

THE QUIET AFFAIRS IN THE SIAMESE-MALAY RELATIONS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian

I

The political development in the Malay Peninsula in the nineteenth century saw the culmination of the rivalries mainly between Great Britain and Siam. There existed continuing attempts to settle the conflicts and to find acceptable solutions to the rivalries, which could easily jeopardise the congenial atmosphere for commerce and stability in the region, so much desired by the British. Outstanding among these attempts were the 1826 Bangkok Treaty, the famous Salisbury instruction of 1889, the Anglo-Siamese Secret Convention of 1897, and the 1902 Treaty. Nonetheless, all these efforts seemed to have left certain aspects of the jealousy and rivalry unattended. Thus the result was the renewed efforts on both sides to improve their respective position against the other. It was only with the Siamese decision to leave the Malay arena to the British in 1909 that the perpetual in-fighting and bickering between Bangkok and Singapore came to a final end.

Within the context of the intensified Anglo-Siamese rivalry and competition, especially after the 1880's, Siamese-Malay relations fluctuated in accordance with the rhythm of the Anglo-Siamese relations, and the internal political development in the individual Malay principalities. It was a common feature that various factions within these Malay polities would appeal, sometimes to one sometimes to the other of the two powers, for assistance and support of their cause against their respective opponents. It is also a common knowledge that a number of Malay leaders within the Siamese sphere of influence actively sought British support against domestic opponents, and what they considered Siamese oppressive and unjust interventions in the domestic affairs of their home state. Probably the most notable one was the call made by Abdul Kadir, the Tuan Besar of Pattani, in 1901 – 2¹. The request and the subsequent events which involved the sudden arrest and demotion of Abdul Kadir by the Siamese authority, and the Straits Settlements Governor's genuine and persistent efforts to get him free, nearly brought about a diplomatic showdown

1 CO 273/268 Swettehnam-CO, May 21, 1901.

between Bangkok and London.² In fact, if the English evidences are anything to go by, the majority of Malay leaders in the Siamese political ambit were anti-Siamese and would rather choose to live under British protection. This sentiment has been accepted by the colonial historians as self-evident, which exhibited Malay response to Siamese misgovernment, cruelty, as well as the desire to follow the “civilised” way of life effectively propagated by the British and their culture.³

However, if these events were scrutinised more carefully, it is more than likely that King Chulalongkorn’s comment on the aspiration of the Malays and their opinion of foreigners, Europeans or Southeast Asians alike, is more to the point.

“The Malays” the King explained, “like any other races hate foreign interference. It is a big misconception when the British say the Malays respect and support them ... If the Malays have sought British assistance, it is because Great Britain is a great power, whose authority could be employed to help freeing them from our hand.”⁴

Chulalongkorn was of course talking with many evidences to back his opinion. Within the Siamese archives, lie numerous documents recording the requests and appeals from various Malay leaders for Siamese intervention and assistance against both their internal opponents and the British advancement. Compared with the well-studied documents of Malay requests against Siamese power and authority, these records represent the quiet side of the Siamese-Malay relations, which so far have hardly received deserved attention from scholars in the field. The records offer a reader some insight into the existing relationship between the Malays and their powerful northern neighbour. It is the intention of this article to bring forward a few events which exhibit some “preference” of the Malays for Siamese assistance against Britain, because of their realisation that the latter as the administrators were “a heavy-handed lot”.⁵ They also reveal the quiet side of the Siamese-Malay affairs in the midst of the boisterous claims of the SS officials concerning the Anglo-Malay understanding against the common opponents, the Siamese.

2 Kobkua Suwannatha-Pian, “The 1902 Siamese-Kelantan Treaty: An End of the Traditional Relations”, *JSS*, 1985, pp. 95 – 139; Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud, *Patani di Akhir Pemerintahan Tuan Besar 1896-1902*. Jabatan Sejarah, UKM, 1891 – 2. Also FO 422/56; CO 273/274, 282, 286, 296.

3 B.W. Andaya & L.Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, London: Macmillan Asian Histories Series, 1982, pp. 150 – 4, interestingly expound the attitude of the colonialists vis-a-vis their relationship with the natives.

