INDONESIA-MALAYSIA RELATIONS IN THE POST-CONFRONTATION ERA: THE ROLE OF THE SERUMPUN CONCEPT

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The relationship between the Malay people, both from the mainland and archipelago, has developed over many centuries, well before Indonesia and Malaysia formed as independent countries. Relations, however, have not always been smooth and cooperative but also conflictual and, to a certain degree, rivalries have occurred.

This situation was not resolved when these people, who originated from the same stock, formed their own countries. Interestingly, relations between the two countries are fuelled by a ‘love-hate’ relationship. The special nature of the bond can result in cooperation which is, for example, shown by their strong tendency to make ASEAN work as a mechanism for regional organization. On the other hand, there are unresolved situations, such as a reluctance to solve certain bilateral conflicts.

This article aims to present the problems underlying the relationship since the post-Confrontation era in a situation where the ethnic dimension is still dominant in the relationship.

The fact that the same ethnic stock and other similarities exist between the people of both countries nevertheless does not always bestow advantages on the development of the relationship. This is because the ‘emotional’ dimension is often involved and this has a deep influence on the relationship, and sometimes it becomes a ‘barrier’ to a valuable and effective partnership.

The Interaction Among the ‘Serumpun’ People

Literally, serumpun means the people of the same racial or ethnic stock. The majority of the people of Indonesia originated from the same ethnic groups as the people of Malaysia, called Malays (Melayu). Historically, their ancestors were from Yunnan, in the south of China. However, the origin of the term Melayu is still clouded in uncertainty. The first mention of “Melayu/Melayur/Malayu” occurs in Chinese chronicles in AD 644 when it was recorded that an emissary from Melayu in the vicinity of the Jambi or Batang Hari river in Central Sumatra was present at the Chinese imperial court. However, the term was never used as a term of ethnic identity until fairly recent times when European travellers, merchants, missionaries and colonial officials began to categorise the indigenous people living along the coastal estuaries and surrounding islands of peninsular Malaysia as ‘Malays’. Although the Malays themselves did not for a long time refer to themselves as Malays, this does not mean that they were not aware of their distinctiveness as a group. With the passage of time, a Malay identity emerged. This identity grew in tandem with an expanding ethnic mixture comprising Malay and others of the same racial stock such as the Minangkabause, Acehnese, Bugis, Banjarese, Mandailings, and Javanese (Tham Seong Chee, 1992:1).
The interaction among Malay people has taken place from over a thousand years ago through trade and religion. The feeling of sameness among them is a significant factor in the relationship which has conditioned perceptions and expectations and it is of contemporary significance. There are several factors which can represent the significance of the relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia at present. Besides sharing a high degree of cultural and ethnic similarities, both countries are geographically proximate, and share land and sea borders. The official languages of the two countries are almost identical and Islam is the dominant religion of both countries which also share similar historical experiences.

Several historical moments mark the interaction between the Malay communities, both in Malaya and in Indonesia. Although Indonesia declared its independence in 1945 and Malaya was granted independence by Britain in 1957 and became Malaysia in 1963, contact between the two communities can be traced back many centuries. Since the era of the Srivijaya Kingdom, for example, Malay culture spread from Palembang, where the Srivijaya Kingdom was located. The Malay language was used by the people both on the peninsula and in other parts of Sumatra. Furthermore, throughout the Fifteenth Century, it is clear that the people of Aceh in the west and Ternate in the east adopted Melaka Malay’s style of government, literature, music, dance, dress, games, titles, and even pantun after the establishment of Melaka as a commercial and religious centre (Andaya and Andaya, 1982:54-5). Malays had lived for centuries in the region before the international boundaries were settled in the Nineteenth Century; seafaring Malays, Buginese, Sumatrans and Javanese roamed and settled at will throughout the archipelago and had little regard for frontiers in the modern sense. Political boundaries have not been a very substantial barrier to the movement of the various people throughout the region, even during the last one hundred years (Mackie, 1974:60).

The feeling of ‘oneness’ among Malay people in Indonesia and Malaysia can be seen from the spirit of nationalism among them. Mackie suggests that Indonesia’s quest for national independence made a powerful appeal to young Malays in Malaya in the last decade before the Second World War and in the years of Indonesia’s revolutionary struggle against the Dutch between 1945-1949. Soekarno and Hatta were regarded as national heroes in Malaya as well as in Indonesia and their photos were displayed in many Malay and Bornean households some years before independence (Mackie: 18).

The general sense of ‘oneness’ had also been manipulated, sometimes exaggerated, for political reasons in both countries, especially before and during World War II. The notion of serumpun proved to be useful in mobilizing anti-colonial sentiments and boosting a sense of solidarity and mutual help among the nationalist groups in both countries. For instance, there was a strong impulse from the young Malayans and Indonesians for the growth of the idea of a closer union between Malaya and Indonesia. The Seruan Azhar, a monthly journal which was published by the Association of Indonesia and Malay students in Cairo (which was originally called Jami’ah Al-Khairiyah) made an appeal for the people of Sumatra, Java, and Borneo, and Malaya to “unite with one heart for progress and prosperity” (Roff, 1994:88-9).

Another monthly journal, Pilehan Timur, centered on three main concepts: Pan-Islamism, Pan-Malayanism (union between Indonesia and Malaya), and anti-
colonial nationalism. There were three political organizations formed in Egypt endorsing the ‘oneness’ of the ‘two blood brothers’. The Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Union of Malay Youth: KKM), formed in 1937, was a radical nationalist and anti-British organization. The leaders, Ibrahim Yaacob and Ishak Haji Mohamed, presented the concept “Melayu Raya” as being synonymous with “Indonesia Raya” (Greater Malay[sia] and Greater Indonesia) based on a common history linked in continuity to a glorious past. Their dream was for the various groups of Bangsa Melayu in both the Dutch colonial territories and the Malay states in Malaya to be liberated from colonial rule and merge into a sovereign state of one united bangsa (Omar, 1993:21).

The aspiration of the bangsa orang Melayu is to struggle for the independence of the land and the bangsa Melayu who will unite again in one great country according to the interest and desire of the people as a whole. The aim of Melayu Raya is the same as Indonesia Raya which is the aspiration of the Malay nationalist movement, that is to revive again the heritage of Sri Vijaya, which is the common unity of the bangsa.

