

# Abu Bakar and the Conspiracy to Revive the Ancient Empire: Searching for Legitimacy in Johor-Pahang Relations

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**Abstract:** This article examines Abu Bakar's involvement in other Malay states regarding the relations between Johor and Pahang in the 19th century. It argues that his ultimate aim was to consolidate his position in Johor's territory and obtain recognition from other Malay rulers. This is because the existing view claims that Abu Bakar had the ambition to restore the ancient empire of Johor-Riau-Lingga under his hegemony. Indeed, this view is generalised by historians even though it remains merely speculative. Thus, the discussion here is to provide a conclusive argument that rejects this view by showing that his involvement in other Malay states' political affairs was to consolidate his position in Johor.

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini mengkaji keterlibatan Abu Bakar di negara-negara Melayu lainnya terkait hubungan Johor dan Pahang pada abad ke-19. Dikatakan bahwa tujuan utamanya adalah untuk mengkonsolidasikan posisinya di wilayah Johor dan mendapatkan pengakuan dari penguasa Melayu lainnya. Sebab pandangan yang ada mengklaim bahwa Abu Bakar berambisi mengembalikan kerajaan kuno Johor-Riau-Lingga di bawah hegemoninya. Memang, pandangan ini digeneralisasikan oleh para sejarawan meskipun masih bersifat spekulatif belaka. Dengan demikian, pembahasan di sini adalah untuk memberikan argumen konklusif yang menolak pandangan ini dengan menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatannya dalam urusan politik negara-negara Melayu lainnya adalah untuk mengkonsolidasikan posisinya di Johor.

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## INTRODUCTION

Abu Bakar (Temenggung/Maharaja/Sultan), the ruler of Johor from 1862 to 1895, became the most important political figure among the Malays in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is partly because the other Malay rulers in the Malay Peninsula became directly or indirectly concerned with his quest for political legitimacy as the sovereign ruler in Johor. However, they became even more concerned with his involvement in the internal affairs of other Malay states.

There are two views proposed by historians concerning this issue. Firstly, Winstedt argued that Abu Bakar's involvement in the affairs of other Malay states was always associated with his role as an intermediary between the British and other Malay rulers. He noted that in all the troubles of the 1870s in the Malay Peninsula, 'the Governors of the Straits Settlements turned to the ruler of Johor, the only Malay they could trust for information and help' (Winstedt, 1932/1992, p.125). In many respects, this view should be regarded as conclusive because it was construed as a straightforward interpretation based on the official opinions in the British colonial records.

Secondly, in her Pahang case study, Aruna Gopinath proposed that Abu Ba-



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kar had a great desire to extend his commercial interests to other Malay states. She gave conclusive evidence that Abu Bakar and his father had become involved in the Pahang civil war (1857-1863) to extend their commercial interests into tin mining in the state. It would be highly commercially advantageous if Abu Bakar's faction were victorious in the conflict. This ambition was further evident in the 1880s when he and his financial associates were granted several economic concessions in Pahang after securing a reconciliation with Sultan Ahmad, his former enemy in the Pahang civil war (Gopinath, 1991, pp.24, 77-83).

Apart from the above views, historians also argued that Abu Bakar's involvement in other states was motivated by his political ambition to restore the ancient empire of Johor by incorporating its former dependencies in the Malay Peninsula under his hegemony. This view was first proposed by Gullick and was shared by Trocki and Andaya. However, it can be observed that this view is merely a matter of generalisation and not conclusive. It was presented as a conspiracy or a failed attempt by Abu Bakar to achieve his ambition to restore the ancient empire rather than based on firm historical evidence.

So far, no historian has provided any counterargument except for Fawzi Basri. He argued that Abu Bakar continued to pursue his father's initiative of consolidating his position as a sovereign ruler of Johor by trying to obtain recognition from the other Malay rulers. Fawzi also argued that to secure Abu Bakar's and his father's position in Johor as an independent sovereign state, the treaty of friendship and alliance with Pahang was necessary to prevent attack from other Malay rulers (Ahmad Fawzi, 1988, pp. 33-4). This view seems sensible because Abu Bakar's quest for legitimacy as a sovereign ruler in Johor through his rivalry with Sultan Ali brought significant concerns to the other Malay rulers. Under this circumstance, engaging with them was necessary to pursue his political legitimacy.

Thus, this article examines Abu Bakar's involvement in the affairs of other Malay states, particularly Pahang. It provides the counterargument to Abu Bakar's ambition to restore the ancient empire of Johor-Riau-Lingga under his hegemony. Instead, it argues that Abu Bakar's ambition to involve himself in the political affairs of other Malay states was to consolidate his position in Johor's territory and obtain recognition from other Malay rulers.

## **THE IDEA OF THE REVIVAL OF THE ANCIENT EMPIRE**

The word 'empire' has become a fixed term for extending a territory or sphere of influence beyond a kingdom. Since the Malay tradition did not establish boundaries at fixed geographic points, the sphere of power was the only means to manifest territorial extension. This extension was symbolised by the willingness of the people there to give loyalty to a particular king (MacCloud, 1995, pp. 96-97). Nevertheless, not all cases of such expansive areas resulted in the emergence of an empire. A kingdom did not become an empire if the areas affected were frontier areas where the royal residency was located (Tarling, 2001, pp. 17-20).

