capital to have justice delivered to them: the local *Shariah* court — sponsored and regulated by the Colonial State apparatus — was always on hand to deliver judgements on the day itself. The fact that ordinary Muslims did not have to engage lawyers (and thus incur heavy costs), that they knew the verdict even before the judgement was pronounced and that the system seemed consistent, open and reliable meant that *Shariah* courts enjoyed a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of many Muslims.

In the postcolonial period, practically every newly independent Muslim State embarked on extensive and impressive development initiatives. The modernising programmes of Ayub Khan of Pakistan, Sukarno of Indonesia and Nasser of Egypt were expected to deliver the bounties that independence had promised the people. The same was the case for Malaysia, from the time of Tunku Abdul Rahman onwards. But the failure of so many modernising programmes, coupled with the creeping culture of corruption, nepotism, abuse of power and authoritarianism in so many Muslim States, pointed to the failure of secularising elites and their ideologies. As their hopes and dreams were dashed on the hard rocks of *realpolitik*, Muslims began to look for other alternatives and the Islamists were there to provide them with one: the *Shariah* and the Islamic State.

To understand the appeal of PAS's *Hudud* proposals today, one would therefore have to look at the corresponding failure of its counterpart, the civil legal system. PAS has always called for the creation of an Islamic State and the introduction of *Shariah* law in the country. (Although the party's own understanding of what such an Islamic State would look like has changed over the years,

from the time of Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy to Asri Muda to Yusof Rawa, and then on to the present generation of *Ulama* leaders.) But for the first four decades of its history, PAS made little gains as far as the *Shariah* issue itself was concerned. It was only from the 1990s onwards that PAS has made *Shariah* its main weapon against the UMNO-led Government, and with some success.

That this shift took place at a time when Malaysians were exposed to a string of major corporate and political scandals could not be a simple coincidence: as the scandals grew in scale as well as number, the public's faith in the civil legal system was tested and pushed to the limit as more and more corporate misdemeanours were brushed under the carpet or kept under wraps. The Constitutional crisis of 1982-3, the UMNO legal battle of 1987, the second Constitutional crisis of 1991-93, the financial crisis of 1997 and the Anwar Ibrahim crisis of 1998 all contributed to the steady erosion of public confidence in not only the ruling coalition, but also the institutions of State such as the police, legislature and judiciary.

Faced with such stark realities, it is hardly a surprise if so many among the younger generation of Malay-Muslims today have given up on the secular developmental model. Though this does not pretend to be an exhaustive analysis, one can tentatively conclude that one of the main reasons *Shariah* and *Hudud* have become so popular among many Malay-Muslims is the failure of the secular option itself. The solution to the 'problem' (if it merits being described as such) is to restore the integrity and credibility of the civil legal apparatus itself. Rather than demonising PAS's *Shariah* project and engaging in an endless debate about the religious credentials of 'PAS's *Hudud*' or 'UMNO's *Hudud*', it would be simpler to reform the civil legal system in the country so that it once again does what it is meant to do: handing out justice in an open, fair and consistent manner according to the fundamental principles of the Malaysian Constitution.

40 | THERE WAS ONCE A RELIGION CALLED SCIENCE: A FABLE FOR OUR TROUBLED TIMES

In February 2002, a number of academics, human rights activists and writers (myself included) were accused of 'insulting Islam' by the Malaysian Ulama Association (PUM). The PUM tried to make this an issue of national concern, lobbying various Islamist organisations and it eventually gained the support of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) as well. Though the matter was later brought to rest after those accused were given the chance to defend themselves at various public forums and consultations with the state's religious authorities, the months that followed the PUM's initial salvo proved to be a living hell. Some of those accused (myself being one of them) received death threats, rape threats, verbal abuse and had to live with the stigma of being regarded as 'blasphemers' and provocateurs by ordinary people who had not read our writings or were familiar with our work. It seemed that once again a group was setting itself up as the self-proclaimed guardians of the faith and were using religion as a vehicle for mass mobilisation. This article was written in the first week of the PUM affair, in early March 2002.

IT WOULD APPEAR that the *'kafir-mengkafir'* season is back in town, with various religious elites and organisations going around accusing others of being 'bad Muslims' just because they happen to disagree with them and their

views. It is interesting to note that while we support their right to speak and to spread their teachings, the very same 'defenders of the faith' are not prepared to defend the right of others to criticise them when they speak falsehoods and nonsense.

Under such circumstances, it would pay for us to reflect upon these troubled times of ours, and to ask where this country might go in the future if such trends remain unchecked. The key question is this: Are we to allow a handful of self-proclaimed leaders and representatives of the faith community to dominate the discourse of the religion itself and to claim the exclusive right to interpret it for others? Will Islam one day become the exclusive domain of a handful of *Ulama* who claim that they and they alone have the right to interpret it, teach it and talk about it?

These questions are, of course, not unique to Islam alone. Indeed the history of the world shows us that practically every religion and belief system has come under the dominance and control of those who sought to use it for their own instrumental ends. History also teaches us what often happens next: The religion in question invariably grows ossified, dogmatic and rigid, and finally ends up losing its relevance in the age it finds itself in.

I wanted to raise these concerns in this article, but because the concerns go beyond Islam alone I have decided to write about the issue in the broadest terms possible. So forgive me, dear reader, if I take this opportunity to spin a fable for you. Perhaps in an oblique way it can shed some light on the subject that has been so close to my heart all this time.

There was once a religion called Science. (Well, all right-Science is/was not a religion *per se*, but it ultimately came to be regarded as one by some.)

When this belief system first appeared in the world, it was thought to be one that was inclusive and open to all. Those who promoted this new belief system claimed that Science was a universal creed and that it did not distinguish between race and culture, class and gender. Science was said to be a universal language that spoke to humanity as a whole and its message and values were timeless and universal.

