

Political Consciousness among The Kelantanese Peasants

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to explain that the dynamism of Kelantanese politics is not a new phenomenon. Long before the democratic political system was introduced, the Kelantanese were already actively involved in political activities. The main event in the colonial period in Kelantan was the rebellion of Tok Janggut in 1915. There is a tendency to portray that the incident only happened in Pasir Putih district. According to the oral history confirmed by written records, the Kelantanese from all over the state were supportive of the rebellion. This involvement showed that the Kelantanese had not only the political consciousness but were also willing to promote their interest even through violence. Therefore it is not too strange if these days their political life is more vibrant, especially when they change the state government from time to time. It also makes the outcome of the general election unpredictable.

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini cuba menjelaskan bahawa kedinamikan politik orang Kelantan bukanlah suatu gelagak baru. Jauh sebelum sistem politik demokrasi diperkenalkan, mereka telahpun terlibat dalam politik secara aktif. Peristiwa terbesar semasa pemerintahan kolonial di Kelantan ialah pemberontakan Tok Janggut pada tahun 1915. Terdapat kecenderungan untuk memperlihatkan peristiwa ini sebagai gerakan yang terhad di Jajahan Pasir Putih sahaja. Mengikut sejarah lisan yang disahkan oleh catatan bertulis, rakyat di seluruh negeri Kelantan menyokong pemberontakan itu. Penglibatan orang ramai itu menunjukkan bahawa mereka bukan sahaja mempunyai kesedaran politik tetapi bersedia memajukan kepentingan mereka walaupun melalui kekasaran. Dengan itu, tidak ganjil sekiranya pada hari ini kehidupan politik mereka sentiasa bergegar, terutama apabila mereka mengubah kerajaan yang memerintah Kelantan dari masa ke masa. Ini juga membuatkan keputusan pilihanraya umum di Kelantan sukar diramalkan.

INTRODUCTION

A fascinating phenomenon of modern politics in Kelantan is the consciousness and participation of its people. Kelantan has always been an arena where fighting between political parties, i.e. PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) and UMNO (United Malay National Organisation), is fierce, especially during the general election time. Without the awareness and involvement of the people, the heightened competitiveness might not exist. The awareness and involvement of the people are also probability factors which determine the outcome of the general election and thus make it very difficult to forecast the results (Yahya Ismail n.d. 6).

The consciousness and involvement of the people, however, is not a new phenomenon. Of course, this phenomenon has a connection with the freedom that was given by the democratic political system. But this opportunity has not been fully used or anticipated by all people in all states, only in Kelantan and perhaps Sabah have the dynamics of the people's politics prevailed.¹ Therefore the element of consciousness and involvement of the Kelantanese people must have been rooted long before the practices of democracy-politics. It is the aim of this essay to describe and analyse political consciousness among the Kelantanese peasants in the roughly fifty-year period from 1900 to 1955. Within this period, the absolute power of the Sultan was transferred to the British Adviser (1909) and the first general election was held (1955). This period can be called the era of transition because it refers directly to the process of transformation of a feudal political system into a colonial one and, later, democracy.

PREMISE OF THE VIEW

The experience of the people, their social and economic relations and the conflicting interests embodied in them have never been given a proper place in historical writing about Malay society. The history of Malay society has belonged to the elite. The elite personalities and institutions were the focus of historical writing whenever history explained Malay politics (Sullivan 1982, 1985). The peasants had no role in politics. In fact, the peasants were totally powerless and they could not administer anything, even their own souls (Clifford 1897:114).

The premise of the view has been reinforced by the nature of Malay precapitalist society. No doubt the society was a peasantry (Shanin 1975). The earlier, or what Keesing (1981:423) called the 'standard', view of peasant societies held by many scholars, is very compatible with the historical works discussed above. The view expressed the notion that

peasants are passive, irrational and fatalistic (Redfield 1950; Foster 1962). Even Karl Marx (1975:231) himself believed in this view when he wrote:

Peasants cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above.

