

BRITISH COLONIAL RULE, JAPANESE OCCUPATION, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MALAY KINGSHIP 1930s-1957

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Preamble

Various studies on Malay kingship tend to give an impression that the great transformation of that august institution occurred with the introduction of the residential system, a system of ‘indirect’ British colonial rule in Malaya. Simply summarized, the residential system—first introduced in the state of Perak following the Pangkor Treaty (1874) between the British colonial representative and Raja Abdullah, would-be ruler of the Malay state of Perak, firmly consolidated two years later after the murder of J.W.W Birch (the first British resident), by a group of Perak Malay noblemen—deprived the Malay rulers (hereafter Rulers) of their administrative, political and economic powers and placed these powers in the hands of the British residents who ‘advised’ the Rulers of individual states on all state affairs except those dealing with the Islamic religion and Malay customs. Since the resident’s advice could not be rejected without serious consequences to the position and personal standing of the Ruler concerned, it is generally agreed that the Ruler was reduced from being a ‘oriental despot’ to being a mere figurehead who had to do the resident’s bidding. Logically it has been assumed that this British colonial ‘indirect’ rule was able to smooth the process of modernization of the institution of Malay kingship on its way to become the constitutional monarchy of present-day Malaysia.²

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² On colonial scholars’ views on ‘Oriental Despotism’ for example, see High Clifford, ‘Report of Expedition to Trengganu and Kelantan’, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (JMBRAS), Vol. XXXIV, Pt. 1, (May 1961); and, Frank Swettenham, *Malay Sketches*, Singapore, Graham Brash, 1984. On the role of the Ruler in the residential system, see Hugh Clifford, *Proceedings of the FMS Federal Council 1927*, Kuala Lumpur: Government Publications, 1927; and, J. M. Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*,

There is much truth in the aforesaid claim. The residential system together with the strong determination of British colonial authorities to keep up the façade of royal dignity and grandeur succeeded in altering the substance of the traditional administrative and political structure without changing its form. The Malay masses were convinced that there was nothing amiss as far as the power and position of the Ruler was concerned, and the resident and other colonial officials were there to render a hand and do the royal bidding. Accordingly, the residential system is, in form, very much similar to the concept and the practice of the modern-day constitutional monarchy whereby a monarch reigns and never rules. A difference between them, however, lies in the all-important fact that in the case of the residential system, the Ruler gave up his powers to the colonial authority which arbitrarily used them first and foremost for the interests and benefits of the British empire, whilst in the case of the present-day constitutional monarchy, a ruler gives up his powers to the people whose representatives, both legislative and executive, exercise their powers for the good of the nation and its citizens.

Interestingly, the study of Malay kingship reflects a general absence of an awareness of the all-important effects of the Japanese occupation (1941-5) of Malaya (present-day West / Peninsular Malaysia) on that institution. It is quite intriguing to discover that the period has more often than not been treated particularly by colonial scholars as if it were an aberration or, worse still, of no consequential meaning to the history and political development of Malaya, especially to the institution of Malay kingship. It is a well-documented fact that Japan's policies throughout its occupation towards the Rulers and Malay kingship effectively undermined the socio-political public image of the Rulers that the British had so painstakingly orchestrated and projected for the benefit of the Malay *rakyat* (masses).

It shall be argued that the Japanese occupation of Malaya and its policies towards the Rulers and the Malay community had, more than any other factors, succeeded in stripping the royal institution of its mystique and grandeur to the level that it no longer commanded fear and/or undisputed reverence among the postwar indigenous elite. The Japanese authorities in fact revealed to the Malays the socio-political haplessness of the Rulers either to uphold their own position or to protect the people and the latter's interests against a powerful opponent. It drove home the fact that the very existence of the royal institution itself very much depended on the goodwill of those in power. This socio-political awareness among both the traditional and

progressive elite provided the Malays with valuable lessons when dealing with intractable or recalcitrant royalty during the postwar period.

Malay Kingship under British Colonial Rule

Leading colonial administrator-scholars such as Thomas Stamford Raffles, Hugh Clifford, George Maxwell and Frank Swettenham, seem to agree that pre-colonial Malay kingship was essentially grounded in the concept of ‘oriental despotism’ whereby the Ruler—the kingpin of the traditional society without whom all ‘would fall into confusion’—ruled with unlimited power. In the words of Clifford, the Ruler was ‘an autocratic, Muhammadan monarch’.³ Accompanying this understanding was a justification—nay, a need—for an establishment of an efficient, orderly and beneficial-to-the-people type of administration which could only be provided with strong and active British guidance for the good of both the Malay states and the Malays. Upon this seemingly altruistic rationale, the residential system was introduced in the Malay states, as British colonialists were fond of pointing out, at the behest of individual Malay Rulers themselves.

More conscientious scholars apparently do not see the pre-colonial Malay Rulers in such a clear-cut portrait. Both John M. Gullick and Anthony Milner, for instance, share a common opinion that the pre-colonial Ruler only performed a ceremonial rather than a practical role. Gullick sees the office of the Ruler as a ‘collective inheritance of the dynasty who were identified as the ‘heirs of the state’ [*waris negeri*];’ and it was the *waris negeri*, and not the Ruler, who administered the state affairs in partnership with the Malay chieftains.⁴ Within this scenario, the Ruler was reduced, according to Gullick, to the position of ‘the chief of his own district’.⁵ Nonetheless, the Ruler possessed a unique power which ensured his survival, namely the power to grant honours and aristocratic ranks. This power, as Gullick puts it, was the cement that sealed the Ruler and the noble elite together, for without a ruler there could be no noble or aristocratic elite together with all the privileges entailed. In fact there could be no state. This view of pre-colonial Malay kingship appears to have bestowed legitimacy on the residential system which in theory was an administration in accordance with the wish of the Ruler and in practice strengthened the hand of the Ruler in dealing with unruly chieftains and problematic members of the royal family. The resident merely replaced the *waris negeri*, and not the Ruler, as the governing power

³ Clifford, ‘Report of Expedition’.

⁴ Gullick, *Rulers*, p. 276. Also, see J. M. Gullick, *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya*, London: Athlone, 1958; and, A. C. Milner, *Kerajaan, Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule*, Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1982, chap. 6.

⁵ Gullick, *Indigenous*, p. 54

of the state. He received his mandate to rule from the Ruler. Yet as we all know, the resident actually received his 'mandate' to rule from the Colonial Office (hereinafter CO), London and the Ruler was neither consulted nor empowered with any alternative but to accept him (the resident).

Whether the residential system was introduced to end the rule of an 'autocratic Muhammadan monarch' or to curb the power of the *waris negeri* seems of lesser importance. What it did to the institution of Malay kingship is definitely weighty. The British colonial administration certainly introduced changes to the institution of Malay kingship throughout the seven decades of its 'indirect' rule of Malaya.⁶ On the plus side, the various treaties signed between the Rulers of the four federated states (FMS) of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang, and the British government, clearly stated that the Ruler retained the power over matters concerning Islam and Malay customs. All policies and state affairs, finance included, were formulated and implemented in the name of the Ruler that, in turn, meant that all state affairs could only be carried out after they had received the royal consent signified by the signature and seal of the Ruler. Thus the position of the Ruler became supreme vis-à-vis state dignitaries. The British authority further recognized that the sovereignty of individual Malay states, despite being a protected territory of Great Britain, resided with the respective Rulers. This made the royal position legally unassailable as proven by cases brought against the Sultan of Johor during the closing years of the nineteenth century.⁷ With hindsight, it also posed an insurmountable obstacle to the British postwar plan for the socio-political restructure of Malaya.

