

# RSOG SEMINAR

## Malaysia from the Perspective of Orang Asli

with

**Emeritus Professor Dato' Dr. Hood Mohd Salleh**

- When** : 20 April 2016  
**Where** : Razak School of Government  
**Speakers** : Emeritus Professor Dato' Dr. Hood Mohd Salleh

### About the Seminar

*Orang Asli* forms hardly half a percentage of the Malaysian population of over 28 million people. They can be further categorised into groups and subgroups, spread into various locations in Peninsular Malaysia. Not only that they are disadvantaged in terms of total number, they also lacked the concentration. The proportion of urban population in Malaysia increased to 71 percent in 2010 from 62 percent in year 2000 in light of rapid development. *Orang Asli* observed to have certain way of living, may find the ongoing development a challenge in the long run. In line with the spirit of inclusiveness, it is timely for policy makers to understand the perspective of *Orang Asli* on Malaysia, now and going forward. Evidently, they have their share of contribution to this country especially in terms of national security during the formation years. In this seminar, Emeritus Professor Dato' Dr. Hood Mohd Salleh through his years of field research relating to *Orang Asli*, will share his thoughts and insights on the perspective that the latter have about Malaysia and its implications to policy making, if any.

### Summary

*"The first narrative is a lie; the second narrative is a reality"* – the Guest Speaker professed the idea of how little we know about the *Orang Asli* or Indigenous people. He believes what we see is always different from what we read. Hence, our perception will only change upon seeing their real way of living. He portrayed the Malaysian perspective of *Orang Asli* using the *Kampung* concept and unique characteristics. Practicing exclusive customs, they maintain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live in. The *Orang Asli* is not a homogeneous group. There are 18 sub-ethnic groups generally classified under *Negrito*, *Senoi* and *Proto Malay*. The *Senoi* are the largest among these tribes, followed by the *Proto Malay*, and the *Negrito*.

Each tribe has its own language and culture, and perceives itself as different from the others. *Orang Asli* are claimed to be peace-loving as they possess and nurture good values. They are well-known as non-violent people and the people who practice total sharing

because of their dream theory, in which they can control and manipulate their dreams to fulfill socio-psycho and political needs. The Guest Speaker also perceived indigenous leaders – good traditional healer, educated in *adat* law and referred to as *Batin, Bomoh* - as brave people because of their intelligence in diverse ideas of development, based on their traditional values, visions, needs and priorities.

After the emergency period in Malaysia, they were all marginalized socioeconomically and culturally into one *Kampung*. *Orang Asli* have been disregarded as their historical territories became state-run. According to the Guest Speaker, this situation was described as the worst time for them as they were not nomadic. They are settled people and will only move to another place for some rational tendency. He believes this is because they have a special relationship with their inherited land for their collective physical and cultural survival as people. Subsequently, some initiatives by the state were introduced to highlight the importance of *Orang Asli* as well as to protect their identity. *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA)* has been assigned with the task to supervise the development of the *Orang Asli* while the Aboriginal Peoples Act of 1954 is the referral for the department to control all matters concerning the *Orang Asli*.

Act 134 (Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954) states that the *orang Asli* has the right to get protection and privileges of settling on the land. However, there are several provisions that have led to the existence of conflicts on land ownership as most of the lands occupied by the *Orang Asli* community presently have not been gazetted as reserve land and most of them are still at the proposal stage. This has limited them from using their land for development especially in economic activities based on market crops.

Additionally, in Section 13 of the same act, it is stated that the government can relocate them to other areas at any time when the area in question has to be taken for development. The fear on this issue is clear when *Orang Asli* trespassing or intrusion occurs as they have no clear proof that the land is rightly theirs to use. This is a nightmare for the *Orang Asli* community that has all this while worked the land for generations but the reality is that the land is not theirs. When their land is taken, the implication is that the cultural and spiritual survival that has become the foundation of their existence as a community will be affected.

To a large extent, relocation becomes an impediment to the development of the *Orang Asli* as they are never settled. Towards the end of his talk, the Guest Speaker shared his concern on this issue as the indigenous people are still struggling for recognition of their identities, their ways of life and their right to traditional lands, territories and natural resources in their *Kampung*. He further signifies the importance of activists such as *Jaringan Orang Asli* and other non-governmental groups that have indigenous peoples' issues as the focus. He remarked that we are also part of the solution for indigenous rights and development in Malaysia. In order to do so, we need to truly understand them, what and who they are. This will eventually enable them to develop themselves further and tap more opportunities in other fields as well. Thus, we need to implement the open door concept to communicate with them because the relationship among Malaysians is important in narrowing the gap and moving together towards better development in Malaysia.

## Issues raised

1. Jaringan Orang Asli refers to the new activist group that speaks up for the indigenous people especially on their rights. They will bring up the real issues of their Kampung and will understandably talk about their land. Jaringan Orang Asli is inclusive of indigenous people from Sabah and Sarawak to provide the indigenous communities with representation not just nationally but regionally in terms of development of Orang Asli, and as an alternative platform to protect their rights in terms of development, especially their traditional lands.
2. Leadership in Orang Asli is usually reflected in the word Batin which means leader. The ideology of their leadership is there is no great hierarchy among them because they believe they are all equal. Batin is the elderly in their ethnic community who is more knowledgeable in their adat. Indigenous leaders are also perceived as soft because they will never discuss about power and are very general. Although they are indirectly involved in the political leadership, they are not allowed to be given any chance to speak up or given a position in parliament.
3. The issue of the religion of Orang Asli people is another aspect of their cultural identity which is under threat. Their religious beliefs which revolve around the existence of spirits in objects – animism - are being looked down upon. Some of the indigenous population have embraced Christianity, Islam and other religions. Many of them embrace Islam, speak Malay and follow the Malay culture and tradition since they were merged into Kampung by the dominant people. While many acknowledge converting without any pressure, some of them are still being orthodox because they have been given freedom to choose their religion.
4. Orang Asli will always be part of Malaysia's economy. Economy is something that they understand, but their involvement is very minimal. For instance, they produce precious products from natural resources and some of these products receive high demand. However, the Orang Asli has been identified as one of the poorest groups because of the effect of marginalization and they will become poorer as they have never settled in one place.
5. The education level of the Orang Asli are increasing. Since 1996, various efforts were initiated by the government to improve their education system. Education is one of the medium for them to change their perspective and a tool for development. Nevertheless, the biggest struggle in enhancing their education system is to change their mindset by believing on the importance of education. Lack of public facilities in their settlement also forces them to travel across their Kampung. There are also a lot of initiatives taken by the government especially in protecting their rights, and involving them in poverty eradication.
6. The federal government realizes that land issues does matter to the Orang Asli. Gradual efforts are being made to address these issues which is intricate as land falls

under state matters. Moving forward, efforts to help the Orang Asli is likely to be integrated and not to be entirely dependent on JAKOA.

### **About the Speaker**

Emeritus Professor Dato' Dr. Hood Mohd Salleh is presently a Senior Research Fellow, Academic & Research at Razak School of Government. He spent most of his academic career at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in the field of Anthropology and Sociology. He was once the Holder of the Chair of Malay Studies at Victoria University in New Zealand. YBhg Prof. Dato' is an award winning researcher i.e. Ford Foundation Southeast Asia Fellowship, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, and Sumitomo Foundation to name a few. He graduated with a First Class Honours degree from University of Western Australia in 1970. He also holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Social Anthropology (1971), Bachelor of Letters (1974), and PhD (1978) from University of Oxford.

### **Contact**

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