4 R 5 M 62, vol. 5, Chulalongkorn-Suriya, March 17, 1903.

5 *Ibid.*

II

The first of such events concerns the affairs in Perak before the signing of the Pangkor Treaty in 1874, which established for the first time British protectorate in the form of the Resident system in that state. In 1854 the Siamese court received a request from a "Phraya Perak", Sultan Abdullah (1851 – 1857), for some military assistance against his domestic opponents-Raja Ngah Jaafar, the Raja Muda, and Raja Ngah Ali, the Bendahara.⁶ The request was sent via the Governor of Songkhla (Singora), one of the Siamese viceroys of the southern region. It was obvious that the appeal to Bangkok was made out of desperation. Sultan Abdullah had during 1851 – 1854 repeatedly appealed to the British authority for similar assistance, but the requests seemed to have fallen on a deaf ear. By June 1854. Sultan Abdullah's position must have become so weak that his main opponent felt secured enough to assume the title of Sultan Safiuddin Muazam Shah.⁷ The situation called for some drastic action, and the Sultan apparently decided to try his fortune with Siam, the traditional big power in the region to save his position. It was clear from the letter that the Sultan was aware of the fact that since the signing of the Anglo-Perak (unratified) Treaty of 1826, Perak had been more or less out of Siamese political orbit, and his action would therefore cause some complication. Nevertheless the Perak ruler offered, in return for the service of the Siamese troops of three hundred to four hundred strong and the success of the operation, Perak as a *muang khuen*/tributary of Songkhla, Siam.⁸

Apparently this was not the first time that Sultan Abdullah had appealed to the Siamese agents in the Malay Peninsula to help him overcoming his subordinates' opposition. At the beginning of his reign, the Sultan had already requested the help of Kedah under Sultan Zainal Rashid I. Kedah however was advised to decline the honour as it was under Siamese jurisdiction, and therefore was bound by the 1826 Treaty not to interfere in the affairs of Perak.

6 KH R 4, vol. 8 J.S. 1216/1854, Chao Phraya Akkramaha-senabodi-Phraya Wichiankiri Phraya Songkhla, Saturday of the 3rd. waning moon, the 9th. month J.S. 1216/1854.

7 Details of Perak history of this period see Khoo Kay Kim, *The Western Malay States 1850 – 1873*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 124 – 140.

8 KH R 4, vol. 8, J.S. 1216, *op.cit.*, part of the letter stated, "Phraya Perak ... offers to become a tributary to Songkhla ... < in return for the service of a Siamese army of about 300 – 400 strong > ... If the British were to object to this, Phraya Perak and his sons gives an assurance that they would not implicate Phraya Songkhla in the matter whatsoever".

This time even though Mongkut and his ministers were apparently keen to extend Siamese influence in the Malay Peninsula, and regain Perak as a Siamese *bunga mas* tributary, they were restrained by the Treaty not to interfere directly into Perak's affairs.⁹ Bangkok thus instructed Songkhla to explain Siamese position to Sultan Abdullah as well as to contact the Ngah Jaafar-Ngah Ali party so as to obtain the accurate picture of the events in Perak.

Siamese failure to interfere in the power-struggle in Perak in the 1850's did not however deter Perak leaders from appealing again for Siamese participation and assistance as the power struggle in that state had succeeded in weakening the authority of the ruler. In 1873, it was the turn of Raja Yusuff to request Siamese aid. The son of Sultan Abdullah who had not been appointed the Bendahara of Perak at the death of his father in 1857 as custom demanded, Raja Yusuff now join up with Raja Abdullah who claimed to be the rightful ruler of Perak, and was appointed by the latter *Raja Muda* in 1873. Raja Yusuff's letter to the Siamese Consul in Penang stated that,

Formerly Perak was under the suzerainty of the King of Siam. But in the year A.H. 1237 an army from Nakorn invaded Kedah and the latter fell, causing great chaos and disturbances which lasted until A.H. 1259. By that time Sultan Abdullah Mohamad Shah had become the ruler of Perak. He passed away in the year A.H. 1275. I have myself surveyed (the affairs in the Malay Peninsula) and come to the conclusion that all the Malay states under His Majesty the King have made lots of progress. Because of this I have sent my brother, Raja Sulaiman, and my son, Raja Mohamad, to go and pay homage to His Majesty in Bangkok. That was in the sixth month of the year A.H. 1284. They arrived in Nakorn and there remained for four months. However that seemed to be the end of their journey ... Now I have