On the minus side, however, the residential system reduced the Ruler to a mere politico-administrative glamorous bystander. There can be no gainsaying that in the final analysis the Ruler lost all their political and governing authority to the resident, and later to the Governor of the Malayan Union, who always had the last say on matters important to the interests of the British Empire. Even Gullick, a credible proponent of the Ruler's meaningful role in the colonial scheme of administration admitted that in evaluating Malay kingship of the second decade of the twentieth century, one should perhaps also consider whether a view that the role of the Malay Rulers of the FMS was 'confined to affixing their signature and accepting of financial grants, was justified'.⁸ A clear illustration of this unsavoury fact

⁶ The following explanation and analysis is based on the following works: Simon C. Smith, *British Relations with the Malay Rulers from Decentralization to Malayan Independence 1930-1957*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995; A. C. Milner, *Kerajaan*, 1982; and A. C. Milner *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; Gullick, *Rulers*; and, Mohammad Kamil Awang, *The Sultan and the Constitution*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1998.

⁷ For example, see Mohammad Kamil Awang, *The Sultan*, pp. 56-9.

⁸ Gullick, *Rulers*, pp. 342-3.

occurred during the Durbar of the FMS Rulers on 25 November 1939. The Durbar discussed at length matters that were of grave concerns to the Rulers namely the mining industry and the permission for Malays to participate in its development and the objection of the Rulers, coherently put forward by the Sultan of Perak, on mining in Malay Reservations; and on an alarming rate of Chinese immigration into Malaya. In spite of their apparent united front on the matters, the royal requests were only met with negative, or at best, non-committal responses from the High Commissioner Sir Shenton Thomas. On the requests concerning the mining industry, Sir Shenton responded with 'I do not think we need to go into that just now', and on the royal request for a restriction of Chinese immigration into Malaya as there were more Chinese than Malays in the three FMS states, the High Commissioner firmly stated, 'I do not think the Chinese are really so great a danger to the Malays as is sometimes suggested.'⁹

It is also relevant to argue that the loss of their active role in the administration of the state, not to mention active participation in the state economic development, had reduced the Rulers and the Malay nobility to an unhealthy status of frustrated and spoiled pensioners some of whom found no meaningful outlets for their abilities and energy except in unproductive activities. The case of Raja Muda of Selangor, Raja Musa 'Eddin, and the case of Tengku Indra Petra, Raja Muda and heir apparent of Kelantan firmly support this argument.¹⁰

At the beginning of the World War II (1939-45) in Europe, the nature of Malay kingship under British colonial rule was described thus: the royal institution was a depository of state sovereignty, the Ruler being its living component. As far as the administration of the state was concerned, the Ruler was the face of power but never really its force nor authority. The latter was within the jurisdiction of the resident who took direct order from the High Commissioner and whose prime loyalty lay with the interest of Great Britain, and not to the Ruler nor to the Malay state that he administered. Though the Pangkor Treaty signed with Great Britain assured the Ruler that he had authority over matters concerning Islam and Malay customs, yet by the early twentieth century, it was evident that the Ruler's power over these two areas was being eroded as it was steadily made subject to British interventions whenever the British authorities thought necessary. In such cases, the wishes

⁹ Proceedings of Durbar held at the Astana [sic] Sri Menanti, on Saturday 25th November 1939, CO 717/ 143/18, Public Record Office (PRO), London. The three FMS were Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Perak. Only Pahang remained a state with Malays as a majority community.

¹⁰ For the Tengku Indra Petra affair, see Sir Edward Gent to CO (CO), 9 December 1947, CO 717/151/2; and Sir Edward Gent to CO, 31 December 1947, CO 717/151/3 (together with enclosures), PRO. For the Selangor succession, see Yeo Kim Wah, 'The Selangor Succession Dispute 1933-38', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, II, 2, September 1971, pp. 169-84; and, CO 717/112 series for the year 1935.

of the High Commissioner would always prevail. Socially, however, the British took great trouble to project to the public a traditional image of the Ruler who was the sacred font of power from whom authority, honours and legitimacy were derived. To the Malay masses and chieftains, the Ruler remained the figure of power and authority. The resident was there as an adviser and a trusted and knowledgeable friend.

Malay kingship under British colonial rule was not a constitutional monarchy. Theoretically a Ruler possessed 'absolute' authority but in practice, the resident's consent was required whenever the Ruler wished to exercise such power; yet not unusually the Ruler would be asked to exercise this theoretical power to secure a consensus from the State in favour of policies proposed by the resident but failing to secure support from State Council members. In other words, the royal 'absolute power' was often employed by the resident through the Ruler to overcome local opposition to the wishes of the colonial regime.

Malay Kingship and the Japanese Occupation¹¹

As the Pacific War (1941-5) theatre began, British authorities were very much alive to the Ruler's socio-political value and were most concerned that the Malay Rulers should not fall into the hands of the advancing Japanese army. The Rulers were offered and in fact urged to vacate their states and move to the safety of Singapore. It was to their credit that none of the Rulers took up the offer. All chose to remain in their respective states as 'the Ruler

¹¹ The discussion in this section draws much of its facts from the following works: Abu Taib Ahmad, 'Japanese Policy towards Islam in Malaya during the Occupation' in JSEAS, 33, 1, February 2002, pp. 107-22, and, 'The Impact of Japanese Occupation on the Malay Muslim Population' in Paul H. Kratoska, ed., *Malaya and Singapore during the Japanese Occupation*, JSEAS Special Publications Series no. 3, Singapore, Singapore University Press, 1995, pp. 1-36; Ken' Ichi Goto, *Tensions of Empire, Japan and Southeast Asia in the Colonial and Post-colonial World*, Edited by Paul H. Kratoska, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, Ohio University Research in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series no. 108, 2003; Cheah Boon Kheng, 'The Social Impact of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1942-1945' in Alfred M. McCoy, ed., *Southeast Asia under Japanese Occupation*, New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series no. 22, 1985, pp. 91-124, 'Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941-1945', *Indonesia*, no. 28, (October, 1979), pp. 85-93, and, *Red Star Over Malaya*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983; Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya, A Social and Economic History*, London: Hurst & Company, 1998; Yoichi Itagaki, 'Some Aspects of the Japanese Policy towards Malaya under the Occupation, with Special Reference to Nationalism', in K. G. Tregonning, ed., *Papers on Malayan History*, Singapore: Journal of Southeast Asian History, 1962, pp. 256-67; and, Yoji Akashi, 'Education and Indoctrination Policy in Malaya and Singapore under the Japanese Rule', *Malaysian Journal of Education*, 13, 1-2, (December 1976), pp. 1-46.

must remain with his people'.¹² On 15 February 1942 when Malaya and Singapore were conquered by the Imperial Japanese 25th Army under Lieutenant-General Yamashita Tomoyuki, all the Rulers were subject to the military authority of the conquerors. Like most of their subjects, the Malay Rulers were faced with two alternatives: either to work or co-operate with the new 'colonial' regime or to work against it. Records revealed that all Malay Rulers regardless of their personal sentiments gave no resistance to the authority of the Japanese Malayan Military Administration (MMA).¹³

It is here relevant to examine Japan's general socioeconomic policies that were in place since 1938 as a response to the trade barriers Japan encountered in the Dutch, British and American colonial markets in Asia. Eventually, these policies were crystallized into the New Order known as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. At the beginning of the Pacific War, the New Order clearly emphasized the socioeconomic and political interests of Japan at the expense of the indigenous communities that came under its military power. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere would do away with the old order, namely the Western colonial regimes in Asia, but it was not apparent how the former East Asian colonies would benefit from such a change. Nevertheless, once Japan's war fortune began its downturn spiral, Tokyo readjusted its policy and promised a new order of a benevolent Japanese metropolis working together with newly liberated indigenous national regimes. The Pacific War thus became a means to achieve such a sublime objective. The readjusted objective of the war was expounded by Foreign Minister Shigemitsu in the Diet in October 1943:

To East Asia and its peoples, this is a war of racial awakening—a war for renaissance of East Asia.... The present war is to us a war of national emancipation which to our enemy is nothing but a war of aggression. . . . [Truthfully] The war of Greater East Asia is a war for justice to combat aggression. It is a war of liberation.¹⁴

¹² The case of Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah of Kedah who was on his way to Penang on the advice of the British authorities which led to his being 'kidnapped' by his son Tunku Abdul Rahman, can be interpreted that the frail and elderly Sultan was forced to move against his will, that is if we accept the explanation of the Tunku as to why he was forced to intercept and take his father back to Kulim, Kedah. See Tunku Abdul Rahman, *As a Matter of Interest*, Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, 1981, pp. 213-17; and, Mubin Shepherd, *Tunku, His Life and Time*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1995.

