



THE GOVERNMENT SYSTEM OF THE SELANGOR STATE UNDER THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to shed light on the Malaysian states' rule under the British empire, highlighting the strong role of the appointed governor and the role of the local rulers. It also reveals the influence on the local judicial as well as tax matters.

KEYWORDS: *British Empire, Malay states, Local Rulers, Selangor state, Colonial Office.*

In the late 19th century, the British Empire established residencies in Selangor, Perak, and Sungei Ujong (part of Negeri Sembilan). The intervention aimed at capitalizing on trade opportunities, expanding influence in the Malay states, and averting potential conflicts among Malayan clans. Moreover, the British sought to prevent future Siamese intervention in the region. At the end of the 19th century, the British administered and united the states of Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang, establishing residency institutions to administer their matters and by 1884 these states formed Federated Malay States (FMS). The appointed residents who ruled over the states had real power over administrative matters and administered each state independently¹. After the establishment of the Residents, all matters were governed directly by them, except religious ones, which were left with the Sultans of the respective states.

In Malaysia British took over gradually all states starting from Penang in 1786 and administration in Malaya began in 1874 with the Treaty of 'Pangkor'². The signing of the Pangkor Treaty in 1874 marked a significant development. At the Pangkor meeting, two crucial agreements were reached: the Chinese Engagement, wherein leaders of the Ghee Hin and Hai San factions pledged to maintain peace under penalty of a substantial fine, and the Pangkor Engagement, which addressed the appointment of Residents. In March 1873, Tengku Zia'u'd-din granted Davidson and another party a ten-year concession to exploit untapped tin land in Selangor³. The Selangor Tin Mining Company was tasked with managing this concession, prompting their London representative, Seymour Clarke, to seek protection for the enterprise from the Colonial Office. Clarke referenced a letter from Tengku Zia'u'd-din, inquiring about security measures for the people and properties of traders and entrepreneurs.

Due to escalating warfare in the Peninsular Malaya, posing a potential threat to British dominance in the region, the Home Government opted for tighter control by instituting British Residents. Sadka notes that this policy shift was communicated to the Straits Government in a dispatch dated 20 September 1873. The Secretary of State highlighted the prevailing chaos in the Peninsula, the resultant harm to trade, and the imperative need for a solution. Consequently, Sir Andrew Clarke, a new Governor, assumed office in Singapore on 4 November 1873. Clarke's initial report to the Colonial Office indicated that he had resolved the Perak succession issue, persuaded the Sultan and chiefs to accept a Resident, and appointed an officer, Captain Speedy, as Assistant Resident in Perak to oversee affairs in Larut. Before leaving the Straits in May 1875, Clarke had also established Residents in Selangor and Sungei Ujong. However, Clarke was cautious about appointing Residents in Selangor and Sungei Ujong until he was certain of the success of the appointment in Perak. In September 1874, Clarke appointed Swettenham as Resident of Perak and J. G. Davidson as Resident of Selangor. By the end of 1874, British authorities were active in Larut, Lower Perak, Klang, Langat, and Sungei Ujong. Initially, appointed British Residents operated without clear regulations or guidelines. Their effectiveness depended largely on the support they received from the Straits Settlements office. Although the Pangkor Engagement defined the role of Residents, it was not robust enough to enable them to intervene extensively in Malay politics. Residents were prohibited from advising or interfering in Malay religion and customs, despite their pivotal role in

¹ Ganiyev, A. (2020). *Institution of zakat in colonial Malaysia. The Light of Islam*, 2020(1), 12

² Oybekovich, A. G., Shah, H. S., & Ayaz, M. (2017). *The Role of the Zakat System during the Colonial-period in Malaysia and Uzbekistan. Islamic Banking and Finance Review*, 4, 40-54.

³ Sadka, E. (1968). *The Protected Malay States. The other press. Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia see p. 344*



Malay political and social life. Consequently, Residents had to navigate these challenges largely independently. Kennedy notes that early Residents were largely self-reliant; if they proposed advice, they were responsible for implementing it. Over time, the appointment of Residents expanded to other states⁴. In 1896, Pahang and the remaining part of Negeri Sembilan were incorporated into the British Residency system, forming the Federated Malay States along with Selangor, Perak, and Sungei Ujong, under the central administration of the British Empire.

