

SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS IN SARAWAK
FROM 1930 TO 1941

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During Brookes' rule in Sarawak (1841-1941) the Sarawak 'natives' seemed outwardly to be passive and loyal to the Brookes. Such passiveness was influenced by the policy and administrative system of the Brookes. The system successfully instilled loyalty to the Brookes in the 'natives'. The open policy pursued, in which the 'natives' were given a free hand in respect of their own customs,¹ had led them to place trust in the Brooke administration. The 'natives' believed truly that the Brooke regime was working for their own interest and benefit to the extent that they looked upon the regime as being at one with them. This loyalty also could be attributed to the fact that a characteristic of the Brooke regime was its championship of the idea of universal humanism which blinded the 'natives' to the more imperialistic designs of the dynasty.

Admst such passivity and peacefulness the 'natives' lived in ignorance of what was taking place outside of their own country and that which concerned their future. It was not until after the Second World War that some of the Malay-Muslim 'natives' had the opportunity to organize a mass movement to protect their political and economic position when the British Colonial Government wanted to annex Sarawak. These were particularly Malay school teachers and government servants who had received Malay and English education in either Malay schools, Madrasah Melayu, Sarawak Teacher Training College or mission schools.

In actual fact the development of vernacular education in the 1930s resulted in more and more Malay-Muslims becoming interested in education. In 1931 the government of Sarawak made a slight change in the vernacular school system by introducing a new and higher Malay school, i.e. James Brooke Malay College, but later on the title of the school was changed to Madrasah Melayu to provide advanced study in Malay. The main purpose was to produce native officers and Malay school teachers,

¹ *The Facts of Sarawak*, Bolding and Mansell, London 1947, Appendix D, p. 28.

Through Maderasah Melayu the government hoped "it would help the Malay to help himself by fitting him to take an active and useful part in the life of his own community."² Hence, from the 1930s Malay-medium education reached a much higher number of students from a much wider geographical area. By 1933 some 500 to 600 Malay students were studying in the various Malay language schools. As a result of this new development in Malay schools, a number of children from non-aristocratic families could enroll in schools, but the schools ensured that the majority of the Malays would receive an education reinforcing traditional values. In spite of the growing number of educated Malays from the non-perabangan group, the native officer service remained the monopoly of the perabangan (aristocrat) group. It was not until 1941 that the government appointed the first Malay native officer who was not an 'abang'. Normally the educated non-perabangan Malays became dressers or teachers.³

The development of education both in Malay and English through the mission schools, and the change in the ethnic composition of the population in Kuching, brought about a political consciousness among a small group of educated Malays of non-aristocratic origin. Between 1867 and 1939 the population of Kuching grew by almost 350 percent, from under 8,000 to almost 35,000. The census data from both 1876 and 1939 showed the decline of Malays and the rise of Chinese numerical dominance. The Indians had the highest percentage increase, and the Chinese grew over twice as much as the average for the town as a whole. The Malay percentage of the population fell from a commanding 69 percent to a majority of 39 percent, while the Chinese grew from 29 percent to 55 percent. As a result Kuching changed from a predominantly Malay town to predominantly Chinese one.

By the end of World War I rubber was Sarawak leading product. The development brought thousands of Chinese into Sarawak. As a result the number of Chinese increased from 45,000 in 1909 to 123, 626 in 1939.⁴ Many of them settled in Kuching, the financial centre, chief entrepot, and major port of entry. Although the rate of the immigration was reduced in the early 1930s because of the Depression, the economic recovery which

²SG March 2, 1931.

³Good examples are Hj. Suaat Tahir interviewed on 24th July 1979 in Kuching and Hj. Ahmad Zaidell Tahir in SG (Sarawak Gazette) January 31, 1972 and SG February 29, 1972.

⁴Lee Yong Leng, *Population and Settlement in Sarawak*, Singapore Asia Pacific Press, 1970, p. 110.