With this view, the discussion of peasant politics only can explain the role of ideological and leadership aspects offered by outsiders such as urban intelligentsia and political parties, but not the politics of the peasant (Scott 1985:xv). For instance, most of the written works on peasant rebellions in Kelantan (1915) and in Trengganu (1928) were focussed on their leadership. The peasants who took part in the rebellions were not acting on their own accord but had been deceived by their leaders (Timah 1981)².

This premise is still being used in the discussions of present politics by many writers and political observers. For instance, the triumph of the Opposition Front (PAS and Semangat 46 party) in Kelantan in the general election of 1990 was said to be due to the characteristics of Kelantanese people, who are irrational (antidevelopment), parochialistic and religiously fanatic. In fact, this premise has been criticized thoroughly by Kessler (1978) but it is still being upheld by some writers.

In recent studies, it was revealed that the view which denied the ability and intelligence of primitive people, like tribal minorities and peasants, in deciding their own fate is no longer true (Harden 1990).³ Although, peasants form a lower social class, they have their own calculations about their lives (Shanin 1982). They live in a small world in which they are economically and politically disadvantaged but they have no illusions about their position (Diaz 1967:56). They are sensitive to their surroundings and quite aware about any form of exploitation which could disturb their peaceful lives (Scott 1976).

Therefore, the consciousness and involvement of the Kelantanese peasant is not a new phenomenon. The politics of democracy only provided them a more tangible means to express their interests and protest. Their political consciousness is rooted deeply in the era of feudalism. In order to survive, they have had to take part in any system of politics whether it be feudal, colonial or democratic. Without participation in politics, their interests cannot be defended. So, in any situation, they cannot be irrational, fatalistic or ignorant, if they want to survive.

An Englishman who worked as a Siamese representative in Kelantan in the early 20th century, W.A Graham, wrote about Kelantanese

peasant in the following sketch (Graham 1908:19).

He grows the seventy thousand odd tons of rice which feed the population, he catches and dries fish enough for home consumption and for considerable export, he makes some forty thousand pikuls of copra every year. He makes a very comfortable living, supplies all his wants and is contented.

Graham's report is very compatible with the report made by Richard Sidney, a freelance journalist and a former principal of Victoria Institution. He visited Kelantan many times before the year 1934. In that year, he delivered a speech about Kelantan at Klang Rotary Club. In the speech included in Khoo and Ranjit (1994), he said:

And amidst all this is a Malay who is dissimilar from the Malay whom we know in the West, a Malay proud of his ability to work at everything that is necessary to keep his state going.

The composite picture of the Kelantanese peasants painted by Graham and Sidney is very incompatible with the portrait presented by Bozzolo (1993) or Skeat (1993) besides Clifford mentioned earlier. Bozzolo and Skeat gave very gloomy pictures of the Kelantanese peasants; Bozzolo (1993: 137) said in his report that:

The poorer class, after a hard struggle for life, they began emigrating, leaving their families behind, others given to thieving etc. Cattle were stolen and killed for food. Those who had padi lands had to give up planting as their crops were stolen before the harvest time came. The Sultan taking advantage of these hard times commenced to lend out money but at a very high rate of interest and those who had means also imitated the Sultan's way in lending out money with the result that a number of families were submitted to slavery for small sums.

In his report, Skeat (1993:142) gave a more devastating picture.

On leaving the Execution grounds we entered a small kampung, where seeing more than usually attractive children, I asked if they would sell me one. The reply was that if I had come there, two or three month ago, I could easily have purchased several. On my inquiring ... the people informed me that the up-river Malays had in a number of cases set their sick children adrift on rafts. At several places these dying children had been washed ashore by the current.

According to the reports above, during the years in 1888 and 1899 the pauperisation of the Kelantanese peasants had been spreading widely due to the powerlessness of the people and the wickedness of their chiefs. The same argument can be applied to the statements made by Graham and Sidney that the comfort and content among the Kelantanese peasants were unattainable because of their incapability to defend themselves – their properties, women folk and cattle.