The existence of the Malay empire of Malacca and Johor-Riau-Lingga, in principle, did not demolish any particular sultanate that was subjugated by those empires, provided that the conquered Sultan or Raja of the state was still alive and remained in residence at his royal palace. In other words, the existence of the Malacca-Johor empire manifested the circumstance that the powerful kingdom exercised hegemony over weaker kingdoms. However, the traditional Malay empire came to an end with the ratification of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824. This treaty divided the Malay Archipelago into two spheres of influence. The dominions of the Johor-Riau-Lingga Empire, south of Singapore, were incorporated into the Dutch sphere, while Singapore and the dominions north of it were subjected to the British (Mills, 1960, pp. 86-98).

The idea of the restoration of the ancient empire was initially associated with Abu Bakar's role in the 1870s as an intermediary between the British and other Malay rulers in the Peninsula. Most historians believe that Abu Bakar sought to use his intermediary role to further his political ambition. J.M. Gullick is the first historian who explicitly linked Abu Bakar's intermediary role to the restoration of the ancient empire of Johor-Riau-Lingga. In his case study of Abu Bakar's involvement in Negeri Sembilan, Gullick argues as follows:

It is striking that the rebels in the three states, although not in communication with each other, were all in correspondence at some time or another with the Maharaja of Johore. Abu Bakar sought to restore the Johor sultanate's ancient position as overlord of all Malay states. He could not bring the pro-British parties in Perak, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan under his wing because they did not need his help.... The Maharaja was therefore obliged to make the resistance party his protégés, acting as their mentor and go-between. He described the struggle in the Malay states as a

civil war in which the British had become identified with the wrong side; constitutional legality and popular support were with the rebels. He hoped by this means to bring the British to terms with the 'rebels' who would thus become indebted to him for obtaining British recognition of their claims' (Gullick, 1954, p.5).

If Gullick's suggestion is to be accepted, he must raise a fundamental principle he used to justify his argument. It is hard to get the rational thinking that the restoration of the ancient empire, according to Malay tradition, can be explained by the fact that Abu Bakar was able to bring in his factions in the conflicts with the British and then assume that those factions were indebted to Abu Bakar, as the intermediary between them and the British. The restoration of the ancient empire could be realized if those factions succeeded and agreed to recognize Abu Bakar as their overlord. The restoration of the old kingdom by Malay tradition was more complicated than Gullick suggested. Restoration would become justified only if a ruler of royal blood initiated it. To exercise hegemony over other states, he must secure the allegiance of its rulers and the ruling classes rather than merely depend on military force.

It is also impossible to accept the thinking that Abu Bakar was able to serve his ambition to restore his position as the overlord of the ancient empire through his association with the British. The presence of the British should be regarded as the main obstacle for Abu Bakar to achieve this ambition. This is because such restoration was against the policy and spirit of the British advance in the Malay Peninsula in the 1870s and 1880s. Indeed, in principle, the British would refuse to allow this restoration because they had their colonial designs on those states.

Moreover, Gullick did not provide a comprehensive discussion to develop his argument. The case study used by Gullick to build his opinion was Abu Bakar's role in the negotiations between Tengku Antah and Governor Jervois over the succession dispute for the throne of the Yamtuan of Sri Menanti (Gullick, 1954, pp.19-20). Gullick's suggestion that Abu Bakar's attempt to pursue his ambition to restore the ancient empire under his overlordship through his involvement in the political affairs of Perak and Selangor remains inconclusive because it has not yet been observed extensively either by Gullick himself or other historians. Two other cases that were referred to by Gullick were the Klang War in Selangor, involving Raja Mahadi and Tengku Dzia'uddin between 1868 and 1873, and the

murder of the first British Resident in Perak, J. W. Birch, in 1875-6.

Abu Bakar's involvement in the political conflict in Negeri Sembilan was mainly concerned with the succession dispute between Yamtuan Antah and Tengku Ahmad Tunggal over the position of Yamtuan of Sri Menanti. This dispute led to the outbreak of a war in Negeri Sembilan that involved the principal chiefs of the state (Gullick, 1954, pp.5-19). It is important to note that Abu Bakar was not involved in the war between the two parties. His relationship with Yamtuan Antah was evident only when the Yamtuan fled to Johor. He was sympathetic with the Yamtuan, seemingly because of his perception that the Yamtuan still enjoyed widespread support among the chiefs in Negeri Sembilan, even though Tengku Ahmad Tunggal was supported by Datuk Kelana who had become associated with the British. He then managed to bring Yamtuan Antah's case before the Governor. On 6 June 1876, he arranged an interview between Yamtuan Antah and the Governor. In this interview, at which Abu Bakar was present, Governor Jervois was impressed with Yamtuan Antah. Governor Jervois observed Yamtuan Antah as 'a proud truculent-looking character and possessed much determination.' Yamtuan Antah promised the Governor that he would settle down peacefully in Johor under the supervision of Abu Bakar. At the request of the Governor, Abu Bakar consented to provide hospitality to Yamtuan Antah and his people while they were living in his state, awaiting the final settlement of the dispute (Jervois, 1876, pp. 7-8).

