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The Conflict of Traditionalism and Reformism in Malaya (1900-1940): A Study of Socio-Political Impact

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Abstrak

Artikel ini cuba melihat kesan sosio-politik yang berlaku dalam masyarakat Melayu di tahun-tahun 1900 hingga 1940an. Di sepanjang era ini sejarah Tanah Melayu telah digemparkan dengan krisis intelektual yang diwakili oleh Kaum Tua dan Kaum Muda. Justeru itu, penekanan diberikan kepada latar belakang sejarah yang menyebabkan krisis ini terjadi, di samping huraian kesan-kesan yang timbul dan impaknya terhadap perkembangan Islam di Tanah Melayu.

Basically, this study will concentrate upon the historical event happened in Malaya ranged from 1900 until 1940 onward. For the manageability setting, it will be divided into two different parts. Part one will contain an ideological approach as well as the historical background that led to the conflict of between traditionalist and reformist. Whereas, in the second part, it will emphasize upon the socio-political impact of such conflict in the Malaysian history.

1. The historical background and an ideological approach of the conflict.

Obviously, the British rule in Malaya accelerated a cultural crisis in Malayan Muslim society. The society was directly exposed to the culture of Europe with its modern principles and values. Following this exposure, the Malayan Muslim has responded toward such values with different approaches, which can be divided into two distinct groups based on their school of thought, namely *kaum ṭua* and *kaum muda.*

Most of the British policies has generated a feeling of cultural and economic insecurity and resignation among the Malays. Ironically, the changing circumstance of the Malays during the colonial period, such as the new form of economic activity, urbanization, the spread of modern bureaucracy and secular educational policies, contributed to the Malay awareness of themselves as an ethnic group against others.[1]

In order to verify this policy initiated by the British, we may look deeply for instance into the British agricultural policy as it involved the Malays. The growth of capitalist enterprises under colonialism led to a rapid increase of the immigrant population and a corresponding growth in rice consumption that affected rice production in several ways. To reduce the loss of foreign exchange caused by the cheap rice imported from Thailand and Burma [2] and to curb the Malay peasants from diverting away from the traditional into the capitalist economy, the British promoted their agricultural policy that had two aims, namely first, to encourage the increase of peasant food production for consumption by the growing labour force engaged in the cash economy and by that reducing the loss of foreign exchange in payment for rice imports and second, to preserve export-oriented cash-crop cultivation for capitalist interests.[3]

Therefore, the Malay peasants were forced into producing a surplus rice crop that could be sold through the market and used to feed the new immigrant workers on plantations and in tin mines. In most areas, Malays were discouraged from cultivating other cash crops, such as rubber, in order to reinforce the role of the Malays as food producers and also discourage competition with the British capitalist plantations.[4]

With the rapid increase of the surplus economy, the British had carried out some development projects that were more concentrated in areas of economic activity, i.e. around mining and rubber estate areas, and these included roads, railways, medical services, telegraph, telephone lines and many others.[5] However, since these facilities provided by the British were found in the towns of the Federation of Malay states that were inhabited mostly by non-Malays, it appears that the Malays in the rural areas were deprived of these facilities.[6]

The state of backwardness of the Malays whose stayed in the rural areas in their almost self-contained villages has been stated by Chai Hon Chan as;

> "While the new urban society became richer and was provided with all the material comforts of civilization, the rural Malays remained in poverty. The Malays had a money economy thrust upon them, but they had little means of earning the same money to buy the goods that came with a money economy. While the British were consciously and deliberately creating a modern economic system consonant with world commercial development, the Malays were driven more into the backward of economic progress."[7]

Finally, the influx of non-Malays revolutionized the demographic pattern, making the Malays a minority in their own country. The influx of immigrant workers and the rapidly expanding economy had pushed the Malays into the inferior rural areas.[8]

Therefore, most of the Malays became aware that against the background of this state of bewilderment and frustration over their general backwardness, were proposals to alleviate their problems from a group of concerned Muslims in the country. These were the Muslim literati, arguably the earliest modern educated sector of the Muslim elite who were later to become known Islamic reformists.[9]

