

## The Politics of Environment: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Malaysian Political Scene

ZAINAL ABIDIN ABDUL WAHID

### ABSTRACT

*In dealing with the issues of environment, human rights and democracy, Malaysia is confronted with some basic and conflicting problems. For example, where can she draw the line between developmental needs and environment; should she allow the 299 nomadic Penans to roam the jungle or bring them into the mainstream so that they could exercise their democratic right to vote; do human rights include the right to enjoy 'freedom from hunger'? These problems are not irreconcilable but would require time and understanding and sincerity by other countries.*

### ABSTRAK

*Dalam mengendalikan isu-isu alam sekitar, hak asasi manusia dan demokrasi, Malaysia menghadapi beberapa masalah asas dan bertentangan. Misalnya, dimanakah hendak ditulis garis pemisah antara kehendak-kehendak pembangunan dan alam sekitar; wajarkah Malaysia membiarkan 299 normad Penan merayau dihutan atau lebih baik dibawa mereka ke dalam masyarakat supaya mereka dapat menggunakan kuasa demokrasi mereka untuk mengundi; adakah tidak hak asasi manusia meliputi hak supaya 'bebas dari kelaparan'? masalah-masalah ini bukanlah tidak boleh diselaraskan tetapi ia memerlukan masa, persefahaman dan kejujuran daripada negara-negara lain.*

### INTRODUCTION

Environment as a national policy issue is comparatively new for Malaysia. Following Merdeka or independence, the Malayan Government then pursued a policy of industrialisation. As industrialisation became more widespread, it was felt that the country did not have adequate legislation to manage the environmental problems that began to emerge. The Government then felt the need to enact a comprehensive environmental legislation to handle the problems and the Environmental Quality Act 1974 was passed. From then on the Malaysian Government became more aware of environmental implications of development. Consequently the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1996) clearly recognises the importance of environment in the social and economic development of Malaysia.

My interest in environment is recent and limited. There develops a feeling of concern when Malaysia was severely criticised internationally and domestically with regard to her alleged inadequate management of environmental problems. My attention was drawn to the politics of environment.

A preliminary enquiry into the Malaysian political scene with regard to environment reveals a potentially difficult and sensitive possibilities. Some basic political issues immediately present themselves, having domestic as well as international implications.

One of the more publicised environmental issues is rainforest in relation to logging and the Penans. A number of important questions have been raised with regard to this problem which deserve in-depth studies so that solutions can be found. What is attempted here is an introductory examination into the forest, development and Penan issues so as to provide a basis for discussion.

For a start one has to examine whether rainforest, in its present extent, should be preserved at any cost. Obviously the answer is in the negative since the concept of sustainable development seems generally accepted. But sustainable development can be differently interpreted. Development to a developed country can have a different connotation to a developing country. The former may regard the clearing of forest or logging as more of an environmental question whereas the latter many look at it as a necessity in terms of getting revenue to finance national needs and development.

In Malaysia, the revenue from timber contributes substantially towards national income. The timber trade for 1991 fetched about RM9.3 billion (US \$3.6 billion) in export earnings which formed 10.8% of the GDP.<sup>1</sup> The timber industry directly provides jobs for 80,000 people, indirectly 150,000, in Sarawak alone.<sup>2</sup> So when Malaysia was told that she should not cut down too many trees for her timber trade, Malaysia did not feel enthusiastic about following such a request. She was informed that logging would quicken the process of thinning the ozone layer since tropical forests were regarded as effective carbon sink.

Malaysia faced a dilemma – to develop or to take care of the ozone layer. She tried to get out of the quandary. She examined the situation. Indeed she found out that there had been cases of over logging. Although she tried to regulate tree felling yet it had not been really successful. The pressure against her was mounting, both domestically and internationally.

Malaysia realises the importance of protecting and preserving her environment. She is also aware of the danger of the thinning of the ozone layer and its consequences to health. What perplexes her is the pressure exerted on one of her development processes because some other countries have produced gases that have adversely affected the ozone layer. What is worse is that these countries had earlier cut down most of their forests and

utilised the benefits therefrom. And to make it much more unpalatable is the actions taken by some of the environmental groups from these countries in their over-enthusiastic attempt to stop the timber industry of Malaysia. One of them had, for example, stayed illegally in Malaysia in order to organise and highlight opposition to logging in Sarawak and a few had handcuffed themselves to logs that were going to be exported. I wonder whether these so called environmentally-concerned groups and their likes have shown a more rigorous opposition to the rapes, murders and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina or do they think that atrocities committed by the Serbs are less damaging in comparison to what they believe is happening to the Penans?