After the interview, Jervois was prepared to discard the British choice, Tengku Ahmad Tunggal, and to permit Tengku Antah to remain in the position of Yamtuan of Sri Menanti. He also allowed Abu Bakar to represent the Singapore Government in the settlement process. In November 1876, Abu Bakar managed to bring together most of the chiefs concerned in the dispute to Singapore to negotiate a final settlement. With the consent of Governor Jervois, the final payment was then embodied in a treaty between the Governor of the Straits Settlements and certain chiefs in the nine states on 23 November 1876. Under this treaty, the leaders agreed to form a confederacy consisting of Sri Menanti, Ulu Muar, Jempol, Johol, Terachi, Gunung Pasir, and Inas, with the royal residency at Sri Menanti. They also agreed to accept Tengku Antah as their sovereign, recognized as the Yamtuan of Sri Menanti. He would then have authority over the other states in the confederacy (Allen et al., 1981, pp.289-90).

This Treaty also had one significant element that might have resulted from Abu Bakar's involvement. Article VI recognised the slight influence of Abu Bakar over the confederacy by stating that the chiefs agreed that in any dispute or difficulty that might arise between them, they would seek the advice of the Maharaja of Johor, who would then consult the Governor over any further course of action (Jervois, 1876, p. 89). Gullick argues that Abu Bakar was given a semi-official protective role over the Sri Menanti Confederacy (Gullick, 1954, pp. 5, 19-20). Other historians then described this as the role of advisor to the Sri Menanti Confederacy. Gullick did not explain how this role would make Abu Bakar an overlord to the Confederacy. However, Barbara Andaya and Leonard Andaya created further confusion by saying that Governor Jervois, who was convinced of Abu Bakar's suitability as Singapore's representative, aimed to make Abu Bakar overlord of the entire Negeri Sembilan area, an advisor to all the Negeri Sembilan states, excluding Sungai Ujong (Andaya et al., 1982/2017, p. 165).

The status of Abu Bakar as the semi-protective advisor, as suggested by Gullick, or as the advisor to the confederacy stated in the treaty, clearly did not promote him to the status of overlord. Moreover, it is not clear whether the chiefs were obliged to act upon Abu Bakar's advice. In reality, this position did not give him an authority equal to that of the British Residents, who had *de facto* control over the internal affairs of the Malay states in the 1870s and 1880s. His position as the advisor to the confederacy was only a recognition of his role as an agent of the British in communications with the Malay chiefs due to his knowledge of Malay customs. The leaders of the Sri Menanti Confederacy were not dependent on Abu Bakar since they retained their freedom in their internal affairs. His advisory role would arise only if the chiefs referred to him in any dispute. Even on that occasion, he had to consult the British on any further course of action. He had virtually no authority since all the decision-making was in the hands of the British.

Thus, it is clear that Abu Bakar needed such authority to recognise his position as an overlord to the confederacy. Moreover, it is doubtful that Governor Jervois aimed to promote Abu Bakar to the overlord status, not in the least because Jervois did not acknowledge Abu Bakar as of royal descent (Jervois, 1876, p. 53). In time, the confederacy was to be subjugated to the British administration by appointing British Residents. This would lead to the abolition of Abu Bakar's role.

Whether or not Gullick was successful in

sustaining his argument, his view was applied by other historians to other aspects of Abu Bakar's relations with the other Malay states. Eunice Thio related the same idea of Abu Bakar's ambition to the event in which the British recognized Abu Bakar as Sultan. According to Thio, the British officials shared the conspiracy of Abu Bakar's ambition to restore the ancient empire. She argued that although Abu Bakar finally achieved his ambition to be recognized as Sultan, he did not have everything his way. She then pointed out that Robert Meade, an Assistant Under-Secretary in the Colonial Office, considered it necessary to define Abu Bakar's title in this manner to prevent the Malays from thinking that it was a revival of the ancient title, which carried rights of overlordship over the Riau-Lingga Archipelago, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang, in addition to Johor proper, thus clarifying his title as the Sultan of the state and territory of Johor (Thio, 1967, p.10).

Carl Trocki tried to apply Gullick's view to Abu Bakar's involvement in Pahang. Trocki stated that Abu Bakar sought to translate his father's intermediary role into outright hegemony by taking a military approach in the Pahang Civil War. His failure appeared to have resolved the question of Johor's military domination of the peninsula once. For all, and until 1885, he retained his intermediary status and continued to make his influence felt in the arm as an agent of Singapore. However, his dreams of empire were checked (Trocki, 1979, pp. 212-3). This view was supported by Andaya, who stated that Abu Bakar was ambitious and, as his involvement in the Pahang Civil War suggested, was anxious to extend his hold over the territory that had in the past century acknowledged the suzerainty of the kingdom of Riau-Johor (Andaya et al., 1982/2017, p. 164). In other words, Trocki and Andaya tend to see Abu Bakar's involvement in the Pahang Civil War as an ambition to incorporate Pahang into Johor. They also applied this judgment to Abu Bakar's involvement in other Malay states in the later period, seeing his association with the British in Singapore as part of an ambition to revive the ancient empire under his sovereignty. Trocki has given a detailed account of this situation. Unlike Trocki, Andaya has only made two general statements without further elaboration. Thus, focusing on Trocki's view is worthwhile, which also reflects Andaya's view.