The masses were persuaded at first. They fell to the charms of Science and its claims to reason and truth. They genuinely believed that Science could answer all their questions and that it would lead them to enlightenment and escape from the bonds of unreason, fear and prejudice. Science became the panacea for the ills of humanity and its proponents were seen as deliverers who would rescue all of humankind.

It was true that at first Science did live up to many of its claims. Science brought new wonders. It showed the people how to look at themselves and the universe around them anew. Suddenly the people realised that they were not alone in the world, and they inhabited it along with a host of germs, microbes, forces and energies that were previously invisible to the naked eye. With Science, they thought they could understand and explain everything. The world became theirs to conquer and they no longer feared the darkness of the night or the darkness in their hearts.

But in time the doctors of Science grew more and more confident in themselves and their achievements. They basked in the glory of the adoration of others, and soon realised that the people believed in them wholeheartedly. This blind faith in Science and the doctors of Science led to a growing feeling of superiority among the doctors themselves. They argued among themselves about the ways to improve their Science, and how Science could be used to service the needs of the masses — though

the masses themselves were rarely consulted. They spoke of saving the souls of the people — though they never bothered to ask if the people wanted to be saved. They claimed that they had so much to offer to the masses — but failed to ask if the masses wanted what they had to give at all.

The doctors of Science were respected and admired for the knowledge they possessed, but this knowledge would also have a corrupting role to play. The doctors of Science grew more and more conceited and self-satisfied. They claimed that they alone knew and understood the secrets of Science and the wonders it could produce. They became introverted and suspicious of those who tried to understand their arts, and in time the knowledge they possessed became more and more exclusive.

The doctors began to grow closer together. They spoke only with each other, for each other and to each other, among themselves. They formed closed circles with all manner of rites and rituals of association and entry. They created tests and curricula, so that fewer and fewer could join them in their charmed circle. They kept out the mob with their criteria of knowledge and they began to speak a language of their own that nobody else understood. They dressed in a particular way, spoke in a particular manner and adopted mannerisms that were particular to them alone — all in an effort to draw a distinction between themselves and the others. Soon their mode of dress, behaviour and speech became as important as the science they claimed as their own. One only had to look at one of them to conclude: "There goes a doctor of Science".

But among the doctors were quite a few charlatans and hypocrites too, who had learnt how to dupe the masses with their manners and dress, and who in fact knew precious little about Science itself. (Except a few quotes

in some esoteric script that nobody else could read or speak).

When the ordinary people began to question the doctors about their Science, they were told had no right to ask such questions. "We are the inheritors of a tradition of knowledge that goes back many generations. We have passed this knowledge among ourselves, from one generation to the next. How dare you, a mere layperson, ask? How dare you speak about our Science which your simple untutored mind cannot understand?" they thundered.

Those who tried to read about Science and discuss it on their own were deemed 'misguided' and 'untutored' by the scientists. Those who tried to criticise the doctors were dubbed 'unbelievers' and 'sceptics', who were threatening the orthodoxy itself. And those who tried to get around the doctors and practice Science on their own were attacked on the grounds that they had 'insulted Science', and accused of being mere amateurs with no knowledge and know-how.

Thus, as fate would have it, what began as a universal belief and value system ended up being the exclusive purview of a select few. The doctors of Science tried to monopolise the discourse of Science to themselves. They issued decrees and warning to all who tried to challenge them and their dominant position. Those who questioned them, criticised their methods or doubted their intentions were cast beyond the pale of society and judged 'irrational', 'unscientific' and 'backward'. They were regarded as a danger to society and to Science.

Because no one had the courage or will to question the scientists, Science was allowed to develop on its own, beyond the control of society and heedless to the needs of humanity. It was a supreme irony that Science, which began as a gift and boon common to all, became a closed discourse for a select few only. In time, it developed into a

dogma that had binding force on all who came under its sway. The doctors of Science lorded it over the masses, and the hypocrites and charlatans among them were given the opportunity to lead people astray with their theories of racial supremacy, eugenics, social Darwinism, nuclear deterrence, atomic weapons and modern methods of genocide. All of humankind was made to pay the ultimate price thanks to the conceit of a minority who felt that they and they alone understood the meaning and benefits of Science.

If this story is to have any relevance to us at all, it ought to remind us that no system of belief — sacred or profane — has ever been immune to the frailties of human beings. We are, every single one of us, mortal beings with mortal flaws. Our egos, fears and prejudices will see to it that even the noblest of intentions will be sullied in time.

For that reason, it is imperative that our beliefs and convictions ought to be checked time and again. Proud beings that we are and blinded by our faith in ourselves, it pays to have our convictions questioned and our authority challenged once in a while. This is true for scientists and doctors, politicians and peasants alike. It is also true of religious leaders, be they priests or *Ulama*, who — like any one of us — are just as likely to make mistakes or be swayed by their all-too-human weaknesses.

It is for this reason that no discourse should ever be kept closed and exclusive only to a select few. Religion, like any other belief system or way of life, has to be kept open to the scrutiny and enquiry of everyone — from the educated to the most ignorant. For in the questions and critiques that are levelled at us, we may gain an insight into the flaws and mistakes of ourselves and our interpretations. For religious elites to claim that they and they alone have the right to speak and teach our religion

is an offence and an insult both to our intellect and to the religion itself. Islam will survive the questions we put to it, even if some flawed and mistaken *Ulama* won't. Islam is too important to be left to a handful of clerics and scholars alone. Let the doors of *ijtihad* (interpretation) open; let Islam breathe again.