In the modern period, the conflict between the reformism and traditionalism started in Egypt subsequently spread throughout the Muslim countries,[10] including the Malay Archipelago. Initially, the ideological link between the reformists in the Malay Archipelago, (i.e., Malay Peninsula and Indonesia) and the Middle East had already existed before the Second World war.[11]

However, at the beginning of the early twentieth century, the dimension of this link between both areas and become bigger and more substantial, due to several factors, such as:

First, the increasing measure of the intellectual connection between Malay Archipelago and Egypt represented by the University of al-Azhar. The increasing interest in Islamic religious learning combined with the search for a means of enhancing the socio-religious status of Malays, had intensified the need to venture into reputable centres of learning.[12] Consequently, al-Azhar University began to attract many Malays for study. This centre of highly developed academia became the pivot for the reformism ideas.[13] In sum, the mounting influence of the Islamic reformism as advocated by Afghānī and Muḥammad 'Abduh coupled with their desire to combat colonialism and repressive local despotism, undoubtedly attracted many Muslim students to study in Cairo and to become part of this intellectual and political re-

vival.[14] In this sense, considering the effect of reformism activated by 'Abduh upon the Malay students, Dr. Zaki stated;

> "During the last decade of the same century and the early years of this, 'Abduh gave lectures on various religious topics in al-Azhar, especially in Tafsir. In consequence the reformist ideas found their way into the student body, which contained a number from Malaya. Ever since that period the name of al-Azhar has become associated with anti-conservatism, the exact opposite of what Mecca under the Wahhabis came to stand for. Since then, Azharites have become suspected by the conservative authorities in Malaya".[15]

Second, the introduction of the modern printing press and contributed as a more effective method of spreading the reformation idea started in Egypt's bases.[16] Both of the reformist journals, i.e., *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā* and *al-Manār* were effectively distributed and circulated to the Malay Archipelago's scholars. For instance, both journals had penetrated into the state of Kelantan in Malaya. The *Mufti* of Kelantan in the early years of the twentieth century, Haji Wan Musa (1874-1939) seems to have been influenced by both journals, for he supported the ideas of returning any cases in Islamic law to the Qur'an and Sunnah.[17]

Therefore, based on such mentioned factors, in the early decade of the twentieth century (1909-1920), for the first time, Malay history experienced the social and intellectual strife between reformist and traditionalist that challenged the religious establishment. With the arrival of Islamic reformist idea in the Malay region, the intellectual tradition in this region received a new lease of life and source of revitalization and vigor. It also caused serious internal cleavages and social-cultural conflict in an otherwise stagnant social order in which the forces of indigenous tradition that had coexisted with Islamic traditionalism characterized by a strong Sufi tradition and a degree of cultural accommodationism.[18]

Historically, since the early period of their intervention in Malaya, the British had faced much resistance from the Malay chiefs as well as the Malay religious leaders.[19] However, within this period, apparently no armed rebellions had occurred. Instead, most of the Malayan religious leaders had responded to the British power with a different approach. In this course, the Malayan religious leader's attitude towards British colonialism can be divided into two different groups according to their religious thought, i.e., the traditionalist and the reformist.

Basically, the Malay-Muslim traditional elite that was also called *kaum tua.*[20] was comprised of religious leaders and *'ulama* who had accommodated themselves within the system of Malay ruler and chiefs, and did not use Islamic teachings to criticize the latter ill behavior and actions. They were dependent on the Malay rul-

ers for their religious appointment. Moreover, they seem to work hand in hand with the Malay rulers to establish, administer and control religious institutions such as mosques, *pondok,* state religious councils and religious courts,[21] all of which continued to exist since the British residential system granted the Malay rulers formal authority over Malay religion and customs. Therefore, the Malay rulers paid great attention to these recognized jurisdictions and above all they patronized the traditionalists through various religious institutions and hierarchies.[22]

The interdependent relationship between the traditionalists and the Malay rulers is a well-known aspect of political and religious development in Malaya, which has been described by W.R. Roff as;

> "A direct effect of colonial rule was thus to encourage the concentration of doctrinal and administrative religious authority in the hand of a hierarchy of officials directly dependent on the Sultans for their position and power."[23]