9 The subtlety of the 1826 Burney Treaty concerning Perak was that on its own accord, however, Perak could still choose to remain within the Siamese sphere of influence. It was to this effect that Bangkok had tried to cultivate a good-will and understanding with both Abdullah and Ngah Jaafar in the hope that either one of them would finally declare his adherence to Siam. *Ibid.*

The Article 14 of the Burney Treaty stated,

“The Siamese and English mutually engage that the Rajah of Perak shall govern his country according to his own will. Should he desire to send gold and silver flowers to Siam as heretofore, the English will not prevent his doing as he may desire. If Chao Phya of Ligor desires to send down to Perak, with friendly intentions, forty (40) or fifty (50) men, whether Siamese, Chinese, or other Asiatic subjects of Siam; or if the Rajah of Perak desires to send any of his ministers, or officers to see Chao Phya of Ligor, the English shall not forbid them. The Siamese or English shall not send any force to go and molest, attack or disturb Perak”

(*Treaties and Engagements of the Native States of the Malay Peninsula*, Part I, II, III, Singapore, 1877).

learned that you, my dear friend, have become the Siamese Consul ... I request you to forward this despatch to the Kalahom, relaying my desire to become, together with Perak, the subject of His Majesty the King again. I would like to undergo all the necessary ceremonies so as to make valid the position of Perak within the Siamese tributary system.¹⁰

The reason behind this sudden request again was not hard to identify. The Raja Abdullah camp had been fighting for the throne of Perak since 1871, and had been appealing to the Penang Governor to support his legitimate claim. However, up to 1873, these efforts had been disappointing. Sultan Ismail and his chieftain Ngah Ibrahim had in fact scored a political and economic victory over Raja Abdullah and Raja Yusuff, when they managed to obtain the full support of Lieut.-Governor Anson and the service of Captain Speedy and his men to fight against their opponents in Larut. Raja Abdullah was thus in need of a powerful ally. October 1873 witnessed the intensified political manoeuvrings on the part of Raja Abdullah and his associates. It was not surprising that Raja Yusuff undertook to revive the tributary ties with Siam, while Raja Abdullah himself wooed and won the support of Tan Kim Cheng, a powerful and influential entrepreneur in Singapore.¹¹

Unfortunately, the request of Raja Yusuff came at an inopportune time. Siam was about to get entangled in the serious power-struggle between the old/traditional and the young progressive camps which spared her no attention for other external affairs. The struggle which was soon to develop into an open defiance on the part of the *Wang Na*, the heir-presumptive, against his progressive young monarch in 1874 – 5, was so intensified that Bangkok was in no position to intervene in the affairs so remote a land as Perak.¹² By the time Siam had sorted out her domestic problem, and ready to strengthen her influence in the Peninsula, Perak had already signed the Pangkor Treaty which, in essence, put it beyond the reach of Siamese political ambitions.

III

The dynasty quarrels in Kelantan from the death of Sultan Long Ahmad (1886 – 1890) until the accession of Sultan Long Senik (1899 – 1920) saw the local chieftains pre-occupied with efforts to win

10 KT R 5, vol. J.S. 1231 – 1239, Letter of Tengku (sic) Yusuff ibni Al-marhum Sultan Abdullah Muhamad Shah, Perak — William Thomas Lewis, Siamese Consul at Penang, Sunday of the 2nd. waxing moon, the 10th month J.S. 1235/1873.

