

## **Brunei Darussalam: Royal Absolutism and the Modern State**

Naimah S. Talib

Adjunct Fellow, Political Science Department, University of Canterbury

**B**runei Darussalam (Abode of Peace) is a small, independent state with the only ruling monarchy in Southeast Asia. Since achieving independence from Britain in 1984, the Brunei monarchy has managed to consolidate its power and now has almost unchallenged control over the state. What explains the durability of Brunei's absolute monarchy? This article argues that the Brunei monarchy has been successful in centralizing power in the office of the Sultan, has drawn on traditional and religious sources of legitimacy and has shown itself to be a stable regime. It has managed to avoid demands for political reform by making effective and expeditious use of its hydrocarbon revenues through the provision of extensive and generous welfare programmes. A neo-traditional polity, the Brunei Sultanate has demonstrated its adaptability and resilience in a changing global environment.

### **Historical Background**

The Sultan of Brunei (Yang Di-Pertuan Negara) is part of a long-line of hereditary Sultans ruling continuously for 600 years. The present Sultan, Haji Hassanah Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah, is the 29<sup>th</sup> ruler. Brunei has a small population of around 400,000, comprising 66% Malays,<sup>1</sup> and is divided into two enclaves, each surrounded by the east Malaysian state of Sarawak. After reaching its peak of power in the sixteenth century, the Sultanate declined and in the nineteenth century, its territory dwindled under pressure from the Brooke Rajahs in neighbouring Sarawak. Threatened with extinction, the establishment of a British residency in Brunei in 1906 provided a much needed reprieve. At the end of the residential period in 1959, internal self-government was extended to Brunei and the Sultan given executive authority. A new constitution was promulgated in 1959 which provided for a partially elected Legislative

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Brunei website, <<http://www.gov.bn/bm/Pages/About-Brunei.aspx>> (accessed 3 December 2012).

Council.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the Brunei Rakyat Party (PRB) won all the elected seats to the Legislative Council; however, armed resistance to unification with Malaysia by the PRB in 1962 prevented the elected candidates from taking office.<sup>3</sup> The uprising, which was swiftly quelled by the British, was a decisive event in Brunei's political history; it engendered a sense of vulnerability and insecurity that has prevailed until today. It also provided the then Sultan, Omar Ali Saifuddin III, with a *raison d'être* to impose emergency regulations, postpone constitutional changes and also influenced the Sultan's decision against joining Malaysia. Refusing to bow to British pressure to institute constitutional changes, the Sultan abdicated in 1967 in favour of his son, Haji Hassanal Bolkiah.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, one can argue that British colonisation breathed life into the weak and fragmented monarchy, transforming it into a centralized autocracy.

### **Fashioning a Neo-traditional State**

Many scholars have questioned the viability of absolute monarchies. Modernisation theorists, such as Huntington, argue that monarchical regimes are not able to withstand the pressures of modern state-building.<sup>5</sup> Monarchs are confronted with what Huntington and others have described as the "king's dilemma"; modernisation undercuts the king's power and authority, requiring monarchs to share power with important new groups such as the expanding urban middle class.<sup>6</sup> According to modernisation theory, the middle class pushes for change and greater political participation and this ultimately causes the downfall of monarchies.

However, oil dependent Gulf monarchies in the Middle East and Brunei have been able to avert this eventuality and have instead evolved and flourished as neo-traditional states. These monarchies continue to be conservative, paternalistic and highly authoritarian. They employ a legitimacy formula predicated on religion, culture and tradition. Additionally, in response to rapid socio-economic development, they have expanded their legitimacy formula to include

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<sup>2</sup> See B A Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III and Britain: The Making of Brunei Darussalam* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Graham Saunders, *A History of Brunei* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.147.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160.

<sup>5</sup> See Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Christopher M. Davidson, "The United Arab Emirates: Prospects for Political Reform," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol.15, no.2 (2009), p.118.

economic performance supported by generous welfare programmes. Rulers seek to build strong and lasting bonds with their citizens.<sup>7</sup>

After achieving independence in 1984, Brunei was confronted with the arduous task of institution-building. The Sultan exercised absolute power, but at the same time he understood the importance of developing professional institutions of government which would aid in coping with the demands of governing a modern state. A ministerial form of government was announced in 1984, but the Sultan continued to wield enormous power, simultaneously becoming the Prime Minister, Finance Minister and Home Minister.<sup>8</sup> To alleviate the “king’s dilemma,” the Sultan absorbed new well-educated elites in his government so as to reduce discontent among emerging new social groups. By allying himself with these new elites, the Sultan was also able to reduce his dependence on the royal and traditional elite. Technocrats and the educated elite were brought into important positions in government. The Sultan’s son, Prince Haji Al-Muhtadee Billah, was appointed the Crown Prince in 1998 and elevated to Senior Minister in 2005. He has been given a more prominent role in the last decade, often deputising for the Sultan, officiating at public events and hosting foreign dignitaries in order to ensure a smooth transition of power. Since independence, there has been hardly any attempt to introduce meaningful representative government, and the Sultan and his close relations have continued to centralize power.