Meanwhile, in contrast to the first group, the second group that was called *kaum muda* was comprised mostly the young Malayan religious leaders who had studied and graduated from the Islamic centres of learning and were strongly influenced by the Islamic reformism such as that found in the Middle Eeast and India.[24] and regularly used Islamic teaching to critise the Malay ruler as well as Malay customs. Subsequently, they had influenced and gained support from other Malay-English educated students who became their respected followers.[25] Most of them were not dependent on the Malay rulers for their position.[26] Moreover, their religious thought in most areas of Islamic teaching was more moderate than the *kaum tua,* especially in their respective political and religious attitudes towards western modernization.[27]

At the early stage, compared with *kaum tua*, the number of *kaum muda* was very small, i.e., about a hundred persons of which most were from the young educated Malay group.[28]

Moreover, among this small group, the most outstanding and influential figures can be sorted into four persons, i.e., Sayyid Sheikh al-Hadi, Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin, Haji Abbas Muhammad Taha and Sheikh Muhammad Salim Kalali.[29]

The flourishing of Islamic reformism was primarily started with the active involvement of the Arab community and the *Jawi Peranakan* (Indian Muslim) with their desire to arouse Muslim religiosity and a commitment to make a social change.[30] This is because despite being called aliens by some Malays, they saw themselves as part of the Malay society due to religious affinity and cultural harmony.

It is in their publication called *Bintang Timur,* that they analyzed the economic and educational backwardness of the Malays, which was mainly caused by their adherence to outmoded customs, untalented leaders, lack of innovation and ambition, hostility toward one another and the absence of mutual help.[31]

Consequently, this effort was absorbed into the thinking of the Malay intelligentsia and literati in their search for a remedy for the Malay backwardness compared to other nations.

In this spirit, in 1906 a Malay journal called *al-Imam* began its publication at the initiative of the *kaum muda.* This journal was a monthly periodical published in Singapore during the period 1906-1908.[32] Those responsible for the editing and publication of the journal were mostly educated in the Middle East particularly in Mecca and Cairo.

As an organ of Islamic reformism, *al-Imam* was largely similar to *al-Manār* both in form and content. For instance, some of the most significant articles in *al-Imam* were in fact adopted from *al-Manār* that was in turn a continuation of *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā* published in Paris in 1882-1884 by Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad 'Abduh.[33] This is not surprising since *al-Imam*'s first editor-in-chief, Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin, had spent about four years studying at the al-Azhar University in Cairo where he had the opportunity to meet Muḥammad 'Abduh, Rashīd Riḍā and other personalities of the reformist movement.[34] Like his chief, *al-Imam*'s assistant editor, Haji Abbas Muhammad Taha also spent a considerable time in Mecca and Cairo.[35]

Apparently as well as at the *kaum muda* centre the publication of this journal was also based in Singapore, a colony and not part of the Malay states. This was so, perhaps, because, unlike the Malay states where religious affairs were vested in the prerogative power of the Malay rulers, in a British colony the population was allowed more freedom in religious matters.[36] Furthermore, the merchants and traders who were generous in both their material aid and moral support to *al-Imam* were residents of Singapore.

Since *al-Imam* was the main resource of *kaum muda*'s effort in spreading the idea of Islamic reformism in Malaya, the whole contents of this journal were scheduled to fulfill several aims of reformism such as to;

(1) Preach Islam in its pure and original form.

(2) Promote religious knowledge among the Muslim community in the Malay world.

(3) Encourage intellectual activities among the knowledgeable people by sponsoring discussions and constructive criticisms.[37]

(4) Cleanse the existing religious corruption and correct the misconception of Islam as perceived in the Malay world.[38]

(5) Fight against all religious innovations *(bid'ah)* imported into Islam in the region.[39]

(6) Call upon the Rulers and their chieftains[40] to apply Islamic teaching in their practical life and to become examples for their subjects.[41]

(7) Preach a return to the Qur'ān and Sunnah in every matter of life, and against any *taqlīd.*

To achieve the seventh objective of this proposal, the editor had created the regular section in this journal of readers' questions and answers *(fatwā)* on the disputed matters of religion. The prime emphases of this section were laid on the necessity of a return to the textual sources and practicing *ijtiḥād* rather *taqlīd.*[42]

