

Nationalism and the Muslims of Malaya, 1930–1941

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Abstract. This paper aims to discuss about the development of nationalism and its effect on the Muslim society in Malaya in 1930-1941. The discussion began in 1930, because that was a turning point in the history of social relations of Muslims communities in Malaya. The focus is on the relationship among the Muslim communities, especially between the Malays who were the majority and the communities of the Arabs and the Indian Muslims (the minority groups). The Malays began to assert their nationalist sentiments towards the Arab as well as the Indian Muslims because they were not only from a different ethnic groups but also generally much superior in social and economic achievements compared to the Malays. This paper discusses the effect on Muslim society, and analyses the views of Muslims on nationalism given the fact that it was unknown to the Muslims in Malaya before 1920s. The discussion in this paper is based on the news and articles as well as the letters published in the prominent newspapers circulated in Malaya within the period of this study. Information derived from these newspapers suggests that the Malays in the period of this study were eager to improve their economic conditions and political position in Malaya. Therefore, newspapers under the management of the Malay nationalist began to promote their ideas on nationalism and instil the awareness about the development and progress by comparing the Malays' condition to the other races in Malaya. Newspapers in Malaya began to describe the Arabs and Indians with negative labels and convince the Malays that these groups aimed to took away the Malays' special rights as the native in Malaya. The Arabs and the Indian responded and that led to an internal strife among the Muslims in Malaya. This incident was a unique development in the social history of the Muslims because they were close to each other prior to the early 1930s. In sum, this paper, tries to explore to what extent nationalism change the social setting and relationship between the Muslims in Malaya beginning in 1930 until the eve of the Second World War, 1941.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the impact of the development of Malay nationalism in Malaya and its effect on the Muslim communities based on the articles published in newspapers in Malaya in the period of the study. Newspapers in Malaya belonged to two groups: the Malays and the Arabs. The latter were known as the prominent group that owned many publishing houses and published various types of reading materials. Previous studies show that after the growth of Malay nationalism, Muslim communities in Malaya were divided into groups based on their ethnic backgrounds. Prior to 1930, Muslim communities had had a close relationship with one another, and the Malays (the majority group and native to Malaya) had accepted the Arabs and Indian Muslims as a part of their community based on the principal of Islamic brotherhood. Besides that, the Malays looked up to the Arabs because of their religious knowledge and they were assumed to

be the descendents of the Prophet Muhammad. Information on the issues that tore them apart and the Muslims' views on nationalism are scarce. Even though a few works mention the Malays' dissatisfaction with the Arabs and Indians in the Straits Settlements (SS), a close scrutiny of newspapers is needed in order to put a clear picture on the social changes that took place within the period of this study. Furthermore, works on the history of nationalism in Malaysia usually pay their main attention to the development of Malay nationalism and their xenophobic against the non-Muslims, namely the Chinese and Indians. In summary, this paper tries to demonstrate how the development of Malay nationalism had an impact on the Muslim communities in Malaya.

2. Background

Studies of the Indian Ocean and Arabs diaspora show that the relationship between the Middle East and Malay Archipelago began thousand years ago [1;2]. The relationship became closer after the Malays accept Islam as their faith. Historians suggest various dates as to the coming of Islam to Malaya. The earliest date was in the 630A.D. and the latest was in the 15th century. Azra [3], for example, demonstrates that Muslim scholars of the Malay Archipelago in the 16-18th centuries had travelled to Arab countries to learn about Islam. In summary, the Muslims in Malaya and the Muslims in Arab countries had a long history of inter-relationship.

Lombard [4] suggests that the Arabs who conducted business in the East had settled in the coastal parts of the Malay Archipelago. In the Malay Peninsula, Arabs settlements were found in Kedah and in other parts of that area. In the modern period, many Arabs came to Malaya in 19th century as they were attracted to business opportunities in the region. Many of them settled in the Straits Settlements (SS), which was then the trading centre of Malaya. However, the majority of them chose to settle in Singapore, as the island rose to be the hub of trading world in the East. Hence, in economic terms, the Indians and the Arabs were rich people as the majority of them were businessmen who conducted trading activities between the Malay Archipelago, South Asia, Arab countries and Europe.

In the 19th century, Muslims in Malaya consisted of three different groups based on their backgrounds: the Malays, Arabs and Indian Muslims. The offspring of mixed marriages were considered as Arabs or Indians, in accordance with the patriarchal system adopted by the Muslims. Due to mixed marriage and social assimilation, the Arabs and Indian Muslims spoke the Malay language and had adopted Malay traditions. Some of them had a physical appearance that was similar to the Malays. Thus, the Arabs and Indian Muslims were recognized through their family names and titles in front of their names.