¹³ For example, see Fortnightly Intelligence Report of the Far Eastern Bureau, British Ministry of Information, New Delhi, during the year 1943, CO 273/669/1, PRO.

¹⁴ Quoted from Peter Duus, Raman H. Mayer, and Mark R. Peattie, ed., *The Japanese Wartime Empire 1831-1945*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. xxvi. It should be pointed out that this statement was also aimed as a counter statement to the Atlantic Charter of 1941.

Thus for the first time since the Pacific War began, Japan was compelled to spell out with a précised statement the future of Greater East Asian areas under its occupation. Japan now committed itself to build a Greater East Asia on the bases of 'co-prosperity', 'mutual respect for sovereign independence', 'mutual co-operation and assistance', and 'elimination of racial prejudice'. In short the statement was an appeal to all indigenous nationalist movements to support Japan's war efforts as their future as sovereign nations depended on Japan's eventual victory.

Japanese policies towards the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Area were therefore based on short-term rather than on comprehensive long-term requirements of Japanese interests. They were not consistent, or well thought-out. It is without doubt that as a part of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity policy, Japan's policy towards the Malay Rulers also suffered from the ad-hoc nature of its blue-print for Southeast Asia. The glaring evidence of this is the draft plan prepared in 1941 concerning Malaya. This document called for the retention of the Rulers as nominal heads of state with their political power and privileges intact under an advisory system. Yet, with the British surrender on 15 February 1942, the policy changed overnight to that of removing the Rulers entirely from the socio-political structure.¹⁵ In spite of the various stages of shifting and changing of policy towards the Malay Rulers, closer scrutiny reveals that this inconsistent policy yielded certain constant features. Such features included the intrinsic position of the Rulers who were now reduced to the level of low-ranking officials of the Japanese empire, paying symbolic allegiance to the emperor in Tokyo through the performance of a bow in the direction of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo at official functions and before prayer. The Rulers, like the rest of the population of Malaya, were subjected to the authority of the MMA and the governors of relevant states; and the Rulers' right to retain their empty title and position was entirely within the purview of the Japanese authorities.

Like the British colonialists before them, the Japanese made clear from the beginning their supreme authority in Malaya. Only Rulers who co-operated with the Japanese military authorities were retained. The 'pro-British' Ruler of Selangor, for example, was unceremoniously deposed and made way for the 'legitimate' candidate, Tengku Musa 'Eddin. After the death of the Raja of Perlis, the Japanese-favoured candidate, Syed Hamzah was appointed the new Raja, bypassing the British-selected Raja Muda. All sultans, according to the Sultan of Johor, were asked to contribute 10,000 dollars to the Japanese war chest, possibly as a commitment to their co-operation and support of Japan.¹⁶

¹⁵ Kratoska, *The Japanese*, pp. 67-9.

¹⁶ Cheah, *Red Star*, pp. 267-8

The initial attitude of the Japanese towards the Rulers and Islam up to the end of 1942 could be seen as their true design towards Malaya. Upon the Japanese victory, the Rulers' position as heads of state was only on a temporary basis and subject to Japanese supervision, while the local army commander awaited further instructions from Tokyo. In July 1942, that is five months after the victory over Malaya, the awaited policy towards the Rulers and Islam was received. The policy embodied moves for the ultimate removal of all traditional rulers throughout areas in Southeast Asia that came under Japanese military power. In order to avoid local confrontation and opposition, Tokyo warned the military authorities to work towards this objective through 'indirect action'. It was believed that once the Rulers and people understood that the future of Malaya lay with its union with Japan, they would come to accept their allotted position within the Japanese empire. The Rulers would then be persuaded to 'dedicate' their titles, lands and peoples to the Japanese emperor that is transforming Malaya into a *de jure* colony of Japan.¹⁷ At that point, the Rulers could no longer hold even the nominal title as heads of state but serve as heads of the state religious bureau and receive allowances accordingly.

In practice, however, the Japanese military high command in Singapore in September 1942 gave its recognition of the Rulers as Heads of State but with no political authority. It was also clear that they were not well-treated and their pensions were reduced to roughly half of the pre-war amount. In January 1943, the Head of the MMA finally announced to the Rulers during a meeting with the Sultans and Representatives of Malaya and Sumatra in Singapore the basic principles of the policy towards the Rulers and Islam, to wit: the official recognition of the honorific title of the Rulers and Their Highnesses' right to retain their personal property, the Rulers were also confirmed as supreme authority of Islamic affairs, and Their Highnesses' pensions were increased and expected to be restored to the pre-war rate. Throughout the occupation period, however, the Rulers lost all political power as the state councils were suspended and the political and administrative powers were in the hands of the Japanese governors of individual states to whom the Rulers stood as advisers in a reverse role to that they had held under the residential system. Only in 1944 were the Japanese able to restore the royal pensions to the rate promised. The improvement of the royal position went in tandem with the declining war fortune of Imperial Japan.

The Japanese treatment of the Rulers improved tremendously after the visit of Prime Minister Tojo Hideki in July 1943 to boost morale and the war efforts in the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity areas. The Rulers were highly praised by the prime minister for their contribution to the building of the New

¹⁷ Itagaki, 'Some Aspects', p. 256.

Order. In October, the Rulers were appointed as vice-presidents of the newly formed state advisory councils. The state advisory councils were created at Tojo's suggestion with memberships drawing from various communities within the state. Their main function was to give voice to local opinions in matters concerning the state but had no legislative power. As mentioned earlier, in 1944 the Rulers were given pensions equivalent to amounts of pre-war years.

In sum, the power and position of the Rulers under the Japanese occupation was drastically reduced from the implicit and explicit position they occupied under the residential system. The Rulers were no longer the heads of state though they were allowed to use their honorific titles. They were only advisers to the heads of state namely the Japanese governors, and retained the headship of the state religious bureau. The Rulers were treated shabbily in public and in private, particularly during the period between the British surrender and mid -1943. As result, they were cruelly denuded of the aura of royal mystique, grandeur and authority in the eyes of the majority of their subjects—traditional as well as modern elites, and the *rakyat*. In short, the Rulers were compelled publicly to display their status as minor officials of the Japanese empire. They also lost part of their religious authority when the Japanese authorities allowed the Chief Kathi consultative councils to lapse.¹⁸

In contrast, Islam and the Malay elites seemed to fare better than the Rulers under Japanese rule. Though Islam and the Malay elite (traditional and progressive) suffered severely at the hands of the conquerors at the beginning of the occupation, the situation improved greatly from 1943 onwards. It was these three communities—Islamic leaders, the Malay elite of progressive and traditional strands—that later emerged as the 'new' Malay leadership that eventually superseded the Rulers as champions of the Malays and their cause.