In 1938, Persatuan Melayu Selangor (Selangor Malay Association) was formed in Kuala Lumpur. This organization proposed to stop all “alien” immigration to the then Malaya but encouraged Indonesian immigrants because ‘the Indonesians come from the same ethnic stock as the Malays’ (Aris, 1977:79). Another organization endeavoured to link Malaya’s future with Indonesia’s and to declare joint independence of the two nations; this was Kesatuan Ra’ayat Indonesia Semenanjong (Union of Peninsular Indonesian: KRIS). The other organization was Persatuan Pemuda Indonesia dan Malaya (The Association of Indonesia and Malay Youth or Perpindom) (Nasution, 1977:63).

Apart from Egypt, similar organizations were formed by the association of Indonesian and Malayan students in Saudi Arabia called Persatuan Talabah Indonesia-Malaysia (Talabah Indonesia-Malaysia or Pertindom). In Iraq, a similar organization was formed and called Majelis Kebangsaan Indonesia-Malaya (The National Council of Indonesia-Malaya: Makindom). Later, this organization was transformed into Perkumpulan Pemuda Indonesia (The Convention of Indonesian Youth: PPI), in which the youths from Malaya regarded themselves as Indonesian youths. The Malay Left formed Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (Malaya’s Malay National Party: PKMM), in October 1945. The PKMM held its inaugural congress on 30 November and adopted eight points, two relevant among them were:

- To unite the bangsa Melayu (Malay race) and plant kebangsaan in the hearts of the Malays with the aim of unifying Malaya in a big family, that is the Republik Indonesia Raya.
- To work with other bangsa who live in the country to live in peace and work towards setting up the Malayan United Front to enable Malaya to be merdeka (independent), prosperous, and peaceful as part of the Republik Indonesia Raya.

The congress also adopted the Indonesian flag, the Merah-Putih, as the PKMM’s banner and voiced its support for the Malayan Union. Besides, PKMM also adopted five principles which were very similar to Indonesia’s principles of Pancasila.

Undoubtedly, the plan for Indonesian independence and the realisation of “Indonesia Raya” was intended to include Malaya. After the Japanese offered the prospect of independence and the constitutional and political structure of the
new state came under discussion, the question whether Malaya and British Borneo colonies should be included in the national territory of Indonesia was debated in the Investigating Preparatory Committee for Indonesia’s Independence (Badan Penyelidik Usaha-usaha Kemerdekaan Indonesia: BPUPKI) on July 1945. The inclusion of the Malaya was put forward by Muhamad Yamin and Sukarno. Yamin’s argument (Mackie:21) was simple that:

... the areas which should be included in Indonesian territory are those which are given birth to Indonesian people: the motherland of the people will be transformed into the territory of a State.

The areas he listed as inhabited by Indonesians were the islands of Netherland Indies (including West New Guinea), Timor, North Borneo, and Malaya (Mackie:21). In the BPUPKI meeting, Yamin argued that Malaya bridged Indonesia, Indochina and the Asian continent. The Malacca Straits and the Malaya Peninsula are a passage to and the neck of the Indonesian archipelago. Therefore, to separate Malaya from Indonesia meant weakening Indonesia’s geo-political position and to unite them meant strengthening Indonesia’s position and completing and entity with national aspirations and this was consistent with the interset of the geo-politics of land and sea (Dalton, 1972:122-123). Sukarno supported Yamin’s idea by saying:

... I myself am convinced that the people of Malaya feel themselves as Indonesians, belonging to Indonesia and as one of us ... Indonesia will not become strong and secure unless the whole Straits of Malacca are in our hands”.

The members of KMM also persuaded their counterparts in the BPUPKI to put forward the “Greater Indonesia” concept to Sukarno. But there is no indication that the idea of merging Indonesia and Malaya was considered again when Indonesia declared its independence without the inclusion of Malaya. However, the conception of “Indonesia Raya” reinfoung its momentum again after West Irian was successfully incorporated into Indonesian territory. The ‘Konfrontasi’ policy was launched by Sukarno during 1962-1963. Initially, Indonesia did not oppose the formation of the Malayan Federation; this was probably because Jakarta was still faced by the West Irian problem. However, Indonesia’s attitude changed after negotiations over West Irian were successful and the Brunei revolt had occurred. Indeed, the success of the confrontation style politics it had pursued with regards to the Netherlands’ control of West Irian, encouraged Indonesia to apply the same diplomatic style to Malaysia (Agung, 1990:445). Indonesia believed that Malaysia (and Singapore) could threaten its security since these two countries had supported the PRRI-PERMESTA (Pemerintahan Revolusioner Republik Indonesia: Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia) rebellion of separatist movements against the Indonesian Government in 1957-1958 (Penders, 1974:176).

Sukarno also opposed the formation of Malaysia because he saw the formation as one manifestation of the ‘marriage between Malay feudalism and British imperialism’ (Leifer, 1983:80). Sukarno’s foreign policy doctrine was based on a militant-anti imperialist and anti-colonialist ideology known as ‘nekolim’ (neo-colonialism, colonialism, and imperialism). The formation of Malaysia allegedly gave substance to Sukarno’s suspicions of the West’s motives in Southeast Asia.

Confrontation was to lose its capacity to serve an important political
function when it was abandoned following the elimination of the PKI, the primary supporter, and the downgrading of Sukarno’s role after the abortive coup attempt in 1965 (Weinstein, 1969:12).

Despite the feeling of ‘oneness’, the development of serious conflict, meant that the relationship was marked by a “love-hate” tendency. Generally each perceives the other in those terms and sometimes exhibits suspicion and distrust towards each other.

Mackie (1977:14) asserts:

... the very mixed feelings which Indonesians and Malays have shown toward each other in the last decade - pride in their common Malay cultural heritage, yet at the same time mutual suspicions: admiration tinged with the apprehension on the Malay side, disdain spiced with both envy and contempt on the Indonesian - are a complex amalgam derived from both recent experience and folk-memories of the past which we find embodied in their myths and legends.