Trocki presented his argument of Abu Bakar's dreams of empire by referring to the fact that the British recognised Abu Bakar only as the Sultan of the state and territory of Johor. Indeed, his argu-

ment was much influenced by Gullick and Thio, as he stated as follows: '...Abu Bakar's ambition exceeded the Sultanate, which he gained. There is undoubtedly some truth in Gullick's conclusion that he sought to make himself the Sultan of most Malaya. The British, of course, had never seen the need for such a ruler; in 1885, they acknowledged the sentiments of other chiefs and served their interests by qualifying Abu Bakar's title and making him only the Sultan of the state and the territory of Johor.'

It can be said that the conspiracy to restore the ancient empire, associated with Abu Bakar's political ambitions, is inconclusive. This judgment is based on two reasons. Firstly, Abu Bakar presents this ambition as a failed attempt to achieve his political ambition. Secondly, we have no record explicitly expressing Abu Bakar's intention to achieve this ambition in other states. Thus, it can be said that this view remains a matter of generalisation. On this particular point, those historians mentioned above do not refer to the Malay sources which reflect the perspective of the Malays on this issue.

#### THE CASE OF PAHANG

The main event used by historians to establish the conspiracy of Abu Bakar's ambition to exercise hegemony over Pahang was his involvement in the Pahang Civil War (1857-63) (Linehan, 1973; Gopinath, 1991, chapter 1). This war broke out due to the dispute between Wan Mutahir, or Tahir, and Wan Ahmad after the death of their father, Bendahara Ali. In this war, Temenggung Ibrahim and Abu Bakar supported Tun Mutahir. This led to the view that Abu Bakar intended to use this war to extend his influence into Pahang. Trocki proposed this idea. It appears that the reason why Trocki interprets Abu Bakar's involvement in the Pahang Civil War as an attempt to take over Pahang is based on two sources. First, Trocki establishes his argument by extensively using Winstedt's accounts of Abu Bakar's involvement in the Pahang Civil War (Trocki, 1979, pp. 121-3; Winstedt, 1932/1992, pp. 113-121). The most significant fact pointed out by Winstedt in his account of the war is a statement from Abu Bakar to Sultan Jaafar of Perak and also to the interior chiefs of Pahang, claiming that the fate of Pahang was entrusted to him. Another fact that appears to have led Trocki to reach this interpretation is also taken from Winstedt, that when the war was heading to its conclusion, the Pahang chiefs excused themselves from attacking Wan Ahmad because 'Abu Bakar was running the war and owned Pahang' (Winstedt, 1932/1992, p. 117). Sec-

ondly, Trocki also referred to a report in the *Straits Times* of 1 April 1861, which stated that Abu Bakar had stated the chiefs of Pahang claiming that the British government would support him in any fight with Wan Ahmad (Trocki, 1990, pp. 124-5).

Perhaps, the validity of the facts pointed out by Winstedt and used by Trocki is acceptable if the views in the *Hikayat Pahang* are to be compared. *Hikayat Pahang*, which was written by an unknown author on behalf of the Pahang court in the first half of the twentieth century, had presented an opposing view of Abu Bakar's involvement in the Pahang Civil War and its aftermath until 1868 when the boundary dispute between Pahang and Johor was settled. The cause which encouraged the Pahang chiefs to defect to Wan Ahmad because Abu Bakar's involvement in the war was so dominant is also made explicit in this *Hikayat*. The *Hikayat* stated that the people of Pahang were dissatisfied with the presence of Johor's military forces. Thus, the number who defected to Wan Ahmad increased.

This was further strengthened by the fact that until 1868, it was generally understood that Abu Bakar intended to enhance his influence in Pahang. It was understood that he intended to incorporate Pahang into Johor. This might be true when Abu Bakar was given additional territory by ratifying the treaty between Johor and Pahang in 1862. This accusation was further enhanced by the fact that Abu Bakar used every means to support the weak Wan Mutahir and Wan Koris by supplying them with manpower, weapons, ammunition, and other military supplies in the Pahang Civil War (Winstedt, 1932/1992, p. 117).

According to the *Hikayat Pahang*, the main reason the people of Pahang defected to Wan Ahmad was that most of them were dissatisfied with the involvement of the Johor army in the war. The *Hikayat* also pointed out that after Wan Ahmad's victory, Abu Bakar, who was still harbouring the sons of the late Bendahara Wan Mutahir in Johor, was still plotting to overthrow Bendahara Wan Ahmad and restore one of them, or one of Wan Koris' sons, to the throne of Pahang. The *Hikayat* claimed that Abu Bakar had bought a fast steam yacht from Europe to be used for attacking Wan Ahmad in Pahang. However, one day, when Abu Bakar was going to visit the steam yacht before his arrival, the engine of the steam yacht exploded, and the yacht was burnt. The *Hikayat* claimed that the tragedy of the yacht was due to the miraculous manifestation of Bendahara Wan Ahmad's royal dignity since the vessel was going to be used for malicious purposes toward him. The *Hikayat* also claimed that Abu

Bakar was lucky to escape because he was persuaded by his wife, Che Engku Chik, Wan Ahmad's niece, not to visit the steam yacht that day, thus delaying Abu Bakar's arrival. The *Hikayat* continued to mention the boundary dispute, in which Maharaja Abu Bakar and Governor Harry Ord went to meet Wan Ahmad in Pahang. Although Wan Ahmad was in a rage during the meeting, he succumbed to Governor Ord's viewpoint (Kalthum, 1986, pp. 55-60).

