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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE WISDOM OF SULTAN ZAINAL ABIDIN III IN DEALING WITH BRITISH INTERFERENCE IN TERENGGANU AFTER THE 1909 BANGKOK TREATY

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Abstract

The Kingdom of Siam relinquished its authority over Terengganu to the British Government through the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. However, since Sultan Zainal Abidin III did not assent to the draft of the 1902 Treaty, only British agents were stationed in Terengganu. Although only British agents were intended to be stationed in Terengganu, Sultan Zainal Abidin III did not want to accept the stipulations of the Bangkok Treaty and had taken cautious steps in accepting the placement of British officers. He refused to accept the placement of British agents and examined all the contents of the agreement drafted by the British. This study aims to examine the wisdom of Sultan Zainal Abidin III in dealing with the British Government interference in Terengganu state government affairs with the placement of a British officer of the rank of an agent after the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. This study used a qualitative research method with a historical approach. The results of this study found that Sultan Zainal Abidin III tried to avoid British interference of placing an officer in Terengganu. Although only an agent-ranking British officer was stationed in Terengganu, His Majesty refused to accept the stipulation. When he realised that he ought to accept the British agent in Terengganu, he tried to examine all the contents of the agreement which was aimed at reducing the jurisdiction and influence of the British agent in the administration of Terengganu.

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Introduction:-

By the end of the 19th century, British power had spread to the majority of the Malay states except for the northern Malay states which were considered to be under the authority of the Kingdom of Siam. The British dream to dominate the Malay Peninsula was achieved when the Siamese Government agreed to hand over its rights over the states to the British through the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. As a result, the Malay states of Kedah, Perlis and Kelantan had to accept the placement of British advisors who ruled the state governments on behalf of the government of Great Britain. However, the State of Terengganu was quite different. The British only stationed a consular-ranking British agent there. The credibility of the ruler of Terengganu at that time, Sultan Zainal Abidin III caused the British to realise that they were dealing with a very different Malay ruler. They were found to have adopted a rather cautious policy to deal with the said ruler. Although they only wanted to place a British agent who had very limited powers, the British had to deal with various tricks performed by Sultan Zainal Abidin III. His Majesty tried to prevent the placement of a British agent and tried to prove that the State of Terengganu was an independent Islamic

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Malay Kingdom, not a state under Siamese authority and refused to accept the stipulations of the 1909 Bangkok Treaty.

The Personality of Sultan Zainal Abidin III

Sultan Zainal Abidin III, was a Malay king or sultan who had a special personality. His Majesty was one of the three Sultans of Terengganu who were often mentioned in the history of Terengganu, together with Sultan Mansur Syah I and Sultan Baginda Umar. His Majesty was a capable ruler who became a legend (Muhammad Yusoff 1991) in the history of Terengganu. His personality, especially in terms of his tendency to learn Islamic teachings in depth and practise them rigidly, distinguishing him from other Malay kings.

There were British officers working in Malaya who said that they had never met a Malay ruler similar to him when they served in the administration of other Malay states. They were not used to dealing with a smart and open-minded Malay sultan like him. They found many differences in his personality (Allen 1968) compared to the other Malay Sultans. Policies carried out by His Majesty in the government made Terengganu politics successfully controlled and the people lived in a state of harmony and prosperity. The political stability in the government of Terengganu caused the British to have no reason to force His Majesty to request or accept British intervention as what happened in other Malay states.

British officials had their own views of Sultan Zainal Abidin III and most of them did not forget to mention the knowledgeability of this ruler of Terengganu. The British High Commissioner, Sir Charles Mitchell who met him in 1896 described him as a person who adored to learn, read many Arabic-Islamic books and was very rigid in his religious practices (CO 273/217 1896). He had many teachers, among them were Sayyid Zain (Zainal-Abidin) bin Muhammad, Sayyid Abdullah bin Muhammad, Sayyid Abdul Rahman bin Muhammad al-Idrus (Tok Ku Paloh), Haji Wan Abdullah bin Mohd Amin (Tuk Syekh Duyung), Haji Wan Abdul Latif bin Abdullah (son of Tuk Syekh Duyung), Haji Wan Abdul Latif bin Abdullah (Losong), Haji Wan Muhammad bin Ali (Kampung Gedong), Haji Zainal Alim (Banggol), Haji Musa (Pengkalan Setar), Sayyid Abdul Rahman al-Haddad and Haji Wan Mohd Salleh bin Haji Wan Abdul Kadir (Bukit Bayas). Meanwhile, his reading room was filled with Arabic language books such as *Minhaj al-Talibin*, *al-Fath al-Jawad*, *Hashiyat Tuhfat al-Muhtaj*, *al-Fatwa al-Kubra*, *al-Umm*, *Tuhfat al-Muhtaj*, *Tafsir al-Baydawi*, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, *al-Tarikh al-Kamil* and *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah* (Muhammad Yusoff 1991).