Confrontation had been a bitter experience for Malaysians and to some extent is considered a betrayal of a special relationship by blood brothers across the starits. Like any other kind of special relationship which sours, unfulfilled expectations or dissatisfactions can cause deep and long-lasting ill feelings. However, before the Konfrontasi era, although the need to stimulate the serumpun sentiment was no longer as important as during the anti-colonial era, the presence of the sentiment was still considerably strong among the Malays in Malaysia. It is significant that, after Malaysia was formed, Malays still celebrated the anniversary of Indonesian independence (Abdullah, 1993:145).

Recently, there have been some attempts to redefine Malay identity as shown by the formation of Majelis Usahawan Serantau (Overseas Businessman Assembly). This institution consists of 15 prominent leaders from both Indonesia and Malaysia, and five leaders from Singapore. This assembly exists to promote business opportunities among them and to explore the possibilities for investment outside ASEAN. (Republika Online, Sept. 9th 1996). A seminar was held on 12-13 September 1996 in Jakarta with a theme of “Jaringan Melayu Antar-bangsa” (International Malay Network). The participants decided to conduct cooperation in various areas, including transportation, trade, tourism and education. They resolved to establish Universitas Melayu Antar-bangsa (International Malay University) in Jogjakarta, Central Java. (Republika Online, Sept 11th, 1996) to institutional form to their aspirations.

Another method to promote Malay unity was to conduct an international symposium on “Melayu Se-Dunia” (Malay Throughout the World), held on 23-27 September 1996 in Selangor, Malaysia. This Malaysian-initiated symposium invited Malay leaders from 16 countries and discussed the promotion of Malay economic progress and cultural development. (Republika Online, Sept 24, 1996) The symposium was important to “promote the honor” of Malay people all over the world and to correct the stereotypes about Malay people (Republika Online, Sept 23rd, 1996). The resurgence of the widespread interest of the Malay people was inspired by two strong desires, first, that the Malay people want to be “the masters of their own country” and to eradicate the image of Malay people as “coolies” among other nations in the world. Second, to a certain extent, the resurgence was also inspired by the idea of an “Islamic Revival”, considering Islam is the Malay people’s dominant religion in both Indonesia and Malaysia.
Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur are actively promoting the idea of Malay resurgence as these countries are the largest Malay countries in the world. Their cooperation may contribute to the wealth of their people, especially, in terms of the advent of the Pacific Century. Additionally, it is now time for Malay people to contribute significantly to the world economy as both Indonesia and Malaysia are predicted to become “Asian Tigers” in the 21st Century.

**Post-Confrontation Era**

Sukarno was being unreasonable when Indonesia withdrew from the United Nations because of Malaysia’s membership of the Security Council. This cost Indonesia its friends and Jakarta became isolated which led to a closer alignment with China, its only supporter in abandoning the UN. With China, Indonesia made a futile attempt to organise a conference of the new emerging forces that was to become the alternative to the “imperialist dominated” UN, but it never materialized. Indeed, the Confrontation policy against the Malaysian Federation was the darkest period in the history of Indonesian diplomacy.

For Malaysia, Confrontation brought about a profound change in outlook on foreign policy. Indonesia’s attempt to isolate Malaysia diplomatically and to discredit it in international fora led Malaysia to follow a more vigorous foreign policy and it established many new Embassies abroad. Describing the impact of the Confrontation episode on Malaysian foreign policy, the Malaysian Secretary for Foreign Affairs (Bhattacharjee, 1977:190) stated:

However Confrontation by a big neighbour in 1963 provided a stimulus to foreign policy. For example, several new diplomatic missions in Africa and Asia have been established and a foreign service recruitment accelerated. Indonesian propaganda aimed at denigrating Malaysia as a ‘neo-colonial’ creation far from succeeding, has been exposed and Malaysia’s reputation throughout the world correspondingly enhanced.

When the first Non-Aligned Conference was held in September 1961 in Belgrade, Malaya remained indifferent to it, but Kuala Lumpur could not adopt the same attitude towards the second Non-Aligned Conference held in Cairo in October 1964. Malaysia could not make adequate diplomatic preparations to expect an invitation, but Kuala Lumpur was afraid that Indonesia would utilize this Conference to create among the Non-Aligned Countries a false impression of Malaysia. This led the Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, to write to all governments participating in the Conference requesting them to give his country a “fair hearing” against possible Indonesian abuse. Malaysia then became active in the Afro-Asian political world and it was accepted of a member of the Non-Aligned countries group in September 1970 at the Summit Meeting Conference held in Lusaka. Furthermore, in 1963, Indonesian diplomacy was very active in Africa and it protrayed its conflict with Malaysia as a struggle against neo-colonialism. In order to counter Indonesian propaganda, Malaysia also initiated diplomatic activities in Africa. Besides that, Malaysia associated itself intimately with Islamic world. Though Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, in the pre-Confrontation era Kuala Lumpur took little interest in Islamic affairs. The Malaysian King’s goodwill visit to some Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Republic and Jordan, contributed much to integrating Malaysia with the Islamic world. Confrontation also brought Malaysia closer to the United States
which could be relied upon for support against communist aggression. Washington provided military training for Malaysian personnel and considered appropriate military equipment for the defence of Malaysia. In addition, the role of the People’s Republic of China during the Confrontation period naturally intensified Malaysia’s feelings of hostility toward Beijing. Tunku Abdul Rahman argued that “the whole Confrontation by Indonesia is communist-inspired”; in 1966, he again said that ASA “would serve as a bulwark against any effort of Communist China”. The hallmarks of Malaysian foreign policy during the Tunku’s era can be instantly classified as being pro-Western and anti-communist on the global stage. When Tunku Abdul Razak assumed the Prime Ministership, Malaysia became even more actively involved in regional and international affairs (Pathmanathan, 1984:38).

In the post-Confrontation era, the nature of Southeast Asian politics was radically changed. This was mainly due to mainly three basic factors. First, Indonesia abandoned the militant foreign policy of Sukarno and the main objective of foreign policy in the New Order has been achieving economic development as rapidly as possible. Second, the British withdrawal from ‘East of Suez’ led Malaysia to consider the defence problem against its regional background which meant that its security now become integrally related to the security of Southeast Asia as a whole. Third, the withdrawal of the US after the Vietnam War forced all powers in Southeast Asia to reconsider their policy toward the People’s Republic of China. These circumstances have brought a diplomatic and security revolution to Southeast Asia.

