

# SOME NOTES ON PELITA MALAYA

by

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## Introduction

On 4 March 1946 the *Pelita Malaya*, a Malay daily<sup>1</sup> (excluding Sunday) made its appearance in Kuala Lumpur. On 3 August 1946, after its one hundred and thirtieth publication, it was taken off the press. The reason for its early demise is still unknown. However, its contribution towards an understanding of the political thought of a section of the Malay society during the 1940s is undeniable.

*Pelita Malaya* was founded under the leadership of Zulifli Auni and others, amongst whom were Onan Haji Siraj, Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmi, Ahmad Boestamam, Airama, Mak Chik Muda, Dahari Ali and Salleh Daud and Ishak Haji Muhammad who served as Chief Editor.<sup>2</sup> Ahmad Boestaman was directly involved in the founding in 1945 of a political party in Ipoh, Perak. Known as the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP),<sup>3</sup> it was the earliest political party formed in the country as soon as the Japanese Occupation ended (September 1945). Its origin was from within the ranks of his Ipoh-based newspaper *Suara Rakyat* (*Voice of the People*).

During its early days, the party had adopted this periodical as its independent official organ. But, after the MNP head office shifted, sometime in early 1946, to the Federal capital of Kuala

<sup>1</sup>It was printed in Jawi (Arabic script) by Tai Chong Press, Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>2</sup>See its first publication on 4 March 1946 and Ahmad Boestamam, *Merintis Jalan Ke Puncak* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Kejora, 1972), 64-5.

<sup>3</sup>For further discussion on its formation, see *ibid.*, 23-31.

Lumpur, it published a new official organ named the *Pelita Malaya* (The Light of Malaya) at its new base. MNP reckoned that if they wanted to confront the British and make an adequate impression, they must be at the administrative centre of Malaya.<sup>4</sup> The periodical, according to one of its founder members, Ahmad Boestaman, was considered to be "the true voice of the MNP" as the *Suara Rakyat*, published some 200 kilometers away in Ipoh, could no longer act effectively as its official organ.<sup>5</sup> By then, *Suara Rakyat* remained a local daily propagating the ideas of MNP for the northern states of Malaya.

The new periodical had as its foremost aim the pursuit of truth, peace and national independence with the view of advocating Malaya for the Malays. To promote the awakening of self-identity amongst the Malays it hoped to disseminate information particularly in the countryside, about developments both within and outside the country.<sup>6</sup>

#### The Issues In 'Pelita Malaya'

Apart from local news and the editorial, which was mainly concerned with voicing MNP's political aspirations, news from abroad pertained to the affairs of the colonial powers, namely Britain, France and the Netherlands, as well as political developments in Egypt, Palestine, Israel, India, Vietnam, Burma and the Philippines. The struggle for independence by the Indonesians received special prominence. On the whole, the foreign news focused on the theme of colonial subjugation which stimulated anti-colonial feelings. The *Pelita Malaya* was decidedly politically biased and concerned itself only marginally with socio-economic matters and religious matters.

In the present survey, the editorials of the *Pelita Malaya* are used as the basic reference for the purpose of reviewing its contents. Besides that, some general articles and daily news will be referred to in connection with the specific topics which follow.

<sup>4</sup>See Ahmad Boestaman, *Carving the Path to the Summit* (Translated, with an Introduction by W.R. Roff) (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1979), 47.

<sup>5</sup>See Ahmad Boestaman, *Merintis*, 64.

<sup>6</sup>See *Pelita Malaya*, 4 March 1946.

## The Socio-Economic Aspect of Malay Society

According to the *Pelita Malaya*, Malay society, compared with the other communities, was backward in the field of education. It estimated that there were some 13,000 illiterate Malay children, stressing that this illiteracy and their economic weakness were the main reasons for their lack of progress. The Malays were therefore urged to start a National Education Fund. Appeals were made to all Malays, including the royalty and the upper classes, to support this move. It was hoped that with proper financing Malay children would be able to achieve a higher standard of education and, thereby earn the respect and honour of the community at large. The *Pelita Malaya* also urged that university education be made available locally in Peninsular Malaya. It stated that up to 1946 the number of Malay students who had succeeded in entering British universities was too few and that the situation could only be remedied with the availability of local university education. According to the *Pelita Malaya*, such a university "would prepare the Malays to govern themselves according to the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations".<sup>7</sup>

*Pelita Malaya* also concerned itself with the economic activities of the Malays. Attention was given to the problem of food shortages in Malaya and the Malays were urged to till their empty lands for the cultivation of tapioca, sweet yam, corn and vegetables. The small holders as a group were encouraged to set up co-operatives to secure better prices, thus avoiding middlemen exploitation.