A further analysis of this section will clearly show that it resembles the periodical of *al-Manār* generated in Egypt by Muḥammad 'Abduh and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā. This periodical that appeared from 1898 to 1940 had designated a special column on such ideas. More than a thousands *fatwā*s were published to answer the questions of Muslim living in Europe and America. In these *fatwā*s a vast variety of problems that face the Muslim living in the modern world have been dealt with by the Egyptian reformists.[43]

Although the publication of *al-Imam* only survived for a very short period,[44] most of the scholars[45] admitted that *al-Imam* had succeed and acted in a prominent role in circulating and distributing the reformism ideas as well raising the Malay socio-political consciousness in the Malay Archipelago.

Significantly, this early movement, afterwards brought long term effects upon the political and legal awareness among Malays, which has effected most of the Malay masses, including the *kaum tua* themselves.

2. The impact of Islamic reformism upon the Malayan History.

At the end of 1930, the *kaum muda* movement in Malaya seemed to be declining due to several immediate factors which arose among the Malays in Malaya.[46] Based on this fact, some of the scholars claimed that Islamic reformism represented by *kaum muda* in Malaya had failed in its effort to reform and win over the Islamic traditionalists. Such scholars also correlated this failure with the Islamic reformism movement in Egypt which happened due to several reasons, such as:-

First, *kaum muda* had to contend against the traditionalist *(kaum tua)* which had dominated the Malays long before the introduction of Islamic reformism ideas

for legal reform, their main target was to focus more on the stagnation and petrifaction of Malay-Muslim thought and the innovation in religious practice.[52] However, in the succeeding period, due to the effective educational system founded by *kaum muda* as well as the modern consciousness increasing among the Malays, their reformation ideas have been perpetuated and accepted by the Malay masses, including the so-called *kaum tua* themselves. Several instances can be presented about this fact, such as:-

(1) The British had enacted various legislation concerning administration of Muslim law, beginning with the Kedah Shariah Court Enactment of 1928, a state statute apparently drafted with the cooperation of Islamic reformists.[53] Despite their considerable limitations, these statutes implicitly treated the Shariah as the same species of law as English law. It became clear that these enactments initially provided a greater measure of uniformity and interpretive influence for *qāḍīs* and religious scholars than had prevailed previously.[54] The frequency of Islamic ligitation in the civil court contributed to the growth of Islamic law, and constituted a sector of the legal system paralleling the secular sector. One could, for the first time, cite Shariah-law in cases decided by the British judges.[55]

(2) The principle of *talfīq*[56] which had formerly been resisted by the *kaum tua* has been accepted and assimilated in the practice of Muslim law. Most of the Majlis Agama Islam (State Religious Department) had accepted the application of *talfīq* in the case of payment of the *zakāt fiṭrah*. Due to communication difficulties arising from the lack of a good communication system, the Majlis Agama had legalized the payment of the *zakāt* with money, instead of the surplus crops, by referring it to the Ḥanafī *madhhab*.[57]

(3) The practice of issuing *fatwā* based on public interest *(maslaḥah)* laid by the *kaum muda* has been adopted and utilized by most of the *Muftī* in issuing their *fatwā*.[58]

(4) The modern *madrasah*[59] founded by the *kaum muda* has constructively perpetuated the reformism idea among the Malay-Muslim students. Those students who were interested in continuing their study have been persuaded by their teachers to proceed to the Middle eastern universities, such as Egypt. Obviously, these students will be exposed to reformism ideas by getting involved with the Middle eastern reformists, and this will facilitate as well as strengthen their reformism ideas. Later on, these students will return to Malaya and be absorbed in the various religious administration professions and indubitably will further inject their reformism idea into Malay-Muslim religious practice.

Third, the emergence of the various non-political reform *(iṣlāḥ)* group aimed at propagating the whole idea of reformism among the Malay masses. Obviously, these particular groups can be seem in different parts of Malaya, such as the *iṣlāḥ* movement in Perlis and Seberang Prai, and *Gerakan Anṣārul Sunnah*[60] in Melaka. These movement were largely influenced the former *kaum muda* movement and were further entrenched by the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia. At its climax, the *iṣlāḥ* movement in Perlis has been accepted by the Malay ruler.