Although the *Hikayat* did not mention Abu Bakar's ambition to take over Pahang, most historians see Abu Bakar as having that ambition and see Abu Bakar's failure due to the British determination to serve their interests. However, there is a tendency for Trocki and Andaya to justify their arguments in general perspectives by applying the same view to Abu Bakar's involvement in other Malay states in the later period. Thus, they concluded that his intervention in Pahang was a failed attempt by Abu Bakar to realise his dreams of an empire.

However, Fawzi Basri presented Abu Bakar's involvement in the political affairs of Pahang from a different perspective. He stated that Abu Bakar's father, Temenggong Ibrahim, after ratifying the 1855 treaty, which recognised the Temenggong as the *de facto* ruler, was seeking recognition from other Malay states as the sovereign ruler of Johor. Fawzi Basri supported his statement by presenting the details of the treaty of friendship and alliance between the Temenggong of Johor and the Bendahara of Pahang. This treaty stated that both parties agreed to recognise each other and their respective dynasties as the sovereign rulers, with the descendants of the Temenggong as Raja of Johor and the descendants of the Bendahara as Raja of Pahang in perpetuity. The details of the agreement between the Temenggong and the Bendahara were derived from *Hikayat Johor*, written in 1940 by Mohd and said the Secretary to Abu Bakar's son, Sultan Ibrahim of Johor (r.1895-1959). Fawzi Basri went on to mention that Abu Bakar continued his father's ambition to consolidate the position of the Temenggong dynasty in Johor by renewing the treaty with Tun Koris, promising mutual assistance in case of attacks. This is the treaty between Johor and Pahang of 17 June 1862 (Ahmad Fawzi, 1988, pp. 33-4).

Fawzi Basri argued that Abu Bakar was determined to find any way for his kingdom and his status as the sovereign ruler of Johor to be recognised. Thus, he stated that Abu Bakar intended to establish close relations with the Riau-Lingga court as a diplomatic step in obtaining formal recognition for his position on the throne of Johor. He also showed

how Abu Bakar could achieve his ambition through the association with the British, stating that the prosperity of Johor strengthened Maharaja Abu Bakar's intention to consolidate his position as a sovereign ruler. In Abu Bakar's opinion, the British could still assist him in achieving his political ambition to adopt the title 'Sultan,' similar to other Malay rulers. Thus, with this title, his position would no longer be irresolute (Ahmad Fawzi, 1988, pp. 61-2).

There are many reasons to support the Johor chronicles' view on why Temenggong Ibrahim supported Wan Mutahir in the Pahang conflict. Temenggong Ibrahim had to support Wan Mutahir because Wan Ahmad was supported by Sultan Ali, Temenggong's main political rival. Shortly after Bendahara Ali's death, Wan Ahmad and his followers traveled to Singapore to prepare for the attack on Pahang. He went to Kampung Gelam and received sympathy and support from Sultan Ali, who claimed to be the rightful heir to the royal court of the Johor-Pahang Empire (Ahmad Fawzi, 1983, pp. 206-8).

It can be argued that Temenggong Ibrahim's support for Wan Mutahir was based on Wan Mutahir's refusal to offer allegiance to the royal court of Johor-Riau-Lingga. It was noted that in 1853, Wan Mutahir, or his father, had renounced their allegiance to that royal court and claimed their independence (Buckley, 1965, p. 574). With this alliance, Temenggong Ibrahim hoped that Pahang would recognise him as an independent ruler of Johor. It is well known that from political considerations in the 1850s and the 1860s, Temenggong's position as a sovereign and independent ruler of Johor was controversial because his conflict with Sultan Ali brought concern from other Malay rulers. In this situation, Bendahara of Pahang was the only Malay ruler willing to recognise the Temenggong's sovereignty over Johor.

On the other hand, Wan Ahmad, who fought against Wan Mutahir, was supported by the Sultan of Terengganu, who was also hostile to the Temenggong, and the ex-Sultan Mahmud of Lingga, who had been deposed by the Dutch in 1857 and arrived in Pahang in 1858. Thus, it is clear that Abu Bakar was committed to assisting his allies, who were vulnerable to attacks, to preserve the recognition he had obtained from the Pahang court.

The evidence relating to the restoration of the ancient empire to the Pahang War should be applied to Wan Ahmad and ex-Sultan Mahmud. The prospect that brought primary concern to Abu Bakar and the Straits government was that the Pahang

war might provoke intervention from Siam. It is noted in the *Dynastic Chronicles, Bangkok Era*, that ex-Sultan Mahmud, who was residing in Terengganu, had sent a delegation to Bangkok to meet the King. The delegation explained to the King that Wan Ahmad had planned to take over Pahang and install the ex-Sultan as the ruler. If the King aided the venture, the ex-Sultan would make Pahang a vassal state of Bangkok. Later in the same year, 1861, Mahmud himself went to Bangkok and was received by a royal audience (Flood, 1978, pp. 231-2, 242-3).