11 Khoo Kay Kim, *op. cit.*, pp. 174 – 5.

12 For some detail of the *Wang Na* crisis see CO 273/77, 79.

over some foreign assistance to their individual causes against one another. The problem started with the big royal family of Sultan Ahmad.¹³ When he died, the royal brothers were left to fight for what each considered the fair share of their birthright. At least five brothers registered their discontent against the dictatorial rule of their royal brothers: first against Sultan Mohamad III (1890 – 1) and then against Sultan Mansur (1891 – 99).¹⁴ It had been alleged that the Sultans had put aside the traditional method of administering the state. By so doing, both of them, in their turn, had deprived their brothers and relatives of their (the latter's) birthright in the affairs of the state, political and economic. Instead of consulting his royal peers, Sultan Mansur, it was alleged, ruled with the firm hand and the assistance from a few chieftains who had been instrumental to his succession to the throne, and ignored completely the political right of his relatives.

By March 1890 the Kelantan royal brothers submitted their complaint to the Straits Settlements officials, asking for help against the Sultan's harsh treatment. The letter was signed by five brothers of the Sultan: Tuan Long Mahmud, Long Salleh, Long Sulaiman, Long Yusuff, and Long Abdullah.¹⁵ However, it appeared that little could be done to remedy their grievances against the Sultan since by August, when the five brothers met with the Siamese Consul-General at Singapore, they had no hesitation in pouring out their dissatisfac-

13 Leslie Ratnasingam Robert, "Kelantan 1890 – 1939: Government in Transition", unpublished *M.A. thesis* University of Malaya, 1973, pp. 24 – 30, 55 – 63.

14 Concerning the activities of the five brothers see below. *Sultan Mohamad III*, the eldest son of Sultan Ahmad, came to the throne with the support of Siam and could afford to adopt a heavy-handed rule against his possible rivals. Nik Mohamad bin Nik Mohd. Salleh, *Satu Catatan Mengenai Masalah Sengketaan atas Takhta Kelantan dalam Abad-abad 18-20 Masehi*, Document ARD 14, Arkib Negara, n.d., pp. 8 – 10.

Sultan Mansur, the younger brother of Sultan Mohamad III and the supposedly hand-picked heir by Sultan Ahmad, was also a prime mover against Sultan Mohamad III, who, it was reported, kept a midnight appointment with Sir Henry Norman, the British M.P., to discuss the overthrowing of his brother. However he also received Siamese approval as the rightful successor to his brother in 1891. Once a ruler, Mansur proceeded to adopt his brother's method of administration to the chagrin of his erstwhile associates. See CO 273/73, Smith-CO, June 17, 1891.

15 Leslie R. Robert, *op. cit.*, p. 60. However, the letter signed by the five Tengku to the Kalahom, September 24, 1890, stated the names of the five signatories as Tengku Long Mahmud, Tengku Petra (Tengku Long Idris), Tengku Sulaiman, Tengku Abdullah, and Tengku Yusuff. See R 5 M 62 vol. 16, Petition of the Five Tengku-Kalahom for submitting to the King, September 24, 1890. For the names of the 12 sons of Sultan Ahmad, see Nik Mohamad Nik Mohd. Salleh, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

tion with their royal brothers.¹⁶ The crux of their grievances which was stated in the petition to Chulalongkorn was the Sultan's unfair treatment towards all his brothers. This included the denial of their rightful place in the State Council; the withdrawal of the privileges granted during their father's lifetime of receiving certain income from specific revenue; the misappropriation of their hereditary property; the oppressive rule of the Sultan and his trusted officials which had caused the exodus of about 10,000 of Kelantan Malays from the state. They also pleaded that the King re-instated them in their rightful place in the administration of the state affairs, and, perhaps more important, grant them the right to operate the gold and tin mines in Kelantan, the concession of which was denied them by Sultan Mohamad III.¹⁷ In October of that year, the five brothers had arrived in Bangkok to strengthen their case against the Sultan. They even went so far as to perform the ceremony of Drinking the Water of Allegiance in order to demonstrate their adherence to the authority in Bangkok.¹⁸ In October 31, 1890, the five Tengku officially submitted another petition which stated clearly their discontent with the Sultan of Kelantan, who had, according to their viewpoint, put aside all the traditional practice of the affairs of the state to the detriment of his brothers and relatives.