In the light of such changes, entering the post-Confrontation period, Indonesia’s relation with Malaysia took a different form from those of the previous era. According to Donald K. Emmerson, Suharto’s decision to abandon Sukarno’s campaign against Malaysia was rational not only because it facilitated the achievement of regional peace, but regional peace itself was a rational objective (Jackson, 1986:93). Suharto’s foreign policy was seen as being subordinated to Indonesia’s national development and has been confined largely to the immediate region. A major goal was improving relations with Indonesia’s neighbours by terminating konfrontasi and signing agreements on land and sea borders with most of Indonesia’s neighbours. The second major foreign policy initiative was to engage Indonesia in a regional structure, ASEAN, in order to regain the confidence of its neighbours. The stability of the immediate region is regarded as a prerequisite for the success of Indonesia’s national development efforts. The New Order leaders, especially the Army, also believed that regional cooperation would contribute directly to Indonesia’s domestic political security and economic development since such cooperation would help create a stable and non-threatening regional environment. Indonesia’s participation in regional organization would ensure that neighbouring countries remained friendly to Jakarta (Anwar, 1994:46), so that Indonesia would be safe from interference by neighbouring countries, such as was the case of PRRI-PERMESTA. The creation of a friendly environment meant moving the danger zone away from Indonesia’s perimeter whilst the removal of immediate external threats would contribute to domestic and economic development.

The outlook of the New Order under Suharto leadership has had three key aspects, namely strong anti-communism, a commitment to stability and economic
development, and a pragmatic international outlook. The New Order leaders saw several benefits to Indonesia actively participating in regional cooperation immediately after Confrontation. Uppermost was the urgent need to restore Indonesia’s credibility, both in the region and in the wider international community. Regional cooperation was firstly intended to exorcise the “ghost” of Confrontation. It was not enough just to end Confrontation, this was only the beginning of a more positive and active foreign policy in the region. Indonesia needed to provide further proof that it was really committed to a good neighbourhood foreign policy. Indonesia had to show enthusiasm for regional cooperation otherwise its sincerity towards neighbouring countries would be in doubt.

Ideas for the establishment of a new regional association emerged as direct normalization talks in Bangkok began in April and May 1966. The three Foreign Ministers, Adam Malik, Tun Abdul Razak, and Thanat Khoman, agreed that closer regional cooperation was necessary to prevent the recurrence of Confrontation between countries in the region. ASEAN was finally established with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok on 8 August 1967. In this Declaration the Foreign Ministers of member countries agreed on several general major points to improve intra-regional cooperation and work toward the creation of regional stability.

Changing perceptions of the Serumpun concept

Indonesia and Malaysia have developed as independent and sovereign states and adopted different policies and strategies to achieve their national goals. The specific conditions of the two countries have highlighted the differences in many ways; one important difference is the changing perceptions of the serumpun concept. The Indonesia Raya or Melayu Raya concept which once desired to unite Indonesia and Malaysia in a single country was considered unviable. The Malay advocates of the concept interpreted it in purely racial terms, while Sukarno and Yamin saw it in geopolitical terms. The main reason for the difference in perception was that in Malaysia this idea was the product of racial anxiety, while in Indonesia it was an extension of the nationalist attempts to build a multi-ethnic unity.

There has been a recent development which shows the dissimilarity in each nation’s perception toward the serumpun concept. The differences in perception happen not only at the macro level but also at the micro level. The variations of and the reasons for the changes are many. The generation gap is the common determining factor which contributes to the difference and is complicated by the recent economic, social, and political realities which currently prevail in both countries. The previous generation emphasised the similarities between them based on emotions and abstract notions such as ethnicity, language, religion, culture and history. These notions served intended purposes from time to time (pre and during World War) by the older generation, but such abstract nations seems to be less relevant for the younger generation. This is partly because of the less historical orientation among them, the lack of meaningful interaction between counterparts and the lack of relevant knowledge and interest in each other’s country.

Malaysia adopts the policy of multiculturalism and uses the term bangsa (nation) which follows that what it means by serumpun can only be applied to the bangsa
Melayu (Malay people) who constitute only a part of the whole Malaysian population. The Malays consider themselves as bumiputra (literally means “the sons of the soil”) and enjoy a privileged position in the political life of the country. Because of that, the Malaysian Federation was not based on any sentiment of Malaysian nationalism. The racial division constitutes the basic problem of Malaysian nation building.

Different from Malaysia, Indonesia is strongly tied to the philosophy of “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” (unity in diversity) instead of serumpun. Unity here was meant to express the popular desire of a national unitary state, whereas diversity refers to the plurality of ethnic groups from more than 13,000 diverse large and small islands in the Indonesian archipelago. The country-wide desire for unity was strongly felt and nurtured, particularly in the anti-colonial movements by political organizations, long before the founding fathers of the Republic of Indonesia were in position to give reality to the goals. In October 1928, a National Youth Congress was held in Jakarta which unanimously adopted the resolution for the formation of “One Nation, One Fatherland, and One National Language”, later known as Sumpah Pemuda (Youths’ Pledge).

There are at least two reasons why Indonesia adopts the Bhinneka Tunggal Ika philosophy. The first concerns the variation of Indonesia’s ethnic groups. There are more than 150 ethnic groups spread from Sabang in north Sumatra to Merauke in Irian Jaya and these speak different ethnic languages. But Indonesia has adopted bahasa Indonesia (Indonesia language) as the official and unified language, although ethnic languages are still used in daily and informal conversation. Although of mainly Malay stock, there are several other non-Malay groups, such as Manadonese, Irianese, Ambonese, Timorese, and numerous others. It is inconceivable that the Indonesians were advocating serumpun as this concept has strong racial undertones. In Indonesia, the Malays are only one of many ethnic groups. The unity of the various ethnic groups is an Indonesian unity, one in which all groups could feel an affinity. In addition, Malaysians emphasize the superiority of the bumiputra in politics, economics, and socio-cultural areas, whereas in Indonesia, although Javanese are still dominant and national integration still a crucial problem, the government does not allocate superiority to a specific ethnic group, for instance by propagating an identity based on Javanism. The use of bahasa Indonesia as the national language as the national language was designed to avoid conflict caused by domination of the Javanese.