However, in contrast to the account in the *Dynastic Chronicles*, it was pointed out by L. A. Mills that Siam intended to install ex-Sultan Mahmud as the ruler of Terengganu because Sultan Omar, the ruler of Terengganu, refused to acknowledge the King of Siam as his overlord, by ignoring to deliver '*Bunga Emas*,' the traditional gift to Bangkok, or refusing to pay homage in person to Bangkok (Mills, 1960, pp. 128-70). In this matter, Winstedt is right to argue that Abu Bakar worried less about Siam than Mahmud, who was now looking for a throne. Abu Bakar could foresee endless troubles if the ex-Sultan were installed as the Sultan of Terengganu. Winstedt suggests that Mahmud was still regarded as the *de jure* royal house of Johor, Pahang, and Lingga, even though he had been deposed by the Dutch from Lingga in 1857. If Wan Ahmad conquered Pahang, the Lingga house would probably get a footing there too, and would undoubtedly claim its former hegemony over Johor and Pahang (Winstedt, 1932/1992, p. 116).

Both perspectives and narrations had only one significance. The alliance of ex-Sultan Mahmud with Wan Ahmad provided a symbolic significance that Wan Ahmad could manipulate as conferring legitimacy on him in this dispute. In a letter to the Straits Government in 1862, Wan Ahmad claimed that he worked for the 'true Sultan' and portrayed his enemy, the Temenggong and Bendahara, as usurpers. He also explained that if the Temenggong and Bendahara were ministers of the Johor empire, they were bound to obey the rule of the 'true Sultan.' He accused these officials of having changed their seals and made themselves Rajas, and thus had committed crimes against Sultan Mahmud and, according to Malay law, would have lost their lives long ago (Mutahir, 1861).

Thus, it is sensible to conclude that from Abu Bakar's point of view, if Wan Mutahir were defeated, he would not only lose the only outsider recognition of his sovereign status over Johor, but Wan Ahmad would install ex-Sultan Mahmud as the Sul-

tan. He would assert rights to the allegiance of the Malay states in the southern Peninsula, including the kingdom of Johor. Abu Bakar's claim of the danger from the presence of ex-Sultan Mahmud is well documented. By this, the restoration of the ancient empire of Johor under the overlordship of ex-Sultan Mahmud would become probable. From the traditional Malay point of view, although ex-Sultan Mahmud had been deposed by the Dutch in Lingga, he was far superior to all other Malay rulers in the peninsula because he was still regarded as Sultan. This was manifested in the propagandist statement from Wan Ahmad, stating that he was working for the actual Sultan against the Bendahara and Temenggong, whom he claimed were usurpers. Thus, it can be assumed that Abu Bakar had to assist his ally in protecting his position in Johor because if his enemy were victorious, Johor would also be incorporated into Pahang as a step to establish the ancient empire under the overlordship of ex-Sultan Mahmud.

Suppose Abu Bakar attempted to take over Pahang through his involvement in the civil war. In that case, the evidence used by other historians to justify this view can still be disputed. The firm evidence to support this view is the provisions in the treaty between Pahang and Johor of 1862. This treaty provided for mutual assistance in case of attacks. It also declared that the Endau River would determine Johor and Pahang's border on land and Tioman's island at sea. Tioman and all islands south of it, but north of the Endau River, were incorporated into Johor. These islands included Pulau Tinggi, Pulau Aur, and Pulau Seribu. In the old days, these islands belonged to Pahang. Wan Koris transferred the sovereignty of these territories to Johor as a reward for Abu Bakar's promise of military assistance. The treaty also accepted British government mediation if any dispute arose between the two parties (Abu Bakar, 1863; Allen et al., 1981, pp. 343-4).

Abu Bakar was thus able to extend his hegemony over those additional territories. However, this provision was insufficient to establish his status as the overlord over Pahang because no such provision required the Bendahara to pay allegiance to him. Moreover, incorporating those territories into Johor did not justify moving Johor from a state to an empire. Those islands were frontier areas and not the core. Thus, Johor remained a state or *negeri*.

Even if the *Hikayat Pahang* is used to support this argument, certainly its claim is still suspicious because of the political situation at that time, in which Abu Bakar still refused to acknowledge

Wan Ahmad as the Bendahara of Pahang and still insisted that the throne of Pahang should be occupied by one of Wan Mutahir's sons or the sons of Wan Koris. However, it is clear that the main concern to Abu Bakar in his hostile relations with Wan Ahmad, particularly after the death of ex-Sultan Mahmud, was the boundary dispute that arose from the agreement of 1862, which Wan Ahmad refused to acknowledge. As reflected in both *Hikayat Pahang* and Winstedt's accounts, it can be argued that Abu Bakar was preparing to use this issue to reach an agreement with Wan Ahmad. He intended to establish the state's boundary by the concept of a modern state because such a concept did not exist in the Malay tradition. An adequately defined boundary that marked his sovereignty's limits would help secure his position because he would no longer face boundary disputes with neighboring states, especially Pahang. The only way he could achieve this settlement was to associate himself with the British.