TABLE 1 Ethnic composition of population of Kuching 1876-1939

Group	Population 1876	Percentage	Population 1939	Percentage
Chinese	2,251	29.3	19,109	55.4
Malays	5,311	69.1	13,714	39.7
Indians	122	1.6	1,258	3.7
Others	-	-	397	1.2
	7,684	100	34,478	100

Sources: Craig Lockard, "From Kampong to City: A Social History of Kuching, Malaysia 1820 - 1970" (typescript) University of Malaya Library, p. 575

began in 1933 with the rise of rubber prices, resulted in an increasing migration of Chinese from other parts of Sarawak to the first Division and the revival of Chinese immigration. Thus, the drastic change in the racial composition of Kuching, especially the decreased number of Malays in relation to Chinese, led a small number of educated Malays to appreciate more fully their weak position in economics and education in comparison to the Chinese. In 1930, this group showed their political awareness by publishing the first Malay newspaper, *Fajar Sarawak* (Dawn of Sarawak) with its motto "the dawn has broken. Arise my nation."⁵ It appeared fortnightly and was published by Haji Abdul Rahman Kassim. The editors consisted of educated Malays of non-aristocrats background, such as Haji Mohd. Daud Abd. Ghani, Mohd. Awi Awang, Mohd. Johari Anang and H.K. Abdul Rahman. The chief editor was Rakawi Mohd. Yusof, a former school teacher and customs officer who used his retirement bonus to launch the newspaper. He was familiar with the political events then occurring in Malaya and Singapore, probably through his membership in PASPAM and his contact with *Kesatuan Melayu Singapura*. He himself was a Malay representative on the Kuching Municipal Board in 1934-1935. Besides involving himself in *Fajar Sarawak*, he had also written a semi-historical book, *Hikayat Sarawak* and the first Malay novel in Sarawak, *Melati Sarawak*, which were published in early 1930s.⁶ Together with other educated Malays he initially planned the establishment of the Malay National

⁵ *Fajar Sarawak* Bilangan 1, February 1, 1930. Sarawak Museum Archives, Kuching.

⁶ P.L. Thomas, "Melati Sarawak" *SMJ* Vol. 24, No. 45 (SG) July-December 1976, pp. 317-321.

Union of Sarawak though the Union came into being in 1939 when he was already dead.

FAJAR SERAWAK

As the first Malay language newspaper, *Fajar Sarawak*, in its first editorial stated its aims:

... to extend the hand of friendship to the other 'sons of the soil' [Malays] whom we regarded as brothers, as the same flesh and blood. To visit you and the rest of our people throughout the Malay world. To help each other so that we can have a better life. To remind the Malays not to dilly-dally and not to be naive in worldly matters. Time is passing and the Malays are lagging behind when compared with the newcomers who have come to seek refuge in their land (i.e. the Chinese and the Indians). In short they are being left behind in every way whereas they are the ones who should be drinking the milk of their land (eating the fat of their land).⁷

Furthermore, the editors of *Fajar Sarawak* expressed their wish to visit their relatives (the Malays) in the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia because of the pride they felt in the progress their 'relatives' had achieved. Thus they would like to emulate the steps their 'relatives' had taken in order to achieve the good name they (the relatives) had won for themselves because of their belief in their own nation.

However, *Fajar Sarawak* reminded its readers that, "This little newspaper, the dawn of light, cannot compete with the brightness of the moon and the sun. Its aim is only to present our views to the public - in the hope that the dawn will signify the passing away of the darkness into the brightness of the day." It then continued to assert that, "this light of dawn is a phenomenon created by Almighty God for the benefit of mankind so that he can better accustom himself to the strong light of the sun later." Thus the newspaper urged the readers to wake up while the light of dawn was there; "get your eyes accustomed to it so that you will be able to face the strong light of the sun (challenge). Wake up, be conscious of surroundings and work hard from the

⁷ *Fajar Sarawak*, Bil. 1, February 1, 1930. Translation. For a detailed account about *Fajar Sarawak*, see R.H.W. Reece, "The First Malay Newspaper in Sarawak," *SG* April, 1981, pp. 9-11.