The Arabs enjoyed a high status within the Muslim communities in Malaya. They were considered as doyens of Malay society due to their background as the descendents of the Prophet Muhammad. Some of the Indian Muslims who had *saiyid* title in front of their names also enjoyed a similar honour. Due to their tradition, the Arabs and Indian Muslims travelled without women and that led many of them to marry local women. As time went on, the Arabs and Indian Muslims were considered to be part of Malay society, and some of the Arabs married into royal families and became noblemen. The British, as the administrators of Malaya, were aware of the Malays' view on the Arabs and appointed many of them as local leaders. In summary, minority groups of Muslims in Malaya enjoyed a higher social status than natives group. The hierarchy was never questioned by the Malays until the third decade of the twentieth century.

3. Muslims and nationalism

Bangsa (race) was considered to convey most effectively the emotional value associated with the

English word *nationalist* and became a persistent theme in Malay political thought during the 20th century [5]. Arifin Omar [6] suggests that the term “state” was not familiar in Malay political culture until the advent of the British. The Malays in the 19th and early 20th centuries were used to the feudal system where the sultan was considered to be the highest power in Malay society. Hence, newspapers in Malaya had often published articles explaining nationalism. For example, *Penghiboran* enlightened readers on the meaning of nationalism by explaining that it is a form of love for country and one’s race [7]. Some of the Malays in the early period of this study misunderstood nationalism as the sentiments that they shared only with those who were born in the same village. Hence, *Pemimpin Malayu* informed readers by telling them that nationalism refers to one’s love towards your country and is not limited to a village only [8;9]. Meanwhile, *Warta Ahad* advised its readers that love of country is an obligation for everyone. [10]

Malay nationalism up until 1940 was not associated with any determination to put an end to British colonialism in Malaya. *Pemimpin Malayu*, for example, in a series of article about “love for country” encouraged readers to obey the British administration and discussed the benefits of British colonialism to the Malays [8]; Malay nationalism focussed on the development of the Malay economy rather than the cessation of British colonialism. The non-Malay Muslims also shared similar views on the British administration in Malaya. The British were described as great administrators in Malaya. The lenient policies adopted by the British towards the Arabs compared to the Dutch in Indonesia, as well as the position of the British as the administrator in their own homelands, might also have led to the acceptance of Arabs and Indians towards the British.

The discussion on nationalism first emerged in Malaya in 1906. Roff [11] shows that the first stage of Malay nationalism was initiated by the Arabs through *Al-Imam*. The main characteristic of this stage was the call for the Muslims in Malaya to return to pure Islamic teachings in order to break out their backwardness. It ended in 1926 as the second stage began when the Malays changed their focus from religious issues to economic issues. In the 1920s, both Arab and Malay newspapers in Malaya began to discuss the threat of the Chinese towards Malay society. Malay xenophobia then began and the Chinese and Indians were seen by the Malays as economic rivals. Besides that, both Chinese and Indians had characteristics that were different and alien to the Malays. Means as quoted in Comber suggests that the social and religious structure of the Malays made it impossible for any other religious or ethnic community, with the exception of Arabs or Indian-Muslims, to be integrated with them [12]

Developments in 1921 showed that nationalist sentiments began to surpass the traditional social and religious structure. The Malays in the SS began to show their xenophobia and hesitated to recognize non-Malay Muslims as part of their group. The Malays of the SS had voiced their discontent when the Arabs were considered as the representatives of the Malays in the legislative council of the SS [13]. To what extent was that sentiment shared by Malay and Muslim communities in the whole Malaya? The answer could be derived from a letter published in *The Malaya Tribune and Shipping Gazette*. It provided a vivid picture on the Muslims view on the issue. The author stated that nationalism is a creation of Europeans and its unknown to Muslims [14]. After all, the author was certain that “what is good to a Muslim is unquestionably good to a Malay, an Arab or a Muslim Indian both from political and religious points of Muslim view” [14]. Hence, even though some of the Malays showed their dissatisfaction against the appointment of the Arabs, many of them hesitated to share similar opinions on the issue. Therefore, the Muslims in Malaya were still in a good relationship with one another and held no negative feelings towards each other.