Moreover, it was clear that the British had agreed to promote him as the sovereign ruler of Johor. Thus, he agreed to accept Governor Ord's arbitration to settle the boundary dispute with Wan Ahmad in 1868 (Clifford, 1896; Allen et al., 1981, pp. 345-6). With this settlement, he eventually withdrew his cooperation with Wan Mutahir's son to attack Wan Ahmad, as claimed by *Hikayat Pahang*. This ends the hostile view towards Abu Bakar portrayed in *Hikayat Pahang*.

Obviously, the British supported Abu Bakar as Johor's ruler but did not want to see Abu Bakar enhance his influence in other Malay states. Thus, Abu Bakar needed to find an alternative way to realise his political ambitions. At the end of the 1870s, the only way for him to achieve this was to establish friendly relationships with other influential Malay rulers dependent on his services. Thus, the apparent alliance for Abu Bakar was Bendahara of Pahang. Although both were not recognised as royal-born rulers, they had established themselves as *de facto* rulers in their territories. At the same time, they needed to acquire royal status with the title of Sultan. Abu Bakar needed to be recognised as Sultan to prevent Sultan Ali's heirs from reviving their claims to the Sultanate of Johor. Tengku Alam was still pressing to be recognised as his father's successor. If Tengku Alam were successful in his claim, it would undoubtedly make Abu Bakar's status ambiguous.

Meanwhile, Bendahara Wan Ahmad was also facing a challenge from his chiefs, especially To' Raja of Jelai, who had growing popular support in Pahang. To' Raja was also reportedly trying to chal-

lenge Bendahara Wan Ahmad's authority through his insolent behaviour, and he styled himself Raja in his residency at Jelai (Clifford, 1887, 17 February). At the beginning of the 1880s, Wan Ahmad's popularity among his chiefs declined due to his harsh treatment of those he suspected to be his rivals. In order to revive his perilous political situation, he needed to boost his prestige and dignity. Eventually, it was inevitable that he had to assume the title of Sultan of Pahang.

From this stage, if the story in the *Hikayat Pahang* is followed, Abu Bakar's intention in his relations with Pahang becomes clear that he was seeking to make friends with Wan Ahmad to obtain recognition from him. Initially, it can be seen from the *Hikayat Pahang* that Wan Ahmad did not aim to adopt the title 'Sultan.' About three years after the death of Sultan Ali, in 1880, according to *Hikayat Pahang*, Abu Bakar sent a letter to Wan Ahmad expressing his intention to establish friendly relations with Wan Ahmad. After that, in August 1880, Abu Bakar himself visited Wan Ahmad in Pahang. Two months later, Wan Ahmad visited Abu Bakar and was warmly received by him. The *Hikayat Pahang* explained that during this visit, Abu Bakar came to meet Wan Ahmad and expressed his hope that Wan Ahmad should assume the title 'Sultan.' The *Hikayat* reports that Abu Bakar reminded Wan Ahmad about the past, where their fathers had witnessed a significant loss when the Dutch took over the kingdom of Riau (Daik). Wan Ahmad replied that this matter had been brought to him by his chiefs, but he had not yet made any decision. Abu Bakar insisted that Wan Ahmad follow the Pahang chiefs' advice and assume the title 'Sultan.'

The description of the meeting between Wan Ahmad and Wan Abu Bakar, derived from *Hikayat Pahang*, can be seen as the expression of Wan Ahmad's willingness to acknowledge Maharaja Abu Bakar as Sultan. This is based on the moment when the author of *Hikayat Pahang*, for the first time, referred to Maharaja Abu Bakar as His Highness Sultan of Johor, which is used twice when describing the meeting. However, the timing when Maharaja Abu Bakar began to be mentioned as Sultan of Johor in the *Hikayat* appears to raise a question because the *Hikayat* still referred to Wan Ahmad as Raja of Pahang. It is generally understood that in the Malay historical texts, primarily written in the nineteenth century, the title 'Sultan' is perceived as superior to Raja. The *Hikayat* called Wan Ahmad 'Sultan' only after he had undergone the installation ceremony performed by his chiefs. After this instal-



lation, he adopted the title Sultan Ahmad Muazzam Syah. It is also known that the installation of Wan Ahmad as Sultan had taken place before Abu Bakar assumed the title Sultan of Johor with the sanction of the British in 1885.

There are two possible reasons why Maharaja Abu Bakar was referred to as Sultan of Johor before Sultan Ahmad in the *Hikayat Pahang*. Firstly, it appeared to have been an error by the author because in the *Hikayat*, between the meeting and the installation of Wan Ahmad, the author had referred to Abu Bakar as Sultan of Johor three times before switching back to calling him Raja of Johor. Only after the installation of Sultan Ahmad was completed did the author return to refer to Abu Bakar as Sultan of Johor. Secondly, because this *Hikayat* was written in the early twentieth century, long after the friendship between the royal courts had been established, the author appeared to have regarded the meeting in Johor as the moment both rulers became friends and agreed to recognise each other as Sultan of their respective territories. It is also known that during that time, in 1880, they were the only rulers who had not yet been acknowledged as Sultan by other Malay rulers.