Sir Frank Swettenham who visited His Majesty in 1902 described him as a very secretive, quiet Muslim who was very obedient to his religious teachings. The British officer also considered His Majesty as someone who had a policy of not leaning towards any side. His Majesty's attitude caused the Siamese kingdom failure in intervening in the Terengganu administration and His Majesty was able to prevent Europeans including the British from entering the state of Terengganu (Sheppard 1949). Whereas Sir John Anderson when meeting him in 1909 described His Majesty as a man of about 40 years of age with an intriguing pious character. He thought that Sultan Zainal Abidin III's attitude towards the British was undoubtedly due to the influence of his relatives and advisors (CO 273/350 1909). The personality and wisdom of Sultan Zainal Abidin III caused British officers to use quite a different way when dealing with His Majesty. This resulted in the state of Terengganu being relatively late in receiving British interference.

The Reign and Authority of Sultan Zainal Abidin III

Sultan Zainal Abidin III ascended the royal throne in 1881 AD (Buyong 1982), only five years after the death of Baginda Omar in 1876 (Sheppard 1949). At that time, the memory of the entire state for Baginda Omar's firmness and wisdom had not yet been forgotten. He was appointed to replace his father, Sultan Ahmad II (1876-1881) when he was 18 years old (Buyong 1982). As a sultan or king who was supposed to be the most powerful individual in the State of Terengganu, some Western historians (Allen 1968) considered Sultan Zainal Abidin III as a weak ruler, being dominated by his relatives and dignitaries, especially his teacher, Sayyid Abdul Rahman al-Idrus or Tok Ku Paloh and His Majesty's private secretary, Haji Ngah Muhammad bin Yusoff when compared with his father, Sultan Ahmad II and also his grandfather, Baginda Omar. Nevertheless, J.V. Allen thought that the records or notes left by British officers on duty in Terengganu gave a different picture of him (Allen 1968), as being a ruler who was not so easily influenced arbitrarily.

Sultan Zainal Abidin III had a complete opposite personality to his grandfather, Baginda Omar who was always out to visit all corners of his state (Shaharil 1984). Sultan Zainal Abidin III was described as someone who preferred to

study science rather than having an interest in knowing state administration affairs. His Majesty preferred to stay inside the palace spending his time studying sciences of knowledge, enjoying delicious food and having intimacy with his wives (CO 273/351 1909). His Majesty allowed the state of Terengganu to be broken up by his relatives who oppressed the common people at will (Sheppard 1949). His Majesty was said to hand over the power to his relatives so that he could dedicate his time performing religious duties and worships (Emerson 1964). His Majesty was also said to rarely leave the palace except to perform Friday prayer every week at the mosque located near the palace (CO 273/351 1909). Apart from that, he also taught religion reciting religious books (Arba'iyah 2006).

Sultan Zainal Abidin III faced a different situation from that of his father, Sultan Ahmad II who inherited a stable kingdom after 37 years of ruling by Baginda Omar. Baginda Omar had the experience of being dethroned of the kingdom and re-ascending the throne through a coup d'état. Therefore, Baginda Omar had implemented a strict government by centralizing the power to ensure the stability of his kingdom (Abdullah Zakaria 1984) so that the event of dethronement would not happen again. The political stability enjoyed by the people of Terengganu was not only due to the decisiveness and ability as well as justice of His Highness Omar. It was also a blessing of Allah SWT bestowed upon His servants because the sultanate of Terengganu strictly implemented the Islamic laws in its governance (Muhammad Yusoff 1991). Sultan Zainal Abidin III also inherited a powerful kingdom from his father. However, at that time he was still a teenager who had no experience in ruling a state. Thus, in the early stages of his reign, he was said to spend much of his time acquiring and studying knowledge and letting the ruling of the state be run by his relatives (Sheppard 1949). His Majesty's keen on seeking knowledge turned him into a person with high Islamic knowledge to the extent that he was considered by W.L. Conlay as 'a distinct scholar' (CO 273/351 1909).