41 | IN DEFENCE OF DIFFERENCE: WHY FREEDOM OF SPEECH MATTERS MOST

*What goes around comes around. A few months after the 'PUM controversy' died down, the spiritual leader (*Murshid'ul Am*) of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) was accused of blasphemy for his alleged statement that God was a 'gangster', said to be delivered at a PAS rally earlier. Needless to say, the powers-that-be in the country jumped on the opportunity to exploit the precedent that had been set by the PUM earlier in order to vilify and discredit the* Murshid'ul Am *and his party. This article was written in late 2002, in defence of the* Murshid'ul Am *of PAS and his right to free speech.*

THE NEWS THAT the *Murshid'ul Am* of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat has been accused of blasphemy and called for questioning by the authorities has struck many of us by surprise. Nik Aziz was accused of blasphemy for his statement where he is alleged to have claimed that God was a 'gangster', made during a PAS rally some time ago. The statement was instead taken up by PAS's opponents who claimed that Nik Aziz had committed a crime against his faith and should be hauled up in court instead.

Needless to say, this is yet another one of those convoluted dramas in Malaysian politics. I cannot claim

to be an expert in this particular issue for the simple reason that I have not heard or read the speech given by him *in toto*. I was not there when he made the alleged remark that has landed him in trouble. The same would be true for 99% of us: Most of us were not there when he said what he said and all that we have been told so far is mere hearsay. To indulge in malicious gossip and hate-mongering is to deliberately cause strife and discord in society. There is a word for this: *fitnah* .

What is ironic, however, is that the man who is accused of blasphemy today happens to be the spiritual leader of a party that has itself used the discourse of *takfir* (to accuse other Muslims of being *kafirs* or *munafikin*) and has led the way in numerous witch-hunts against independent academics and writers whom they have likewise wrongly accused. "The revolution has come full circle, and now, Saturn-like, devours its own children."

What is worrying about the present campaign to demonise and persecute Nik Aziz is the way that the religious laws of the land are being used to silence alternative voices and criminalise independent thought. (Not that PAS is innocent of this, as the party is equally inclined to criminalise the thoughts of others opposed to its ideas.)

Living as we do in a country already burdened with a host of repressive laws and regulations restricting our fundamental political freedoms, the use of such religious laws merely adds another layer of control to an already over-policed state. Despite the paternalistic rhetoric of care and concern (we are, as usual, being told that this is being done to 'protect' Islam and Muslims from dangerous ideas) the bottom line is that such selective persecution smacks of not-too-subtle politicking of the authoritarian variety.

The ongoing drama between the UMNO-led Government and PAS — which has been made all the worse thanks to the Islamisation race between the two —

has incurred an enormous cost to the political and personal liberties of Malaysians in general. As both sides try to out-Islamise each other, there can be only one final outcome: The use (and abuse) of Islam as a discourse of legitimation and delegitimation which ultimately politicises Islam and turns it into a discourse of State control and thought-policing.

But by institutionalising and using the discourse of Islam in this way, both sides have contributed to the narrowing of Muslim thought, the closure of the space of discursive exchange and the eradication of the plurality of voices that exist within the lived experience of normative Islam. Islam and Islamic discourse have become the terrain for a battle for hegemony and dominance, where neither side is prepared to concede to the other. Both sides are even less inclined to admit other voices into the arena, rendering impossible any form of intervention that can possibly present itself as a viable alternative critique to the status quo.

It is therefore ironic that in this race to claim Islam for themselves, neither PAS nor UMNO is willing to open the way for alternative ideas and schools of thought. Though both sides claim that theirs is an agenda to 'protect Islam' and to 'protect Muslims' from devaint ideas and heretical opinions, it should be clear to anyone by now that what is really going on is a battle for power and dominance fought out on the plane of discursivity. What is more, both sides have shown that they are equally intolerant of other opinions and interpretations, and made clear their own agenda at dominating and closing off the discursive boundaries of Islamic discourse once and for all.

Under such circumstances, what hope is there for any alternative, middle-of-the-road reading and understanding of Islam in the country? Despite the fact that both UMNO and PAS claim that they acknowledge

and even encourage openess and freedom of thought, both sides have singularly failed in this respect. The hounding of Nik Aziz by UMNO and the hounding of independent academics and writers by PAS both now and in the past show that neither side is really able and willing to open up the middle ground, allowing for the emergence of that crucial third space that would free the discourse of political Islam from the binary opposition that has split the Muslim community (and Malaysian community by extension) for so long. As for those non-Muslim citizens who might want to enter the fray to add their insights and opinions on the matter, the prospects are even less promising: The fact is that neither side would welcome the intervention of non-Muslims (still labouring under the pejorative label of *kafir*) into the matter.

For those of us who are thoroughly sick and tired of the antics and shenanigans of both UMNO and PAS in this matter, the agenda should be clear. Though we may be like ants caught between a pair of warring elephants, we need to defend whatever space we have left in our control. It is for this simple reason that any progressive Islamic agenda in Malaysia (and anywhere else in the world) must begin with the foundational premise that freedom of expression, thought and interpretation comes before all else.

But for those of us who count ourselves as 'progressive Muslims' (or 'progressive non-Muslims') the obstacles before us are considerable indeed. In Malaysia, as is the case with the rest of the Muslim world today, independent voices are caught between the demagogues in the mosques and demagogues in the corridors of power. Be they Mullahs, Generals-turned Presidents or Presidents behaving like Generals, the Muslim world is cursed with too many power-hungry leaders who cannot resist the temptation of turning to the discourse of religion when it suits their interests. In Pakistan both Zulfikar Ali Bhutto

and General Zia ul'Haq used Islam to justify policies that can only be described as Fascistic in their values and practice. Likewise in post-revolutionary Iran we see how the discourse of Islam was transformed from a vehicle for social mobilisation to an ideology of control and policing. In Sudan and Nigeria the universal message of Islam was diluted as it was turned into a political ideology catering to exclusive communitarian ends; while in Afghanistan Islam was sullied at the hands of the Taliban who used it as the basis of a politics of authenticity and nostalgia that took the country back to the middle-ages. Only in a handful of cases have we seen Islam being understood and instrumentalised as a discourse of emancipation and social empowerment.