Second, there is the question of Islam. In Malaysia, a Malay is almost certainly a Moslem; ‘Malay’ is identical to ‘Moslem’. Islam is the official state religion although less than fifty percent of the Malaysian population are Moslems. Unlike Malaysia, Indonesia has no official religion even though more than seventy-five of its population are Moslems and Islam obviously has played an important role in Indonesian political and social life. Islam is not identical to Malay because it does not refer to a specific ethnic group. In fact, many of Malay stock are non-Moslem. On the rejection on a ‘national state’ based on Islam, in January 1953 Sukarno (Brown, 1994:123) stated:

If we establish a state based on Islam, many areas whose population is not Islamic such as the Moluccas, Bali, Flores, Timor, the kai Islands, and Sulawesi, will secede. And West Irian, which has not yet become part of the territory of Indonesia, will not want to be part of the Republic.
Indonesian nationalism embraces all aspects of Indonesian communities, culturally, ethnically and linguistically. Leo Suryadinata (1988:113) has noted:

... the indigenous minority groups are not expected to be absorbed into Javanese society. The Indonesian national culture is seen as a new culture based on various indigenous ethnic cultures, of which bahasa Indonesia is the major vehicle. Islam is part of the culture, but not the dominant one ... the minority groups are tolerated/encouraged to retain their ethnic cultures provided that they accept the authority of the national government and national education.

It is true that both in Indonesia and Malaysia there is a distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous groups, which is expressed by the terms pribumi/non-pribumi and bumiputra/non-bumiputra respectively, and refers to mainly Chinese and other ethnic groups. However, there is a difference policy and attitude toward the non-indigenous community in Indonesia and Malaysia. In Indonesia, a member of non-indigenous people began to refer themselves as “Indonesians”, hence indigenous people gradually abandoned this term in favour of the more exclusive “Indonesia asli” (native Indonesians). The term was introduced into the 1945 Constitution, so that there would no institutionalization of special rights for indigenous citizens, and it was states “all citizens have the same position in law and government”. Since the 1958 citizenship law adopted the jus soli principle, many non-indigenous Indonesians become eligible for Indonesian citizenship (Shiddique and Suryadinata, 1982:670-672).

In Malaysia, on the other hand, a distinction between bumiputra and non-bumiputra gained prominence as a unifying myth in the post-independence period when UMNO leaders were trying to frame legislation to institutionalize the ‘special position of the Malays’ enshrined in the Constitution. The constitutional definition of ‘Malay’ contained in Article 160 (2) provides that a person is considered to be a Malay if he habitually speaks the Malay language, adopts the malay costume and is a Muslim. The major focus of these efforts had been on the issue of language. The dominant unifying argument was that education offered the key to upward socio-economic mobility, and that once Malay became the language of education and administration, the Malay community as a whole would benefit and its ‘special position’ vis a vis the non-Malay speakers would be assured. The Islamic element in the state ideology is designed to rally the Malay community behind UMNO by strengthening the bumiputra myth. As Brown asserts, because of this, there are clear tensions between the attempts by the Malays to employ Islam as a tool to facilitate their own upward mobility into the dominant class and the attempts by poor Malay peasants to oppose that class through the same medium of Islam, and the employment of Islam by the dominant class itself as a Malay unifying myth and as a state ideology.

Politics and attitudes regarding pribumi and bumiputra are justified in different way in Indonesia and Malaysia. As Shiddique and Suryadinata conclude, in Malaysia the dichotomy continues in terms of the overall goal of achieving national unity, but in Indonesia pribumi policies are more narrowly justified as being necessary for the stability of the political system. Indonesia tends to take a more assimilationist/absorptionist views towards the long-term solution of Chinese minority problems, whereas in Malaysia the solution is generally seen in terms of accommodation. In addition, in Indonesia the general lack of
response can be attributed to the fact that the pribumi policy has yet to make a significant impact on non-pribumi life and they are only a small percentage, so they do not constitute a formidable political force. It is different in Malaysia, where the Chinese community constitutes more than a third of Malaysian population and increasingly feels threatened by current government bumiputra policies.

Referring back to the serumpun concept, the younger generation, especially those who are Indonesians, approach the concept with different attitudes than their Malaysian counterparts. Abdullah gives an example of such differences in a magazine article reporting on a conference called Dialog Malindo (Malaysia-Indonesia Youth Dialogue) held in Malacca in December 1988. During the three day conference, most participants from Malaysia made no effort to hide their attachment to the serumpun concept, which in a way was also meant as a hospitable gesture to welcome “brother participants” from the serumpun nation. On that occasion, the Malaysian wanted to emphasize their close relationship so that the Indonesian participants would truly feel at home. Indeed, among the objectives of the conference was to wish to restimulate the serumpun spirit among the younger generations so that both nations will be more cooperative. However, the Indonesian participants seems to demonstrate a lack of empathy and regarded such an enthusiasm as “an obsession” of Malay youths and a manifestation of racial politics practiced in Malaysia.

The serumpun approach, in fact, has been an indication of unhealthy relations between Indonesia and Malaysia. The adoption of such an approach in the two countries’ relationship as a model of diplomacy has aggravated the dissatisfaction in the relationship. This suggests that the problems which have occured between them have never completely been solved on the basis of candid attitudes and discussions (Kompas, July 5th, 1991).

In another context, the spirit of serumpun has been misused and abused. This is clear from the use of that spirit as a “coercive tool”. For example, Datuk Najib Tun Razak, the former Malaysian Minister for Sports, said in Dialog Malindo II, that the serumpun and brotherhood relations are useless if the Proton Saga cars, which are Malaysian made, could not enter the Indonesian market. He also asked why Indonesia limited the landing rights of Malaysian Airlines to Jakarta to only four times a week whereas Singapore Airlines could land four times a day. Moreover, Indonesia had maintained that the serumpun brotherhood was also useless if the Malaysian High Court handed down a death sentence on Basri Masse, an Indonesian who was found guilty of smuggling dangerous drugs into Malaysia. The Indonesians felt that the sentence was too harsh and appealed to a lighter one. All of these incidents indicate the importance of re-examining and re-evaluating the serumpun concept.