Our sufferings are caused by the fact that the new Phraya Dejanuchit Phraya Kelantan refuses to give us our usual allowance, and does not allow us to continue in our assigned role in the state affairs nor discuss with us the administration of Kelantan. Phraya Dejanuchit Phraya Kelantan only discusses these matters with his subordinates. He also forbids us to exercise our judicial authority in our assigned *mukim* ...¹⁹

In spite of their concerted effort, the five Tengku failed to impress upon the King and his Kalahom of their "rightful" claims. Ap-

16 The five Tengku proceeded to Singapore to meet with the Governor of the SS in August. When inquired by the Siamese Consul-General of their business in Singapore, they only replied that the main purpose of the trip was to get medical treatment for Tengku Mahmud who was ill and to pay a courtesy call on the Governor.

17 R 5 M 62 vol. 16, Phraya Anukul-Siamkit, Siamese Consul-General-*Kalahom*, September 23, R.S. 109/1890; Petition of the five Tengku, *op. cit.*, Phraya Montri-suriyawongs — Sommot-amorabhandhu, October 24, R.S. 109/1890.

18 R 5 M 62, vol. 16, Phraya Montri-suriyawongs — Phraya Anukul-Siamkit, November 2, R.S. 109/1890.

19 *Ibid.* Petition of the Five Tengku-Phraya Montri-suriyawongs, October 31, R.S. 109/1890.

parently Bangkok was indifferent to their plight mainly because Sultan Mohamad III was the approved candidate. His policy also was perhaps seen as the logical measures strengthening the ruler's position against his domestic rivals.²⁰ Having remained in the Siamese capital until May 1891, with no apparent result, the five Tengku decided to call it quit. In the mid of the night of May 11, 1891, they, together with their entourage, disappeared from the residence without taking a proper leave of the King nor his minister in charge, the Kalahom.²¹

The failure of their attempt to obtain Siamese assistance against the Sultan had without doubt a profound effect on the course of the Siamese influence and position in Kelantan by the close of the nineteenth century.²² Having performed every possible obligation deemed necessary to win Siamese favour and sympathy throughout their long stay in Bangkok, the five Tengku finally realised the futility of their efforts. The realisation most probably came as a great humiliation to them, since they had unconditionally surrendered themselves to the royal mercy of their overlord. They most likely thought they had been led up the garden path, and thus could not bring themselves to forget the bitter experience, as events leading to the 1902 crisis were to confirm. Their departure in the mid of the night spoke most effectively of their unhappy state of mind. Once they arrived back in Kelantan, the five Tengku and their associates publicly campaigned against Siam and adopted a defying attitude against the Sultan. On the other hand, they would speak highly of and showed support for the Straits Settlements authority in Singapore to the annoyance and infuriation of their royal brother.²³ Most important was the underlined determination to sabotage and to do away with Siamese authority in Kelantan.

20 Mohamad III and Mansur were the two rulers who continued the tradition of Sultan Ahmad of leaning towards Siam for guidance and support. They were considered the "loyal subjects" of the King, the position Mansur himself proudly confirmed in the interview with Sir C. Mitchell in 1896. FO 422/45, Mitchell to Co, September 7, 1896.

21 R 5 M 62, vol. 16, Luang Dhip-aksorn — Luang Patipak-pochanakorn, the Siamese Malay interpreter, May, R.S. 110/1891.

22 Leslie R. Robert, *op. cit.*, pp. 29 – 32; W.A. Graham, *Kelantan Annual Report August 1903 – May 1905*, Bangkok: National Library, 1905. Suffice is to say they were successful in undermining the prestige and influence of Bangkok after 1899 and caused the crisis in 1902 which finally resulted in a Siamese resident of British nationality being appointed to assist the Sultan in the administration of the state. Siam lost her power of direct interference in Kelantan's affairs.