Notwithstanding the failures of political Islam thus far, we who call ourselves progressives still need to find the ways and means to harness the values and ideas of Islam as a means for social mobilisation and liberation.

By 'progressive' I certainly am not referring to the brand of genetically-modified, made-to-order Islam designed by Hollywood or the gnomes of Washington who would love to see an emasculated user-friendly form of Islam that can be domesticated to serve the needs of American/Western hegemony. Nor am I talking about a wishy-washy form of nominal Islam that is mere surface phenomenon.

The form of progressive Islam that we need to create at this stage is one which engages in the realities of the times we live in; is cognisant of the plurality and complexity of the global age; is sensitive to the deep cleavages of power, race, gender and class that continue to divide humanity, and one that is activist in its leanings and approach. This is the sort of active, critical and engaging Islam that has been put forth by Islamist intellectuals like Rached Ghannoushi, Fathi Osman, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Ebrahim Moosa, Abdullahi an-Naim, Amina Wadud,

Nurcholish Madjid, Shafi Ma'arif, Abdul Karim Soroosh, Fatima Mernisi, Chandra Muzaffar and others. It is an approach and understanding of Islam that is concerned with the broad questions of social justice, universal suffrage, equal rights, human rights, democracy and pluralism. It is, in short, a form of Islam that is an once rooted in the universal principles and values of Islam itself while constantly engaging with the world we live in. It is 'progressive' not because CNN or BBC (or RTM) says so, but because it is a form of 'Islam in motion' that is progressing towards the differed goal of universal justice, equality and freedom as embodied in the teachings of Islam itself. It is, in short, a 'progressive Islam' on Islam's own terms.

Have we come any closer to this progressive Islamic agenda here in Malaysia? Unless you have been in a coma for the past twenty years, the answer that comes to mind is a resounding 'No'. But all hope is not lost. The strongest feature of Islam in my mind is that it remains fundamentally an equalitarian religion which resists any attempts to abuse or manipulate it. Though we now find ourselves confronted by a host of self-proclaimed 'defenders of the faith' who have taken it upon themselves to control and police the discourse of Islam, the fact remains that the equalitarian ethos of Islam itself prevents it from being quarantined within any hermeneutic border.

The one good thing about the Islamisation race is that it has made Islam a living reality and presence for all of us. Though some of us may not be too comfortable with the thought of having religion forced down our throats on a daily basis, at least this means that most of us have access to the discourse of Islam itself. Even non-Muslims have begun to raise questions about the use of Islam for political ends in the country, which can't be a bad thing: After all, if Islam is to become the mainframe for political and social relations in the nation as a whole,

it must be the right of all Malaysian citizens (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) to question what is being done to and with Islam in their name. Islam, as I've said a million times before, is simply too important to be left to Muslims alone.

Those of us who want to ensure that this country does not fall into the hands of religious demagogues and thought-police should therefore get off our respective posteriors and engage in this debate before it gets out of control. Rather than allow PAS and UMNO to dominate the debate and introduce more and more repressive laws to curtail our fundamental freedom of thought and speech, we should start exercising those rights instead. The first step would therefore be to stand up and be counted, and to call on both sides to stop using and abusing the laws to limit our freedoms further.

It is for this reason that I am opposed to the current of growing political-religious authoritarianism in Malaysia today, which has claimed Nik Aziz as its latest victim. Living as we do at a time when fundamental liberties are being eroded the world over thanks to the so-called 'war against terrror', we do not need another layer of oppressive laws to suffocate our minds even further. I am not defending Nik Aziz's statements *in toto* (as I've said, I haven't read them), but I am defending his right to speak and think as a citizen of this country. The fundamental principles of freedom of speech, thought and interpretation — which are at the core of any form of progressive Islamic agenda — have to come before all else, whatever the cost.

42 | (NUSANTARA) WOMEN ON TOP

Wanita Utama Nusantara: Dalam Lintasan Sejarah
Edited by Ismail Sofyan, H. Hassan Basri and T. Ibrahim Alfian.
Published by Jayakarta Agung Offset, Sponsored by Bank EXIM Indonesia.
Jakarta, 1994. 157 pages. hardback.

THE WRITING OF HISTORY has become the most contested discursive terrain in Malaysian society of late. Historical discourse has become the battleground for competing wills, backed by clearly identifiable political interests as well. Those of the Islamist camp have attempted to re-write Malaysian history (and Malay history in particular) through the lens of political Islamism, giving everything an Islamist gloss even where/when it wasn't there. Hardly a surprise then that the pre-Islamic past of the Malays has received so little attention by the esteemed intellectuals and academics of the Islamist hue.

So great has this discursive shift been that the younger generation of Malay-Muslims in this country might think that before the coming of Islam, the Malays as a race and culture did not even exist. (Presumably there

were aliens in their place at the time.) But in their rush to write their revisionist accounts of the past, these Islamist scholars have also narrowed the scope of Malay culture and identity and reduced Malay history to a mere few hundred years. So great have been the changes that these days one is almost afraid to talk of the pre-Islamic past in the universities, for fear of being labeled as one of those nasty *munafikin* dressed up in academic clothing.

Another area of Malay history that has been completely overlooked is the role of the non-Malay communities in the development of Malaysian culture and politics, and even more importantly the role played by women (of all ethnic communities) in that development.

There have only been a few notable examples to the contrary: A handful of studies on the role of women in the dominant political parties like UMNO have been written in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but nothing much has followed in the wake of these developments.

Worse still, a gender-sensitive approach to history has not been foregrounded in the writing of the early history of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, which leaves women today with little to fall back on when searching for positive examples of emancipated and politically active women who played a key role in the development of their respective polities.