Even though Sultan Zainal Abidin III's policy of handing over power to his immediate family was viewed as a weakness, but it was this very policy that had succeeded in maintaining peace and political stability in Terengganu (Abdullah Zakaria 1996). Gullick (1992) opined that the agreement reached by the royal family to divide the districts among themselves had prevented the occurrence of disputes among them and managed to avoid the risk of Siamese interference in the administration of the state of Terengganu. But to him, this division was only a matter of tax collection and it should not be misunderstood that Sultan Zainal Abidin III had lost his authority over the provinces. The collective governance policy implemented by Sultan Zainal Abidin III succeeded in preventing the Terengganu Sultanate from falling into the chaos of palatial power struggle that haunted the ruling class in other Malay states.

Collective governance policy had been extremely successful in uniting the ruling families in the state government. As a Muslim scholar, Sultan Zainal Abidin III might have realized that in early Islamic history, which was during the reign of the Umayyads, Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (Ibn Kathir 1997) adopted such policy when appointing members of the Umayyad family to hold important positions in state government. The policy of collective government by the Umayyad family that Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan tried to implement made him successful in restoring the strength of the Umayyad Caliphate which was almost destroyed during the previous political turmoil after the death of Caliph Mu'awiyah ibn Yazid.

In this regard, the political stability of Terengganu guaranteed the security of the state and thus the independence of the state could still be maintained. The power-sharing policy implemented by Sultan Zainal Abidin III enabled him to defend his state from being invaded by external powers, especially the British and Siamese. Attention could be given entirely to problems or threats from outside because the domestic situation could be fully controlled. He ruled Terengganu over a long period of time, 1881-1919. However, there were many parties who blamed His Majesty's preoccupation with studying and acquiring knowledge, especially religious knowledge, which gave space to his relatives to take advantage of oppressing the chieftains and the common people (Sheppard 1949). In his mid-40s, he was a firm ruler and had more and more power with the decreasing influence of his relatives who controlled him when the dignitaries died, whereby they were not replaced by new ones (Gullick 1992). For this reason, the list of the royal households entitled to collect revenue from each district as found in Sir Hugh Clifford's notes in 1898 (Clifford 1992) differed from that recorded by W.L. Conlay in 1909, which was over a period of approximately ten years. Some changes had occurred although some districts were still administered by the same individuals (CO 273/351 1909).

Actions of Sultan Zainal Abidin III in Facing British Intervention

Terengganu was one of the states on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula that was claimed by the Kingdom of Siam as a region under their power or influence. The British then aspired to be the sole European power in the Malay

Peninsula. Therefore, they tried to seize the opportunity to control the states claimed by Siam so that Siam did not give the opportunity to other European powers to control those states including Terengganu. When Sultan Zainal Abidin III ruled Terengganu, both the Siamese and British powers still looked after each other's interests in the region. Jelani (2015) stated that the reign of Sultan Zainal Abidin III was a critical time for the State of Terengganu due to the incoming threat of British influence. However, Sultan Zainal Abidin III succeeded in curbing the advancing influence of the British and put the state of Terengganu as a strong Malay sultanate at that time. Sultan Zainal Abidin III possessed a decisiveness and wisdom in diplomatic administration and abilities which resulted in His Majesty's success in defending Terengganu's independence. His Majesty's insistence on refusing to recognize the authority of Siam in 1902 caused the Siamese to be powerless to place their officers in Terengganu, unlike in the state of Kelantan which accepted the agreement. His Majesty also insisted on disallowing the Siamese Government to build a post office in Kuala Terengganu in the same year (Muhammad Yusoff 1991).