Maritime Borders, EEZ and Archipelagic Principles

The conflict over maritime borders between Indonesia and Malaysia occurred as a result of lack of agreement by some of the major maritime powers over the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea in May 1982. Indonesia and Malaysia (and Singapore) are the states immediately concerned with the status of the Straits of Malacca; however, these countries have different views on this subject. As an archipelagic state, Indonesia regards the straits as internal waters where its sovereignty is supreme and free passage a concession (Indorf, 1984:20). Malaysia, on
the other hand, is more concerned with navigational safety and marine pollution, but concedes the right of innocent passage through territorial waters. To solve the differences, the two governments signed a Treaty of Friendship and Delimitation of Territorial Seas Treaty regarding the Straits of Malacca in 1970. Indonesia had declared a 12-mile territorial sea limit in 1957 which became law in 1960. Malaysia had already done the same thing in 1969. As the result of these Declarations, the Straits of Malacca of less than 24 miles was made a territorial sea of Indonesia and Malaysia. The 1970 Treaty contains a non-aggression pact. Article 3 states that: (Djalal, 1985:63)

The two High Contacting Parties undertake that in case any dispute on matters directly affecting them should arise they will not resort to the threat or use of force and shall at all times endeavour to settle such a dispute through the usual diplomatic channels in true spirit of friendship and goodwill between two neighbours.

Thus, on the national unity issue, Indonesia guarantees Malaysia that the application of the Indonesian archipelagic principles in the South China Sea will not affect Malaysian national unity and political stability, especially between West Malaysia (Malayan Peninsula) and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). This guarantee was already formulated and incorporated in the Law of the Sea Convention.

In 1960, on the basis of 1957 Juanda Declaration, Indonesia officially applied its archipelagic baselines which conform to the rules in the Convention on the Law of the Sea. (Valencia and Danusaputro, 1984:462). As a result, Indonesia has incorporated in its national jurisdiction an area of 999,000 square nautical miles. This comprises one and a half times the land mass of the whole of ASEAN combined. Indonesia’s archipelagic principles have incorporated Anambas and Natuna Islands in its territorial boundaries. This means that Indonesia’s boundaries are interposed between West and East Malaysia. Indonesia’s claims have a traditional foundation, based upon its concepts of fatherland (tanah air) and the strategic need to ensure the integral unity of its 13,000 islands and connecting waterways. Regarding these matters, Indonesia and Malaysia concluded a bilateral agreement as a formal recognition of Malaysia’s traditional fishing rights. These rights pertain within Indonesia’s archipelagic waters off Anambas Island. It took nineteen years of hard bargaining before the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 1976. By recognizing Indonesia’s sovereignty over areas of the South China Sea, Malaysia is granted free passage for its naval and merchant vessels, customary rights for fishing activities, and the laying of submarine cables and pipelines and marine research.

Sipadan and Ligitan Islands

The conflict over these islands (which are located in the Straits of Sulawesi, between Sabah and East Kalimantan) has recently become a sensitive issue in the relationship between Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. Documents confirming who owns the islands are not clear on the point. Both Indonesia and Malaysia claim ownership because each holds different versions of maps inherited from the colonial powers. Indonesia holds the Dutch-version and Malaysia holds the British-version maps. The islands then become an overlapping zone on the two countries’ boundaries. Indonesia adopts “the natural line of astronomical reflection” (garis petunjuk alam pantulan astronomi) whereas Malaysia...
adopts “the river indication” (*petunjuk aliran sungai*). In this regard, Indonesia has claimed that the current of the river has changed and shifted thereby entering Indonesian territory.

The ownership of these islands was discussed in the talks about the determination of the continental shelf boundary (*batas landas kontinen*) between Indonesia and Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur in 1969. However, there was no written agreement reached, and thus the two countries decided that the islands be given the “status quo” position which means that legal position of the islands is not to be tinkered with by both countries while trying to solve the problem with the brotherhood spirit. The status quo position was reaffirmed in 1986 and confirmed during the visit of Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammad, to Yogyakarta in 1988 to meet President Suharto. It was also reaffirmed again during the visit of Suharto to Kuala Lumpur for the G-15 Summit Meeting in 1990 (*Suara Pembaruan*, Feb. 20th, 1991).

In 1980 the Malaysian Government had published its national new map which included Sipadan and Ligitan islands as integral part of the Malaysian Federation. On the other hand, according to *Daftar Nama Pulau di Indonesia* (*the List of the Indonesian Islands*), those islands belong to Indonesia. The problem become more sensitive and critical when a report said that the State of Sabah has developed the disputed island of Sipadan as a tourist resort. Indonesia argues that tourism activities on Sipadan island indicate that Malaysia does not respect of the status quo position of the island. It was reported that there are already 19 motels built and managed there by the Borneo Divers Company. There are also a brochure titled “Sipadan Island, Borneo, Malaysia” with the text and photography by Bill Gleason and published by Malaysia Underwater Adventure Tours and the Malaysia Airlines System. The brochure says that the island is the only Malaysian island located in the centre of the ocean. It is generally agreed that the underwater scenery is one of the five most beautiful diving sites in the world. From this activity, Malaysia earns as much as US$ 304,000 per month (*Suara Pembaruan*, June 4th, 1991).

Indonesia has warned Malaysia not to continue any further development in the Sipadan and Ligitan islands because of their status quo position. Indonesian officials suggests the development of tourist resorts (given the status quo position of the islands) is both provocative and unethical. (*Pelita*, June 20, 1991). By developing Sipadan and Ligitan islands, Malaysia has changed the position of the islands from the status quo to a fait accompli situation. The change of attitude has been made clear by the statement of the Secretary of the Development Ministry of the Sabah State Government that “there is no doubt that Sipadan is a part of Malaysian territory” (*Suara Pembaruan*, June 24th, 1991). Furthermore, he states that the state government has a long-term plan to promote Sipadan island as a “marine garden”, but has been delayed because Sabah is mindful of the Indonesian Government’s wishes. Yet, an Indonesian diplomat in Kuala Lumpur has stated:

if they were really thoughtful of the Indonesian Government, they should stop the development of tourist accommodation until the status of the island is clear (*Suara Pembaruan*, June 24th, 1991).