time of dawn for it is the best time to begin all undertakings."⁸

Looking at the objectives of *Fajar Sarawak*, one is reminded of the aims of *Al-Imam* which first appeared in Singapore in July, 1906. *Al-Imam's* aims were, "to remind those who are forgetful, arouse those who sleep, guide those who stray and give a voice to those who speak with wisdom."⁹ Like *Al-Imam*, *Fajar Sarawak* pointed out the backwardness of the Malays, their domination by alien races, their laziness, their complacency, their bickering among themselves, and their inability to cooperate for the common good.¹⁰

The editorial board comprised a group who were concerned with up-lifting the social and economic condition of the Malays and contrasting it with the vast progress made by the Chinese. In one of its articles *Fajar Sarawak* remarked on the increasing number of Chinese taking over Malay shops and land and urged the Malays not to be left behind. "Get the message across-increase the number of Malay shops. If you cannot do it individually, do it collectively."¹¹ *Fajar Sarawak* regretted that a lot of Malay land had passed into foreign hands because the owners had had to sell their holdings due to hardship created by the drop in the prices of rubber and sago. *Fajar Sarawak* then suggested that one way of solving this problem was by the government decreeing that every Malay be granted three acres of land, either 'new' land or by transferring the said land into a Malay Reserve which was non transferable, and could not be sold or mortgaged. This would, "improve the land ownership of Malays. . . prevent Malay land from being sold; . . . lessen the burden of the unemployed; and increase government revenue to a certain extent." Those suggestions were brought forward so that the Malays in Sarawak would not become like the Malays in Singapore and Penang.¹²

Fajar Sarawak also criticised the *datus* for being more concerned with improving their own material position than with helping poor Malays. *Fajar Sarawak* urged that "those of you who are wealthy, get involved in business," which would employ other Malays. It advised the Malays to work hard because indus-

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ W.R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1967, p. 56.

¹⁰ *Al-Imam* July 2, 1907 in Roff, *Nationalism*, p. 57, and *Fajar Sarawak* Bil. 1 February 1, 1930.

¹¹ *Fajar Sarawak* Bil. 4, March 1, 1930.

¹² *Ibid.*, Bil. 9, June 1, 1930. Translation.

trious people made money and working together was the source of happiness.¹³ It also urged the Malays to wake up and realise what was happening; "surely you would not like to see your descendants renting rooms in the towns or scattered about in the deep jungle and among the hills when in fact the Chinese came here with a piece of mat [sic]."¹⁴ Therefore, the Malays, including the *datus*, were asked not to be carried away with too many festivities but rather to undertake educational pursuits.

Regarding education, *Fajar Sarawak* also called upon the government to spend more money on Malay education, including the provision of scholarship in Malaya for teacher training at Sultan Idris Training College (SITC). It welcomed the opening of the Malay Girls' School, Sekolah Permaisuri, and argued that girls should be given education in order for them to be good managers of their homes and families in future.¹⁵ Although *Fajar Sarawak's* main concern was with the local news, it also contained the news of developments and reports on the Islamic world, particularly Turkish politics. *Fajar Sarawak* regarded a proper knowledge of Islamic religion as the only means by which the Malays could achieve regeneration, and thus the Malays were urged to reject fatalistic attitudes.¹⁶ To widen the Islamic knowledge of the Sarawak Malays *Fajar Sarawak* quoted some of the essential news on Islam from the Islamic journals and magazines from Indonesia and the Middle East. For instance *Fajar Sarawak* cited the magazine *Fajar Islam* from Sibolga which put forward truths about Islam. *Suara Aceh* (voice of Aceh) mentioned Islam, its progressiveness and its good teaching. *Bulan Melayu* from Johor, which was also quoted, was the first woman's magazine about the education of girls and girls' schools in Johor. *Al-Ghalafat* from Turkey reported the events happening in the Middle East.¹⁷

It was rather unfortunate that *Fajar Sarawak* survived for only a short period. It ceased publication after the tenth issue on June 30, 1930, for lack of support and funds. According to one account, *Fajar Sarawak's* sharp criticism of *datus* led the *datus* to ally themselves with the Brooke government to close *Fajar Sarawak*. But *Fajar Sarawak* itself did not attract as many subscribers

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Bil. 4, March 1, 1930 and Bil. 10, June 16, 1930.