Peaceful living can only be achieved through the participation of the people in state politics. In order to participate, they must have power; even though much less than the chiefs; it needed to be strong enough to create and perpetuate the balance of power. Although the balance of power was not in an ideal form, at least it was able to block any form of extreme oppression and exploitation of their chiefs that could destroy their standard of living. The balance of power did not come by itself but it was something to fight for. In every stratified society, every social class fights for its own survival and advancement. The Kelantanese ruling class, for example, was always inclined to perpetuate and promote its interests at the expense of the other social classes. This is reported in the Kelantan Annual Report for the year 1903-04. The report said that the chieftains doubtlessly had abrogated to themselves much of the economic surplus, but the overall picture then was by no means bleak (ARK 1903-04:3).

Therefore, it can be easily said that the Kelantanese ruling class always tried to oppress and exploit the peasants, but at the same time it faced resistance. The resistance was strong enough to deter the ruling class from promoting its interests beyond the threshold of acceptance by the peasants. For example, in the year 1904, the Kelantan government passed a new bill on corvee labour. The purpose of the new bill was to curb the abuse of corvee labour by members of the ruling class. The bill stated that only the Sultan could call up corvee labour and only with written order (Kerajaan Kelantan 1904).

PEASANT ECONOMICS

The Kelantanese economy during this period mainly was based on agriculture and related activities such as fishing and rearing cattle.⁴ On the eve of transfer of suzerainty from Siam to Great Britain, Kelantan was characteristically agricultural and rural (Lim Heng Kow 1978:121). Fifty years later this character had hardly changed due to a number of factors. One of the factors was its geographical isolation from the states on the west coast of the peninsula (Dobby 1951:226). This isolation meant that any economic development and social progress on the west coast was not well diffused. So, Kelantan was left behind to seek its own course of advancement. The other factor was the policy of the British administrators aimed at preserving the traditionality of the state as much as possible, besides the fact that Kelantan came late into the orbit of colonialism (Emerson 1970:252). Thus, the state remained for quite some time as a peasant enclave, even until the 1960s (Nash 1974).

Their peasant economy was not a totally subsistence economy (Graham 1908; Raymond Firth 1966; Dobby 1951). They produced not only for home consumption but for the market too. Although normally

the peasant is regarded solely as a farmer, in the case of the Kelantanese, they were also very enterprising in market activities, especially their women folk. This was well recorded by travellers who visited Kelantan, such as Abdullah Munshi, C.F. Bozzolo and Sidney.

Kota Bharu, the capital in the late 1940s, was still a peasant town. It was small and open, its fringe intermingling with paddy fields that came within a few metres of its center. There were only about a dozen blocks of brick buildings. Most of the residences were made of wood, surrounded by split-bamboo fences and a few fruit trees, much like those in rural areas. The peasants came to town with their goods by walking as far as 25km (Dobby 1951:49-50; ARK 1938:82).

According to the annual report for the year 1903-04, Kelantan early in the 20th century was the most prosperous state in Malaya. By depending mainly on producing its own foodstuff and comparatively less on cash crops like rubber and coffee, Kelantan not only escaped the severe effects of the Depression but managed to develop more rapidly during that time (Lim Heng Kow 1978:127). In fact, during that period, the 1930s, the Kelantanese were able to assist the government in development projects, such as building schools and offices, by supplying labour and material (Chan Su-Ming 1965:179).

The main crop in the Kelantanese peasant economy was paddy. The crop had been planted very extensively and involved all categories of land. According to the categories of land, the crop can be classified into several types of cultivations. The most important one was wet paddy, *padi sawah*. A considerable part of Kelantan, especially in the delta area of the north, was very suitable for wet paddy due to its fertility and ability to retain water during the monsoon season.

Paddy also could be cultivated on higher, dry land. This type of cultivation had been practiced on quite a large scale. Until 1933, 25% of the whole padi area in Kelantan was occupied by this dry paddy (Craig 1933:664). The yield of dry paddy was quite good; in a good year it could produce as much as that of the yield of wet paddy (Dobby 1951:238). Another type of cultivation was swamp paddy *padi baruh*. Even though this type of paddy took a very small portion of land, it could produce a quite substantial yield to supplement the income of the peasants.