Indonesian diplomatic circles suspect the Malaysian Government has used delaying tactics to frustrate a solution to the problem. This is to earn as much revenues as possible from the investment (*Kompas*, July 26th, 1991).
Illegal Immigrants

Malaysia presently faces serious problems of illegal immigration. Many of them are from Indonesia, as evident by their presence in town centres and plantation or estates and by the large numbers of them who have been deported by the authorities. Historically, migration between the two countries was common and enshrined in Malay myths and legends. However, in the post-independence era, immigration from Indonesia, as well as from other countries, has been restricted by the Malaysian Government in an attempt to control population growth.

The flow of labourers who come from Indonesia illegally to Malaysia has recently become one of the significant issues in the Indonesia-Malaysia relationship. It affects not only social and economic development but also aggravates political, security, religious, and cultural problems and, for both governments, these pressures are sensitive issues.

There are several problems due to the massive flow of illegal immigrants. It can be explained by push factors from Indonesia and pull factors from Malaysia. Shrinking employment opportunities in Indonesia are the main push factor. Workers, especially skilled and semi-skilled try to find jobs in other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Brunei and Malaysia. Finding a job overseas means remittances are sent home. Workers can receive much higher wages compared to what they can earn at home, although in Malaysia they cannot get the same amount as their local counterparts. The Indonesians accept the wage discrimination because it is still more they can earn at home. For example, compared to an average daily wage in Lombok, one of the poorest provinces and one of the biggest sources of labourers to Malaysia, a palm-oil plantation worker gets Rp. 7,000-8,000 compared to only Rp. 500-1,000 in Lombok. Remittances reaching Lombok through the BNI 1946 State Bank in Mataram, total 200 million a month, although this has had only limited impact on the national economy (FEER, January 11th., 1990:21).

Malaysia’s similarity in cultural heritage, language and religion has further encouraged migration. The relatively close distance between Indonesia and Malaysia is another encouraging factor. Hence, illegal immigrants without proper documents, when caught are deported but usually find it relatively easy to slip back to Malaysia.

In the mid-1970s the implementation of Malaysia’s New Economic Policy (NEP) gained its momentum; this was a momentous pull factor from Malaysia. In response to the NEP, sizeble portions of Malay youths from the rural areas moved to urban areas which caused acute labour shortages in the agricultural sector. To maintain commodities exports --especially rubber and palm-oil which contribute 17.7% of Malaysia’s export earnings-- the government was forced to concede to plantation owners’ demands to allow them to make up their shortages with imported labour (FEER, April 26th, 1984).

However, the situation soon get out of control when illegal immigrants flooded into Malaysia in 1980s. Concerned about the situation in both countries, the two governments signed a bilateral agreement in Medan, North Sumatra in 1984. Under the agreement, a committee was set up to handle the “recruitment of Indonesian workers”. Article 3 of the agreement stipulates: “Indonesia agrees to supply to Malaysia such numbers and categories of workers as may, from time to time, be requested by Malaysia.” Based on the amount and type of labour needed by Malaysia, the Indonesian Manpower Ministry would recruit workers and facilitate their entry into Malaysia by
providing them with proper documents and exempting them from exit taxes. By this, both countries hoped not only to curb illegal immigrants but also to keep track of immigrant workers and protect them against exploitation by Malaysian employers. Nevertheless, this agreement has not stopped the influx of illegal entries. The biggest stumbling block to this scheme is found in Jakarta which imposes an exit tax on all Indonesians leaving the country; this discourages workers from seeking work in Malaysia through official channels.

The unwelcome guests add to the present sensitivity in the Indonesia-Malaysia relationship. Local resentment against Indonesians has built up over the years. They are held responsible for rising urban crime rates; Malaysians read almost daily of robbers who “spoke with Indonesian accents” ( Asiaweek, November 27th., 1981:12) It was reported that Indonesians are involved in crimes such as robbery, rape and murder in Chow Kit and surrounding areas. The local press has created a bad image of Indonesians by printing news discrediting Indonesians and they seldom highlight positive things about Indonesia. Sulaiman Muhammad, the youth chairman of UMNO, comments that illegal immigrants are falsely treated as identical with Indonesians, as if all crimes were committed by Indonesians. It is true that some Indonesians are involved in criminal actions but compared to the total number of such actions, crimes by Indonesians are not a sizeable portion. In an action to detain such criminals and lessen the impact of illegal immigrants, the government launched Operasi Seberang (Across the Border Operation) in the mid 1980s, and Operasi Nyah II (Go Away Operation).

Another problem created by the illegal immigrants is health and settlement. Abdullah suggests, as they enter the country without any proper health scrutiny, the health risk is exacerbated in the congested areas where they live and contagious diseases spread to the local populations. In addition, their influx into certain “squattered” areas has reduced the original residents to be a minority and, at the same time, has worsened the standards of living because the rapid growth of the squatter community is not commensurate with the increase in basic social amenities. The Malaysian public reactions to the unwelcome guests are various. From the economic perspective, the trade union are resentful of them, as the influx of Indonesians is seen as a threat to local labour. The Indonesians are used to lower wages without the fringe benefits normally accorded to local labourers. Being illegal and unfamiliar with local conditions, the Indonesians make subservient workers; they can easily be manipulated and exploited, hence, the employers’ preference for Indonesian workers vis-a-vis the local (Kasim, 1987:265-267). However, the Indonesian workers can be dismissed easily when the employers no longer need their services.