Again and again, the same excuses are brought to bear: History and historical writing has always been predicated on a specific notion of the rational independent subject as the primary agent for historical progress. History, we are told repeatedly, is the result of the labours of the happy few: Men with power and the ability to use it. That is why we continue to repeat the cliche that Columbus discovered the New World, that Peter the Great modernised the Russian state, that Tunku Abdul Rahman was the founder of independent Malaya/Malaysia. The efforts of the subaltern classes, the millions of nameless

individuals whose identities are lost because they did not carry with them the keys to power, wealth and influence remain relegated to the margins.

Women are doubly disadvantaged in this respect. Robbed of their political rights and access to gaining it, they have been the silent motors of history whose efforts have made history itself possible but whose identities remain lost forever. The fact that history has been (in the past at least) more often than not written by men makes it even more difficult for women to have a say in this discourse of sameness that speaks only of itself and to itself all the time.

Whenever women have demanded their right to contribute to the writing of history, or at least to have their efforts recorded for posterity, they have been told time and again that they are part of a larger current which they need to identify themselves with. Women have been told, since time immemorial, that they play a vital role in society but whenever they seek to find their own histories and identities in the discourse of history itself, the end result is always the same: The presence of women is inevitably sublimated under the broader category of human history itself, which, by some quirk of fate, happens to be the history of men written by men!

It was therefore a welcome change to find a work that looks at the role played by Malay-Muslim women in the political developments of the Malay archipelago, entitled *Wanita Utama Nusantara: Dalam Lintasan Sejarah* (Prominent Women of Nusantara: A Historical Overview). Published in Indonesia and supported by the Menteri Negara Urusan Peranan Wanita of Indonesia, the book which is edited by Ismail Sofyan, H. Hassan Basri and T. Ibrahim Alfian attempts to do what no other major textbook in Malaysia or Indonesia has done before: To highlight the role played by Malay-Muslim women in the political development of Indonesia (most notably in

Aceh, North Sumatra) over the past three hundred years. (It is also comforting to note that Indonesia has at least produced a number of male scholars who are sensitive to the need for this sort of subaltern research and have tried to address the gender imbalances so endemic in Southeast Asian scholarship today.)

The text itself may come across as a 'coffee table' book due to its large format and glossy presentation, but that should not deter the reader. In it, one comes across essays that look at a number of prominent and influential Malay women who have played an important role in defining the political destiny of their respective societies: Ratu Nur-Illah, Ratu Nahrasiyah, Laksamana Keumalahayati, Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah, Sultanah Nurul Alam Inayat Syah, Cut Nyak Dhien, Chuk Nyak Muetia, Pocut Baren and Pocuk Meurah Intan.

The women whose lives and times are recorded in this text make up an impressive crew indeed. They range from powerful women rulers like Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah and Sultanah Nurul Alam Inayat Syah, to guerilla warriors like Cut Nyak Dhien, Chuk Nyak Muetia, Pocut Baren and Pocuk Meurah Intan who resisted the Dutch imperial army. Even more spectacular was the life of Laksamana Keumalahayati, who was the admiral of the Aceh imperial navy and perhaps the only woman in the world who ever occupied such an important post in a nation's maritime forces.

If we haven't heard of any of these names before, it is not exactly a fault of ours alone. Colonial historians were careful to obscure or deminish the role played by any native leader who stood up against the might of the colonial government, and female resisters were treated with even more unbridled contempt. To compound the problem even further, postcolonial history was caught up in the tumult of postcolonial revisionism, and during the decades that immediately followed the declaration of independence

in Malaya and Indonesia, history was held hostage by sectarian political groupings (Nationalist, Communist, Islamist) that had little time for gender awareness and cultural particularism.

The main complaint that the author has about 'Wanita Utama Nusantara: Dalam Lintasan Sejarah' is that it, too, places undue focus on the lives and labours of the rich and famous. It is well and good that a gender-sensitive writing of history takes into account of the role played by prominent and powerful women of the past, but this should not be at the expense of the disempowered and disenfranchised.

As long as the notion of the free rational subject and agent of history is based on an understanding that power confers the right to identity while the powerless have none, we cannot claim to have a history that is comprehensive and all-encompassing.

Even taking into account the fact that such an all-enclusive history is a pie in the sky at best (and a nightmare of cultural particularisms at worst), we nonetheless need to take the step towards the writing of a subaltern history that embraces every section of Southeast Asian society including the non-Malay/Bumiputera minorities and of women in particular who make up, after all, the majority of the population of the world.

Another shortcoming of the text is that it fails to address the complex relationship between Malay culture, Malay women and Islam. It must be noted that all the women featured in the text were Malay-Muslims themselves, but they were also independent subjects who clearly had a will of their own. Just how the discourse of Islam could be adapted to serve as a rationale for justifying the active and open participation of women in politics, government and even warfare is a complex question that deserves to be asked, for it proves that Islam was not an obstacle in the way of women's emancipation in the past.

The text therefore provides us with crucial historical data and background information into the socio-cultural, political and religious framework of Malay-Muslim society in the past, long before Malaysian and Indonesian society came under the sway of the orthodox *Ulama* who have been trying to minimise the presence and influence of Malay-Muslim women in public life.

For activists, academics and laypersons alike, the book offers a glimpse into an Other Malaysia (or an Other *Nusantara* if you wish) which is not too far removed from the present and which could — through political struggle- be reactivated if we have the will to fight for it.

But even after taking into accounts the shortcomings of the book, *Wanita Utama Nusantara: Dalam Lintasan Sejarah* remains a landmark achievement in every respect and deserves the recognition that it has earned. A step in the right direction, and one which we hope will be followed by many more.

43 | DOMESTIC POLICY BY OTHER MEANS: MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE MUSLIM WORLD RECONSIDERED

Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy.
By Shanti Nair.
Published by Routledge under the auspices of the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore.
Routledge Press, London. 1997.
301 pages. ISBN 0-415-10341-X

FOR TOO LONG the study of Malaysian politics has been demarcated along a sharp boundary line that divides between 'hard' political-economic analysis and 'soft' social sciences and cultural studies. The impact of culture on Malaysian politics is seldom discussed at length and in detail, and even less has been said and written about the complex ways and means through which Malaysian politics has been culturally mediated.