Paddy or other off-season crops such as maize, tapioca, beans and root vegetables were produced by the Kelantanese peasants, not only for their own food but also for cash. However, their economy did not depend only on the crop. Another important and integral part of their economy was cattle rearing. During the off-season, their oxen and buffaloes roamed freely in the paddy fields. The annual report for the year 1903-04 stated that there were large herds of cattle in Kelantan and several thousand head were annually exported (ARK 1903-04:18). The cattle were kept at an estimated ratio of seven head to every two hectares of padi

(1947-48); for every three persons there was one head of cattle. The cattle population in Kelantan was unusually large in comparison with the rest of Malaya (Dobby 1951:245-246).

The peasants also took advantage of this dry season by relaxing and not engaging in any serious task. What they did during this time included repairing their houses and tools as well as tending their backyard garden. Besides those personal tasks, they also were occupied during this off-season period with social activities, like repairing village roads and mosques as well as holding ceremonies and feasts. During this season, they entertained themselves with all sorts of plays and performances, such as shadow plays (*wayang kulit*), dance dramas (*menora*) and (*mak yong*), top-spinning (*gasing*), *dikir barat* (rhythmic chanting), kite-flying (*wau*), giant drum-playing (*rebana ubi*), wooden drum-playing (*kertuk*), and cock and bull fighting (*berlaga ayam dan lembu*).

Looking at all these, one could easily say that the peasants were wasting their time and being lazy. Obviously, this scenario was being reported by one of the observers who was an assistant engineer at the railway station in Pasir Mas in 1914 (Wells 1988:154):

They have been called the gentlemen of the East, they certainly have many gentlemanly characteristics. For instance they are generally courteous and polite. Usually they are more or less independent and hate any kind of work. In fact the only real work that a Malay does of his own accord is to plough his rice field.

Without the cushion of their hard-earned economic surplus, it would have been impossible for the peasants to have had the leisure time to promote their cultural activities. In Kelantan, cultural activities were not restricted to plays and performances; they also encompassed the religious sphere. All of these activities meant expenses, labour and time. If they were poor and harassed by their chiefs, as Gullick and others tried to portray them, it would have been impossible for them to have had a very rich cultural heritage. Indeed, their economy was not a subsistence economy as was described by Scott (1976) in his discussion of the moral economy of Asian peasants. The Kelantanese peasants produced a surplus which can be seen in their letters to the government asking for permission to export rice to Johor Bharu (BAK M 42/1919), Singapore (BAK M 106/1919) and Trengganu (BAK M 42/1919).

Their cultural activities were not only an indicator of their economic well-being but also a means of expressing their political protests and interests (Geertz 1960:228). All of the cultural activities had twin functions, one for entertainment and the other for political discourse. So, it is not surprising, that all the plays and performances mentioned above revealed the theme of conflict and struggle. This theme, no doubt reminded the peasants that their survival depended on their fighting spirit

and their will to struggle, just as *Serama* (Sri Rama) and *Maharaja Wana* (Rawana) on the wayang screen.

The fights and struggles of the cultural plays and performances were only symbolic and this was not strong enough to forward their interests and protests. They also realised that a violent form of fighting was very risky and costly and they could not afford to do so frequently. The channel had to be waged in a safe and continuous manner. The means that was available to them was the religious one, Islam. Islam could be used by both the ruler and the peasants. On the one hand, the ruler used Islam as a political ideology. In this ideology, the ruler is Allah's viceroy (*khalifah*). Allah gives the ruler the mandate and legitimacy to rule; the subject must submit to the ruler (*Quran, an-Nissaa* 59). On the other hand, Islam is a blue-print for the subjects to promote their dreams of a just government and an egalitarian society. The ruler of an Islamic state is a just and humble person who cares for the well being of his subjects. The story of justice and caring which was prevalent during the reign of Khalifat al-Rashidun has always been told among the Kelantanese peasants.

The spread of Islam rapidly in Kelantan in the early 20th century can be seen as an indication of the consciousness and involvement of the peasants in politics. They provided the labour, material, money and time for building mosques and religious schools and for sending their children to study there in order to create an Islamic atmosphere in politics, if not an Islamic state. In this atmosphere, the ruler could not rule according to his own whim and fancy. The ruler's ethics must be compatible to the spirit laid down by the Khalifah al-Rashidun. Religiously speaking, although Kelantan was given the nick-name of the porch of Mecca (*Serambi Mekah*), its people were no more or less pious than the people in other states. They were committed to Islam mainly due to its relevancy to their political interests.