Apart from absorbing the well-educated elites in the executive and the government bureaucracy, the Sultan also appealed more broadly to the rest of the population by providing generous and comprehensive welfare programmes. Brunei’s economy is heavily dependent on natural resource extraction; it relies on oil and gas for 90% of its export revenue and more than half of its Gross Domestic Product.<sup>9</sup> The state is the largest employer, currently employing 25% of Bruneians and the government provides a high standard of living,<sup>10</sup> with a GDP per capita of US\$51,760<sup>11</sup> ranked among the highest in Asia. The Sultanate has experienced steady economic growth with a 2.6% rise in GDP in 2011 due to higher oil prices.

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Anderson, “Absolutism and the Resilience of the Monarchy in the Middle East,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol.1, no.1 (1991), p.4

<sup>8</sup> David Leake, *Brunei: The Modern Southeast Asian Islamic Sultanate* (Kuala Lumpur: Forum, 1990), p.68. The Sultan currently holds three portfolios – Prime Minister, Finance, and Defence, and is also the Supreme Commander of the Royal Brunei Armed Forces.

<sup>9</sup> Koh Wee Chian, “A Macroeconomic Model of Brunei Darussalam,” *CSPS Strategy and Policy Journal*, vol. 2, July (2011), p.70.

<sup>10</sup> C.Roberts and Lee Poh Onn, “Brunei Darusslana: Cautious on Political Reform, Comfortable in ASEAN, Pushing for Economic Diversification,” *Southeast Asian Affairs 2009* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009), p.74.

<sup>11</sup> See World Bank <<http://www.data.worldbank.org>> (accessed 26 November 2012).

Inflation is low and there is no personal income tax.<sup>12</sup> The ability of the Sultanate to provide generous welfare programmes confers the state much-needed legitimacy in a political environment without political representation and any meaningful participation.

Brunei society is strictly regulated and the media is tightly controlled. Emergency regulations have been renewed biennially although there has not been any serious challenge to the monarchy since 1962. Any challenges have been met with swift and strong response. One of the earlier political parties, the Brunei National Democratic Party (BNDP), founded in 1985, called for the eventual establishment of a parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarchy, a repeal of emergency laws and the reintroduction of elections.<sup>13</sup> The party was swiftly de-registered in 1988 under the Societies Act and its leader, Abdul Latif Chuchu, was arrested under emergency laws.<sup>14</sup> A number of other political parties have also emerged but their membership has been small and they have avoided public criticism of the royal family. In spite of their moderate stance, these political parties were also de-registered. The only political party remaining in Brunei today is the National Development Party.<sup>15</sup>

### **The 2004 Constitutional Amendments**

As Brunei enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century and matures as a nation, many in Brunei were expecting the re-institution of elections and opportunity for participation in government.<sup>16</sup> However, a series of constitutional amendments announced in 2004 have given the Sultan greater power. Although the once partially elected Legislative Council was resurrected in 2004, its members were all appointed and included the Sultan, his brother, Prince Mohamed Bolkiah, the Crown Prince, Cabinet ministers, prominent members of society as well as representatives from various districts.<sup>17</sup> The resurrected Legislative Council was given the task to pass the 2004 constitutional amendments including new legislation designed to entrench the Sultan as an absolute sovereign. The new amendments clarified the powers of the

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<sup>12</sup> Kieren Cooke, "Brunei Darussalam: Diversifying is hard to do," *Global: The International Briefing* <<http://www.global-briefing.org/2012/07/diversifying-hard-to-do/>> (accessed 10 December 2012).

<sup>13</sup> K.U. Menon, "Brunei Darussalam in 1985: In Search of the Political Kingdom," *Southeast Asian Affairs 1987* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1987), p.94.

<sup>14</sup> Naimah S. Talib., "A Resilient Monarchy: The Sultanate of Brunei and Regime Legitimacy in an Era of Democratic Nation-states," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.4, no.2 (2002), p.138.

<sup>15</sup> See Freedom House <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2011/brunei>> (accessed 30 November 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Hj Mohd Yusop Hj Damit, "Brunei Darussalam: Steady Ahead," *Southeast Asian Affairs 2004* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2004), pp. 66-67.

<sup>17</sup> Hj Mohd Yusop Hj Damit, "Brunei Darussalam: Towards a New Era," *Southeast Asian Affairs 2007*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007), p.104.

Sultan, giving him supreme authority and placing him above the law in both his official and personal capacity.<sup>18</sup> The constitutional amendments also undermined the role of the Legislative Council. Despite provision for elections, the Council has thus far comprised only appointed members and meets annually in March to raise questions about the budget and governance issues of concern to the public.