Yet, as time went on, the Malays’ hatred towards the non-Malay Muslims piled up. At the

beginning of the 1930s, the Malays began to mock the Arab scholars and doubted their opinions on religious issues [15]. This development marked the turning point in the inter-relationship of the Muslims in Malaya. The Malays adopted a different attitude and newspapers began to put the blame on the Arabs and Indians for their backwardness [15]. The Malays began to question the tradition of kissing the hands of Arabs in order to obtain a blessing and the marriage regulations practiced by the *Alawiyyin*. Malays raised their dissatisfaction in the newspapers. An author under the pseudonym *Selangorian* concluded that those traditions were one of the main reasons for the backwardness of the Malay in Malaya and were incompatible for the Malays in their striving for development and modernization [15]. Consequently, non-Malay Muslims were seen as an obstacle to the Malays in reaching the goal of their nationalism.

The Malays were at the bottom of the economic ranking in Malaya. Malay newspapers circulated in Malaya in the period of this study describing the Malays as the race that was falling behind in the competition between races in Malaya [5]. On the other hand, the Arabs and Indian Muslims were among the richest people in Malaya; many of them were businessmen, traders or worked in the British administration. The Malays came to conclusion that non-Malay Muslims were snatching away what were supposed to be their rights and began to encourage their own people to participate actively in business activities. That included the need for them to sell at the night market, to open small shops, and to invest in corporative companies set up by Malay nationalists. How these thoughts were spread to the Malays will be discussed below.

3.1 The spread of nationalism

The Muslims in the early phase of this study still collaborated and shared similar views about the call voiced by the Malay nationalists. These nationalists used newspapers to channel their ideas and thoughts about nationalism. Similarly to the early 20th century, Malay newspapers were continually promoting the need of development in order for the Malays to be equal to other races in Malaya in the 1930s. It was done by publishing articles encouraging Malays to improve their lives. Every member of Malay society, regardless of their gender and age, were urged to equip themselves with the knowledge that would benefit themselves and their race. Newspapers under the management of the Arabs echoed the campaign in the Malay newspapers. *Warta Ahad* convinced Malay readers that they could overcome their backwardness by participating in business and trading activities [16]. Besides that, Malays, who were always portrayed as lazy people, were urged to work hard in order to improve their conditions. Likewise, members of the Malay society were asked to contribute their best in the economic and social fields in order to make sure they could achieve development sooner. At the same time, *Warta Ahad* emphasized the importance of collaboration in business and urged all Malays to pray for the best for the country [10].

Consequently, the Muslims in Malaya were exposed to nationalism and were convinced that nationalism would benefit them. In addition to the campaign and the call made in newspapers, Malay teachers also played a significant role in disseminating the idea of nationalism. News published in *Warta Ahad* reported the commitment shown by the Malay teachers who had graduated from Sultan Idris Training College in promoting nationalist sentiments to students who attended Malay schools during that time [17]. Meanwhile in Perak, the Inspector of Education had instructed teachers and students to wear Malay attire at classes [18]. A nationalist sentiment could be derived from this instruction because Malays at that time were going through a social transformation process as they began to adopt foreign attires such as Shanghai fashions and western dress. The attention given by the inspector of education to the attire used by teachers and students in Perak demonstrates that staff who served in the education field in Malaya during this period of study were committed to nurturing Malay nationalism among their students. Therefore, Malay nationalism

grew and spread throughout Malaya. Consequently, Muslims in Malaya were faced with issues and conflicts of thought relating to nationalism which then led into a long period of strife.

3.2 Issues and conflict

The main characteristic of the second stage of Malay nationalism was the Malay sensitivity to the issue of the economy. In the early phase, they had only shown their discomfort to the monopoly of Chinese and Indians in economic activities in Malaya, but then it was widened against the non-Malay Muslim towards the end of the 1930s. The Malays illustrated their disappointment to the non-Malay Muslim traders and businessmen whom they saw as manipulators, in many aspects, of Malay society. For example, the Arab and Indian Muslim businessmen were selling “invaluable things” to the Malays in the name of Islam [19]. The Malays also raised the fact that the non-Malay Muslims were foreigners who had taken advantage of the Malays’ kindness for generations. The Malays according to an article helped the Arabs who were “worthless and poor” in their homeland become noble and rich in Malaya [20].