The Malays of Kelantan, Kedah, Terengganu and Perlis were praised because of their keen interest in business. According to the *Pelita Malaya*, Malay companies, big and small, had mushroomed everywhere in these states. This was viewed as a good sign paving the way to unity within the community and towards economic independence, overriding the constitutional division imposed by the existence of the Federated Malay States (FMS), Unfederated Malay States (UFMS) and the Straits Settlements (SS).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 7 March 1946, 8 April 1946 and 1 June 1946.

<sup>8</sup>Discussion on the economic aspects of the Malay society, can be found in the articles that appeared on 13 March 1946, 16 March 1946, 28 April 1946 and 25 June 1946.

In the field of politics, the Malays were urged not to sit on the fence any longer but to actively involve themselves in various movements. Political inertia, they were warned, would not contribute towards progress.<sup>9</sup>

### Attitude Towards the Malay Union

The *Pelita Malaya* was published at the time when the Malayan Union<sup>10</sup> plan was being widely discussed in the country. In fact, the first issue of the periodical became by coincidence, available to the public on 4 March 1946, the last day of the three-day meeting in Kuala Lumpur of the Malay National Congress. The meeting was well represented by the forty-one Malay organisations throughout Malaya, including the MNP. One of the most important resolutions passed was opposition to the Malayan Union plan announced by the British only a few days earlier.<sup>11</sup>

The *Pelita Malaya*, not surprisingly, gave a wide coverage to the Malayan Union Plan and related issues. Although the *Pelita Malaya* did not oppose the plan *in toto*, as did the Malay National Congress, it had its reservations about it. The *Pelita Malaya* accepted the proposed structure of the Malayan Union plan. The idea of bringing all the states under a single union - thereby doing away with the anachronistic system of tripartite - the Federated Malay States, Unfederated Malay States and the Straits Settlements - was welcomed.<sup>12</sup> However, the proposed meetings were vehemently opposed on the plea that what was desired was "a government of the Malays for the Malays". The *Pelita Malaya*, furthermore, criticised the British government because of its high-handed policy in conceiving the plan in London without consulting the people of Malaya. This, in its view, was why the proposed Malayan Union Constitution contained clauses which were more favourable to the British than

<sup>9</sup>*Pelita Malaya*, 29 March 1946.

<sup>10</sup>For a detailed discussion on the Malayan Union plan see, for example Allen J. de Vere., *The Malayan Union*, Monograph series No.10, Southeast Asian Studies (Yale: Yale University Press, 1967) and Mohamed Nordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation* (Kuala Lumpur: 1974), 13-55.

<sup>11</sup>With respect to the Congress see, for instance, Mohammad Yunus Hamidi, *Sejarah Pergerakan Politik Melayu Semenanjung* (Kuala Lumpur: 1961) and *UMNO Sepuluh Tahun* (Pulau Pinang: 1966), 16-26.

<sup>12</sup>*Pelita Malaya*, 4 March 1946.

to the people of Malaya. The unfavourable clauses quoted included the right of the British government to appoint members, both of the Federal and State Legislative Councils; the veto powers granted to the President of each Legislative Council; and the appointment of the State British Commissioner as the President of the State Legislative Council.