¹⁶ Compare with *Al-Imam*, which stressed that "religion is the proven cure for all the ills of our community," Roff, *Nationalism*, p. 56.

¹⁷ *Fajar Sarawak*, Bil. 9, June 1, 1930 and Bil. 10, June 16, 1930.

as was originally hoped and the later issues contained pleas for support. In the final issue (June 30, 1930) the editor explained that publication was to be suspended because the local printer, the Diocesan Press, did not give sufficient value or priority to *Fajar Sarawak* in its work schedule. With regards to the fate of the newspaper, its editor wrote, "this tenth issue of *Fajar Sarawak* marks the end of the publication." *Fajar Sarawak* has been forced to discontinue due to disagreement with the printers regarding their irresponsible attitude towards the aims and aspirations of *Fajar Sarawak*. God willing *Fajar Sarawak* will reemerge when we have it reorganised."

PERSAUDARAAN SAHABAT PENA MALAYA (PASPAM)

With the demise of *Fajar Sarawak* the Malays lost what might otherwise have been an important catalyst of social and economic change, because after that there was no Malay newspaper in Sarawak until the appearance of *Utusan Asas* in 1947. The only concession to Malay readers during the intervening period was the occasional 'Jawi' or romanised Malay article in the *Sarawak Gazette*.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in 1935 many of the educated Malays, including Rakawi himself, had joined the *Persaudaraan Sahabat Pena Malaya* (Brotherhood of Pen Friends), PASPAM, a social and cultural organization with Malayan affiliations. PASPAM was the first genuinely pan-Malayan Malay organization and drew upon a much larger number of members. It provided a shared, and politically safe outlet for a host of Malay anxieties.¹⁹ Through the membership, correspondence with members in Malaya, and reading the PASPAM journals, it brought some new ideas to Sarawak Malays. Hence, in a way PASPAM fed Malay nationalism and increased the interest in Malay culture and literature and kept the Sarawak Malay intelligentsia in close contact with their counterparts in Malaya. In 1936 the Kuching branch of PASPAM was officially opened with Datu Amar as President, Mohd. Nawawi as Secretary and Abang Hj. Zaini as one of the Committee members. There were 80 other members.²⁰ Local Sarawak representatives were appointed to the central committee in Malaya.²¹ By

¹⁸ R.H.W. Reece, "The First Malay Newspaper in Sarawak", *SG*, April, 1981.

¹⁹ Roff, *Nationalism*, p. 166.

²⁰ *SG* February 1, 1936 and *SG* May, 1, 1936.

²¹ Roff, *Nationalism*, p. 214.

May 1935 PASPAM had more than 1,000 members from Kuching to Kangar. Because of its increasing scope and size the British Government in Malaya became suspicious that it could be a secret society or political organisation. In order to allay this suspicion its President, S.M. Zainal Abidin, stressed that PASPAM was a Malay Literary Association whose sole object was to promote a spirit of goodwill and cooperation among its members, to infuse into the members a love of reading and a keen interest in the Malay language and literature, and to establish a Malay library.²² In 1938 PASPAM began publishing a monthly journal, *PASPAM*, which was issued free to all members. Although a rift occurred in the Malayan Branch due to the reputation of PASPAM's Malayan members as 'Kaum Muda' the Sarawak branch did not appear to decline. In fact it not only had a branch in Kuching but others in Sibu, Miri and Lutong.²³

MALAY UNION OF SARAWAK

In order to awaken the Malays as a whole, Rakawi, together with the co-founders of *Fajar Sarawak* made an attempt to form the first Malay association, Malay Union of Sarawak (MUS). Rakawi died three years before the inception of the MUS in January 1939. The union was influenced by the Malay union movement in Malaya, which originated in *Kesatuan Melayu Singapura* (Singapore Malay Union). Although the MUS was only registered as a social club in 1939, it had existed in an informal way for about two years. In May 1937 a circular was distributed in Sarawak calling for the establishment of a Malay association with branches in all major towns, whose members would subscribe funds for co-operative enterprises.²⁴ Prior to that there had been an attempt in December 1936 to form a (Bumiputra) natives club similar to the Malay social clubs which already existed in Sibu and Miri. The main reason for the delay in registering the MUS was probably that Datu Patinggi had been enraged by criticism of the datus in *Fajar Sarawak*; whereas on the Brooke government side, the granting of approval depended on the agreement of Datu Patinggi to be the patron of MUS. In actual fact the MUS encountered

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *PASPAM* September 1939, *PASPAM* March and April, 1940.