Shanti Nair's study on the impact of religio-cultural concerns on Malaysian foreign policy is one of the few books that have looked into the complex relationship between religion and politics in Malaysia. This has to be the best treatment of the subject by any

contemporary scholar of Malaysian and Southeast Asian politics, and Nair's analysis skillfully weaves elements of history (both Malaysian and Islamic), local and regional political developments and a sound methodological approach that neatly ties together her analysis.

Nair's thesis, simply put, is that foreign policy is just a form of domestic policy by other means. This is clearly evident in the case of those countries that have opted for more active and open foreign policy initiatives abroad, and is certainly not confined to the developed and powerful nations of the North. As she tries to show, even in cases of developing countries like Malaysia, foreign policy is an effective and convenient tool to project a country's image abroad and to secure political goals on the domestic front as well. "*That foreign policy can serve as a function of domestic policy is particularly vital to understanding the ways in which small but rapidly developing nations like Malaysia engage in international society*" she points out (pg. 6).

Of particular interest is the focus of Nair's analysis. By locating one variable factor — Islam — as her main concern, she has tried to show how and why Malaysia's foreign policy re-orientation both before and during the Mahathir era was shaped by local political demands and the complex intra-Malay-Muslim rivalries in the country:

> *Islam's symbolic function in foreign policy under the Mahathir administration is explained primarily by its political relevance to the ruling party UMNO and its role of 'protection' of the Malay community... This symbol is particularly relevant to the period in question because of both serious and deepening intra-Malay rivalry and the capacity of international Islam to impinge on the domestic scene* (pg. 9)

Nair tries to explain the factors that led to Malaysia's re-alignment closer to the Muslim world during the 1980s and 1990s. She correctly points out that during the first two decades of Malaysia's independence the country was still very much oriented towards its regional neighbours and the Non-Aligned Movement. (During the Indo-Pakistan conflict of the 1960s, for example, Malaysia did not immediately align itself with its co-religionist Pakistan but sided with India instead.)

But as the global currents of Islamic revivalism swept across the Muslim world, Malaysia — already a highly exposed and therefore vulnerable nation-state— was affected by external variable factors that it could not control. The rise of Islamist movements in countries like Pakistan, Iran and Egypt was soon to have an immediate impact on the local political culture of Malaysia and the Malay-Muslim community as well.

Here is where the local variable factors come into play. Nair notes that one of the reasons global Islamist resurgence was to have such a profound effect on the domestic political terrain was the intra-communal rivalry between the two major Malay-Muslim parties (UMNO and PAS) that were vying for the same ethno-religious vote bank: The Malays. The Mahathir administration employed the rhetoric of Islam as one of the ways to extend its sphere of influence, control and patronage over the Malays while the ideologues of PAS saw it as a convenient tool for attacking the credibility of the government.

As this intra-communal rivalry intensified, Islam became one of the major points of contestation. As both PAS and UMNO sought to outbid each other's claim before the same Malay-Muslim constituency, Islam and Muslim concerns were highlighted and became the focus of attention for both parties. (The emergence of other Islamist movements like ABIM, JIM and *Darul Arqam*

also complicated the scenario further, making Islamist discourse the most hotly contested space in Malaysia).

The net result of this attempt to use Islam to outbid each other was the re-alignment of Malaysian foreign policy. Both the UMNO-led government and the opposition Islamist party PAS promote themselves as the defenders of Islam and Muslim interests and both sides project themselves on the global stage, forcing a radical turn-around in Malaysian foreign policy and external relations.

To counter the growing influence of PAS (and to a lesser extent ABIM) on the international scene, the government of Dr. Mahathir re-directed the country's foreign policy. The first decade of the Mahathir era was marked by a significant re-orientation of the country's political compass. A new formal ranking of external relations was announced, in the order of (1) ASEAN, (2) the Muslim world, (3) the Non-Aligned community and finally (4) the Commonwealth. As Nair argues, this shift in foreign relations was matched by a shift in official rhetoric as:

> *Throughout the 1980s Malaysia increasingly (but selectively) sought to identify itself with international Muslim issues and (presented itself) as an active member of the global Muslim community. Both government and UMNO rhetoric increasingly referred to Malaysia as an Islamic nation and to UMNO itself as the third largest Islamic party in the world.*(pg. 80)

Henceforth, Malaysia aimed to improve bilateral relations with all the nations of the Muslim world, on both political and economic levels. Nair, however, notes that "*expectations were not matched by reality. Although there were individual*

successes in specific areas of economic exchange, overall trade with other Muslim countries remained only a small sector of the total volume of Malaysian trade with the world and appeared strikingly miniscule compared to trade with developed countries and countries in the Southeast Asian region." (pp. 103-104).

But even though nothing much came out of this re-orientation of geo-political priorities (America, Japan and the countries of Western Europe remained the biggest trading partners of Malaysia), the intended effects on the local political scene were considerable: It helped to improve Malaysia's self-image and standing as an Islamic country and it boosted the Islamist credentials of the UMNO leadership in particular.

These foreign policy initiatives also helped the Malaysian government reap further benefits closer to home. In time, a number of local initiatives was launched with the help of foreign funding and political support. The *Universiti Islam Antarabangsa* (UIA - International Islamic University of Malaysia) which was founded in 1983 was one of them. The UIA project was announced after the Prime Minister's visit to the Arab Gulf States. Apart from Malaysia, the UIA's initial funding came from Muslim states like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Libya, Turkey and Egypt.

By initiating its own Islamisation programme, the government of Dr. Mahathir had effectively stolen a march from the Islamists of PAS. In time, the labours of the Mahathir administration began to pay off: Cash injections came from countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, though they were aimed more at projects related to Islamic *dakwah* (missionary) activities[1]. Apart from that Dr. Mahathir himself gained recognition as a Muslim leader. In 1983 the Malaysian Prime Minister was awarded the 'Great Leader' award by none other than President Zia'ul Haq of

Pakistan (who had previously anointed the ABIM leader-turned-UMNO politician, Anwar Ibrahim).