The reluctance of the Terengganu ruler had great implications to the British after they succeeded in persuading the Siamese Kingdom to hand over the states recognized by the British as Siamese protectorates in the north of the Malay Peninsula in 1909. The process of taking over Siamese patronage over Terengganu by the British through The Bangkok Treaty of 1909 did not go smoothly because Sultan Zainal Abidin III refused to recognize Siamese supremacy. Coercion could not be done because there was no representative of Siam in Terengganu. After all, the Sultan of Terengganu never signed any agreement with either the Kingdom of Siam or the British government.

While the British themselves admitted that Siam's supremacy over Terengganu was somewhat vague (CO 273/350 1909). Because of that, the Sultan of Terengganu had the opportunity to waver and took a long time to sign an agreement with the British. His Majesty apparently checked all the terms of the agreement carefully in addition to comparing it with other agreements, especially that between the British and the State of Johor. All matters contained in the treaty were discussed and a lengthy explanation was requested from the British side so that the meaning was clear (Abdullah Zakaria 1996). There were no provisions in the agreement which were ambiguous in meaning and overlooked by the Sultan of Terengganu and his officials (Allen 1968).

Although the State of Terengganu did not make progress like the other Malay states, Sultan Zainal Abidin III and Terengganu officials realized what was happening in the other Malay states after they accepted British interference. According to Gullick, this was a result of the marital relationship between the royal family of Terengganu with the royal family of Riau and the family of the former Sultan of Johor in Kampong Gelam, Singapore, which made them aware of what was happening in the Malay states which received British interference. They used this knowledge to manage Terengganu state administration and also implement their foreign policy (Gullick 1992). This proves that Sultan Zainal Abidin III and Terengganu officials were aware of the true intentions of the British and also the Siamese Kingdom.

Sultan Zainal Abidin III along with Terengganu officials were unable to reject the presence of British influence and they realized that the British and Siamese were ready to use any means to gain a foothold in Terengganu. In fact, the history of Kuala Terengganu being bombed by British warships during the reign of Baginda Omar was still a lesson to the Terengganu government (Muhammad Yusoff 1991) to be careful in dealing with those powers.

This was also feared to be repeated because the British never forgot to 'show' the mightiness of their warships which usually participated in the visits of high-ranking British officials to Terengganu (CO 273/350 1909). A British citizen underestimated the credibility of this Malay ruler when he threatened Sultan Zainal Abidin III by trying to relate the events of the British reactions after the murder of Resident J.W.W. Birch in Perak while discussing the issue of land concession applications in Terengganu (CO 273/384 1911). However, the British officials were aware of the advantages possessed by His Majesty. In fact, they were found to be taking advantage of Sultan Zainal Abidin III's fame in terms of his wisdom among the Malay sultans by proclaiming his action, as the most pious Malay Sultan, of pledging his loyalty to the British Empire, instead of to the Ottoman Caliphate in the First World War (CO 273/411 1914).

Despite being forced to accept the presence of the British which necessitated their intervention in Terengganu through the Bangkok Treaty of 1909, Sultan Zainal Abidin III insisted on the principle and decision that he was the independent ruler of Terengganu until the British High Commissioner, Sir John Anderson, agreed to a draft agreement which was entirely redrafted by His Majesty. In the agreement, it was clearly stated that the state of Terengganu was an Islamic Malay state that governed by itself. This attitude actually indicated that Sultan Zainal

Abidin III still did not want to submit to and hand over Terengganu's independence to the British government. Sultan Zainal Abidin III's assertiveness also rendered Terengganu the only Malay state that had not yet been fully controlled by the British during his reign. The wisdom of Sultan Zainal Abidin III stood out through his attitude towards diplomacy, ever ready to hold consultation after consultation with the English side to avoid any larger problem (Jelani 2015). Sultan Zainal Abidin III's wisdom and firmness in preserving Islamic teachings received praises from Sheikh Ahmad al-Fathani, a famous Islamic scholar who lived around the same time as His Majesty. Sheikh Ahmad al-Fathani composed a poem praising Sultan Zainal Abidin III. Sultan Zainal Abidin III was also found to seek advice from this scholar when facing problems (Wan Mohd Shaghir 2005).

