



Malay nationalism in the making of modern Malaysia: Abdul Majid Salleh and the Anti-British Movement in Johor 1946-1948

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Abstract

The political existence and shape of contemporary Malaysia cannot be divorced from the historic contributions made by Malay nationalism. Abdul Majid Salleh was one of the leaders of the Malay nationalism engaged in the political movement in the state of Johor. He was trying to persuade the Malays to rise and fight for their right. He was a young man who traveled from Perak to Johor to join and lead the anti-British movement in Johor. Anti British movement was in full swing at the time. Thus, Abdul Majid Salleh tried to enlighten the people of Johor to join in the nation-wide movement. This study described, by means of primary and secondary sources of information, Abdul Majid Salleh's role and contribution in raising the Johor's Malay political consciousness and in igniting the anti-British movement in Johor in the fight for the independence of Malaya.

Keywords: Abdul Majid Salleh, Johor Malay nationalism, labour movement, Malaya Independence, Malay nationalism, Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Union

Introduction

Haji Abdul Majid bin Salleh is fondly called by his friends and foes as Majid Salleh, is known to be one of the anti-British leaders in our nation. After Malaya's independence, he is well known by the name of Pak Majid. Being in the same league with other prominent Malay leaders like Buharnuddin Al Helmy, Ahmad Boestaman, Ishak Haji Muhammad, Karim Bakar, Shamsuddin Salleh, Cikgu Harun Aminurashid, Daud Samad, Aishah Ghani, Shamsiah Faqeh and Khadijah Sidek has him made famous. Before his 7 years political imprisonment by the British, there is literally no evidence to show his involvement in the mainstream political struggle against the British authorities in Malaya. But his 7 years experience in the prison for going against British especially in the state of Johore, was all it needed to proof himself to be one of the leader leading the anti British movement over there (Ishak Saat, 2012).

This article is written based on the writer's recollections with Abdul Majid through a series of formal and informal interviews as the writer befriended him since 1984. This historical writing is further strengthened with some documented evidences specifically written on Abdul Majid to reinforce references on primary and secondary sources.

Background

Born on 5 December 1923 at Kampung Tok Mulan (Banir), Tapah, Perak, after Malaya's independence he resided at No.17 Kg. Sengat, Sungai Raya, Kampung Kepayang, Ipoh, Perak. He has 6 children

through two marriages. His first wife was Rokiah bt Muhd. Dom whom he married in 1946 and she bore him two kids.

His first marriage lasted only for three years and they went separate way in 1949 as she and her two children could take the pressure from the British Secret Police who were constantly harassing them (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2003). Later, in 1979, Pak Majid took Hamimah bt Mustapha as his wife and they had four children.

Early education and work experience

His early education was in Arabic school for 7 years starting at Madrasah Arabiyah Banir, Tapah, Perak from 1935 till 1936. He continued his studies at Madrasah Ahmadiyah Temoh, Perak from 1937 till 1938. Then, he joined Sekolah Agama Kerajaan, Batu Masjid, Temoh, Perak which was also known (Sekolah AL- Quran Perak) and studied there privately (informally) for 5 years from 1937 till 1941 in the afternoon session. He learnt English language from his teacher Ishak Haji Muhamad while he was prisoned by the British authority (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002). As for his working experience, he began his first career as a Termarcator Apprentice in 1941 for a year. During the years of Japanese occupation (1942-1944) he became a field contractor in plantation.

After Malaya's independence, he became full time reporter for Kencahana newspaper owned by Cikgu Harun Aminurashid for three years (1945-1947). After he was freed from detention, he switched his job and became a barber in Senai, Johore and also in Singapore between 1955-1956 (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002). During post independent era, he sustained himself being a religious teacher teaching children and the adults till his last breath at the age of 88 on the 14 December 2011.

Political endeavor

The Japanese occupation has stirred his interest in political development in Malaya. In 1944, he became an ordinary member of Malayan Anti Japanese Union. He was not deeply involved in this movement. On the defeat of the Japanese in the second world war in 1945, paved a path for him into the local politics. He was serious in his fight against the British occupation of Malaya for the second time. Soon he joined a the Malay Nationalist Party of Malaya (MNP). He was involved with full commitment and was tasked in forming the first MNP branch in Perak at Simpang Ampat Empat, Kampar, Perak. It was headed by Ismail Haji Qoli and Pak Majid was one of the committee members together with Salleh Nakhoda Hitam (the ex DAP Member of State Legislative Assembly of Perak for the state seat of Buntung, Ipoh (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002). It was the first MNP branch formed in the whole of Malaya.