Nair also notes that Malaysia's realignment closer to the Muslim world did not make it a passive consumer or recipient of anything and everything that came from other Muslim states. Indeed, as Nair correctly points out, the realignment closer to the Muslim world was also a way for the Malaysian government to 'sift out' elements and tendencies that it regarded as antithetical to its own model of 'modernist' Islam. Efforts to woo diplomatic support and economic co-operation with other Muslim states was also a way to establish strong bilateral links with their respective governments and to fend off any unwanted influences that might come in indirectly via non-governmental channels[2].

Nair is careful to maintain a sense of balance and objectivity in her analysis. Unlike many other political observers and scholars who misread Malaysia's realignment as a genuine shift closer towards a more radical brand of Islam, she correctly points out that the policy was motivated more by local political demands and the necessities of *realpolitik* than anything else. The realignment — though not entirely cosmetic — was nonetheless a case of domestic policy at work under a different guise. Its aim was to knock the wind out of the sails of the local Islamist opposition movements and parties, and to help the UMNO-led government reclaim precious discursive ground and Islamist credentials.

Cynics may dispute the Malaysian strategy as being superficial in nature, but they would obviously be overlooking the fact that it did by and large succeed. Despite its marginal status and role in Muslim world affairs, Malaysia has made its stand clear and has projected its image as a moderate and progressive Muslim nation. Proof of this is the fact that in the midst of the present international crisis that threatens to divide the world

between Islam and the West, Malaysia is one of the few Muslim countries that is able to walk the fine line between the two and is still seen as the one predominantly Muslim state which has managed to gain economic success without dressing itself in the *burqa* of an Islamic state.

All in all, Shanti Nair's Islam in *Malaysian Foreign Policy* is a gem of a book, certainly worth reading by all who are interested in the complex relationship between religion and politics and its impact on both domestic and foreign policy. A timely intervention which has helped to elucidate and illuminate many of the murkier quarters of Malaysian studies.

Endnotes:

1 In 1982, Kuwait donated more than RM 120 million for projects launched by the *Pusat Islam* (Islamic Centre) under the Prime Minister's department and the *Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah* (Islamic Dawah Foundation). Later in 1986 eight loans totalling RM 390 million were secured from the Saudi Fund to help with other missionary and welfare projects for Muslims in the country.

2 This was most clearly demonstrated by Malaysia's cautious approach to Iran, which Nair examines in considerable detail. Nair notes that the Malaysian government's initial reluctance to deal with Iran in the wake of the Iranian revolution (for fear that Iranian revolutionary elements and ideas might seep into Malaysia as well) was later replaced by a more realist stance that saw the need for bilateral co-operation instead. By slowing improving contact with the government of the new Islamic Republic, Malaysia managed to send its own message through: 'Economic co-operation: Yes, Islamic revolution: No'.

PART THREE
Looking For The Other Malaysia

44 | MALAYSIA HAS LOST A FAVOURED SON: IN MEMORY OF NIK RASHIDIN NIK HUSSEIN

This article was written in June 2002. It was, without doubt, the most difficult piece I have ever had to write.

ON WEDNESDAY THIS WEEK, Malaysia lost a favoured son. The untimely death of Nik Rashidin Nik Hussein, traditional woodcarver, artist and teacher, has left an enormous void in the world of traditional Malay art and culture, and his passing will be mourned by all those who knew him and his work.

Nik Rashidin passed away at his father's home in Kota Bharu, after battling the cancer that assailed his body for over three months. I was abroad at the time, and I received a phone call from Malaysia the morning after his passing. The news did not surprise me.

I first met Nik Rashidin, his brother Nik Rashidee and his apprentice and collaborator Norhaiza Noordin four years ago. The three of them had been working together for years, creating some of the most spectacular and beautiful Malay woodcarvings that have been used to decorate mosques, official buildings and institutions all over the country. Between them, they learned, collected and documented thousands of images, illustrations, records

and books related to the art of Malay woodcarving as well as the arcane knowledge of the cult of wood itself. They also amassed a huge collection of Malay woodcarving, with many pieces more than 200 years old and which no museum collection in the country could ever match.

For someone like myself who is drawn to the marginalised and often forgotten aspects of Malaysian culture and history, meeting Nik Rashidin was like being offered the key into a vast library that nobody else had access to. From our very first encounter at his village home in Bachok where he lived with his wife Rosnawati, we hit it off from the start. During the weeks and months when I was back in Malaysia, I tried my best to travel to Kelantan to meet up with Nik and compare notes. Our evenings were spent on the quiet balcony in front of his wooden house, where we would discuss into the early hours of the morning the subjects that interested us the most: the cult of wood and the culture of the Malay *keris*.

The Africans have a saying: "The death of a learned man is like a library burnt". Although he did not possess much in terms of formal schooling, Nik Rashidin was an abundant wellspring of knowledge which had been transmitted orally from his teachers to him. He spent his early years as an apprentice woodcarver in Malaysia and then in Bali, and upon his return to his homeland became a student of the foremost carvers of the time. From them he learned not only how to carve but also the esoteric knowledge that marks the boundary between the true artist and the amateur. What was more, the chain of transmission (*silsilah*) between Nik and his teachers went back well beyond a dozen generations, which meant that he carried with him a body of knowledge that was well over half a millennium old.

But Nik realised that unless and until this knowledge was put down into words and collected in a formal and regulated manner, it would be mere

information that made little sense. Worst still was the fact that he could not pass the knowledge to anyone else, for few had time for what he had to say. He felt the anguish and pain of someone who was watching his country and his people die a slow death. Modernisation meant the dislocation and destabilisation of life patterns in the countryside, making it impossible for traditional artists like him to continue their work in a setting that was appropriate to their temperament. His forefathers were royal artisans who had worked in the courts of Patani, but Nik was forced to work for modern urbanised clients who were more interested in the resale value of the pieces they bought from him.