From the political point of view, the reaction is also influenced by the ethnic group factor but this is changing over time. In the early years of their presence, the immigrants were “silently welcomed” by the ethnic Malays from the main component of the bumiputra; the immigrants were perceived as bangsa serumpun who would eventually assimilate with the local bumiputra (Abdullah, 1983:185). Nonetheless, the influx of Indonesians is suspected by non-Malays as an attempt by the Malay-dominated government to increase the demographic strength of the Malays and with it, political strength. Because Indonesia and Malaysia are culturally and socially similar, Indonesians
can be easily assimilated into Malay society as in the case of earlier Indonesians. The Democratic Action Party, the Chinese-dominated party, alleged that some Indonesians are already being given blue identity cards which means granting them citizenship which enables them to vote in general elections. Thus, in the long run, the Indonesians immigrants are regarded as having strengthened the Malays’ electoral power. This assumptions was reinforced by a Deputy Minister of UMNO who stated:

It is true that today the Indonesian immigrants do not contribute anything towards UMNO. But it would be different after they stay in this country for ten years and are allowed to apply to citizenship and thereby become voters. Even their offsprings in this country will automatically become Malaysian citizens (Tempo, January, 1987)

There are also socio-cultural problems associated with the immigrants. It was reported that some of the Indonesian illegal immigrants were Christians and there were those who tried to establish churches and some were alleged to have spread Christianity among Malays. The Malays, who are generally orthodox about their religion, took it as a sensitive issue and a serious offence. The President of UMNO youth, Dato Seri Najib Tun Razak, considered it as the “biggest threat facing Muslims in Malaysia today” (Abdullah:177-178).

The concentration of Indonesians of different ethnic groups within a confined geographical area has led to stiff competition between them and Malays for limited resources, especially jobs and housing. This had led to jealousy, enmity, quarrels and fights between them. Moreover, Malays also complain that Indonesians lack a ‘sense of propriety’ when it comes to dressing and male-female interactions. This is especially true for the Maduras and the Boyans, but exceptional to Minangkabaus (Kasim, 1987:276)

The issue of illegal immigrants is multidimensional and it seems this will remain a significant and sensitive issue in the relationship between the two countries for some time to come.

Conclusion

The governments of Indonesia and Malaysia have tried seriously to improve their relationship on the basis of cooperation and mutual benefit for almost three decades. In ASEAN, Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to “bury” the confrontational era and began the new phase in the relationship. However, relations are not always cordial and have been uneasy because there are still some unresolved problems. The two countries’ diplomatic manoeuvres and foreign policies still reflect sensitivities in their relationship. As developing nations, Indonesia and Malaysia feel the need for a wider international forum, and therefore, each of their manoeuvres, to a certain degree, conceals their rivalry in seeking to play the leading role in certain issues. For instance, Indonesia has shown its interest in becoming a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement by nominating itself as organiser of the Summit Conference, while Malaysia is anxious to become a leader in the South-South Dialogue.

Indonesian political relations with Malaysia may be called a commonality of family relationships. The former Malaysian Foreign Minister, Tunku Ahmad Rithaudden, claims that “relations between Malaysia and Indonesia have been very special”. On the one hand, these relations show intimacy, but, on the other hand they disguise many complex problems which are
difficult to solve. Sutopo stresses the fact that, as Indonesia is located in the same geographic area as Malaysia, this makes it difficult to understand Indonesia’s relations with Malaysia by only referring to the ‘rational’ aspects of interrelationship. Geographic, economic, and cultural ties emotionally influence Indonesia’s political relations with Malaysia.

Being neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia have rationally sought to fix the boundaries of each country’s internal sovereignty. Defence officials from both countries stress that no other ASEAN member countries share a longer border than that between Malaysia and Indonesia in Borneo, or holds strategic positions such as the grip on the Straits of Malacca or control of secondary passages such as the Lombok and Flores Straits. As far as internal problems are involved, the principle of not interfering in the affairs of each country has been kept and maintained as far as possible. At the bottom line of the defence cooperation lies one basic tenet: both want a reliable partner on the other side of ASEAN’s longest frontier and each sees the other’s stability as crucial to its own.

Jakarta makes no effort to hide its need for Malaysia as a “buffer state” between itself and Indochina, and an even more distant perceived threat from China and Jakarta quietly supported Malaysia’s defence ties with the West during the Cold-War era. At the official level, relations between Indonesia and Malaysia appear to be very good and no urgent problems seem to be waiting to erupt.

Emotionally, Indonesia’s relations with Malaysia conceals an anxiety emerging from actual and perceptual factors. In reality, the existence of the unresolved problems between them make this relationship often seem very clumsy. The current problems which are most noticeable involve borders and illegal immigrants.

Even though in general the two countries have been able to settle their border disputes on land and sea, some problems which have not been solved, can hopefully be settled appropriately. These problems, continue to generate a certain hidden reluctancy between the two countries. This feeling is based on the belief that they are one of family, of one stock and should be able to settle all problems in a favorable way. But the failure to resolve the status of the Sipadan and Ligitan islands, however, which in some circles is considered futile and should not shake the foundation of Indonesian-Malaysian friendship, demonstrates the “awkwardness” in settling this problem which is supported by the principle of commonality. This actual impasse is a mixture of the problem inherited from the colonial period and the anxiety of the past experience and cultural psychology created through the relations of a larger country (Indonesia) with a smaller one (Malaysia).

From the perceptual point of view, Malaysia, which in general considers Indonesia as its ‘big brother’, hides a feeling of fear that it might be dominated, if not threatened, as an older sibling sometimes does to a younger one. As far as this family relationship is concerned, there is a strong desire that the bond is encouraged to be a more rational, a business-like relationship. If this kind of relationship is to be achieved, both countries need to look for a new approach for managing future relations.

History and geopolitics have brought Indonesia and Malaysia to the present state of their relationship. The formal relationship which has been forged since the two countries became independent is now developing in more complex ways as the emotional aspects are much deeper, as
shown by some cases mentioned in this essay.

If the two countries seriously want a more valuable relationship, then a new form is needed so that the positive aspects can be maximized and the negative sides minimized. The change in the generations might facilitate this process as the younger generation seems to be more pragmatic and wants the relationship to be based on a rational basis. Differences between them, which are normal in the context of bilateral relations, should not be a barrier to a balanced relationship.

Indonesia-Malaysia bilateral relations should now be reaching a new phase, one which produces more substance and reduces the “romantic” sense of the past. The two countries should learn and realize that the serumpun factor, has both positive and negative aspects. To a certain degree, this element is still relevant and if they want to use it as a unifying force, both countries could creatively managed to produce a constructive relationship.

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