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**BRITISH POLICY AND MALAY POLITICS
DURING
THE MALAYAN UNION
EXPERIMENT
1942—1948**

by
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Introduction

The government of Malaya and the development of Malay politics before the Japanese invasion

In historical times the Malays lived mainly in the riverside and coastal settlements of feudal kingdoms which were dispersed over the Malaysian peninsula and archipelago¹. Although fragmented by ethnic, geographical and political factors, the Malay people came to be identified as a cultural group by a shared language, by their adherence to the Muslim religion and by their customs.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, outside powers erected an alien political framework round these scattered communities. The Straits of Malacca, for example, became the boundary between the Dutch sphere of influence in the islands and that of the British in Penang, Malacca and Singapore (the Straits Settlements) and in their hinterland². For a variety of reasons the British subsequently concluded a series of treaties³ with the Rulers of nine mainland Malay states whereby British authority—in the person of an Adviser (or Resident) to each Sultan—was assured and the border with Siam delineated. By 1914 British Malaya had emerged as a political entity divided from the Netherlands East Indies to the south and west, and from the rest of the mainland to the north.

Although the British ruled Malaya, the terms of their agreements with the Sultans shrouded—and, as it turned out, hampered—their exercise of power⁴. Since the British, so the fiction ran, were in the Malay states by the invitation of

¹“Malaysia” is used here as a term to embrace both British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies or Indonesia as, for example, by Rupert Emerson, *Malaysia, a study in Direct and Indirect Rule* (New York, 1937).

²Eg by the Treaty of London in 1824, see W.G. Maxwell and W.S. Gibson (eds), *Treaties and Engagements affecting the Malay States and Borneo* (London, 1924), pp 8-17.

³The first of these was the Engagement entered into by the Chiefs of Perak and signed by them and the Governor of the Straits Settlements at Pangkor on 20 Jan 1874. For the Pangkor Treaty and subsequent treaties see C.D. Cowan, *Nineteenth-Century Malaya* (London, 1961), pp 176-211 and pp 238-262.

⁴The British Adviser (or Resident) was authorised to advise the Malay Ruler on all questions other than those touching Malay religion and custom. In practice, however, “an unsanctioned system of direct government by Residents developed which, however successful it may have been, was completely at variance with the *de jure* position” (*ibid.*, p 270).

their Rulers, the Anglo-Malay treaties, together with subsequent statements of policy⁵, bound Britain to respect Malay custom and religion, the sovereignty of the Sultans and the autonomy of their states. Moreover, in concluding treaties with the Sultans, the British had implicitly recognised their states which the subsequent policy of "government by advice" transformed from shadowy structures racked by internecine war into more solid systems of peaceful administration⁶. When successive British administrators attempted to assert a more direct control over the Malay states and to rationalize their governments in the interests of efficiency or for the progress of economic development, they encountered opposition from Malays, who, jealous of their rights as princes of the soil (*bumiputra*), stood by the letter of the treaties. Although the British managed to federate four Malay states (Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang) in 1896⁷, demands from Malays of these Federated Malay States (FMS) for a looser, decentralised system of control were voiced throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. At the same time the Rulers of the five Unfederated Malay States or UMS (Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Trengganu and Johore) consistently rejected any proposal for peninsular union⁸.

In the FMS the administration was British conceived, British operated and provided a framework for economic exploitation controlled by non-Malays⁹. The economic development of west Malaya passed the Malays by; indeed, British policy aimed at conserving traditional Malay society in the face of changes which were going on around it¹⁰. Moreover the demands which business interests made

⁵Eg Sir John Anderson to the first meeting of the Federal Council, 11 Dec 1909; Sir Hugh Clifford to the Federal Council, 16 Nov 1927; *Report by W.G.A. Ormsby Gore, on His Visit to Malaya, Ceylon and Java*, 1928 (Cmd 3235); and Sir Samuel Wilson, *Visit to Malaya, 1932* (Cmd 4276).

⁶In Perak, for example, Sir Hugh Low (British Resident 1877-89) pointed out that until an effective government had been created the Resident would have to do far more than give advice: "...I fully understand the wishes of Government and intend to carry them out, but we must first create the Government to be advised, and this is what I have all along been trying to do..." (cited in Cowan, *op cit*, p 252). In Johore and Kedah, however, despite British attestation to the contrary, there had been administrative progress before British intervention.