Another dimension of the 'sustainable development' problem is the pressure applied on Malaysia to reduce significantly her logging industry by some developed countries that had largely cleared their own forests earlier and some of them, in fact, are the greatest culprits in the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. A number of these developed countries have adopted discriminatory measures against, for example, the use of tropical timber. It appears that Malaysia is willing to cooperate in order to preserve the ozone layer. However she argues that a huge reduction in activities connected with her timber industry would mean a lessening in her national income and loss of jobs for her citizens and these would retard development and possibly cause social, if not political, problems. In view of these possibilities, Malaysia suggests that the developed countries concerned should compensate her loss of revenue through timber by providing her alternative means of generating income. A transfer of technology has been suggested and less protectionism has also been put forward. Another approach is to provide research fund to study ways to preserve the environment consistent with the developmental needs of a developing country. The first suggestion can help Malaysia to industrialise and could therefore make her become less dependent on timber. A more accessible market would enable Malaysia to sell more of her manufactured goods which would ultimately produce a similar result. The responses from the developed countries could hardly be described as encouraging.

This is a situation that has been described earlier in this paper as 'potentially difficult and sensitive possibilities.' Malaysia cannot completely ignore the demand of the developed countries. They are powerful. Their economic sanctions can ruin Malaysia. Besides, Malaysia needs their investments and their markets and, perhaps, protection. At the same time Malaysia needs increasing revenues, the bigger the better. Malaysia has a duty towards the betterment of her citizens. She has to build more schools, more hospitals, more homes, provide better supply of water and electricity etc. Therefore consciously reduce national income derived from her own easily available natural resources simply goes against the grain. It is just

not right. It is an interference in her internal affairs. It is like an infringement on the sovereignty of Malaysia. Yet it is a reality that Malaysia has to live with, at least for the present.

Some environmentalists and political parties have argued that logging in Sarawak has adversely affected the Penans. It is alleged that the Penans have lost their 'homes', their means of livelihood and their way of life because of logging activities. It is further claimed that there has been a violation of the human rights of the Penans. The Malaysian government has been accused of being undemocratic for not allowing the Penans to pursue their own lifestyle.

In order to get a clearer perspective, it is perhaps worthwhile to note that the total Penan population of Sarawak is 9237.<sup>3</sup> About 95% of them are either settled or semi-settled.<sup>4</sup> Two hundred ninety nine (229) of them are still nomadic, as in 1987.<sup>5</sup> The total population of Sarawak in 1990 was 1.8 million and the grand total of the population of Malaysia is about 18 million. The Penans constitute about 0.6% of the total population of Sarawak.

Undoubtedly there must have been unscrupulous and uncaring loggers exploiting the forest as well as the Penans. Assuredly they should be punished in accordance with the law. If the law could not act as a deterrent in its present form, a more severe penalty must be meted out. This is precisely what has happened recently. The Malaysian Government has agreed to make it more difficult for the loggers not to conform with the law. It was reported on 2 April 1993 that the Government was going to introduce amendments to the National Forestry Act 1984 whereby the maximum fine for illegal loggers would be increased from RM10,000 to RM500,000 and a minimum jail term for one year and a maximum of 20 years. There is no minimum jail term at present although there exists a possibility of imprisonment of up to three years. The amendments would also allow the confiscation of machinery used in illegal logging.<sup>6</sup> These proposed amendments do indicate that there is concern about revenue as well as environment.

However, a more important and sensitive question would have to be dealt with. Views have been expressed that the Penans should be allowed to pursue their own way of life, without any interference from the Government. It has to be borne in mind that the Penans form 0.6% of the population of Sarawak. It must be pointed out that there is a tendency among many environmentalists when referring to the Penans to synonymise it with 'the natives of Sarawak' thus presenting a picture as if the whole native population of Sarawak shares the same view as some of the nomadic and semi-settled Penans or has suffered a similar fate. The following quotation typifies this misleading approach.

“Indigenous and tribal peoples from tropical forests all around the world have united to create a new alliance to confront the destruction of their territories and forests.”

The writer further states,

“The historic new alliance unites for the first time Indians from Amazonia Central America and the southern cone of South America, ‘pygmies from Africa, tribal peoples from India and Thailand, indigenous peoples from the Philippines, ‘Orang Asli’ and Dayak people from Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo’... “<sup>7</sup>

At the same time it must be stated that there are other natives of Sarawak who have also suffered as a result of logging activities. Equally important to bear in mind is that there are and there have been Sarawak natives who are involved as owners or shareholders of logging companies. It must also be emphasised that experience and researches have shown that the Penans are not opposed to development.<sup>8</sup>

My focussing on the Penans relates to the earlier contention that an enquiry into the political scene ‘reveals a potentially difficult and sensitive possibilities’. If 95% of the Penans have adopted settled or semi-settled life then the possibility of the remaining 5% joining the 95% is certainly great. What seems to be needed is understanding and time. There has not been an accusation that the 95% of the Penans have been forced to settle down by the Malaysian or Sarawak Government. In fact it is not the policy of the State Government to resettle the Penans.<sup>9</sup> The fact that a majority of the 95% is semi-settled indicates that there exists a transitional process from semi-settled to settled life. It would not be too remote to expect the nomadic Penans to gradually join the semi-settled group. I believe the Sarawak Government is working towards this objective with its Service Centre Programme, Penan Volunteer Corps and other projects. It does appear that the allegation that the Malaysian Government is not democratic is difficult to sustain. Equally so is the assertion that there has been a violation of human rights because the Penans are not allowed to pursue their own lifestyle.