PEASANT POLITICS

The political consciousness and involvement of the Kelantanese peasants in politics were more significant during the colonial era. Even though the British intervention in Kelantan was only nominal, the introduction of new laws and regulations concerning land and taxes had a serious impact on the peasants. The implementation of the land law based on the Torrens System pushed the peasants into further hardship. The new land law claimed that all land belonged to the government (state). The peasants could own the land that they were currently cultivating and occupying, but it had to be registered at the District Office. The new land law not only denied the right of the peasants to open and cultivate new

land but it allowed the government to take over any land in one way or another for reasons only known to the state officers.

The new land law was incompatible with their previous one. The Malay land law was an Islamic one which had two principles. One, was the proprietary quality (*ihya*) and the other, the markedness quality (*thajir*). Land can be classified into three categories according to these two principles. Firstly, the forest land or jungle land (*tanah hutan*) was uncleared. This category of land could be cleared and owned by anyone and at any time.⁵ Secondly, the cleared land (*tanah hidup*) was continuously occupied and cultivated. It solely belonged to the proprietor. The proprietor had the right to sell, to lease or to pass the land on to his children. Thirdly, the deserted land (*tanah mati*) was once cultivated or occupied. Cleared land could be classified as deserted, whenever it had been left idle more than three years for wet paddy land and if there was no more *thajir* 'mark' on it for other lands. The *thajir* may be a house, hut, well, or tools such as a plough or fruit trees. The status of the deserted land was similar to that of the forest (Mohd Ridzuan 1987:9-15).

The implementation of the new land law and the regulations which were related to it, like: the tender system, also denied access to natural products, such as turtle eggs and wild grass. These wild products were a supplementary source of peasant income. Under the tender system, the government would only allow those who obtained a tender to collect wild products.

In facing these difficulties, the Kelantanese peasants did not 'submit quietly and murmur deeply' as Thomson (1984:108) described in Prai when the British East Indian Company took their land, but continuously engaged the government with their petition letters to express their dismay and protest. One of these letters was sent by Atli bin Omar and 16 others to the British High Commissioner (BAK 84/1912), dated January 1912.

In the letter, the peasants claimed that they did not understand the new law in connection with their property. In fact, what they were trying to say was that they did not want the new law to be implemented with respect to their property. The new land law did not take into account the old regulations such as the period allowed for non-cultivation, the *thajir* and accessibility to the natural products.

With the new land law, the government easily took the peasants' land even without any concrete reason. From the peasants' point of view, the government repossessed their land without any reason at all. The peasants felt that the government had high-handedly dealt with their land. This matter was clearly stated by Jah binti Haji Mat Salleh in her petition letter (BAK 345/11) dated 20th March 1911 to the British Adviser.

The Colonial government not only implemented the new land law, but subsequently introduced new regulations concerning quit rent or '*hasil tanah*' (land tax) as it was popularly known by the peasants. This regulation, implemented in 1915, required the peasants to pay quit rent according to the size of their land rather than on the products as under the previous law. Before 1915, the office which was in charge with this revenue was named '*Office Tumbuh-tumbuhan*' (Crops Office) (Nik Ibrahim 1974:72; BAK M 14/1911).

However innumerable the petition letters were, the official protests made by the peasant were never considered seriously by the government. When the peasants refused to pay the quit rent, the government alienated and auctioned their land (see BAK M 1915). The alternative means to protest was certainly not through a peaceful manner. In late April 1915, the peasants in Kampung Jeram, Pasir Puteh, led by Haji Mat Hassan or well known as Tok Janggut, attacked the District Office and the British estate nearby. The District Officer and the estate managers left the state in the nick of time.