Political development in Malaya at that time forced him moved to Johore and he was assigned by his party stalwarts to expand MNP presence in Johore. His efforts bore fruits when MNP Johore branch was established. He was appointed as the second man and the chief was Mat Haji Rahim and Shamsuddin Salleh became the secretary (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2003). Soon he set up more MNP branches all over Johore in Kluang, Pontian, Batu Pahat, Segamat, Johor Bahru, Kota Tinggi and Muar (Abdul Majid Salleh, 1991). Besides actively setting up MNP branches, Pak Majid was also involved in the labour movement and trade union activities in Johore. He was elected as the Johore State's Labour Union leader (Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Union) from 1946 till 1948 (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2003). He expanded his wings further by joining the Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API) the youth wing of MNP under the leadership of Ahmad Boestamam. Abdul Majid's involvement in API changed his stance, he became more aggressive and radical against British rule in Malaya. API has its own white uniform for its members and also an anthem entitled "*Darah Rakyat*" (Stockwell, 1979).

API has its own white uniform for its members and also an anthem entitled "*Darah Rakyat*" Their patriotic slogan of their anthem said it all...

*'Darah rakyat masih berjalan,
Menderita sakit dan miskin,
Padanya datang pembalasan,
Rakyat yang menjadi hakim,
Rakyat yang menjadi hakim.*

*Ayuh! Ayuh! Bergerak sekarang,
Merah putih panji-panji kita,
Merah warna darah rakyat,
Merah warna darah rakyat.*

(Abdul Majid Salleh, 1988)

According to Abdul Majid, the British declared API an extremist movement which can threaten their position in Malaya. Those Malayan people especially the 'malay rea-actioner group' who hate API and its struggle had interpreted API stand for 'Angkatan Pembunuh Inggeris' or *Movement or Union to kill the British* (Abdul Majid Salleh, 1991). All this hurdles he faces during his time in API became very handy and valuable experience for him to lead the Malayan Federation of Trade Union in Johore.

His role in leading the labour movement in Johore has caught the eyes of many. As a result, indeed he was asked to represent the FTU (Federation Trade Union) in a meeting with the British to discuss the formation Federation of Malaya organsied by the board of Malay Unions of Johore on 8 August 1947 at Johore Bahru (Malayan Security Services, 1946-1948). The outcome of the meeting was to reject the formation of Federation of Malaya and support the people's constitution echoed by PUTERA- AMCJA (Draft of People's Constitution, PUTERA- AMCJA, 1947). As they thought it is more suitable to replace idea of Federation of Malaya mooted by the British (Ariffin Omar, 2015).

Abdul Majid's strong inclination to support the labour cause, finally tested the British authorities patience. He was caught under the section 506 for criminal intimidation on 17 April 1947 (Nordin Husin, 2011). He was charged for threatening the British government. The charge did not stand as he was freed during the trial. This case is in relation with Segamat Hospitals' management for abusing their workers well being. The workers lodged report with Johore State Labour Union (FTU) headed by Abdul Majid. The FTU in return wrote a warning letter to the hospital management demanding them to take care the well being of the workers who are their members, failing which the union will initiate action against the hospital management.

The victory gave Abdul Majid renewed energy to involve more actively in API and trade union activities. He and his comrades employed various tactics and approaches to face the British resistance such as holding public rallies, writing in the newspapers and magazines, organizing strikes and others to make the British feel less comfortable in Malaya.

In fact, the strength and the influence of PKMM and API had at one time affected the stability of UMNO under the leadership of Dato Onn Jaafar, and also managed to destabilize UMNO led by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj. PKMM was strongly inclined to struggle for independence by forming "a great collective Malay nation" under the concept of *Melayu Raya* (Ramlah Adam, 2004). The presence of PKMM in the political arena had not been favored by the colonialists. Its progress was obstructed, and quite a number of PKMM leaders were imprisoned when the Emergency Act 1948 was introduced on the rationale that its activities could threaten the national security. Among the leaders detained were Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, Ahmad Boestamam and Abdul Majid Salleh.