In the 1991 State elections in Sarawak, the Barisan Nasional won a tremendous majority. The main theme of its election campaign was development. The Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) which gave greater emphasis to environmental issues during campaigning fared very badly. Does this give the Barisan Nasional State Government the right to formulate and implement policies that it thinks beneficial to the Penans, Sarawak and Malaysia as a whole? This is one of the implications of accepting democracy. To what extent has a government to give consideration to the particular demands of small minorities?

It may be well to remember that the groups that often raised the question of human rights of the Penans usually linked it with democracy. However it

is ironic that the settled and most of the semi-settled Penans have been able to exercise their democratic right to vote during State and Federal elections whereas the nomadic Penans have not been able to enjoy the same privilege. It would seem to be more democratic to bring the nomadic Penans into the mainstream of national life.

During the British colonial period in Malaysia, particularly in Peninsular Malaysia, the Malay nationalists criticised the British colonial government for not 'developing' the Malays. The nationalists accused the British government of pursuing policies whereby the Malays would not be much exposed to even secondary education, let alone university education. Later when the nationalists demanded independence, the British government said that they were not ready for it. Then there was the case of Straits-born Chinese who did not want Penang and Malacca to join the Federation of Malaya when it achieved independence in 1957.

These issues are relevant when we want to deal with the Penans. The so-called fighters for the human rights of the Penans and the environment may well be advised to familiarise themselves with some of these historical parallels. The Malaysian Federal and Sarawak State Governments are democratically elected in elections held in about every five years. Opposition political parties have been able to win elections at State level to form State governments. The Federal and State governments, who have been elected by the majority, are responsible to their electorates. They have to fulfil most, if not all, of the promises that they had made during election campaigns. The Sarawak National Front who won the elections specifically campaigned on the theme of 'politics of development'. This platform would entail the promotion of education, health, communications etc. for the State of Sarawak, inclusive of the Penans. It would not be too remote to anticipate that in the event the Malaysian Government Forestry Policy is generally and internationally accepted as consistent with the concept of 'sustainable development', the so-called fighters would then point a finger at the Malaysian Federal and State Governments for not providing education to the Penans.

Since an argument has been put forward that some of the Penans would prefer the lifestyle that they had under the British colonial rule, then the example from the attitude of many of the Straits-born Chinese during the 1957 merdeka period is relevant. These very same people have enjoyed and benefited greatly the fruits of independence.

Therefore it is pertinent to ask whether the Penans are fully aware of the consequences of continuing with their nomadic life? Does the rest of Malaysia want them to persist in being so? What is the economic cost of not utilising human resources as represented by the semi-settled and nomadic Penans? How much actual and in-depth research has been done on the Penan community? Are their wants and needs not meetable, without sacrificing overall Malaysian development policies and objectives? How much of their

dissatisfaction is really genuine and how much of it is the result of instigation by others? Would it be fair to regard measures to enable a group of people to exercise their basic rights to vote in elections as violation of human rights? Or, more fundamental still, are efforts to ensure a group of people enjoy 'freedom from hunger' as less important than the preservation of the environment?

Finally the above preliminary enquiry manifests the difficulties involved and perhaps the unfairness committed by developed countries when they adopt policies making it conditional for prospective recipient countries to observe and uphold human rights and the preservation of the environment as perceived by the donor countries, before aid could be given.

#### NOTES

- 1 Dato' Dr. M.N. Salleh, "Forestry In Malaysia: Issues and Prospects", Forest Research Institute Malaysia, 1993, p. 7.
- 2 J.D. Mamit, "Clarifying Controversies on Forestry and the Indigenous People in Sarawak", Notes prepared for Earth Summit on Rio de Janeiro, June 1992, p. 5.
- 3 Jayl Langub, "Some aspects of life of the Penan", *Sarawak Museum Journal*, Special Issue, No. 4, Part III, 40, h. 170.
- 4 Ibid., p. 172
- 5 Ibid., p. 173 3 .ls2
- 6 *New Straits Times*, 2 april 1993.
- 7 Marcus Colchester, 'Global alliance of indigenous peoples of the rainforests', *Environmental News Digest*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1992, p. 12.
- 8 Jayl Langub, *op.cit.*, p. 178.
- 9 Jayl Langub, "Some Observations On Penan Response To Change And Development" in *Bengkel Pembangunan Penan: Ke Arah Penglibatan Aktif Komuniti Penan Dalam Pembangunan*, Angkatan Zaman Mansang, Kuching, 1992, p. 79.

Borneo Studies Centre  
43600 UKM  
Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia  
(until 16-5-1993)

Present Address  
No. 10, Jalan 14/55  
46100 Petaling Jaya  
Selangor DE