According to the 1959 constitution, the Council has an advisory role, and needed to give consent before any law could be passed. However, the 2004 amendments did away with this provision, thus effectively making the Legislative Council a “meaningless rubber stamp chamber.”<sup>19</sup> It is unlikely that direct elections for Legislative Council members will be held in the near future. Tey argues that the 2004 constitutional amendments have resulted in the Sultan becoming the foundation or *Grundnorm* of the legal system in Brunei.<sup>20</sup> Horton maintains that the constitutional amendments show “a desire to wrap the kingdom in some of the clothes of a liberal democracy without actually being one.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Promoting a National Ideology**

Upon achieving independence, the Sultan promoted the ideology of Melayu Islam Beraja (Malay Islamic Monarchy or MIB) in order to encourage loyalty to the nation. This ideology has become an important basis of the Sultan’s political legitimacy; it elevates Islam as the national religion, upholds the rights and privileges of the Malay ethnic community, and justifies the hereditary monarchy as a relevant governing system. This ideology allows the monarchy to situate itself as the protector of Islam, conferring on the office even greater legitimacy.

MIB was formulated by officials close to the Sultan in an attempt to define national identity in terms of attachment to Islam, Malay culture and loyalty to the Sultan.<sup>22</sup> One of the staunch advocates of MIB, Pehin Hj Abdul Aziz Umar, a former Education Minister, elaborates that the system of government which has been continuously practised for 600 years

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<sup>18</sup> Tey Tsun Hang, “Brunei’s Revamped Constitution: The Sultan as the *Grundnorm*?” *Australian Journal of Asian Law*, vol.9, no.2 (2007), p.270.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.269.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.276.

<sup>21</sup> A.V.M.Horton, “Window-Dressing an Islamizing Sultanate,” *Asian Survey*, vol.45, no.1 (2005), p.181.

<sup>22</sup> G. Braighlenn, “Ideological Innovation under Monarchy: Aspects of Legitimation Activity in Contemporary Brunei,” *Comparative Asian Studies*, no.9 (1992), p. 42.

is unique to the Malay world, and the Sultan's power is absolute.<sup>23</sup> MIB is also depicted as a more amenable alternative to Western notions of democracy as it hinges on the special and close relationship between the Sultan and his people. The Sultan has declared that the ideology is "God's will"<sup>24</sup> but it is tempting to argue that this was an orchestrated attempt to socialise the Bruneian people to accept norms and values associated with an absolute monarchy.

The monarchy in Brunei is both paternalistic and personalised. The Sultan is portrayed as a symbol of the nation and the focus of people's loyalties. He conveys a keen interest in public affairs, making visits to far-flung districts to monitor the progress of development projects.<sup>25</sup> He rotates performing his weekly Friday prayers in mosques throughout the country to demonstrate his close relationship with God and his strong commitment to Islam. However, consequently, the Sultan must also be beyond reproach as he is seen not only as a political leader but as someone who is morally virtuous and exemplary. The expectation of good, clean government also extends to other members of the royal family. There appears to be public interest in the legal battles involving the Sultan's youngest brother and former Finance Minister, Prince Jefri, who was accused of embezzling state funds to the value of US\$15 billion in the late 1990s. To preserve legitimacy, the Sultan has been swift to condemn his brother's actions and has attempted to retrieve state assets through costly legal proceedings.

## **Prospects**

As a neo-traditional state, Brunei has shown itself capable of accommodating the modern needs of its population and providing security and stability. However, in the twenty-first century, as Brunei matures as a nation-state, the stresses and strains of managing a modern state become apparent. The Sultan is mindful that the state's capacity to deliver social services and public goods is constantly put under pressure as a result of rising costs. Brunei continues to rely on oil and gas for its revenue and efforts to diversify the economy have not resulted in desired outcomes. The state is also vulnerable to fluctuations in gas and oil prices and production. The challenge for the Brunei monarchy today is to ensure that the state is

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<sup>23</sup> Pehin Orang Kaya Hj Awang Abdul Aziz bin Begawan Pehin Udana Hj Awang Umar, "Melayu Islam Beraja Sebagai Falsafah Negara Brunei Darussalam," in *Sumbangsih UBD: Esei-esei Mengenai Negara Brunei Darussalam*, edited by Hj Abu Bakar bin Hj Apong, (Brunei: Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> Saunders, p.187.

<sup>25</sup> Hj Mohd Yusop, 2004, p.67

always capable of matching domestic demand for public goods and a high standard of living. The Sultan has to be careful in ensuring that supporters of his regime, be they the royal elite, or the upwardly mobile middle class continue to validate his regime. In the absence of participation, the Sultan has to work hard to appeal more broadly to his urban and rural constituencies and continue to gain their trust and confidence as a benevolent ruler.

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