It became evident that Japan chose Islam in place of the leftist nationalist Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM, Young Malay Union) which it disbanded in June 1942, as one of the centre pieces of its propaganda programme to win support and contribution for the war efforts from the Muslim Malays. The other instrument was the pro-Malay policy. In early 1943, as a propagandist rally cry, the MMA identified the Pacific War as a 'holy war—*jihad* or *perang suci*' and had this claim endorsed by the 1943 Islamic Conference as a war to 'liberate Muslims and the holy land from the tyrannical Anglo-Saxon yoke'.¹⁹ The Japanese authorities also called for the Islamic Conferences in 1943 and 1944 officially to sort out various problems facing the communities in Malaya, Singapore, and Sumatra. Islam in fact gained its premier position more or less comparably to that of the pre-war

¹⁸ Cheah, 'The Social Impact', pp. 84, 96.

¹⁹ Abu Talib Ahmad, 'Japanese Policy', p. 116.

days. Positive results from these conferences included the re-introduction of Koranic classes in religious schools, the recognition of and/or respect for Islamic festivities according to the Islamic calendar, for example, the fasting month (Ramadhan) and public holidays for *Raya Aidil Fitri* and *Adha*, and the setting up of the state religious councils.

Within the Malay elite community, the aristocratic and British-trained Malays on the one hand and the progressive and nationalist KMM on the other, both in their turn, benefited from the Japanese policies towards local elites. Originally the shortage of Japanese officials and the Japanese hostile approach towards the Chinese community compelled the MMA to promote educated and/or experienced Malays to high positions that the latter never enjoyed during British colonial rule²⁰. Later, the desire to be assured of local (read 'Malay') support, especially as the decline of Japan's war fortune accelerated, became the main reason for the MMA's pro-Malay policy. The fact that in performing their administrative responsibilities, these officials, the chief ministers (*Menteri Besar*) included, answered directly to their Japanese superiors, was itself a blatant admission that the Rulers were no longer in control of either their aristocratic or common subjects. The Rulers were for all intents and purposes politically deserted by their subjects. The Malay elite, new and traditional, found it necessary and, it seemed, easy to shift their allegiance to those who held the reins of power. The experience left at least one sultan, Sultan Ibrahim of Johor, most disgusted and frustrated. Yet the record shows that even prior to the Japanese occupation, Sultan Ibrahim himself had unwittingly paved the way for the Japan-friendly approach by cultivating good will and friendship with this newly-arrived Asian military power. Through these good relations, three Malay youths, all relatives of the Sultan of Johor, were selected to study in Japan.²¹

Japan's policy of Nipponization of Malay society and its people through education unintentionally resulted rather in strengthening the Malays as one community sharing one language and one religion than transforming them into good citizens of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity community and desired subjects of the Japanese empire. Malay youths were sent to normal and teachers' training schools as well as to the leadership training school (*kurenjo*). In the last-mentioned establishment, Malays were taught to

²⁰ See Mustapha Hussain, *Malay Nationalism before UMNO, the Memoirs of Mustapha Hussain*, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications, 2005, especially chaps.18 to 27.

²¹ The three youths were Ungku Abdul Aziz, Ungku Mushin, and Wan Abdul Hamid. The fact that the majority of Malayan inhabitants were willing to co-operate with the Japanese drew a bitter remark from the British. The War Office's Report on Malaya up to May 1942 concludes that, 'the Chinese are very hostile to the Japanese. ... The Indians middle class is pro-Japanese for most part with the poor class anti-Japanese ... and the Malays were in the main pro-Japanese on account of Japanese pampering. In fact the Malays were "prostituting their country for money"'. A Fortnightly Intelligence Report no. 11 for Period ended 14 August 1943, CO 273/669/1, PRO.

appreciate and live by *Nippon seishin* or 'Japanese spirit' through a daily routine of exhaustive physical and military exercises and rigorous discipline interspersed with lectures on Japanese morality and ethics, and collective responsibility. From the collected opinions of those who had been through the tough training at the leadership training school, the training had been most valuable for them personally and for the postwar struggles against the British generally.²² It had changed the Malay outlook on life particularly its emergent awareness of, as well as its sense of belonging to, one common ethnic community which was to enable the post-war Malays to cast away the narrow socio-political concept of parochialism which had divided the Malays into subjects of different Rulers and owing allegiance to different sultanates.

The Malay elite emerging from the Japanese occupation were clearly different from their pre-war predecessors. Both British educated and non-British educated elites had been through the socio-political baptism of fire and the experiences had without doubt left them stronger and wiser. The Japanese occupation had toughened both their physical and mental endurances. They were no longer pliable and easily succumbing to pressure from superiors. Both the British and the Rulers were to discover this to their consternation and disbelief, and at their expense.

Conversely, the institution of Malay kingship suffered an unstoppable decline as a consequence of the Japanese occupation and policies towards the Rulers and the Malays. During the war, the Rulers had painfully demonstrated their inability to protect either themselves or their people from grave dangers that nearly put an end to their way of life. The Rulers' wartime failure to uphold their position and authority and the Malay way of life gave legitimate reasons for their subjects to desert them and shift their (subjects') attention towards the new centre of power and sources of wealth and honours. Stripped bare of their authority and grandeur, and treated by the victors no different from their common subjects, the Rulers could only helplessly watch their traditional royal attributes—the mystique aura, dignity and grandeur of kingship—slipping away. The British immediate post-war treatment of the Rulers further prolonged this royally abject situation. Without those mystical and sacred elements, 'the glitter and splendour of ceremonial pageantry' as David Cannadine puts it, the institution of Malay kingship appeared but a hollow shell of its traditionally powerful existence.²³

²² Tunku Abdul Rahman was recorded to have stated privately his appreciation for the training of Malays at the *kunrenji*, while the first prime minister of Malaya saw it as an instrument 'implanting in the Malays the seed of possibility, which blossomed in 1957'. An unnamed Malay educator confirmed that 'there are hardly any leaders in Malaya today who were not trained in *kunrenjo*, and hardly any of those trained in *kunrenjo* who did not become leaders'. See, Akashi, 'Education', pp. 21-2;

²³ David Cannadine, 'Thrones: Churchill and the Monarchy in Britain and Beyond' in *In Churchill's Shadow, Confronting the Past in Modern Britain*, London: Penguin Books, 2002, p.61.

The years between 1942 and 1946 could be argued as the lowest ebb of Malay kingship experienced by the Malay Rulers in modern times.

The Post-war Transformation of Malay Kingship

The events between the years 1945 and 1957 bear witness to further political and socioeconomic paralysis of Malay kingship. The general expectation among the Rulers that with the return of colonial authority, life would also return to the calm and contented existence of the pre-war idyllic life, did not materialize. Even though there were some apprehensions among the crowned heads such as Sultan Musa 'Eddin of Selangor and Syed Hamzah, the Raja of Perlis, concerning their positions within the British scheme of things, the consensus feeling among the majority of the Rulers was definitely in favour of the British return. From past practices, the Rulers could at least expect to be treated as Rulers with all the proper decorum and etiquette they deserved. The British, however, had other plans.

Two historic developments occurred which made the decline of the institution of Malay kingship a permanent feature in the socio-politically restructured order of post-war Malaya: the MacMichael Treaty and the Malayan Union 1946-1948; and, the United Malays National Organization's (UMNO) fight for political supremacy.

It is here argued that without the socio-political hard knocks it encountered during the Japanese occupation, the institution of Malay kingship would not have so readily accepted the unthinkable demotion of their dignity, prestige and royal status demanded by the British on the latter's resumption of power in Malaya. Much less to imagine that Their Highnesses would acquiesce, without much protest, to a political compromise with their subjects, a compromise that saw power change hands from the British colonial regime to the emergent Malay elite who assumed political supremacy behind the façade of the constitutional monarchy, viz. the political and administrative system adopted for independent Malaya.