In historical writing about the Kelantanese peasants' rebellion, there is a tendency to suggest that violent incidents only took place in Kampung Jeram, Pasir Puteh, instigated by one person. The portrayal is not very accurate. According to the oral history of the rebellion, the incident was a critical and widespread event, popular tradition the event is called '*Musuh To Janggut*'. Note that *musuh* means a big threat or a clash on a big scale, i.e. war; so, '*Musuh To Janggut*' was the war of Tok Janggut. In support of this, we should remember that the term *musuh* was also given to the events of the Second World War, '*Musuh Jepun*'. The Kelantanese never used the term for the emergency period because the communist threat in Kelantan was very minimal.

The atmosphere of the war in 1915 was not only felt by residents of Pasir Puteh but all over the state. The atmosphere kept the Sultan indoors and his palace was strictly guarded. It appeared that the peasants supported the rebels although they did not do so openly. Before the arrival of the British Army from Singapore, the Sultan himself, expected that the rebels at any moment would enter his palace to oust him (Wells 1984). In the districts which were far away from the capital, such as Pasir Mas, the peasants were actively involved in the rebellion. This was vividly reported by Wells (1988:174):

During the daytime, in the country round about our bungalow at Pasir Mas, the Malays went about their tasks just as usual, but at night, they met in bands to listen to some agitator or the tear up railway, ... Every night there were strange noises of distant gathering, quite unlike the harmless drumming at a roning or native dance. There seemed to be a tense feeling in the air.

The activities of the peasants against the government showed that they were ready to promote their interests through violence. In Pasir Mas they not only attacked and burned the police station and British quarters, but they also destroyed the estates in the country side. To pacify the situation, the police declared a curfew during the night. Anyone seen outside without carrying a light would be shot. It was reported that the peasants in Pasir Mas were well informed not only about the uprising in Pasir Puteh but also about the mutiny in Singapore (Wells 88:172-178).

Another aspect of the uprising which was never highlighted was its connection to the First World War. This connection clearly showed the political consciousness of the Kelantanese people. The uprising was planned in advance and heavily influenced by the international politics of the First World War. When the Khalifatul-Mukminin Othmaniah of Turkey allied itself with Germany in 1914, automatically it made the British enemies of the Muslims. The Kelantanese peasants were aware of their position in this world conflict and they did not hesitate to be involved in any action that would jeopardise the British interests. They also knew very well of the British intention to colonise their Holy Land, Mecca, through the manipulation of Arabian leaders. They also anticipated being involved in the Holy War (Wells 1988:166).

As Islamisation progressed rapidly in the late 18th century, Kelantan was well-linked with the other parts of the Islamic world. Furthermore, the Islamic world before the First World War during the administration of the Khalifalul Mukminin. When in 1911 the Muslims of Tripoli fought against the Italian armies, the Kelantanese supported the Tripolese by donating money to their widows and orphans (BAK M 95/1912)⁶.

During the First World War, the agents of Germany and Turkey in Malaya actively disseminated their propaganda against the British. They came to Kelantan as businessmen or expatriates. Their bases of operation in Bangkok and Singapore were well connected to the Turkish Consulate in Rangoon and the leftist groups in India (Jessy 1975:247). The rumours about the British Government, such as the British losing the war, Germany taking over Malaya and the British Government facing bankruptcy, were spread widely by these agents. In the eyes of Kelantanese people, the rumours were quite plausible because the state government was unable to pay the salaries of its staff. Some of the staff were voluntarily asking the government to postpone payment and their action was much appreciated by the British Adviser (BAK M 175/1914).

In the midst of this situation, the Kelantanese people felt that their uprising would be a success. In fact, the uprising happened in sequence with others. A month before the uprising in Pasir Puteh, in several parts of India, plans for uprisings were set up, but unfortunately the British managed to crush them before hand. The mutiny in Singapore in February, 1915, was part of the Indian clandestine movement (Jessy

1975:345). Therefore, the uprising in Pasir Puteh was not an isolated and parochial event. It was planned and coordinated according to the situation of the world politics and with expectations of triumph.

Although the peasants were in touch with world politics, they were not interested in changing its scenario. What they desired was only to free themselves from the clutches of the colonial government. They wanted to return to their own laws and regulations. They wanted a just government that would not take over their land according its own whims. They knew that the British Government in Kelantan was in a critical situation due to the world politics at that time and they were quite sure that they could expell the alien government with the uprising.