⁷See Emily Sadka, *The Protected Malay States 1874-1895* (Kuala Lumpur, 1968), pp 364-381, and Eunice Thio, *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula, 1880-1910*, vol I (Kuala Lumpur, 1969), *passim*.

⁸"Pan Malayization", wrote Braddell in India during World War II, "was a most objectionable subterfuge, regarded by Rulers and upper class Malays as merely a device for bringing the whole country under British control" (BMA/RP notA). Indeed, Sultan Ibrahim asserted Johore's independence with the words: "On many an occasion, I have mentioned and emphasised the fact to the general public 'That I hope Johore will always be Johore'..." (MBJ no 363/1940).

⁹See G.C. Allen and A. Donnithorne, *Western Enterprise in Indonesia and Malaya* (London, 1957); J.H. Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya 1876-1922* (Kuala Lumpur & Singapore, 1973); J.C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators* (Kuala Lumpur, 1968); Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and their agricultural economy in colonial Malaya 1874-1941* (Kuala Lumpur, 1977); Wong Lin Ken, *The Malayan Tin Industry to 1914* (Tucson, 1965); Lim Chong Yah, *Economic Development of modern Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, 1967).

¹⁰For an analysis of traditional Malay society of the west-coast states see J.M. Gullick, *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya* (London, 1958). For a case study of the UMS Kedah before British intervention and in response to subsequent administrative and economic changes see Sharom Ahmat, "Transition and Change in a Malay State: A Study of the Economic and Political Development of Kedah 1879-1923" (PhD thesis London University, 1969).

of government, together with the influx of immigrant labourers, served to reduce the significance of the Malay community especially in the Straits Settlements and FMS. By the 1930's the Malays amounted to but 49% of the total population of Malaya (excluding Singapore where they were dwarfed by the numbers of Chinese) and, while Malays predominated in the four northern states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu, they were outnumbered by non-Malays not only in the Straits Settlements but also in three of the FMS (and even in the fourth, Pahang, their majority had been reduced) and in Johore.

Although it could be argued that the basis of British power in the UMS was as firm as in the FMS and that its lighter touch was due only to the shortage of European officers and the lack of economic attractions, nonetheless in the UMS the British were ready to compromise on the matter of visible Malay authority and to safeguard the social status and administrative responsibility of the Malay establishment. Thus, in Kelantan and Trengganu the traditional aristocracy was preserved as the result of British policy and the lack of social change and economic development in these east-coast states. Of the UMS, however, Johore and Kedah were the most jealous of their autonomy and the most anxious to administer government with minimum European interference.

Johore boasted an administration which pre-dated British intervention¹¹ and which was preserved within the Advisory system. The state government rested on the Sultan and his three councils (Ministers, Executive and State), and the day-to-day administration was carried on by a hierarchy of Malay officers headed by the *Mentri Besar* (chief minister) and State Secretary. Although a parallel arrangement of European officers was set up alongside this Malay administration to sap the latter of much of its authority, Sultan Ibrahim resisted all attempts by General Advisers to establish a permanent European civil service in his state¹².

Despite the lurid picture painted of Kedah by Europeans, that state was well organised and stable at the time of British intervention¹³. During the early twentieth century the Malay ruling class in Kedah, like Ibrahim in Johore, confronted the British on any change which threatened to dilute Malay power in the state or to absorb it into the FMS. They achieved their desired guarantee by the Treaty of 1923¹⁴, while, before its conclusion, Sir Laurence Guillemard, High

¹¹For the British advance in Johore see Eunice Thio, "British Policy towards Johore: From Advice to Control", *JMBRAS*, XL (1967) pp 1-41, and Keith Sinclair, "The British Advance in Johore, 1885-1914", *ibid*, pp 93-110.

¹²Sultan Ibrahim would accept Europeans on secondment for a three-year period "but for certain not ... under the pensionable establishment, because once they are under that establishment the slack begin [sic]" (MBJ no 121/1939, Ibrahim to General Adviser, 1 Apr. 1939). Cf minute of Deputy *Mentri Besar*, Johore, to State Secretary on 25 Jan 1939: "I would remind you that it is the policy of government to give work to Johore Born Malays first then other nationalities who have been born in Johore" (GAJ no 70/1939).

¹³Cf Sharom Ahmat, *op cit*, p 150 and p 292.

¹⁴As we shall see when discussing Mac Michael's visit to Kedah in Dec 1945 (chapter 3 p 56 below), article 3 of this treaty explicitly preserved Kedah from union with another state or the Straits Settlements "without the written consent of His Highness the Sultan in Council".