Wan Ahmad realized that it was vital for him to obtain the support of his chiefs if he wanted to become the Sultan of Pahang. The *Hikayat Pahang* explained that the relationship between Maharaja Abu Bakar and Wan Ahmad became close. Abu Bakar accompanied Wan Ahmad back to Pahang, staying there for some time. After Abu Bakar returned to Johor, Wan Ahmad traveled to the interior of Pahang and, with the unanimous support of the inland chiefs, assumed the title 'Sultan.' Abu Bakar recognized his assumption of the title and sent a delegation headed by his Chief Minister to attend the installation ceremony of the Sultan of Pahang (Kalthum, 1986, pp.92-7).

The case of Pahang certainly shows that Abu Bakar was pragmatic and realized that his ambition had limits and had to be realistic. With the presence of the British, who also had their interests in the peninsula, he realised that the British were willing to recognise him as an independent ruler only within the limits of the state of Johor. They would not allow him to exercise his outright hegemony beyond his state borders, which would justify the restoration of the ancient empire. Abu Bakar's activities beyond his borders were constantly subjected to the sanction of the British in Singapore. Under the Singapore Treaty of 1824, Abu Bakar was prohibited from becoming involved in the political affairs of other Malay states as long as he continued to reside

within the islands of Singapore.

From the legal point of view, if he intended to free himself from this prohibition, he had to move out of Singapore, abandoning his residency at Teluk Belanga. Thus, it is strange that the independent status of Abu Bakar as the ruler of Johor until 1889 was overshadowed by the fact that he was also a British subject. It was explicitly mentioned in the British correspondence that Abu Bakar was regarded as a British subject due to his place of birth and his permanent residence in Singapore (Ord, 1868). However, it is evident that he never intended to move from Singapore before 1889 to free himself from this prohibition from interfering in the affairs of other Malay states. He realized the British were determined to destroy his ambition of dominating other Malay states.

## CONCLUSION

Having evaluated all the arguments, it can be concluded that Abu Bakar's ambition was limited to an attempt to obtain recognition as Sultan with sovereignty over the state of Johor. He did not seek to restore the ancient empire under his overlordship. In his involvement with the other Malay states, Abu Bakar proved that he could be an intermediary between the Malays and the British. By playing this role, he managed to promote his status and prestige among other Malays and achieve a certain degree of political credibility, as in the case of Negeri Sembilan. However, in the end, he had to abandon to the British all he had achieved in other states to secure his position and reduce British pressure on himself.

In his relations with the other Malay rulers between the 1860s and the 1880s, Abu Bakar's first objective was to obtain recognition as a royal-born ruler, entitled to adopt the title 'Sultan.' The extent to which he became involved in the internal affairs of the states of Pahang, Selangor, Perak, and Negeri Sembilan certainly attracted the attention of other Malay rulers. Other Malay rulers were even more concerned over the political conflict between Abu Bakar and Sultan Ali, whom they regarded as the symbol of the sovereignty of Johor. Indeed, Abu Bakar was also very sensitive to this view. This was reflected in his decision to support any political faction in Selangor and Perak as opposed to factions linked to Sultan Ali. It was more critical for him to secure his position as an independent ruler of Johor from external threats, notably threats from other Malay rulers who resented his political fortune. This was reflected in his relations with Pahang, where he finally established an alliance with Wan Ahmad, who was initially suspected of being the main threat

to his position in Johor.

Maharaja Abu Bakar intended to intervene in the political affairs of other states in order to secure recognition for his claim to royal status from those factions he supported if they were victorious. If his supported factions were successful, the political reality was that Abu Bakar's influence among other Malay rulers was considerable and growing. To a certain extent, although he had not been regarded as a ruler with royal status, he had been regarded with respect by the ruling elites in the states in which he had become involved. Most appeared to appreciate his role as a mediator between the Malays and the British, believing they would better attain their ends through him. This promoted his status and prestige, especially with those factions that benefited from his services.

It is also evident that Abu Bakar was highly successful in his mission over Pahang because he was recognised as Sultan by Sultan Ahmad. However, he did not expect Sultan Ahmad to acknowledge him as his overlord. If he were successful in his involvement in Selangor, this success would not establish his status as the overlord of Selangor because his success in the Klang War was simply nominal. His success in the defeat of Tengku Kudin was just personal success. Even if he were successful in installing ex-Sultan Ismail as Sultan of Perak by using his close association with the British, as he had been successful in assisting Tengku Antah in being restored to the office of Yamtuan of Sri Menanti, it is unrealistic to assume that Sultan Ismail would acknowledge him as his overlord. Even Yamtuan Antah of Negeri Sembilan never expressed his willingness to recognise Abu Bakar as his overlord, although he was indebted to Abu Bakar's service. The only realistic assumption was that Sultan Ismail would recognise him as Sultan of Johor, his absolute dream.

Abu Bakar has no ambition to become an overlord to other Malay states. It is certainly not the case that Abu Bakar intended to use the British to realise his dreams of an empire because such ambitions were clearly against British interests. On the other hand, Abu Bakar intended to use his close association with the British to enhance his status in those states and obtain recognition as the Sultan of Johor. The British policy showed they were willing to acknowledge Abu Bakar as Sultan of Johor. If any Malay ruler were willing to acknowledge this, there would certainly be no objection.

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