The disturbances in the peasants' daily lives were not only from the alien laws and regulations but also from the actions of local leaders, such as *kweng* or *penggawa* (sub-district chief), *nebeng* or *penghulu* (village chief) and *imam* (religious leader)⁷. The leaders' actions affected the peasants' lives as they related to the land and administrative matters. The local leaders especially *kweng* and *nebeng* used their positions to acquire lands for themselves. The land that they acquired, more often than not, belonged to the peasants. There were several petitions concerning these matters which were sent to the British Adviser and the Sultan by individuals and groups of peasants (BAK M 1911-1920). These letters showed that the peasants were aware of the malpractices of their leaders. The malpractices were to be abandoned immediately, otherwise the lives of these leaders could be endangered. (BAK M 30/1911; BAK M 74/1911; BAK M 112/1913; BAK M 120/1913; BAK M 133/1913; BAK M 199/1920; BAK M 172/1920).

One of the letters written by Haji Taib and 18 others (BAK M 119/1920) dated 20th October 1920 was sent to the Sultan. In it the signators expressed their dislike towards their *penggawa* and claimed that their *penggawa* alienated lands to them but, when they had cleared and cultivated the lands, the *penggawa* repossessed or sold the lands. The letter which was sent to the British Adviser by Abu Bakar and 15 others (BAK M 172/1920) claimed that their *penghulu* filled up the ditch that supplied water to their paddy fields. Consequently, they were not able to plant paddy anymore. Without the paddy, their families would suffer.

All these petition letters should be read together with the others which not only complained about the malpractices, corruption and weaknesses of the leaders but also asked the government to remove or replace them. For example, 56 villagers from Padang Pauh, Pasir Mas, wrote a petition letter to the British Adviser asking him to appoint their candidate to replace the present *kweng*. Their young and humble candidate was able to read and write (BAK M 20/1911) and was considered superior to the incumbent *kweng*. Another petition letter mentioned that the government should replace the incumbent *kweng*

because he was very old and could not perform his duties efficiently (BAK M 209/1911).

The competition for the post of *imam* was also full of politicking. The candidates for the post frequently accused and insulted each other, as was well-documented in the petition letter written by Haji Said bin Hassan (BAK M 54/1911) who had been dismissed by the Mufti. Haji Said accused the Mufti of intentionally removing him in order to appoint another person who was less popular than him and, moreover, suffered from a skin disease. Another petition letter pointed out that the incumbent *imam* used his office for his own benefits, such as pocketing the tithes and religious taxes (BAK M 116/1911).

While the members of ruling class were not interested in these posts⁸, they more often than not determined who would be getting and losing the posts. There were many petition letters written by former imams which mentioned that their dismissal had been done improperly. The Mufti, the chief of Religious Department, dismissed them by deleting their names in the list of imam in his office (BAK M 18/1911). The action of the Mufti was clearly revealed in the petition letter of Haji Said cited above. The British Adviser found out that the name of Haji Said was included in the copy of the of the list of imams which was kept in the Crops Office⁹. In this case, the British Adviser asked the Mufti to take back Haji Said and the Sultan also agreed that Haji Said was much better and more popular than his contender. Moreover, the British Adviser asked the Mufti (BAK M 54/1911) why Haji Said's name was not founds the imam's list. The Mufti not only deleted the names of certain imams but also did not entertain applications from any person whom he disliked or who was unfamiliar to him (BAK M 18/1911; BAK M 116/1911).

As Abdul Rashid Ahmad (1969) showed in his study, the royal families had much influence in the state bureaucracy, especially in hiring the personnel. The petition letter of the former *kweng* Che Senik from Sering, Kota Bharu, narrated (BAK M 32/1911) that an outsider, instead of his brother, had replaced him due to the interference of the royal family. In the reply letter, the British Adviser said that the decision to appoint an outsider to the post of *kweng* in Sering was made at the insistence of Raja Muda and Tengku Chik (BAK M 32/1911).