Following such as a triumph, this movement has developed into the recognized state organization which has dominated and controlled the whole Islamic activity of Perlis.[61]

Basically, most of the Malay states had constituted in their religious administration enactment the provision that adherence to Shāfi'ī *madhhab* will be required in the state religious practices. However, this provision has not been included by the Perlis authority. Instead of following Shāfi'ī or any particular *madhhab,* they allowed a fresh *ijtiḥādic* approach by stating that any religious practice as well as the state *fatwā* be referred directly to the textual sources, i.e. the Qur'ān and Sunnah.[62] This method is explicitly similar to the former *kaum muda*'s idea which contended that the Malay-Muslim should refer any new cases in Islamic law to the textual sources.

Conclusion

In the colonial period of Malayan history which ranged from 1900 until the 1940s, the Islamic reformism represented by *kaum muda* emerged and flourished in Malaya. The emergence of this new movement against the old and dominant tradition resulted in the major intellectual conflict between them.

At the early stage, in contrast with the Middle eastern reformer, the main target of the Malayan reformer was focussed more on the non-legal aspect. This was a normal incident since they had prioritized their targets more on the backwardness of the Malays in opposing Malay feudalism as well as the British. Later on, the conflict over the social issues which challenged the status quo of the *kaum tua* extended to other aspects, including the legal issue, in a minimal form.

Significantly, this early movement, afterwards brought long term effects upon the political and legal awareness among Malays which has effected most of the Malay masses, including the *kaum tua* themselves.

Besides, such conflict happened due to the different educational approaches received by bothsides. As a whole, it was the extension of the conflict already activated in the world Islamic learning centre, i.e. the Middle east and India. In this

regard, *kaum muda* seems to be influenced strictly by the external reformers such as Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad 'Abduh, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā and Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dehlawī. This fact can be assured from the basic idea used by the *kaum muda* which is almost a complete adaptation in a translated form their Middle eastern masters. Therefore, *kaum muda* had not at this early stage developed and generated their own reformation formula.

The Middle eastern and Indian reformists' ideas were basically religious in character, and it was also this aspect which *kaum muda* stressed, at least, in the beginning. The former reformists championed *ijtihād,* denounced *taqlīd* and took the Prophet and his Companions as examples in the exercise of religious practices; all points which the *kaum muda* also stressed in propagating their ideas. Viewed from this similarity, we may affirm that the *kaum muda* movement seemed to be a reproduction of what had already been promulgated in Egypt and India.

However, at a certain point, *kaum muda*'s ideas had attained the independent level when they did not halt at their master's idea, but delved deeper into writings which had inspired their masters in the first place, i.e. the views of Ibn Taimiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim. They also naturally attempted their own interpretations of the basic of Islam, i.e. the Qur'ān and Sunnah, and their conclusion might the drawn independently of other scholar's views.

End Notes

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3. *Ibid,* pp. 63-64.
4. *Ibid,* pp. 56-57.
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19. Ibrahim Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya,* Kuala Lumpur, 1994, pp. 10-13.
20. It means the old faction or traditionalist which is termed upon the old fashion scholars in Malaya. See W.R. Roof, *The origins of Malay Nationalism,* pp. 67-74.
21. Mohd. Sarim Mustajab, "Gerakan Islah Islamiyyah di Tanah Melayu 1906 hingga 1948", in *Malaysia: Sejarah dan proses pembangunan,* Kuala Lumpur, 1979, pp. 155.
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27. Ibrahim Abu Bakar, *op.cit.,* pp. 14.
28. *Ibid,* pp. 456.
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32. HAMKA, *Ajahku,* Jakarta, 1958, pp. 77.
33. Abu Bakar Hamzah, *op.cit.,* pp. 2.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid,* pp. 3
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37. *Al-Imam,* 1, i, July 23, 1908, pp. 14-16.
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40. *Ibid,* 11, I, July 12, 1907, pp. 3.
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51. Based on the writing of Shaikh Tahir Jalaluddin which has been quoted in *Ibid,* pp. 171-172.
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