Because of the unfavourable clauses in the proposal the *Pelita Malaya* was of the opinion that the British were not sincerely committed to introducing progressive political changes in Malaya. It felt that the British should respect the political rights of the people, especially the Malays, and make appropriate changes in the proposed Malayan Union Constitution, incorporating the following conditions:

- i. Three quarters of the members in all the Legislative Councils to be elected by the people.
- ii. Membership to the Legislative Councils to be restricted to Malays.
- iii. No veto powers to be granted to the Presidents of both Legislative Councils.
- iv. The Sultan, and not the State British Commissioner, to be appointed the president of the State Legislative Councils.<sup>13</sup>

The *Pelita Malaya* might be referring to the stand taken by UMNO under the leadership of Dato' Onn. As a spokesman of Malay nationalism, he expounded a mild nationalism which stressed on a more gradualist approach to self-government and the introduction of democratic reforms in cooperation with the British, provided they remained sensitive to Malay opinion.<sup>14</sup>

The proposals made by the *Pelita Malaya* regarding the status of the Malay Sultans did, however, contradict its actual political sentiments. In its earlier publications the *Pelita Malaya* had, in fact, vehemently criticised the Malay Sultans because

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.* 24 May 1946.

<sup>14</sup>See G.P. Means. *Malaysian Politics* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976). 101.

of their lackadiasical attitude in having been willing to concede their political rights by signing the Malayan Union Treaty with the British. In the *Pelita Malaya's* view, the Sultans "had sold" their states to the British and did not deserve the trust of the Malays any more. The stand taken by the *Pelita Malaya* appears to suggest that it was anti-feudal (anti-royal) and hoped to reduce the influence of the Sultans.<sup>15</sup>

### **Pelita Malaya's views on the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)**

The periodical applauded the unity shown by the Malays on the last day of the three-day Congress when they decided to form a political organisation known as UMNO. The *Pelita Malaya* hoped the Malay masses (including the Sultans) would give their full support to UMNO so that it could effectively defend the political rights of the Malays.<sup>16</sup>

Though giving its support to the UMNO, the *Pelita Malaya* was also committed to propagating the political ideology of MNP, especially the concept of *Melayu Raya*.<sup>17</sup> In this respect it hoped to promote greater unity not only among the Malays in the Peninsula, but throughout the Malay world, especially Indonesia (the then Netherlands East Indies).<sup>18</sup> This concept was possibly one of the most important ideological forces in Malay politics at that time though, interestingly, it was not acceptable to some of the UMNO leaders. It was felt by Dato Onn, the President of UMNO, that unity amongst the Peninsula Malays was imperative as an initial step to wider unity within the Malay world. This view was shared by the top UMNO leaders at the time.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of differences of opinion, MNP remained one of the affiliated members of UMNO, but progressively, its official

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 23 April 1946.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 5 March 1946.

<sup>17</sup>For further discussion of this concept, see Burhanuddin Al-Helmi, *Perjuangan Kita* (Singapore: 1946) and Rustam A. Sani, "Melayu Raya as a Malay 'Nation of Intent'", in *The Nascent Malaysian Society*, Monograph in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. (Bangi, Selangor: National University of Malaysia, 1976), 11-25.

<sup>18</sup>See for instance, *Pelita Malaya*, 5 August 1946 and 27 March 1946.

<sup>19</sup>*UMNO Sepuluh Tahun*, 34.

organ, the *Pelita Malaya* showed little respect for UMNO. It criticized UMNO and belittled its leaders. The lack of a Constitution for UMNO was interpreted as the lack of clearly perceived aims in its political struggle. A sore point was UMNO's lack of political ideology comparable to that of the Indonesian national movement and its willingness to settle for "self-government" instead of total independence.<sup>20</sup> The MNP leaders were identified as radicals, willing to sacrifice their lives for independence, as opposed to the conservative forces within the UMNO. The increasing ideological gulf between the two groups culminated in MNP's rift, on 30 June 1948, with the UMNO.<sup>21</sup>

### The MNP and the Concept of 'Melayu Raya'

Less inclined towards strong loyalty to the traditional states, the MNP's concept of nationhood was ethno-centric, based on the notion of "the preservation of the Malays". The MNP believed that this could be achieved only through the establishment of a *Melayu Raya* type of government which would incorporate all the Malays of the region.<sup>22</sup>

The rationale behind the concept of *Melayu Raya* was that Malaya and Indonesia were originally a homogeneous unit, subsequently torn apart by Anglo-Dutch political activity in the region. It was thus considered appropriate that the people of the Archipelago should unite once again. The *Pelita Malaya* strongly felt that should they succeed in cementing together the Peninsula with Sumatra, Java, Borneo and the Celebes, there would be greater stability in the region, guaranteeing against future interference in the politics of the region by external forces.