Due to the long history of relationship and assimilation the Malay nationalists found it hard to marginalize the non-Malay Muslims from Malay society. The Malays began to promote a “new definition” for “Malay” to stress the fact that the Arab and Indian Muslims were ‘outsiders’. Even though Malay society could not reach an agreement about who were supposed to be true Malay, almost all of the Malay Associations in Malaya agreed that the Arabs and Indians were not a part of Malay society. In general, the Malays agreed that “Malay” referred to someone who came from Malay parents. Children who came from a non-Malay father or mother would have to “filter” their blood for at least three generations before they could be recognized as a Malay. Later, Malay nationalists in Singapore came up with a campaign known as the Movement in Purifying Malay Blood (MPMB) [15]. It was not radical as it sounds because Malay nationalists “filtered” the Malays by their blood relation.

The MPMB had a huge impact on non-Malay Muslims and those who came from mixed marriage families. The line drawn between the Malay and non-Malay Muslims made the latter unable to access special rights allocated by the British administration for the Malays in Malaya. In the field of education, children from non-Malay Muslim families were having problems in obtaining scholarships or access to special schools opened by the British for the Malays. Besides that, non-Malay Muslims also found that opportunities to work in the British administration became limited. The new definition of Malay left the non-Malay Muslims uneasy.

The Malays found that the new definition of “Malay” that they promoted benefited the Malays because they were dissatisfied with the appointment of the Arabs into positions in the British administration. For example, an author under the pseudonym Perdhuli had written about his dissatisfaction of the Arabs who had monopolized positions in the religious department in Malay states [21]. However, the issues and problems had not ceased to exist. *Utusan Melayu* in the following year commented on the same problems. The Arabs, according to *Utusan Melayu*, were asking to be a part of Malay society due to their intention to work in the British administration in Malaya [22]. The response from Malay newspapers showed that the main reason for the Malays’ hesitation was led by their economic interest. For instance, access to study in special schools was seen by the Malay as a stepping stone to getting a better life; meanwhile, getting a job as a government servant was seen as a guarantee that with the security of a stable salary one’s life would improve. For Malay nationalists, stopping non-Malay Muslims meant they were elevating the chances for Malays to improve their lives.

The non-Malay Muslims had a different view on the issue related to the new definition of

“Malay” promoted by the Malays. The Arabs and the Indian Muslims believe that they were also part of the Malay community based on the principals in the nation-state. Hence, the non-Malay Muslims argued that they were entitled as Malays based on the reason that they were in Malaya for a long period of time. Furthermore, many of them had married Malay women and had assimilated into the local society. The non-Malay Muslims argued that one’s race could also be defined based on the culture that they used in daily life. [23]; therefore, the offspring of mixed marriage families had to be accepted as Malays [24].

The Malays however found it hard to accept non-Malay Muslims based on their birth place and the Malay culture that they practiced. *Warta Jenaka*, for example, published an article stating that one’s race is defined by “blood” and not by the place of birth [25]. The rejection by the Malays was criticized by the non-Malay Muslims stating that Malay nationalism was too extreme and went too far from Islamic teachings [15]. *Warta Jenaka* illustrated the frustration of non-Malay Muslims towards the Malays who were unable to balance between nationalism and Islamic teachings. According to the article, which was published in July 1939, the Malays was known as a community who had been hugely influenced by Islamic teachings in their traditions, custom and daily life. However, the Malays had changed since the growth of Malay nationalism because the Malays had put priority on nationalism and began to neglect Islamic teachings [26]

Non-Malay Muslims in Malaya supposed that the growth of Malay nationalism brought about a negative impact on the Muslim communities in Malaya. It referred to the division of Muslims into groups after the emerging of the Malay nationalism. Hence, the Malays were reminded about the Islamic brotherhood principal. Based on the principal of Islamic brotherhood, non-Malay Muslims called the Malays to end their nationalism. Non-Malay Muslims reassured the Malays that they shared similar goals with the Malays in improving the condition of the Malays Malaya. They pledged through *Warta Malaya* that they would cooperate and help the Malays to enhance their economy and preserve their rights as the natives of Malaya.

The Malays responded negatively to the appeal made by non-Malay Muslims due to their prejudice against the Arabs. They came to the conclusion that the Arabs were dishonest people based on the way the Arabs had treated the Malays. An article published in *Majlis* described the Arabs and Indian Muslims as people with “two faces” who, due to their greed and stubbornness, were always trying to find ways to fool the Malays [27]. Besides that, the Arabs were seen by the Malays as the people who would snatch their rights. Selangorian, for example, wrote about the Arabs in Pahang who claimed to be Malays in order to possess Malay Reservation Land in that state [21]. *Utusan Melayu* published a comment illustrating that they shared a similar opinion to *Majlis*. On July 4, 1941, *Utusan Melayu* described the younger generation of the Arabs in Johore as a group who were aiming to get special rights reserved for the Malay when they refused to support the establishment of Arab associations for Johorean [28].