The above situation is well described in entries in one of Abdul Majid's original manuscript entitled "Where the ending of 1945-1948 Struggle" how the Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Union (PMFTU/FTU) had staged strikes and massive public rallies which can be seen below:

“In Malaya the labourers rallies behind the orders of Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Union. Its head quarter is located in Kuala Lumpur. Workers staged strikes here and there, oppose this and that, ask them to work they strike, sack one worker everyone stops working altogether. Public rallies are staged in open areas in the cinemas, the white masters are invited and given front seats and then were made listened to speeches to accept people’s demands.”

(Abdul Majid Salleh, 1988)

Under the strong labour movement, coupled with the spread of communist ideology and together with a series of murders and also riots, forced the British to declare emergency in 1948. The emergency provided an easy opportunity for the British to detain many freedom fighters and others whom deemed as a threat to the state by labeling them as leftists. Among the notable figures whom were caught were Ahmad Boestamam, Ishak Haji Muhammad, Ustaz Abu Bakar Al Baqir, Rashid Maidin, Abu Saman Shariff, Wan Daud, Karim Bakar, Osman Adabi and also Abdul Majid Salleh (Abdul Majid Salleh, 1988).

Abdul Majid was detained for 7 years from 1948 -1955. It was the beginning of another chapter in his political life. During the detention he was constantly moved from one prison to another by the British with their sole aim to neutralize his thick anti-British sentiment. In the prison, Pak Majid was accused of masterminding, brainwashing and educating the other convicts to go against the British.

He spent his time during his detention by organizing religious classes with help of his friends Ustaz Abu Bakar bin Baqir, English language was taught by Ishak Haji Muhammad and he personally conducted the public speaking and special classes on ways of running meetings. His active life in the prison soon caught the British eyes. He was caught and locked in the dark room for three months at Changi Prison in Singapore in 1950. The British constantly moved Abdul Majid to different prisons in order to deter him from influencing the prisoners from going against them (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002). The following are some records of his movements throughout his seven years of imprisonment:

1. 22 September 1948 was detained at Johor Prison, in Johore Bahru for 3 months.
2. Later, between 1948-1948 at the British Political Detention Camp at Kg. Majidee, Johore Bahru.
3. Detained at St.John Prison, Singapore in 1946 for 6 months.
4. Later, transferred to Changi Prison, in Singapore where he accused of instigating and masterminding uprising among the convicts. He was locked in the Dark Room for 3 months.
5. Once freed from the Dark Room, he was moved into the British Political Detention Camp at Kg. Majidee, Johore Bahru between 1950 till 1951.
6. Then, he placed at the British Political Detention Camp at Tanjung Keling, in Malacca in 1951.
7. After that, he was moved again to British Political Detention Camp at Asbhy Road , Ipoh Perak for a year (1952).
8. When the British could not neutralize him, once again he was moved back to the British Political Detention Camp at Kg. Majidee, Johore Bahru in 1953.
9. Once again he was transferred back to British Political Detention Camp at Asbhy Road , Ipoh Perak in 1954.
10. Finally, before his release, he was placed in the British Political Rehabilitation Camp at Morib, Selangor in 1955 for him to learn some skills lead the life of an ordinary citizen.

(Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002)

Life outside the prison walls

The hard life in the prison had made Abdul Majid not to get into the mainstream politics once he was freed. But this change in him lasted only for short period of time. Soon he became involved in the activities through community work. He became the Secretary of Singapore Malay Social Society from

1957 till 1960. In meantime, to earn a living, he became a barber and moved back to his home state in Perak. There renewed his anti British struggle by heading the Perak State's Labour Party for 7 years (1960-1967) (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2003). His life was empty and he was despised by his own family and society. His first wife had left him while he was serving his jail sentence and his father passed away during the same period. To add salt into his wounds, the society began to address him convict (Megat Terawis, 1987).

