

MALAYSIAN MONARCHY and the BONDING of the NATION

Anthony Milner



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Abstract

A recent, major study on the ‘development of Malay Kingship’ speaks of the ‘socio-political revival’ of Malay monarchy that is currently taking place in this country. There is talk, says the book, of a rejection of the ‘Westminster-style constitutional monarch’ and the advancing of another type of ‘Southeast Asian monarchy perfected by the Ruler of Thailand.’ This lecture considers these propositions, and then examines Malaysian monarchy from three directions. The first concerns the powers of the Rulers, or rather how the Rulers’ powers have fared during the last two centuries. The second examines the changing ideology of Malaysian monarchy – an important topic that has been much neglected. The third deals with the specific issue of whether the Malaysian Rulers ought best to be understood as ‘Malay Rulers’ or ‘Rulers.’ It is particularly in this last section of the Lecture that the issue of the ‘bonding of the nation’ will be examined. This issue is of central importance in a research project being undertaken this year at IKMAS under the auspices of the Distinguished Pok Rafeah Chair in International Studies.



Abstrak

Suatu kajian utama yang baru diterbitkan mengenai ‘perkembangan Kerajaan Melayu’ menceritakan kebangkitan semula secara sosio-politik monarki Melayu yang sedang berlaku di negara ini. Buku tersebut menyentuh ura-ura penolakan sistem raja berperlembagaan gaya Westminster dan memajukan sistem jenis lain, iaitu ‘monarki Asia Tenggara yang disempurnakan oleh Raja Negeri Thai.’ Syarahan ini membincangkan pandangan-pandangan ini, dan kemudian meneliti monarki Malaysia dari tiga sudut. Sudut pertama merujuk kepada kuasa Raja, dan khasnya tertumpu kepada penilaian perkembangan kuasa Raja sepanjang dua abad yang lalu. Sudut kedua meneliti perubahan ideologi monarki Malaysia – suatu topik penting yang kurang diberi perhatian. Sudut ketiga membincang isu spesifik samada Raja-raja Malaysia perlu ditakrifkan sebagai ‘Raja-raja Melayu’ ataupun ‘Raja-raja’ sahaja. Pada bahagian akhir Syarahan ini khususnya, isu ‘kesepaduan negara’ dibincangkan. Isu ini adalah amat penting kepada projek penyelidikan yang sedang dikendalikan oleh IKMAS tahun ini di bawah payung Kursi Kecemerlangan Pok Rafeah dalam bidang Kajian Antarabangsa.



The Honourable Vice Chancellor
The Honourable Deputy Vice Chancellors
Fellow Deans and Directors
Fellow Professors, Associate Professors and Lecturers
Fellow students
Fellow dignitaries
And respected audience

A recently-published survey of the history of ‘Malay Kingship’ – Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian’s *Palace, Political Party and Power* (2011) – has the potential to re-open a productive discussion about the present and possible future role of monarchy in Malaysia. It is a reminder too that Malaysia is characterized internationally not only by its classically plural society, but also by monarchy; by the structure of prerogatives, ranks and ceremonies that accompanies not one but nine Rulers. The significance of monarchy, and the way that significance has changed over time, is of course a topic that reaches beyond Malaysian studies – and a topic that has attracted cultural anthropologists as well as historians and political scientists. One lesson emerging from this academic analysis is that an important distinction needs to be made between royal power and the socio-cultural role of the institution of monarchy. In the Malaysian case, aspects of this latter role, dating back to the pre-colonial history of this region, have the potential to assist modern monarchy in the task of building a sense of national community. It is well known that this task is at present a priority in Malaysia.

In her new work, Kobkua, a senior, Malaysia-based historian who previously wrote a major study on Thai-Malay relations in the 17th and 18th centuries (1988) – refers to a current “socio-



political revival” of “Malay kingship” (xxii), with the growing importance of “proactive and participating constitutional rulers” (391). She writes of the “rejection” of the idea of the “Westminster-style constitutional monarch” and the call for “another type of constitutional monarchy” – a monarchy that is “akin to the concept and practice of the Southeast Asian monarchy perfected by the Ruler of Thailand since the 1970s” (408). Kobkua’s observations will come as a surprise to many around the world who have taken an interest in Malaysian matters. Academics have buried Malaysian monarchy over and over again over the years. Before British intervention, particularly in the West-coast sultanates, rulers are seen to have failed to maintain order in the face of large-scale Chinese immigration (Cowan 1961; Trocki 2007: 162). Then, in the ‘colonial period’ – according to Rupert Emerson’s much-cited 1937 account – the “actual substance of power” passed from the hands of the rulers to the British (1968: 211). The classic study on the pre-colonial state system on the Peninsula – John Gullick’s *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya* – in a sense tempered the drama of this observation by arguing that in reality, on the eve of British control, the sultan’s role in his State had not consisted in “the exercise of pre-eminent power” (1965: 44). Some have argued that the Japanese did more damage than the British to the monarchy. Kobkua herself says the “position and prestige” of the rulers now “went into steep decline” (2011: 122; Cheah 1988: 20). According to Cheah Boon Kheng and others, the Malayan Union crisis that followed the Japanese Occupation was decisive in the fortunes of Malaysian monarchy; the “Malay people” now made “their wishes and ‘Will’ felt over their rulers” (Cheah 1988: 26). According to Ariffin Omar, “the Malayan Union events provoked a revolutionary change in Malay thinking.” For a “growing number of Malays, the sultanates were no longer the central point of the Malay world-view,” and “the interests of the rajas were subordinated to the demands of Malayism” (Ariffin 1993: 52-53). The UMNO leadership now replaced the rulers as the “real or substantive protector of the community” (Chandra 1979: 64).

The next stage of this apparent decline – and here we might be beginning to wonder if there could be any further distance to