It was likewise hard to imagine that without the vast experiences they acquired during the Japanese occupation the Malay elite of all socio-political hues and the masses would have been able to join forces as they did even against their royal masters and to put up a strong united front against their formerly 'invincible' colonial overlord and eventually win the day. In retrospect, the period of the Japanese occupation of Malaya could never be a historical aberration in the socio-political transformation of Malaya—as some scholars tend to make of it—and especially in the transformation of the

traditional Malay kingship to the institution it is today.²⁴ It is not an exaggeration to conclude that the Japanese occupation of Malaya is in fact one principal key to the constructive development of modern Malaysia. Under scrutiny, the Japanese occupation succeeded in altering the nature of Malay kingship and the minds of the Malays to such a degree that there could be no turning back to the traditionally all powerful rulership, not even theoretically.

The MacMichael Treaty 1945 and the Malayan Union 1946-1948

The Malayan Union was a plan designed by the Malayan Planning Unit (MPU) of the CO under the leadership of Major-General Ralph Hone for a re-structuring of the socio-political system in British Malaya. The official purposes included among others 'the interests of the British Commonwealth' for a 'united and enlightened' Malaya; and, as steps necessary for the development of Malaya towards self-government.²⁵ The Constitution of the Malayan Union therefore provided for a strong centralized executive authority, consisting of a Governor, with Executive and Legislative Councils to assist him, as means to ensure efficiency and maximal effectiveness of post-war colonial rule.²⁶ In the new administrative set up, the Rulers lost all their political power and privileges but retained their traditional and spiritual, though more limited, role. The Rulers were to preside over the Malay Advisory Council in their individual states to discuss matters concerning Islam and Malay customs. All decisions passed by the State Malay Advisory Council concerning the aforesaid affairs had to receive the Governor's assent before they could become law. In his turn, the Governor would be assisted by a central Advisory Council comprising the Malay Rulers sitting together under his chairmanship. In the Malayan Union, even in matters concerning Islam and Malay customs it was evident that the Rulers had no last say.

²⁴ A good example of this is Smith, *British Relations*. Smith has little to say about the Japanese occupation of Malaya and its profound effects on Malay kingship. In fact he suggests that 'the period of Japanese domination did not have the effect of undermining the position of the Sultans in the eyes of their subjects' (p.168). It should be pointed out that perhaps it takes a Malaysian scholar to see more clearly the significance of the Japanese occupation on the position of the Rulers. For instance, see Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu: Malay Concepts of Democracy and Community 1945-1950*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993.

²⁵ Statement of Policy for the future constitution of the Malayan Union and the Colony of Singapore, White Paper on Malaya, CO 273/675/11, PRO.

²⁶ There have been various explanations as to the objectives of the Malayan Union ranging from political, socioeconomic needs to post-war punishments and rewards. A recent and interesting study on this subject is Oong Hak Ching, *Chinese Politics in Malaya 1942- 55: The Dynamics of British Policy*, Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2000, especially chaps. 3 and 4.

The execution of the Malayan Union Plan primarily required the surrender of sovereignty of each Malay state by its Ruler to the British Crown. Legally this surrendering of sovereignty would transform the Malay states from the status of British protectorates into that of British colonies and thus empowering London to re-structure Malaya as it saw proper. Another main aspect of the Malayan Union was the question of citizenship. The British stance on this subject was based on a 'broad-based citizenship' principle which would allow all Malayan subjects to become citizens of the Malayan Union without 'discrimination of race or religion', if they could satisfy the required five-year period of residence in the Union or Singapore. With a stroke of a pen, the 'broad-based citizenship' proposal did away with the socio-political foundations on which the Malays' special position was founded. It is relevant to comment that had there been no Japanese occupation, any kind of proposals similar to the Malayan Union would have met with vigorous and long-protracted objections from the Rulers. For comparison, one may point, as an illustration to the argument, to an of-much-less-devastating-consequences event of the pre-war years, namely the Selangor Succession of 1933-8 which saw both Sultan Hishamuddin and the Selangor Malay elite put up protracted and persistent objections to British interference in what they rightly regarded as exclusively within the purview of the Ruler as agreed to in the treaty signed with the colonial authority.²⁷

Familiar with encountering the pre-war difficulties, the CO was in fact prepared to face such objections, at least from the strong and recalcitrant Rulers, notably Sultan Ibrahim of Johor. The relatively smooth diplomatic passage experienced by the CO special representative when 'persuading' the Rulers to consent to surrendering the sovereignty of their individual states, reflects the fact that the Japanese occupation had rendered the Rulers a spent force at this stage. There were of course other additional factors such as the stigma of being collaborators and/or being a Ruler whose position had yet to be recognized by the British. These war-related factors had put the Rulers in a most disadvantaged position vis-à-vis Brigadier H. C. Willan and Sir Harold MacMichael under a threat of the crime of collaboration with the enemy ever present, even the FMS Rulers, whose positions were legally less shaky as most had been recognized by the British authority before the war, had failed to put up a credible struggle in defence of Malay sovereignty. Only among the Unfederated Malay States (UMS) Rulers—the Sultans of Kedah and Kelantan and the newly-installed Raja of Perlis—one witnesses some spirited struggle against unfair tactics. To be fair, it ought to be pointed out that operating under most trying socio-political circumstances most Rulers apparently had not quite 'fully appreciated the significance of the treaties

²⁷ Yeo, 'Selangor Succession'.

they have signed' and thus almost blindly trusted the seemingly flexible approach of Sir Harold MacMichael.²⁸

On the British side, the determination of the CO and British colonial authorities to set up the Malayan Union as a new administrative system was obviously based on the socio-political opportunity in Malaya created by three and a half years of the Japanese occupation as much as the other socio-political and economic interests of the colonial master.²⁹ Of the nine Rulers at the beginning of the Pacific War, only four remained on the throne in 1945, namely the Sultans of Johor, Pahang, Perak and Negeri Sembilan. The other five Rulers had either passed away and were succeeded by the heirs-presumptive with the approval of the Japanese or Siamese authorities, or had been replaced by, or the throne passed over at Japanese insistence to, 'legitimate' candidates as in the case of Selangor and Perlis. But more importantly, all Rulers had been collaborating with the enemies of the British empire throughout the Japanese occupation. They had gravely compromised their position and sinned against their protector. As far as the British authority was concerned, these Rulers were therefore required to work their individual passage back into London's good books. The fact that their protector had likewise gravely sinned against Malaya and the Rulers when it failed, at the very first serious test of strength, to protect the very territory that it had pledged its protection to, did not seem to bother the conscience of the government of Great Britain. It was evident that, to get the Malayan Union set up, the CO was ready to employ whatever means within its power.

Not surprisingly, Sir Harold MacMichael, the official selected to 'negotiate' a new treaty with individual Rulers whereby the latter were requested to give up the sovereignty of their respective states to the British Crown, implicitly and explicitly employed the ever-present threats of collaboration, non-recognition and coercion when the negotiations appeared to be bogged down by the Rulers' persistent misgivings or unwillingness to succumb to his argument (such as the cases involving the two designated Rulers of Perlis and Kedah; and even among the pre-war recognized Rulers of Selangor and Negeri Sembilan). Not surprisingly such serious 'negotiations' were completed in a short time—late October to end of December 1945. The validity of the treaties and thus the success of the MacMichael mission were later hotly disputed as the Malays and their supporters launched a campaign to get the Malayan Union treaties nullified.

Besides Sultan Ibrahim of Johor, whose bitterness against his wartime Menteri Besar and the latter's supporters together with his unhappiness with the Japanese had turned this strong-headed ruler into a willing and

²⁸ W.S. Morgan's comment on the Rulers' requests for amendments of the MacMichael Treaty, 1 January 1946, CO 273/675/18, PRO.