Leadership at the local level was an important issue because it affected the daily lives of the peasants. Under the British administration, the local leaders were part of the bureaucratic system. Their appointment was solely the right of the government and the local people had no say at all in this matter. Consequently, the local leaders belonged to the government. In this bureaucratic system, the leaders were no longer related to traditional values, such as humility, approachability, and popularity. Furthermore, their behaviour and conduct had to be tailored to suit the ethics of the modern civil servant. For instance, if the leaders

It is very true that these issues are relevant to the peasants. Somehow, the attention that is given to the issues, for instance the Islamic issues, are not due to Islam's role in offering salvation in the 'other world', but the peasants believe that Islam will be able to effect a just and considerate government in this world. Precolonial history shows that under Islamic laws, such as the land law, the peasants received better treatment from the government. The peasants are aware of their poverty and their dire need of development. Indeed, their standard of living can be improved if the development projects are properly planned according to their needs and capabilities. But most development projects are planned and carried out by outsiders (Harden 1990). For instance, in 1914 when the railway track was built through their land, the compensations, if any, were very minimal and could not cover what they had lost (BAK M 016/1913; BAK M 206/1913; BAK M 2/1914; BAK M 40/1914; BAK M 41/1914; BAK M 42/1914; BAK M 53/1914).

The peasants as members of a lower class, always need patronage from their local leaders in order to mediate between them and the higher authority but they are not easily controlled by the leaders. The peasants do not always assume, that their leaders can deliver 'rain and sunshine'. For them, corrupt leaders must be opposed. Eighty years ago, the peasants burned down their leader's house (BAK M 8/1914) and would not hesitate to do so again when the time comes.¹⁰

Although both parties of today replay the old issues, like old songs, it is still not easy to deceive the peasants. Certainly, they are not enthusiastic about the Islamic state proposed by PAS, if its leaders are only interested in the accumulation of wealth and positions. They also cannot be lured by development projects, if the UMNO leaders are greedy.

Political consciousness among the Kelantanese peasant can be seen, firstly, through the rise and fall of PAS and UMNO as the Kelantan state government in the last 40 years. A second manifestation is their night gatherings. If Carveth Wells revisited Pasir Mas today once again he would hear 'the noises of distant gatherings'. But this time, the noises are not from gatherings to tear up railway tracks; they are only meetings of peasants with their political leaders. Somehow, the peasants who attend the meeting do not automatically give their votes to the leaders party. They know what to choose and which candidate should be voted in. That is their political awareness and this awareness makes Kelantan an interesting arena to watch, whenever any election is held.

NOTES

1. The dynamics here are measured by the ability and willingness of the people to change their governments especially from the party ruling the federal government to the opposition parties and ready to face any consequences or

- retaliation from the federal government.
2. See also the report on the peasant rebellion in Mamali, Kedah in 1985 (Kerajaan Malaysia 1986). Datuk Musa Hitam, Deputy Prime Minister and also Minister of Internal Affairs, claimed that the incident happened due to the instigation of a certain group (*Utusan Malaysia*, 21 November, 1985).
 3. For instance, Lappe and Collins (1978:44) make interesting observations: Nomadic pastoralists have traditionally made efficient use of vast stretches of semi-arid land Theirmigrations are ... patterned to take advantage of variations in rainfall and vegetation; pastoral nomadism ... is a rational response to an environment characterized by the scarcity of water, seasonal drought and widely scattered seasonal fodder resources.
 4. Raymond Firth (1966) regarded fishermen and rural craftsmen as peasants because they are the same social class as agriculturalists and often members of the same families.
 5. The proprietor only needed to pay a nominal fee to the local chief.
 6. On the 5th October 1911, the Italian armies invaded Tripolitania (Libya).
 7. *Kweng* and *nebeng* were Siamese terms used until 1916.
 8. These posts were for the people. The positions above these posts such as (inspector of *Kweng*) and *ketua jajahan* (district officer) were exclusively for the ruling class.
 9. Before 1905, the quit rent was collected by imam. So, the functions of the imam at that time not only included religious matters under the Religious Department but also the collection of quit rent under the Office of Crops.
 10. The anger of the people could be seen during the riots in 1977; they were angry with their PAS leaders who were corrupt.

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