Apart from the domesticated Philistines, there were also the religious Pharisees, fanatics and bigots who could never understand how and why anyone like him would want to retain their historical and cultural links to the past. Nik's work was firmly located within a tradition that dates back to antiquity and which gave Malay patrimony its weight and depth. But its roots date back to the pre-Islamic era, and the new-age fanatics of the times we live in could not accept that he — a Malay-Muslim — would want to carve *keris* handles and pieces whose provenance could be traced back to the ancient empire of Langkasuka, replete with its Hindu-Buddhist motifs and themes.

Misunderstood by those around him, Nik Rashidin's alienation grew. It was only abroad that he was appreciated by true connoisseurs who saw in him the great artist he was.

Like Nietzsche's madman in the marketplace, Nik Rashidin was a man living in exile. His sturdy frame carried within it a sensitive and tormented soul. But he was neither living in the right place nor the right age. I often thought of the irony of the situation: anywhere else in the world, in Europe or in Japan, a man like him would have been

regarded a national treasure. He was, without doubt, the best Malay traditional woodcarver of his age and there will be few who could ever match him.

But Nik was also a complex and tormented figure who carried with him an enormous burden of knowledge that had to be passed on. Our nightly discussions were basically long monologue sessions where he would speak of anything and everything at the same time, spewing forth ancient riddles, codes, formulae, secrets and instructions for an art now dead. I, in turn, would collect these pieces of information and put them together as best I could to form a reconstituted body of knowledge that could be translated and passed on to others. Together we worked as a team — him the mouth and me the pen. Our first collaboration was the essay *From Majapahit to Putrajaya: The Kris as a Symptom of Civilisational Development and Decline* that was published in the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London[1].

Over his last few years Nik busied himself with the task of putting together his artefacts and works for an expanded exhibition that would tour the world. The first taste of this was a smaller but equally ambitious attempt to revive interest in traditional Malay woodcarving that came in the form of an exhibition called *'Kayu dan Semangat'* that was held in Kuala Lumpur. Even then, our biggest obstacle was having to persuade others of the worth and necessity of such serious research into Malay culture and civilisation.

Throughout his career Nik was also forced to battle the demons within. Anguished by his own explosive and overflowing talent that had to be kept under control all the time, he suffered numerous breakdowns — gripped by feelings of anxiety and confusion that often assailed him.

Yet the man who could break down and slip into solitude and silence for weeks was also one who could mesmerise and charm others when his 'spirit' was in him. For me, talking with Nik was at times almost a revelation, as I understood that through him the voices of generations of carvers, artists and teachers could also be heard.

About three months ago, Nik fell ill with a major back problem that got worse by the day. After weeks of silent suffering and keeping it to himself, he finally consented to be taken to hospital where a formal examination was carried out. The results were a shock for us, as he was diagnosed as having cancer in the base of his spine. Well intentioned though it was, the stay in hospital may well have made things worse for him, Nik being a man who was not accustomed to being confined in crammed places. (He quit the sleepy town of Kota Bharu on the grounds that it was 'too crowded and hectic' for him.)

Just over a week ago he was finally allowed to leave the hospital and he was transferred to his family home in Kota Bharu. Though his mood somewhat improved, his condition did not change and it was obvious that he was slipping away. Conscious of the responsibility that was his and his alone, he spent his last few days in silence, deep in thought and meditation. Often, he was assailed by the tormenting demons.

Nik Rashidin's death is a severe personal loss to me. As someone who deeply admired, respected and loved him, losing Nik is like losing my brother, friend and teacher at the same time. He leaves behind his wife Rosnawati, herself a teacher and artist who probably understood him better than anyone else, and four children. Apart from that he leaves behind a body of close friends, admirers and associates for whom his presence was crucial in the work of keeping alive the patrimony of Malaysian culture

and civilisation. No institution can ever match the competence and potential of this man, now lost forever.

Dear readers, please forgive me for the personal tone of this article. It is but a vain effort on the part of one who could not be there in time to bid farewell to a friend before his final voyage. Goodbye, Nik. I hope you found the Other Malaysia you were looking for.

Endnotes:

1 Farish A. Noor, *'From Majapahit to Putrajaya: The Kris as a symptom of civilisational development and decline'*. In Journal of Southeast Asia Research, vol. 8. no. 3. School of Oriental and African Studies, London. November 2000.

THE OTHER MALAYSIA is a compilation of some of the articles by Farish A. Noor that were published in the online daily *Malaysiakini.com*. His writings aimed to unearth the forgotten and marginalised aspects of Malaysian history, reminding us of the manifold possibilities and contingencies that existed in the past and remain with us still. The articles were an attempt at a sustained critique of Malaysian historiography and an effort to deconstruct some of the more settled and essentialist understandings upon which Malaysian politics, culture and social life are premised.

'Where would we be without Farish A. Noor? His is a distinctive voice, unparalleled in writing about contemporary Malaysia. Thoughtful, discerning, insightful, and well-informed, he probes the surface, and also the deep currents, of Malaysian culture and society, always courageously, judiciously and with engaging readability.' *Clive S. Kessler, Professor, University of New South Wales*

'Farish's reflections on Malaysian politics and history tell us a lot about the man: his powerful intellect; his tremendous facility with words; his deep commitment to social justice and human dignity; and his steadfast devotion to ethical principles in public life.' *Chandra Muzaffar, President, International Movement for a Just World (JUST)*

'Farish A. Noor is the *enfant terrible* of Malaysia who pokes his brilliant mind into everybody's business. He's vastly over-extended, and we pray he will come down to roost.' *Alijah Gordon, Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI)*

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