²⁹ Some General Notes for the Secretary of State's Talks with Prominent Ex-Malayans on 22 February 1946, CO 273/676/4, PRO.

submissive signatory to the new treaty³⁰, other Rulers' responses to MacMichael's proposal ranged from meek submission and resignation to the inevitable outright protest against such high-handedness employed by the CO representative³¹. However, it was also clear that in their submission to the MacMichael's steam-rolling tactics, the Rulers had yet to comprehend the full meaning of the Malayan Union Plan especially the loss of sovereignty which automatically put an end to the position of the Rulers as heads of state and with it, their traditional and political powers and privileges. The royals' lack of the full appreciation of the treaty's contents could be seen from their various requests submitted to the Secretary of State for the Colonies for amendments of the treaties signed with MacMichael.³²

One point was obvious. Whether they understood fully the meaning of the treaty they had willy-nilly signed, all Rulers, with the exception of the Sultan of Johor, displayed various degrees of misgivings about what the treaty represented. A few genuinely believed they signed the treaty under duress. Be that as it may, the whole MacMichael episode clearly illustrates the abject position of the Rulers who had to face for the first time the full pressure from the colonial regime that demonstrated also for the first time, a totally blatant disregard for fair play or treaty obligations on the traditional rights and privileges of the sovereign Rulers it had vowed to protect and uphold. It was an extraordinary situation in the history of the relationship between the colonial regime and the Rulers.

³⁰ Some examples of Sultan Ibrahim's 'mellowed' nature include his statement to Brigadier Willan that he was 'paid by the British Government' which caught the Brigadier by surprise. The Sultan during the pre-war period never admitted that he was under the British Government's payroll as his monthly allowance came from the Johor State funds; also during MacMichael's visit to Johor, the Sultan meekly asked MacMichael to occupy the chair at the head of the table, himself sitting on MacMichael's right, again something out of his pre-war character. See Brigadier H. C. Willan's Interview with the Sultan of Johor, 8 September 1945, CO 273/675/12 and [MacMichael's] Note on First Interview with His Highness the Sultan of Johor, 18 October 1945, CO 273/675/19, PRO.

³¹ For example, the Sultan of Kedah made a strong comment to Colonel Day that 'the technique adopted by H.M.G. appeared to be not unlike the familiar Japanese technique of bullying' and as he signed the treaty, the Sultan stated that 'this was the most distressing and fateful moment of his whole life and that he would sign because no other course was open'. See Minutes of W. S. Morgan of the CO, 4 January 1946, CO 273/ 675/ 18, PRO.

³² Among these requests are some of those relevant to the discussion:

Johor: the State Constitution to be retained and that its finances be kept on a state basis.
 Perak: that the Malayan Union should not affect the status of the State Government on its pre-war basis of decentralization and that land and finances be within the control of the State Government. For these reason the Sultan wanted a High Commissioner and not a Governor. Also Malay and English to be official languages of the new administration.

Kelantan: all matters be brought for discussion in the Advisory Council of Malay Rulers without prior consent of the Governor; and selection and nomination of members to the State Advisory Council be left to the Sultan after consultation with the British officer in the state.

It is here argued that both parties acted out their parts the way they did because of what happened during the Japanese occupation of Malaya.³³ The Japanese occupation of Malaya made it easy for the British colonial authorities to justify the adoption of high-handed methods and coercion to force the Rulers into submission to their plan; and for the Rulers to meekly surrender to such unjustified threats and coercion by the British for fear of losing their royal thrones. Ironically, by signing the MacMichael Treaty the Rulers actually signed away the very thrones they so dearly wished to retain.

UMNO and the Fight for Political Supremacy

Though UMNO was first set up for the singular purpose of demolishing the Malayan Union which had officially become the administrative authority of Malaya since April 1946, it is reasonable to argue that the struggle against the Malayan Union was in fact the very first step UMNO took towards obtaining independence for Malaya. The emergence of UMNO itself emphasized the haplessness of Malaya's traditional leadership to protect the interests of the Malay community. The new leaders were ordinary men from low- as well as high-birth. Nonetheless most of them were well-educated with invaluable training and experiences drawn from the war years. The early leading lights among them were from Johor: Dato' Onn bin Jaafar, Dr Awang bin Hassan, and the Sulaiman brothers. It was in fact the emergent leaders of Johor who fully understood the profound damages of the MacMichael Treaty and the White Paper to the special position and interests of the Malay community and states. They were leaders who made a clarion call for all Malays to unite their efforts and fight against the Malayan Union and for the restitution of the sovereign position of their Rulers to that of the pre-war era.

The first salvo marking a challenge of the emergent leadership against the Malay traditional authority was an attempt known as the 'conspiracy' to force the Sultan of Johor to abdicate in favour of one of his sons. The basic cause of this drastic and 'out-of-the-traditional-box' action was the new leadership's enragement with and serious disapproval of the Sultan's willingness to sign away the sovereignty of Johor to the British Crown, even though such an act was clearly unconstitutional. Their demand, an unheard-of and an unthinkable challenge to their Ruler's authority, amounted to—in the traditional context—an act of *derhaka* (betrayal, disloyalty). Yet to this group of Johor intelligentsia, it was justified as the Ruler had abandoned his responsibility to the Malay community and brought shame to Johor. Sultan

³³ It was obvious that the unhappiness of Great Britain towards the Malay community originated from their assumption that while the Malayan Chinese were 'hostile' to the Japanese, the Malays were pro-Japanese on account of the Japanese pandering to their interests. War Office's Report on Malaya up to May 1942, CO 273/669/1, PRO.

Ibrahim's act in signing the MacMichael Treaty without consulting his subjects had consequently released his subjects from their pledge of allegiance to him. The group sent a telegram on 26 January 1946 to the Sultan in London to this effect.³⁴ A series of verbal battles ensued. It appears that the group received the support of Menteri Besar Ungku Aziz, the then President of the Johor Board of Religious Affairs, the State Mufti and other senior state officials.³⁵ Apparently, the group was able to arouse strong public support and forced the Sultan to back down. The campaign to demolish the Malayan Union had dramatically and effectively begun.

Faced with hostile public sentiments all over Malaya, the Rulers were left with no alternative but to disassociate themselves from the Malayan Union administration. By February 1946 five Rulers including Sultan Ibrahim of Johor himself, had registered with the CO their withdrawal of signature from the Treaty. All Rulers agreed to fight a united legal battle with London against the validity of the MacMichael Treaty while their leading subjects formed the Pan-Malayan Malay Congress against the Malayan Union. By March, it appeared that the Rulers and their subjects had successfully come together and formed a united front against the colonial authority and the Malayan Union. Yet this union did not re-gain the Rulers their status as prime movers of the state's affairs. This was made clear during the clash between the Rulers and the Pan-Malayan Malay Congress led by Dato' Onn who commanded the support of the Malay masses over the intended presence of the Rulers at the installation of the Malayan Union Governor Sir Edward Gent. By succumbing to the demand of the people led by the new leadership not to associate themselves with the Union, all Rulers had accepted the 'will of the people' whose leaders were no longer Their Highnesses but a group of strong-minded Malays under the leadership of the enigmatic Dato' Onn, the new Menteri Besar of Johor. Undoubtedly, it was this new leadership that succeeded in restoring the sovereignty of the Malay states, returning the thrones to the Rulers, and getting rid of the hated Malayan Union in 1948. In May 1946, the new leadership set up its political conduit, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), with an original objective of nullifying the Malayan Union; when that had been achieved, it

³⁴ A part of the message was as follows: 'Your Highness cannot act on your own initiatives and Paragraph 15 of the Johor Constitution does not permit of your signing any Treaty to include Johor in a Federation of Malaya [Malayan Union]. There is a strong objection to it from 14 Associations [represented by] *Lembaga Kesatuan Malayu*'.