Sultan Zainal Abidin III's determination to defend Terengganu's independence caused his position to differ from what the Sultan of Kelantan experienced when he protested the British-Siamese decision regarding the Kelantan-Siamese border. The setting of boundaries in the British-Siamese Treaty of 1909 caused the State of Kelantan to lose many territories, including Menara, which had always been under the rule of the Kelantan sultanate for generations. In the 1902 Treaty, the territory was clearly recognized as Kelantan province (CO 273/350 1909). The consent of the Sultan of Kelantan to accept the 1902 Treaty caused the British to consider the state of Kelantan as a Siamese protectorate, so the Siamese could change the boundaries of Kelantan as they wished. This gave room for the British to reject the demands of the Sultan of Kelantan. Because Siamese advisors were already in Kelantan, Sir John Anderson described that the placement of British advisors in Kelantan was a normal procedure, and not a special case (CO 273/350 1909) such as the case of the placement of British agents in Terengganu. In the case of the claim of Menara territory by the Sultan of Kelantan, he insisted that the matter had been decided in the Bangkok Treaty which had already been signed by both parties and could not be reopened for negotiations. He forced the Sultan of Kelantan to accept all decisions made by the British and Siamese (CO 273/350 1909).

The absence of Siamese or British representatives in Terengganu caused the situation in that state to be different from other Malay states. The British could not act arbitrarily to place their representatives in the state. With that, the British side only placed a single British officer who acted as an agent, an officer with the same rank as a consul. The British agent was appointed to act as an intermediary between the Sultan of Terengganu and the Government of the Federated Malay States in addition to acting to look after the welfare of British citizens in the state. British agents were also instructed to collect information about the State of Terengganu, its governance style and also the views of the people in establishing a closer relationship with the British (CO 273/350 1909).

British agents on duty in Terengganu often reported that Sultan Zainal Abidin III was highly influenced by his advisers, especially the Sultan's private secretary, Haji Ngah Muhammad bin Yusof, so it was too difficult for His Majesty to make decisions on his own. His Majesty had to first discuss the matter with Terengganu noblemen to decide upon any matter or problem that arose. His Majesty was said to be more daring in expressing his opinion when he was alone with the British agent without the presence of His Majesty's dignitaries (CO 273/425 1915). As a sultan who had a broad religious education background and was recognized for his wisdom, Sultan Zainal Abidin clearly practiced the practice of shura to make any decision related to state government. Decisions made were based on the principles of shura as demanded by Islam, not because they were forced to submit to their advisors as claimed by British officials who did not understand the basic principles of Islamic government. The provision that the practice of shura is implemented in the state government as contained in the Terengganu State Constitution proves that Sultan Zainal Abidin III prioritized the practice of shura in his reign.

Actually, Sir John Anderson only wanted Sultan Zainal Abidin III to agree to accept the placement of British officers in the state of Terengganu. After all, if the draft agreement drawn up by the sultan of Terengganu as a result of discussions with W.L. Conlay was to be examined, it is found that it is not much different from the draft drawn up by Sir John Anderson (CO 273/350 1909). Even so, he insisted that the content of the 1910 Treaty was not a guideline in British-Terengganu relations in the future. This proves that the British did make plans to amend the agreement and place advisors powerful enough to bring changes to the administration of Terengganu when they had a suitable reason. The attitude and wisdom of Sultan Zainal Abidin III had delayed the dream of the British power which only successfully intervened fully in the government of Terengganu after the 1919 Agreement which took place after his death.

Conclusion:-

Sultan Zainal Abidin III was a Malay ruler who was respected by British officers who dealt with him. The British had a different approach with the Sultan of Terengganu because of his cautious attitude in building Terengganu's

relationship with the British government. His Majesty's authority as a pious Malay ruler who adhered strongly to Islamic teachings caused the British to 'accommodate' his wishes as long as they could establish a foothold in Terengganu. His Majesty's close relationship with scholars such as Tok Ku Paloh and Sheikh Wan Ahmad al-Fathani influenced his actions in the face of British actions. Although he did not succeed in saving Terengganu from being pushed by the British, he succeeded in causing the British to only station consular-level agents in Terengganu. He succeeded in delaying British intervention in his own unique way until after his death.

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