23 R 5 M2. 12K, Despatches on Kelantan, Kalahom — Sobhon-pandit, September 19, R.S. 110/1891.

By 1902 the five Tengku were successful in reducing Siamese role in their state to that of a distant protector whose power could only be exercised through an agent. The change came after Siam was compelled to negotiate with, and agree to the terms of the 1902 Treaty. Siam thus lost her traditional suzerain role and accepted the Adviser system based on the famous resident system in the British Malay states. The obsession to repay the Siamese for the alleged humiliating treatment to them, nevertheless backfired. The Tengku themselves lost in the process of winning their "birthright" in the affairs of Kelantan. They were forced to accept the role of officials or observers of the administration run by the Siamese Adviser with no political privileges whatever.²⁴

IV

At the height of the Bangkok-Singapore rivalry at the close of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a letter was sent by a "Tengku Petra (Mahmud) ibni Almarhum Tengku Syed ibni Almarhum Sultan Mahmud of Lingga and Rhio" to Bangkok requesting Siamese good service to persuade the Dutch to appoint him the Yam Tuan Besar of Rhiau.²⁵ Tengku Petra was then a resident of Kampung Glam, Singapore. Tengku Petra's decision to appeal for Bangkok's assistance against his rival, Tengku Mahmud, indicated that Siam was still considered an alternative power to an European authority in the affairs of the Malays. Siam however declined to get entangled in the family squabbles of Rhiau-Lingga, and incur not only the suspicion and anger of the Dutch but also the increasing jealousy of British agents in the Peninsula. The King instructed his minister to reply that Rhiau-Lingga was not within the political jurisdiction of Siam, and it would therefore be improper for her to meddle in the affairs of the Malays under the power of others.²⁶

V

Of these three examples mentioned above, only the presence of the five Tengku in Bangkok for a considerable long period was a public knowledge of the contemporary, though their claims and undertakings towards the King remained "a quiet affair", known only to those involved in the incident. These quiet Siamese-Malay affairs throw some new light on the political development in the Peninsula during the second half of the nineteenth century.

24 Kobkua, *op. cit.*,

25 K R 51-76 (M 62 vol. 11), Tengku Petra-Bangkok, n.d.

26 *Ibid.* Chulalongkor-Damrong, October 13, 1902; Anderson-Sri Sahadheb, January 17, 1903.

One of the main aspects confirmed by these incidents is that Britain or the Straits Settlements authority was definitely not regarded as the saviour of the Malays against the big, bad Siam, as the colonial historians tend to make us believe. It also confirms the efforts of Malay leaders to obtain power against their local opponents by means of inviting outsiders to aid them. The pattern was very much similar to the political development in the eighteenth century, where the main "foreign" forces were the Bugis and the Minangkabaus. In the nineteenth century the English and the Siamese were both often appealed to by various factions of the Peninsula Malays in order to champion their individual causes. The main object was to gain victory over the domestic opponents, and then to reduce or do away with the power and authority of their erstwhile "guardians". The case of Perak illustrates vividly the complicated nature of the political struggle within a Malay sultanate which always dictated a need for foreign intervention. It is a gross misconception on the part of either of the outside powers to claim a special place in the heart and mind of the Malays, the way Swettenham or other leading Straits Settlement officials had so insistently declared.²⁷ Malay respect for, and co-operation with their foreign patrons were generally dictated by expediency, and self-interests. And if they could freely choose, as Prince Devawongs aptly stated, they would tolerate neither British nor Siamese interference into their affairs.²⁸

The quiet affairs in the Siamese-Malay relations since the arrival of the British at Pulau Pinang, far from arguing for the favourable Malay attitude towards Bangkok or Singapore in the three-cornered Malay-British = Siamese relations, were the concrete evidence of Malay frantic search for a powerful ally who would solve their domestic problems for them. No more than that. The most outrageous cries against Siam and Britain who dared join hand in the "unholy" 1909 Treaty against the interests of the Malays in the four northern Siamese Malay states, are befitting an evidence in support of the above argument.²⁹ Malay leaders in fact demonstrated their unwillingness to be under British protection as vigorously as they had showed to the British their dislike of Siamese suzerain authority.³⁰

27 FO 422/56 CO to FO, February 7, 1902.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Thamsook Numnonda, "The Anglo-Siamese Negotiations 1900 - 1909", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1966.

30 Leslie R. Robert, *op. cit.* Sharom Ahmad, *Kedah: Tradition and Change in a Malay State: A Study of the Economic and Political Development 1878-1923*, K.L.: MBRAS, 1984, Chap. VI; Letter from the Sultan of Kelantan to Governor of the SS, ARD 15, SP2/71, Arkib Negara.