³⁵ James de V. Allen, *The Malayan Union*, New Haven: Yale University, Monograph series no. 10, Southeast Asian Studies, Yale University, 1967, pp. 33-5. At their public meeting at the Johor Baru Mosque, for example, the cries of 'Down with the Sultan' were resonant throughout. Such public hostility towards the Rulers became a new and constant feature in Malaya of the immediate post-war years. It was evidence of the Rulers' socio-political weaknesses as much as of the socio-political awareness of the Malay elite and masses acquired during the Japanese occupation.

shifted its prime aim to the independence of Malaya. It was UMNO that eventually wrestled with and attained the political supremacy from both the Rulers and the British colonial regime.

Throughout the campaign to abolish the Malayan Union and the struggle for independence (1946-57), it was true that UMNO and the Rulers put up a united front to achieve the targeted abolition of the Malayan Union, yet the Rulers continued with efforts to grasp the socio-political initiatives from the post-war emergent leaders at times even with the help of the colonial regime in the Federation of *Tanah Melayu*.³⁶ Nonetheless, all these attempts were in vain. The awakening of Malay socio-political awareness, made possible on a wide Malayan scale by the Japanese war policies and approaches towards the Malays and their Rulers, had made any attempt to restore the *status quo ante bellum* Malaya as unacceptable as it was unrealistic. Neither, it appeared, could the Malays ever completely trust their Rulers to do what was required to ensure the safety and sovereignty of Malaya then and the time to come.

In retrospect, the Rulers' attempts to more or less put the historical clock back to the pre-war good old days of the resident-controlling-the-sultan-who-in-turn-controlled-the Malay-elite arrangement only succeeded in driving home the weaknesses of the Rulers' power in relation to UMNO and its leaders. A few illustrations will suffice.

First scenario, Kedah 1948. There was a political undercurrent arising out of the attempt of Sultan Badlishah and his hand-picked Menteri Besar demanding that all members of the state council and Malay officials take an oath of allegiance to the person of the Ruler.³⁷ Syed Omar Shahabuddin, a member of the State Council, and Haji Mohd. Rejal, the State Collector of Stamp Duties, declined to take such an oath. They were strongly supported by two organizations namely Saberkas and Persatuan Pemuda Kedah which had strong ties with UMNO. A joint letter to UMNO putting forward their

³⁶ Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, *Political Awakening*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1987, pp. 4-9. A good example of this 'united front' was the officiating of UMNO's meeting in May 1946 at one of Sultan of Johor's palaces by the Tunku Mahkota of Johor, later Sultan Ismail. One of the most memorable royal efforts to suppress UMNO leaders with the help of the colonial authority was the deputy High Commissioner issue. In 1949, UMNO proposed that their President, Dato' Onn, be appointed to the said position. The proposal was 'strongly objected' to by the Rulers especially the Sultan of Kedah who 'violently' felt that '*this would elevate Dato' Onn to a position over and above the Rulers*' (p. 13. Emphasis added). The British were at least unwilling to go against concerted royal wishes.

³⁷ For details see Malayan Security Service/MSS. Ind. Ocn., MSS Supplement to Political Intelligence Journal no.1, January 1948; MSS Political Intelligence Journal no. 4 February 29, 1948; MSS Political Intelligence Journal no.5, March 15, 1948; and MSS Political Intelligence Journal no.8 April 1948. All documents cited are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

common stand with the two officials that Sultan Badlishah 'is not the rightful Ruler' of Kedah as His Highness's position was approved by Sir Harold MacMichael of the Malayan Union Treaty fame. Since the Malayan Union Order-in-Council 'is now to be abrogated, the present Sultan, in effect does not exist'. Meanwhile Syed Omar maintained that his refusal to take the oath was based on a genuine concern that the Sultan was not 'ruling by the will of the people'. Until the question of the royal rightful claim was resolved he had no alternative but to stand his ground. Moreover, Syed Omar was concerned that the royally hand-picked Menteri Besar and State Secretary were not the people's choice. A secret meeting of the committee of the Kedah Malay Union/ *Kesatuan Melayu Kedah*, an affiliation to UMNO, actually decided on a plan to overthrow the Sultan but it would be put on hold until the return of Tunku Abdul Rahman from England.

The event was however overtaken by UMNO's response to this crisis. During its 10th Annual General Meeting in 1948 in Penang, the UMNO President, Dato' Onn, took the floor to express his disapproval of the oath and 'the manner in which it was worded'. He urged all Kedah Malays not to take the oath and reminded the Sultan and the government of Kedah that the Sultan had been reinstated with the support of UMNO. The meeting unanimously resolved to send a protest to the His Highness and the Kedah government.³⁸

Second scenario, Penang April 1949. During the UMNO annual meeting in Penang, the Raja of Perlis, Tuanku Syed Putra Jamallulail, was invited to take the salute of the guards of honour together with UMNO President Dato' Onn. The royal guest of honour was also invited to officiate and deliver an address at the meeting. In his address, His Highness stated that it was now the time for all Malays to work together for the uplifting of the nation. His Highness alluded to the common talk that the Rulers 'were ignoring the masses' and emphatically denied it. He declared that 'the contrary was true' and expressed his fervent wish to see the cooperation between the Sultans and the people strengthened and reinforced. His Highness ended his speech with two advocacies namely that 'Malaya belongs to the Malays... and the time will come when all work will be done by the Malays'; and an exhortation that all Malays to 'help swell' the UMNO Education Fund.³⁹

³⁸ As UMNO leader, Dato' Onn held a record of being quite abrupt and disrespectful of the Rulers since the Malayan Union crisis. His impatience and abruptness towards Their Highnesses even caused the High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney to comment in 1949, 'It was disappointing to see Their Highnesses so spineless in the face of insults to them [from Dato' Onn], *for which before the war, he would have been thrown out of the room*'. Sir Henry Gurney to CO, June 1949, CO 825/74/3, PRO. Emphasis added.

³⁹ MSS Political Intelligence Journal no. 8 April 1948, Bodleian MSS Ind. Ocn. S. 25, Oxford.

Third scenario, negotiations for self-government and independence 1953-55. The major clashes between UMNO and the Rulers in the 1950s involved an accepted number of elected members to the Federal Legislative Council in 1953-4 and the termination of the adviser post in all Malay states in 1955. Tunku Abdul Rahman and UMNO objected to the number of elected members to the Federal Legislative Council which had been agreed upon between the Rulers and the High Commissioner. With this agreement, elected members of the Council, even if one party won all the seats up for election, would ever be in a clear minority to the combined force of appointed, ex-officio and the eight nominated members by the High Commissioner. The Rulers took a bold step to secretly send their objection to the UMNO recommendations to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London. The Tunku was not surprised that UMNO's own request for the CO to reconsider the matter failed to extract any response. He believed that the Secretary of State had chosen to listen to the Rulers who 'must have asked [him] not to come to terms with' UMNO.

