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Indonesia-Malaysia Relations: Baggage of 'Blood Brotherhood'

By Joseph Chinyong Liow

Synopsis

Notwithstanding the long history of ethno-cultural fraternity between the peoples of Indonesia and Malaysia, the relationship between the two countries has been marked by a pattern of friction and discord since the pre-colonial era. An appreciation of this history is critical to our understanding of the undercurrents to the recent spats between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Commentary

TO THE CASUAL observer, recent spats between Indonesia and Malaysia may seem perplexing. After all, we are talking about two peoples who share a similar language, culture, and religion. Of course, there is sound historical basis to this view. The Malay *hikayat* (saga) provides insights into the interconnectedness of an Indo-Malay world spanning southern Thailand to the central Indonesian island of Java and beyond, where a regional system of commerce, intermarriage, and diplomacy was already thriving before the arrival of colonial powers.

Anthropologists and linguists have identified cultural commonalities (and differences) that define an Indo-Malay identity independent of the influence of Western colonialism. Essentially, it was geographical proximity that facilitated the sharing of common linguistic roots, religion, cultural practice, and statecraft among the peoples of the archipelago. In fact, so intimate were these historical ties that leaders of both Indonesia and Malaysia commonly refer to their relationship as one anchored on "Malay blood brotherhood" or Malay "*rumpun*" which, when translated into English, approximates the notion of Malay racial and ethnic "stock".

Melayu Raya

During the colonial era, *rumpun* became politicised in anti-colonial discourse. Early nationalist movements in both Indonesia and Malaysia were not averse to the creation of an *Indonesia Raya* (Greater Indonesia) or *Melayu Raya* (the Greater Malay kingdom) established on precisely such notions of ethno-religious identity. Indeed, a unified Indo-Malay state almost came into being towards the end of the Second World War, when nationalists from the Malay Peninsula led by Ibrahim Yaacob pressured their Indonesian counterparts as well as the retreating Japanese military administration to include British Malaya as part of independent Indonesia. Though unsuccessful, it was not until the formation of independent Malaya in 1957 that talk of Indonesia Raya gradually subsided.

Enduring cultural and ethnic commonalities notwithstanding, the relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia

has in truth seldom been harmonious. Talk of *rumpun* papers over a long record of tension – at times, even conflict – between the leaders and peoples of the two countries. For instance, the reason for the failure of the Indonesia Raya vision was precisely the inability of both countries to reconcile some fundamental differences, such as the role and place of the traditional elite in the post-colonial state. After the Second World War, Indonesia was engulfed in a four-year revolution against their Dutch colonisers intent on re-establishing their control of the archipelago. The revolution was targeted not only at the Dutch, but also vestiges of the old pro-Dutch feudal order in Sumatra, and to a lesser extent in Java, leading to the decimation of the sultanate families by revolutionary youth movements.

Meanwhile in the Malay peninsula, returning British forces were welcomed and eventually played an important role ensuring the security of Malaya during the communist insurgency that followed. Compared to their reception of the British, reactions of the Malay elite to the Indonesian revolution were notably less convivial. The old aristocratic Malay ruling class were appalled at the regicide that took place in Sumatra. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaya and a member of this ruling class, noted in his autobiography:

“The Rulers who had enjoyed sovereignty and prestige under the British rule were concerned. After independence, they had seen how many thrones in India, Pakistan, and Indonesia had toppled. What would be their fate if the British left? Would the people accept them? They felt that they would be at the mercy of the Malay extremists. The general pre-Merdeka feeling was that this country would go the way of our neighbours, from prosperity to poverty, from happiness to sadness and from peace to violence. Even Datuk Onn, the founder of UMNO and a great Malay leader, had shared the views of the Rulers and others against complete independence.”

The reluctance of the aristocratic Malay elite to support the Indonesian revolution was not lost on its leaders. On the occasion of Tunku’s visit to Jakarta in 1955, President Sukarno reportedly turned to him during a public rally and patronisingly proclaimed: “Here is a man I am trying to persuade to fight!” Events such as these no doubt set Indonesia-Malaysia relations off on the wrong foot, and perpetuated a cycle of acrimony that can be traced back to the early kingdoms of the Indo-Malay world. As a scholar of Indonesia, Merle Ricklefs, once observed: “The Sultans of what is now Malaysia rarely battled the rulers of Siam or Burma. Rather, their alliances and conflicts were with peoples from Aceh to east Indonesia. The Bugis and Makasarese of Sulawesi traded widely in Southeast Asia, but their political and trade heartland was the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. When a Javanese king had grand imperial pretensions, it was to other states in the archipelago that he turned for tokens of obeisance – which they, under most circumstances, refused to give.”

Like Teeth and Tongue

Recent diplomatic altercations between Indonesia and Malaysia - be it over domestic helpers, national songs, local cuisine, or territory – must be understood in the context of enduring patterns of rivalry and discord that have long defined the relationship between the peoples and leaders of these two countries who, as the Indo-Malay saying goes, are as close as “gigi dan lidah” (teeth and tongue).

Today, spats between the two countries have led to mobilisation in the streets (mostly in Indonesia) and over cyberspace. Thankfully, cooler heads have prevailed among the respective political leaderships, who have refrained from playing to the gallery and leveraging on disputes in order to gain political mileage. The point to stress is that given the cyclical patterns of friction rooted in fundamental issues of national identity and memory between Indonesia and Malaysia, strong leadership will always be needed to break the impasse of history. Attention can then be oriented towards areas of mutual benefit and successful bilateral cooperation, while downplaying points of contention.

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