Meanwhile, the British propaganda machine took advantage by labeling all the labour movements were under the influence of the leftists and communist ideology. Communist ideology as invented by Karl Marx rejects the existence of the religion and God. But for the Malay community they out rightly rejects communism which is totally contradicts with their belief in Islam so they do not support communist ideology in Malaya (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2004). Abdul Majid addressed the issue of his support for communism in his several series of interviews with the writer and also during the discussion of the "Merdeka Dialogue" at UKM. He quickly dismissed that he and his other anti_British fighters were under the influence of communist ideology at any point of time. He rebutted by saying it was the work of the British and it turned out be their best weapon to deter the Malays from supporting their cause for the workers in Malaya. He went further by saying the British were worried of their struggle may pose a serious threat their presence in Malaya.

The British propaganda had worked in favour of the British authorities as the Malays in general started to believe them and distanced themselves from supporting Abdul Majid's struggle (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002). His dislikes for the British continued even after Malaya's independence and he claimed the new government is not very much different from previous British rule. After Malaya's independence, many of his close aides joined UMNO and some of them died but this latest development did not change Abdul Majid's radical stand. Now he turned his focus on the newly formed self ruled government and start attacking its mismanagement and abuse of power. In 1978, he joined PAS (Islamic Party of Malaya) to continue his political journey till his death. In PAS he was appointed the head of Kinta / Gopeng areas in Perak from 1978 till 1990 before becoming a life member of this party. In 1986 Gopeng Parliamentary by-election, he stood under the PAS ticket against an MCA candidate. Although, he lost in this election, he took it very lightly as for him it is part and parcel in politics and what matters the most is being honest and sincere in once struggle. This was also his message to the younger generation of Malaysia (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2003).

During the "Merdeka Dialogue" held at UKM on 23 August 2003, Abdul Majid proudly declared the tertiary education enjoyed by many female undergraduate at this one of the prominent university in our country was fruits of their struggle. For him it reflects their sincerity in fighting to uplift the economic status of his own race to be on par with others. He was grateful to God for allowing him to see for himself the latest progress of his race after successfully chasing away the British from Malaya.

Ups and downs in his political journey

One of his most memorable experience he encountered in his political journey as an independence fighter was when API was banned by the British in 1947 (Ahmad Boestamam, 1946). The public especially the Malay community was very cynical about this event and they mocked by saying "*the fire has been put out and you do not have the fire in you to go against the British*". This mocking was not a kind of support that Abdul Majid and his other compatriots expected from his own community and they regarded this as an act of "back stabbing by his own race" (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002).

In his course of his political endeavor, Abdul Majid traversed from Perak to Johore to expand MNP influence which to him was an uphill task at that moment. He endured tremendous difficulty to set his foot in the world of politics. On many occasions he was caught and put behind the bars by the British. His constant arrests made his family members to lose their patience, eventually his wife left him and his father died while Abdul Majid was serving his seven years imprisonment (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002). This

bitter experience, he inked in an article entitled "*Where the ending of 1948-1988 struggle?*" For him, this experience was a bitter pill to swallow in his political life but due to his strong will power he trudged on with the feeling that he has taken the right direction.

After he was released from the prison in 1955, Abdul Majid went to Senai in Johore and he opened a bar shop together with one of his comrades. In 1956 he travelled to Singapore to start a new life. There he actively involved in People's Action Party (PAP) under the Malay Teacher's PAP wing (Ishak Saat, 2013). Later he was offered the position of ministerial post in charge of the Malay community affairs under Lee Kwan Yew's cabinet but he declined the offer because he was at loggerhead with Lee on several policy issues. For his rejection, Abdul Majid paid a high price, Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew banned him from entering into Singapore and this ban was lasted even after Malaya's independence. (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002).

In 1958, Abdul Majid returned to his home town in Kampung Sengat, Ipoh, Perak. Life in his own village was not rosier either. There was no one awaiting for his return, this made him to travel to Kedah. (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002). His seven years of imprisonment did not affected him even a little as he continued to uphold his radical principles (Ishak Saat, 2011). In 1979 he married Pn. Hamimah bt Mustapha and they had four children. He continued leading a simple life, teaching Quran and religious classes to young children in his village.

According to Abdullah CD, Abdul Majid Salleh was a strong willed young man who upholds his principles strictly in his struggle to achieve his dream to free his country from the British (Abdullah CD, 1988). Hence, he is able to withstand all the challenges that came along without giving up easily and he never felt disappointed for his actions.