It was only when the UMNO leadership decided on non-cooperation with the colonial authorities and to boycott the Legislative Council election slated for 1955 that the High Commissioner was under pressure to propose a compromise whereby out of the total eight nominated members of the Legislative Council, the High Commissioner agreed to nominate five candidates whose names were proposed by the elected majority party. He also undertook to nominate two expatriate appointees whose candidacy was agreed upon by the same majority party.⁴⁰

Apparently, this tug-of-will-and-strength episode brought the message clearly to the Rulers that royal manipulation of the colonial authorities to strengthen Their Highnesses' position vis-à-vis the new political elite was ineffectual.⁴¹ In August 1955 when Tunku Abdul Rahman handed a memorandum to Alan Lennox-Boyd, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, proposing, among other things, the abolition of the position of the British Advisers in all Malay states, the royal response was more of a resigning-to-the-inevitable nature. The High Commissioner Sir D.C. MacGillivray was asked to put the matter to the Rulers for their deliberation and opinion. The Rulers discussed the matter during the Rulers' Conference in December and came to a conclusion that the Chief Minister's proposal had to be accepted. In the High Commissioner's words, '[the Rulers] came without their Advisers and informed me very briefly that they had discussed the matter together and

⁴⁰ Tunku Abdul Rahman, *Political*, pp. 43-50

⁴¹ Also the change in the attitude of the UMNO leaders especially the Tunku towards the Rulers went a long way to persuade the Rulers to come around to the UMNO way. See David Watherstone, *Officer Administering the Government to Sir D.C. MacGillivray*, 7 August 1954, CO 1030/65, PRO.

had come to the conclusion that *it would be unwise to resist the political pressure for the removal of these posts. They had obviously come to this decision with great reluctance*'.⁴²

The three scenarios mirrored different stages of the struggle for the political supremacy of the post-Malayan Union era. The Kedah new elite–Ruler confrontation reflects the general impatience of the post-war Malay leaders towards their Rulers who refused to accept the writing on the political wall. With confidence in their own political strength and ability to manage the masses, and in their moral high ground, these leaders were able to confront the Ruler and, in so doing, compelled the latter to re-adjust in accordance with the new socio-political atmosphere. The second scenario recorded the understanding of a wise Ruler who, having gone through the hardships during the Japanese occupation and the high-handedness of the British colonial officers and realizing the inevitability of the new era, was willing to adjust to the socio-political change and to accommodate the emergent leadership. The conduct and speech made by Tuanku Syed Putra Jamallulail, the Raja of Perlis could have been mistaken for those made by a constitutional monarch of the post-*merdeka* period. The last scenario first saw the Rulers collectively siding with the colonial authority in order to thwart the political agenda of their rivals but later made alive to the reality of their own socio-political status. Later, with that awareness, Their Highnesses reluctantly bowed to the inevitable and thus confirmed the arrival of the new era in which the destiny of the nation and its political supremacy lay no longer with the palace but with UMNO and its leaders.

Post-war Malay Kingship

The adoption of the centralized system of administration in place of the Malayan Union in 1948 marked the acceptance by both the British and the Rulers that there was no turning back to the 'indirect' colonial rule of the updated residential system. Though the Federation of Malaya returned to the Rulers 'the prerogative power and jurisdiction which they enjoyed prior to the Japanese occupation', the Rulers were not at liberty to act according to their personal wishes.⁴³ At the centre was a strong centralized government with legislative powers on matters such as citizenship, finance and external affairs to oversee the administration of individual states. A High Commissioner was the head of the federal administration. He was assisted by a Federal Legislative Council and a Federal Executive Council. The High

⁴² High Commissioner Sir D. C. MacGillivray to A.M. MacKintosh, CO, London, 22 December 1955 (together with the Enclosure), CO 1030/410, PRO. Emphasis added.

⁴³ *Colonial Annual Reports, Malaya 1948*, Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1949, p.166.

Commissioner was required to consult the Conference of Rulers on immigration policy and to provide the Rulers with an advance copy of every Bill which it intended to bring to the Legislative Council.

At state level, the State Agreements stated that each Malay Ruler undertook to govern his state subject to 'the provision of a written constitution' and to provide for the education and training of Malay subjects so as to enable them to participate fully in the economic progress, social welfare and government of the state and the Federation. In other words, it was the responsibility of each state to prepare its subjects for self-government and independence. The executive authority of each state was exercised either directly by the Ruler or through State officers in his name. In exercising the executive power, the Ruler was aided and advised by the State Executive Council led by a Menteri Besar. The legislative body of the state was the Council of State which was empowered to pass any law other than those under the jurisdiction of the Federal Legislative Council, including those concerning Islam and Malay customs. Such a Bill passed would become law only after obtaining the assent of the Ruler of the state.

In theory, the Federation of Malaya returned all the powers to the Rulers. Yet, in practice, the Rulers were not at liberty to exercise these powers but to do so within the legal parameters set by the state constitution, the State Agreements, and the Federation of Malaya Agreement 1948, and the Constitution of Federation of Malaya 1948. In other words, Their Highnesses were forced to accept their position as a Ruler under the rule of law: the State Constitution and the Federal Constitution. They were required to be mindful of, and accept advice from not only the British residents, now renamed British advisors, but also from the Malay Menteri Besar, the State Executive Council, the Council of State, the Federal Legislative Council, the Federal Executive Council and the High Commissioner in all matters concerning the state and the Federation.

Legal position aside, the Rulers had to accept the bitter truth that they had also lost their traditionally political leadership and power to UMNO and its leaders. Malays might still uphold their Ruler as symbol of their special position, privileges and *ketuanan bangsa Melayu*, but it was evident that they no longer entrusted their Rulers with power to rule. That power was given to a new group of leaders who had proved themselves during the immediate post-war years to be trustworthy and dependable and who appeared to have the long-term interests of the people, the states and the nation neatly worked out.

In retrospect, it is easy to recognize the factors that led to the abrupt political decline of the institution of Malay kingship in the eyes of its subjects. It was not the pre-war colonial rule that revealed the weak nature of Malay kingship. On the contrary, the British colonial officials had taken pains to maintain and present the Rulers in the traditionally most favourable

light. To the Malay masses, the British were there to assist the Rulers as all policies were done in Their Highnesses' names for the benefit of the state. The British colonial regime was successful in preserving the mystical aura surrounding the Rulers, the grandeur and glory of the thrones with all the traditional rituals and trappings. It was the Japanese who stripped Malay kingship of the empty grandeur façade and displayed the Rulers to the people for what they really were, namely a group of men who were made to obey the orders of the conquering power, a group of men not much better off than the common people themselves. Simultaneously, the Japanese launched policies and programmes that aimed to recondition the Malay mindset and to cultivate self-confidence, an awareness of personal ability and strength, leadership skill and ability, and the significance of discipline and team-play— in short, as it turned out, basic qualities that would enable Malays to stand up and fight for what they believed was theirs by birthright.

Probably, the most important effect of the Japanese occupation to the socio-political development in Malaya was an emerging potent sense of *bangsa Melayu* among Malays of the various states in Malaya. The socio-political decline of the Rulers made it possible for the first time for Malayan Malays to see themselves as Malays with common language, religion, history, ethnic and customs, and no longer as subjects of different Rulers, living in different geographical confines. This potent sense of *bangsa Melayu* made the political struggle against their Rulers, their traditional socio-political values based on the Ruler-subject relationship and colonial power not only possible but also logical and inevitable.

It is well nigh impossible to visualize the socio-political successes of the Malays of the immediate post-war era without acknowledging the principal part played by the wartime MMA and its policies towards the Rulers and the Malay community. This success was achieved at the expense of both the colonial regime and the Malay kingship institution. The Malayan Union, a socio-political and administrative system of the CO, doomed from the very beginning, was demolished within two years of its inception. The colonial master was forced to accept a compromise demanded by the once submissive and politically ignorant Malay community, and also compelled to assure the Malays of the plan for self-government and the independence of Malaya. Amidst these changes, the Rulers never regained their pre-war power and position. Conversely, Their Highnesses were presented with no alternative but to come to terms with the fact that they were no longer champions of the Malays nor the latter's socio-political prime leaders. Reluctantly the Rulers relinquished their political prime position to the newcomers who had won the minds and the trust of the Malays.

In essence, the post-war Rulers were left with the symbolic sovereignty of the Malay states and collectively of the Federation of Malaya. As living symbols of Malay sovereignty—and with it, the special position of the

Malays, Malay language, Malay customs and Islam—the Rulers were to reign with all the pomp and grandeur of traditional kingship but never again to rule. Within a very relatively short period (1942-57), the transformation of the ancient institution of Malay kingship from absolute Rulers to Rulers under the law was achieved by the Malays who were themselves, prior to the outbreak of the war, politically ignorant, most obedient and submissive subjects. It has been indeed an amazing socio-political journey for both the Rulers and their subjects.