It was clear that the MNP's primary aim in advocating a *Melayu Raya* type of government was with the express view to reinstating Malay power in the region, to guard against the inroads of the immigrant population. It argued that if Malaya did not unite with Indonesia, the political and economic power would be eroded by the immigrants, relegating the indigenous people to the same fate as the Red Indians in the United States.

<sup>20</sup>*Pelita Malaya*, 27 March 1946.

<sup>21</sup>Ahmad Boestaman, *Merintis*, 82-89 and *UMNO Sepuluh Tahun*, 39.

<sup>22</sup>*Pelita Malaya*, 20 March 1946.

The concept of *Melayu Raya* in its original interpretations can be understood from the following quotations:

Apakah akan terjadi kepada bangsa Melayu jikalau Malaya nanti sekali lagi menjadi rebutan bangsa-bangsa yang perkasa di dunia ini.... Inilah soal-soal yang sedang hidup dalam hati orang-orang Melayu yang mengerti hal politik negerinya. Dalam hubungan ini, mereka hanya nampak satu jalan sahaja untuk keselamatan, iaitu Malaya hendaklah disatukan dengan Borneo, Celebes, Jawa, Sumatra dan lain-lain pulau Melayu, menjadi satu kesatuan yang besar. Itulah hanya satu jalan untuk menjaga keamanan Pasifik. Inilah yang dikehendaki oleh orang Melayu.<sup>23</sup>

... didorongkan oleh keinsafan bahawa sekiranya Malaya tidak disatukan dengan Indonesia pada satu masa di hadapan, maka tenaga politik dan tenaga ekonomi akan jatuh ke tangan bangsa asing dan dengan jatuhnya tenaga politik [bangsa Melayu di Tanah Melayu] akan menjadi melukut di tepi gantang di tanahairnya sendiri sebagai mana nasib orang-orang *Red Indian* di *Amerika Syarikat*.<sup>24</sup>

Because of its firm commitment to the goal of *Melayu Raya*, the *Pelita Malaya* gave a wide coverage to political developments in Indonesia. By doing so, it hoped that the Peninsula Malays would be inspired to emulate the fighting spirit of the Indonesians in their struggle for independence. The *Pelita Malaya* believed that the Malays in Malaya should strive to fight to the last drop of their blood towards the attainment of independence and total political and economic liberation from the British.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Attitude Towards Contemporary International Political Developments At That Time**

It can easily be discerned from the content of the *Pelita Malaya* that it championed the cause of liberation from colonialism and other forms of political oppression. Thus, fairly wide coverage was given to political developments in Egypt, Palestine, Vietnam, India, Burma and the Philippines. According to the *Pelita Malaya*, these nations were ruined by the policies of colo-

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 March 1946 and 19 March 1946.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 March 1946.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 June 1946.



nial powers. Colonialism was therefore seen as an evil force, to be overthrown by a concerted effort for independence.<sup>26</sup> The *Pelita Malaya* focussed especially on the political struggle in India. Because of the British presence there as well as the historical ties the Peninsula had with India, the *Pelita Malaya* evidently counted on arousing anti-British feelings among the people of Malaya. To this end it highlighted the success achieved by the Indian nationalists. According to the *Pelita Malaya*, India, through its hard struggle won them close to the achievement of independence. Their success was well deserved and though paving the way for Asian nationalism the country deserved to be acknowledged as "the light of Asia".<sup>27</sup> The Malays were, therefore, urged to emulate the Indians in their struggle for independence.<sup>28</sup>

As the *Pelita Malaya* appeared for the short span of a few months, it could hardly be expected to give a full insight into political developments in the 1940s. Nevertheless, its appearance during the crucial period of the Malayan Union proposals, and its role as a vehicle for the views of the MNP makes it an invaluable source for the study of contemporary politics and nationalism in Malaya. In disseminating the views of the MNP it made a significant contribution towards boosting the popularity of the political organisation during its formative period. The MNP's escalating radical views, which led to the suppression of the organization by the British from 1947 to 1950 may, in some small measure at least, be attributed to the seeds of ferment sown by the *Pelita Malaya*.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 5 March 1946.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 18 March 1946.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 23 March 1946.