The Malays were hesitated to accept the call for unity, mainly because of the implication that this had for them. Selangorian in his response to the suggestion made by *Warta Malaya* for the Malays to accept non-Malay Muslim based on the faith that they shared, insisted that the suggestion was incompatible to and contradicted with Malay nationalism [29]. Selangorian’s letter demonstrates that the Malay put a priority on nationalism rather than Islam. The opinion voiced by Selangorian was shared by the Malay Association of Perak [30] and the Malays in Malaya [31]. Furthermore, from the Malay point of view, race and religion were two different issues. Religion could not be used as a prerequisite to categorize people under the same race [32;33]. Hence, the call for unity on the basis of religion failed to convince the Malays to accept non-Malay Muslims as part of their group again.

The Arab found the Malay rejection of their suggestion for unity to be unacceptable and a disgrace for all Muslim communities in Malaya. *Lembaga* criticised Selangorian because of his suggestion for Malays to distance themselves from the Arabs for the sake of Malay nationalism [34]. Writings like Selangorian were seen as an act of antagonism and cause for ill feeling among the Arabs and Malays [34]. The discussion above demonstrated that the tension in the relationship between the Malays and non-Malay Muslims was led by the collision between nationalism and Islamic brotherhood.

Despite the Malays' rejection, the Arabs continued to propose for unity among Muslims in Malaya. Syed Muhamad bin Ali Al-Sagoff asked for Muslim collaboration in his attempt to establish the United Muslim Central Council (UMCC). In his appeal for Muslims' support, Al-Sagoff stated that the UMCC was to be set up to take care for Muslims' welfare regardless their background [35]. Based on that purpose, Al-Sagoff had invited all Muslims in Singapore to collaborate and contribute to the UMCC and cease all the arguments that they had. Bickering, according to Al-Sagoff, brought harm to the Muslim communities in Malaya [35]. The Malays had no argument with this opinion. *Utusan Melayu* as the speaker for the Malay nationalist had stated their acknowledgement to the effort made by Al-Sagoff and made a declaration that the Malays had no hatred against the Arab[35]. Besides that, *Lembaga* had also published a letter informing their readers that the Malays appreciated and acknowledged the principal of Islamic brotherhood [34]. However, the Malays, according to *Utusan Melayu* were reluctant to join in the UMCC because they could not accept the Arabs as a part of their community. Furthermore, the Malays argued that their reluctance was fair because the Arab associations were also refusing to accept Malays as members [34]

To what extent the claims made by the Malays were sincere could be analyze from the development that took place a few months after that. The Malays took an action that demonstrated their hatred against the Arabs. Religious schools in Kuala Lumpur had decided to remove 'Arabic names' in order to 'cleanse' their school names' [36]. This development illustrates that the Muslims in Malaya were going through a deep conflict due to the growth of Malay nationalism in 1940. The Arabs found that the Malays' nationalism posed a threat to the unity of the Muslims in Malaya. Hence, famous individuals from the Arab community like Saiyid Alwi Al-Hadi and Sheikh Abdullah Baladram had declared that Malay nationalism is forbidden in Islam [15]. Their argument was refuted by the Malays.

Other than the religious argument, the Arabs tried to win over the Malays by reminding them about the sacrifices and goodwill of the Arabs in Malaya. The Malays were advised to acknowledge their gratitude to the infamously rich Arab families like the Al-Sagoff and Al-Junied families in Singapore, as well as the Al Attas family in Johore for their generosity in establishing religious schools and *waqf* institutions in Malaya [37]. The Malays had a different view. *Majlis* for example argued that the Arabs built those schools in order to maintain their influence and to instil Arabness among their younger generation [38]. Discussions above show that it was hard for the Arabs to regain the Malay trust. They also suggest that the Malays' commitment towards nationalism was high in the period 1930-1941.

4. Conclusion

Muslims in Malaya in the period of this study were going through a dark period as they were dragged into a deep conflict. Both Malay and non-Malay Muslims in this period had different views on nationalism. The Malays put their concern on the ethnic background. Meanwhile, non-Malay Muslims in their attempts to defend their rights focus on the other principal of nation state, i.e. birth

place and culture. It shows that Malay nationalists were yet to fully understand nationalism. It also shows that the Islamic brotherhood principle was neglected by the Malays in the period of this study.

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