

RSOG Seminar

Socio-Political Development of the Monarchy in Malaysia

with

Dr. Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian

When : 22 October 2015
Where : Razak School of Government
Speakers : Dr. Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian

About the Seminar

The monarchy has been around in this country for some time, and it is prominently positioned in the constitution. One of the five pillars of our *Rukunegara* is Loyalty to the King and Country. Important establishments like airports, buildings, and roads are named after the Kings. Having said so, insights into the system of monarchy is often from the legal, protocol, and customary perspectives. This seminar intends to explore the socio-political aspect of the monarchy in Malaysia. Evidently, the monarchy in Malaysia have over a period of time *responded* to the changing socio-political landscape; from the late colonial period, Japanese Occupation as well as the post-independence – in particularly the outcome of 2008 General Election. What are the significance of such responses, if any, to the monarchy specifically, and the society generally? Were such responses observed in other monarchies abroad? What could be the potential factors driving socio-political development of the monarchy in the future?

Summary

From the feudal period up to the 1870s, the Malay kingships was an absolute monarchy with a strict social contract and Islamic socio-political philosophy leading to rule by consensus. Colonisation by the British somehow reduced kingships clout as the real power was in the hands of British Residents and Governor-High Commissioner in Singapore. These fundamental socio-political changes were not in the consciousness of the people being ruled then, and the kingships power declined further with Japanese Occupation. The decentralisation of power in the monarchy system drastically started during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, where the rulers' powers were reduced to

religious and customs purposes, unable to exercise their full powers of protecting the needs of the Malays. Therefore, the rise of strong political awareness among the Malays after realising their rulers are powerless to help the condition of the Malays at that time was crucial to the Kingship's revival. It also created a new concept of mutual obedience, where the rulers must provide if they are to be respected.

Thereafter, the establishment of the Malayan Union under the MacMichael Treaty 1945/46 with consent from the Malay rulers sparked the wave of Malay nationalism fighting against the establishment of the Malayan Union and the reassertion of traditional powers over the people by the Malay rulers. The Malays were able to mobilise such masses mainly through the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the political party that undisputedly replaced the monarchy as protector and champion of the Malays and the monarchy. In addition, UMNO stresses loyalty and obedience to rulers are mutual, conditional, and not absolute, emphasising that loyalty works both ways, putting an end to unquestioned obedience and loyalty to the rulers among the rising learned community.

Upon independence of Malaya, UMNO had become the dominant political figure, replacing the Malay rulers and Malaya to a *constitutional monarchy*. Nevertheless, the first Prime Minister played a role in strengthening the post-independence kingship through constitutional monarchy, whereby its role, rights, and privileges (including discretionary powers) are enshrined in the 1957 Constitution. Since then, numerous amendments has been made to the constitution in adjusting the power and influence of the royalties, notably the constitutional amendments of 1983/4 M (Articles 38, 66 and 150) and the constitutional amendments of 1992/3 (the Eight Schedule, Article 33, Articles 42, and 181).

From the period of 2003 onwards saw increasing influence of the royals in what can best be classified as *participating constitutional monarchy*. The rulers are now seen as symbol of national unity and thus, was viewed as being above politics, as head of the official religion in Islam but also protecting other religions practiced by Malaysians, representing continuity, common identity, and stability of the nation, as well as providing advice as far as the well-being of the nation is concerned. This *rejuvenation* can be attributed to the decline of UMNO's political fortunes from 2003 onwards, unexpected political tsunami in 2008, rejuvenation of the royal houses led by Perak, and generation of younger and more critical voters. It is also argued that this also underlines rising issues in Malaysia such as racial disintegration, economic slowdown, and heated political atmosphere, all of which somehow decreases the credibility of the government and raises the influence of the royalties.

Currently, the socio-political development of the Malaysian monarchy seems relatively stable. Apparently, there are two factors that sustains participating constitutional monarchy of Malaysia: the socio-political scenario remains with no political party with a relatively decisive command of electoral votes and Rulers retaining people's respect and support. It must be noted that the Malaysian monarchy is not an absolute system

and that their action is highly depended on the consensus of the Conference of Rulers, and their powers remain bounded by the Constitution. Whether the monarchy gains or losses more influence highly depends on their action and support from the politicians and the general public. As the famous saying goes, “*rakyat dan raja berpisah tiada*”.

Issues Raises

- 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty is an important accord that formally divides the Malay Archipelago into two separate territories – Malaya belongs to the British, Indonesian archipelago belongs to the Dutch. This creates multiple and distinctive monarchy system and tradition between the two territories, serving as background of our modern monarchy system.
- While the involvement of Malay rulers were prominent in many important dates of Malaya and Malaysia, such as Malaya’s independence in 1957, and the constitutional amendments in 1983/84 and 1992/93, the racial riot in 1969 is construed as a *socio-politically motivated* event, which did not relate to any of the royals apart from the declaration of Emergency by the then *Duli Yang Maha Mulia Yang diPertuan Agong*.
- The nature of Malay kingship did not change as nobilities emulate the leadership from the past. The inverse relationship between the Rulers and the political leaders can be seen as a positive consequence from the constitutional monarchy system, whereby ultimately the citizens have various avenues to voice their dissatisfaction or channel their support.
- The Malay kingship is unique and unlike any other in the world. The decision or statement by the Kings or *Sultans* are seen as advices and opinions rather than the law itself such as the case with the Thailand monarchy.

About the Speaker

Dr. Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian was formerly Professor of History and Senior Fellow at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, *Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris*, Tanjung Malim, Perak. She is an acknowledged authority on Thai-Malaysian relations and contemporary Thai socio-politics. Throughout her academic life that spans over 30 years, Kobkua has served as lecturer, visiting fellow and professor to some of the leading institutes of higher learning in the region, including *Chiangmai University*, *Chulalongkorn University*, *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*, *Universiti Tenaga Malaysia* and *UPSI*; *Universiti Gadjah Mada*; and the

University of Hong Kong. Her research focuses on socio-political issues in Thailand and Malaysia.

Contact

To get more information on this event, you can contact us via email at programmes@rsog.com.my