He is ever ready to throw smiles during most of the interviews. When he was asked permission for an interview the first time, he candidly asked the writer "*are there someone who is still willing to listen to stories from our side which have been branded as leftists?*" (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2002) before finally granting permission when he was convinced by the writer (Abdul Majid Salleh, 2004).

Conclusion

In sum, it can be said that Abdul Majid Salleh was a true freedom fighter and a leader who fought against the British rule especially in Johore. His involvement in Malayan politics encompassed the period before and after Malaya's independence. The seven years of his imprisonment and the time he spent at British political detention camps were two of his biggest sacrifices in his fight for the freedom of his motherland. The imprisonment paved the way for him to learn new skills and to foster a closer kinships with some of the prominent Malay radical freedom fighters at the time. He upheld his principles closely even after Malaya gained independence and started addressing the many issues of mismanagement and power abuse found in the newly formed self-government.

He carried on his political struggle into a different platform by joining PAS. Once he was asked why he did not join PAS when it was formed in 1951? He responded by saying that at that time PAS was under the control of religious figures and his brand of radical politics has no place in PAS.



Source: Utusan Zaman, 24 March 1974

Fig. 1. *In the Detention Camp, Ashby Road, Ipoh in 1952.
Abdul Majid Salleh, Osman Abadi, Samah Sharif, Karim Bakar, Penghulu Ariffin and colleagues.*



Fig. 2. *The meeting of two friends of PKMM, Abdul Majid Salleh and Mohd Daud Yatimy
In Sg. Rapat Tambahan, off Jalan Gopeng, Ipoh on 1/08/08*



Fig. 3. *Date 14/12/2011 Funeral of the late Mr. Abdul Majid Salleh
Kg Sengat Cemetery, Ipoh, Perak*

17.4.1947 aku ditahan kali pertama.
Dimarkas kawasan Jalan Tunku Ahmad, Segamat.
Siangnya namaku ^{siar} tertulis dalam berita Utusan.
Aku akan berada di Segamat pada malamnya
dalam rangka lawatan keseluruhan Daerah.

Tepat jam 12.30 malamnya sesudah kami mesyuarat,
tiba-tiba OCPD Segamat datang membawa warrant
untuk menangkapku. OCPD orang puteh.
Aku baharu hendak nebat.

Aku ikut OCPD ke police station.
Naik motor car Ford V8 nya diiringi oleh
3 orang mata mata Melayu.

Selama 58 jam aku berehat di lock-up Segamat,
baharu di kawasan Kamah Kamah.

Hatim tanya mengata Saleh atau hendak bichara?
Ku jawab, bichara.

3 bulan bichara tiap dua minggu sekali.
Tuduhan atas ^{bawah} Section 506 criminal ~~law~~ mediation.
INTIMIDATION

Akhir bichara Hatim kata:-
This case is NoD. None offense discovery. (Ta'jampa Saleh)
Aku bebas tanpa syarat.

22.9.1948 baru ditangkap sekali lagi.
Ditangkap dibawah undang undang darurat.
Ditahan hingga akhir tahun 1955.

Fig. 4. Hand written notes by Abdul Majid Salleh 1988

Translation of hand-written statement given by Abdul Majid Salleh in 1988

On 17 APRIL 1947, I was arrested for the first time at a base at Jalan Tungku Ahmad, in Segamat. In the afternoon, my name already appeared in the Berita Utusan Newspaper. I will be in Segamat that evening on my scheduled visit to Segamat District At at sharp 12.30 midnight, after our meeting suddenly the OCPD of Segamat came with a warrant to arrest myself. The OCPD was a white man. I was about to rest. I followed the OCPD to the police station in his Ford V8 police vehicle and escorted by 3 Malay police Constables. I was detained for 8 hours at Segamat police lock up before I was brought to the Court. The judge asked me whether I plead guilty or seek trial? I answered trial. The court case went on for 3 months. I was charged under the section 506 criminal intimidation. At the end of the trial, the judge concluded that this case was a NOD (No Offence discovery). I was freed unconditionally. On 22.9.1948 I was again arrested under the Emergency Ordinance and detained till the end of 1955.

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