After the establishment of the Residents, in 1874, in the States of Selangor, Perak and Sungei Ujong, the real control over the states started to move towards the Residents, after a few years of struggles by them to enforce their authority on the local leaders. From the British ruling side, as Rubin writes there were two ways to take over the control. "To ensure the compliance of the Malay Rulers with the British wishes there were two possibilities ... first, military force and second was to manipulate the facts to fit an acceptable legal framework that would justify British authority as a matter of right, not might." A good example of how the British Residents established their control over states under their residency determined with the actions of the Resident of Perak Hugh Low, who became Resident in 1877. Prior to coming to Perak, Hugh Low was a Governor of Labuan for 24 years. During his service, he travelled a lot in Borneo, made many expeditions as his interests were ranging from botany, the study of the local languages, customs and economy. Sadka observes that "Low came to Perak after he spent a lifetime among Malays, knowing their language and customs and something of the problem of adapting European administration to their needs and prejudices." Low had his ruling experience in Borneo, where James Brookes was ruling, he learned Brooke's style of dealing with the locals⁵. Sadka writes about Brookes following ... "Sarawak under Brookes was known throughout Malaysia as a government which identified itself with existing Malay authorities, enlisted them in the administration, deferred to their opinion, and introduced changes at a pace acceptable to them."⁶ Low was a friend of Brookes and worked under him. For the European rulers, Low's approach to Malays was impressive; no matter what the designation of the person was, either he was the Sultan himself or small district chief, he dealt with each of them, in a respected manner and gained their trust easily. Kennedy indicates that "He worked on the principle that when dealing with members of another race, one should be at least as considerate as to members of one's own race, and infinitely more patient."⁷ From all over the state, district chiefs and village penghulus came to him to seek his advice pertaining to the settlement of this or that issue that arose in their district. Low left everyone with satisfying decisions and gave them confidence that they came to him again. Sadka gives an example of the Low's approach towards the locals' issues, saying, "He reassured them, dealt with their difficulties, lent them money – everyone tugs at the Resident for this scarce article - and took the opportunity to accustom them to proposals for the land rent and poll tax." Low was successful in assuring the participation of the district chiefs and rajas in the rule of the state, however, he made sure that these people knew their place and felt a responsibility towards their position. In this way, he kept them involved somehow in the affairs of the state but at the same time, keeping them away from the executive positions. Under Low, many chiefs became government tax collectors; their income was based on the fixed amount of salaries from the collected amount of taxes. Low and Swettenham enforced the law where they appointed the penghulus of the mukims to keep order in the districts, instead of costlier police forces. Many Selangor and Perak third rank rajas were appointments as penghulu. This was one of the marked successes in the intentions of the Residents. Due to the diminishing role of the former district chiefs, the administrative matters pertaining to tax revenues and judicial rule came into the hands of the European District officers. The state Council was the most important body during the Residents time. As Kennedy writes, "All important acts of State stemmed from the Council. It dealt with the annual estimates of revenue and expenditure; the appointments and salaries and pensions of all Malay chiefs and headmen; the confirmation or modification of death sentences passed in the Courts."⁸ The legislative body of the State, which was the State Council, was incorporated into the administration system of the new rule, dedicated to administering the state as a whole. It consisted of the chiefs, Chinese captains, Sultan and the Resident, the last being the main person in charge of the final decisions factually. The Resident was the person, who nominated the members and determined the agenda of the meeting as well as influenced its decisions. Describing the power of the Residents Sadka writes, "Despite the inadequate constitutional basis for their authority, the Residents by 1880 had become the effective rulers in states; in the years followed, their association with Malays developed smoothly on established principles, and the success of the Perak and Selangor administrations was reflected in phenomenal increases in revenues and populations." These developments ensured legally that the British Empire settled down in this region as an Imperial power and enjoyed the benefits of rich local natural resources for a long period.

Forming the local administration required careful allocation of salaries and pensions by the Colonial Office. Salaries and pensions were approved only for Residents and Assistant Residents of Perak and Selangor, recommended by the State Secretary and approved by the

⁴ Kennedy, J. (1962) *A History of Malaya*. Macmillan and Co Ltd. London. UK. See p. 201

⁵ Sadka, E. (1968). *The Protected Malay States*. The other press. Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia see p. 108

⁶ *Ibid.* see p. 108

⁷ Kennedy, J. (1962) *A History of Malaya*. Macmillan and Co Ltd. London. UK. See p. 179

⁸ *Ibid.* See p. 181



Governor. Other subordinate appointments were made by the Governor without involving the State Secretariat, as these appointees represented the Ruler. However, the status of Residents and Assistant Residents regarding their salaries and pensions remained ambiguous. The Colonial Office attempted to incorporate Malay states' officers into the colony's establishment, but without committing to defining their actual status, leaving it to the Malay states' governments.

Although Residents like Maxwell, Low, and Swettenham were appointed by the Colonial Office and considered servants of the Crown, their pensions and salaries had to be funded from the revenues of the Malay states. Despite the uncertainty surrounding their legal status, administrative practice continued without interruption. The Colonial Office retained final decision-making authority over their appointments and salaries, and upon retirement, their pensions were paid through the Crown Agents on behalf of the states, following approval by the Governor and the Secretary of State.

Together with trade and mining opportunities, the British established a colonial office in order to take over the control of the Malaysian peninsula. Relations between Residents and the Colonial Office were crucial for the success of the Malay campaign⁹. The Colonial Office closely monitored affairs in the administered states, receiving updates through annual reports from state authorities. Based on these reports, the Secretary of State made decisions to prioritize development in key areas. For instance, the promotion of agriculture as a complement to mining through the introduction of Chinese and Indian peasant families was a recurring policy recommendation emphasized by the Colonial Office year after year.

Regarding judicial matters, various sources provided information to the Colonial Office. The issue of slavery drew attention, with the Residents in Selangor and Sungei Ujong liquidating the value of slave labor against original debts. In Perak, the death penalty for those involved in secret societies was initially widespread, but later restricted to cases involving murder, following objections from the Secretary of State.

The Colonial Office also objected to licensed public gambling in Malay states, which persisted despite being illegal in the Straits and Hong Kong. However, local opposition delayed abolition until 1912, with rampant illegal gambling contributing to increased crime levels.

CONCLUSION

Residents and Governors aimed to improve local infrastructure to increase revenues for the British Empire, although they sometimes clashed with the Colonial Office. While both sides agreed on a Pan-Malayan railway system and uniform construction standards, the Colonial Office cautioned against extravagant railway concessions. In instances like the Sungei Ujong railway concession, where private interests clashed with state interests, the Colonial Office intervened to secure better terms for the state. This demonstrated the priority of state interests over private profits, even when pursued by Residents. A significant achievement was the construction of railway lines, facilitating tin trade and city infrastructure development. Initially tasked with advising the Sultan, Residents ended up administering all matters, while the Sultan retained ceremonial power as President of the State Council. The first Residents in Perak and Selangor served as a learning experience, with their successes and failures informing subsequent Residents in expanding British rule to other states.

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