²⁴ *SG* May 1, 1939, June 1, 1939 and July 1, 1939.

strong resistance from the Brooke government for several years and it was not until the necessary patronage had been obtained from the Datu Patinggi, Abang Haji Abdullah, and the Datu Amar, Abang Haji Suleiman, that the Registrar of Societies was prepared to give his approval. Even then in January 1939, the MUS was obliged to remain as a social organization.

While the Malay Union in Malaya maintained an exclusive elitist element in their leadership, the Sarawak branches were dominated by a mixture of aristocrats, tua kampongs and government servants. However, the posts of President and vice-presidents were held by members of the perabangan class, namely Datu Amar as President, Datu Temenggong and Datu Pahlawan as Vice-Presidents.²⁵ But the posts of Secretary General and Treasurer were held by non-perabangan men namely Johari Anang and Moh. Nor respectively. Both of them were the former editors of the defunct *Fajar Sarawak*.

As with the Malay Unions in Malaya and Singapore, the MUS was obliged to cover its political purpose. Instead, as a social organization, its objectives were to encourage the Malays to cooperate with each other, to improve and encourage Malay education; to preserve the culture and to maintain the dignity of the Malays, to encourage the Malays to enter business and to spread the teachings of Islam.²⁶ They had succeeded in collecting \$5,000 in order to form a Cooperative. It bought its own house for the MUS Headquarters. Like its counterparts in Malaya the MUS was loyal to the government, the Rajah and the State. To commemorate the centenary celebration of the Brooke Raj, the MUS had opened a restaurant and participated in selling things in Fancy Bazaar in Kuching to collect money for the British War Fund and China Relief Fund. From this activity it would seem that the MUS was not biased against the Chinese cause and did not challenge the government's authority.²⁷ Although support for China in war with Japan may not be the same as support for Chinese in Sarawak, it does show war time patriotism and loyalty to Britain. At the same time the MUS members prayed together in thanksgiving and prayed for the British to win the war. The MUS also organized the Chinese Lion Play which was acted by the Malays from Kampong Buso. It was also declared that in commemorating

²⁵SG April 1, 1939, February 1, 1940 and July 1, 1941.

²⁶SG June 1, 1937.

²⁷SG November 1, 1941.

the centenary, Malays, Melanau, Dayaks and other natives were united and worked together and had trust in each other. They did not look down upon one another. Thus it was hoped that the natives always live in peace and cooperate with the MUS in the future.²⁸

Besides concentrating on its own local affairs, the MUS also interested itself in the affairs of the Malayan movement. It sent delegates to the second congress of the Malay associations in Singapore on the 25th and 26th December, 1940.²⁹ MUS sent Mohd. Nor, Johari Anang and Abang Zaini as its delegates. In this conference the Sarawak delegates proposed choosing a Malay national anthem. Though the congress failed to create a genuinely pan-Malayan organisation, the Malay association movement was nevertheless not without its successes and had some significance for the rapid growth of Malay political nationalism a few years later.³⁰ When the Sarawak delegates went back to Kuching they brought with them the idea of nationalism. Although during the Japanese occupation the MUS was not active due to the Japanese government policy of not encouraging any potentially 'dangerous' activities, there was still enough support among its members to organise the Union immediately after the war. The idea could only be propagated widely when Vyner Brooke ceded Sarawak to the British Crown. It was the MUS as the organised body that led the anti-cession protests in 1946.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Roff, *Nationalism*, p. 246.

³⁰ *Ibid.*