

# Preserving Johor's Independence in The 1880s: The Question of Abu Bakar's Personal Standing

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**Abstract:** There is a tendency among historians to argue that the main factor in the preservation of the independence of Johor was the political talent of its ruler, Abu Bakar, in resisting pressure from the Singapore authorities. Many would argue that Abu Bakar was successful in resisting the pressures from Frederick Weld, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, to extend the British Residential system to Johor in the mid-1880s by establishing diplomatic relations with the London authorities, notably the Colonial Office, which was used to play off Singapore. This article focuses on the issue surrounding Abu Bakar's (1862-1895) personal standing in preserving Johor's independence in the 1880s, which will include a discussion on the friction that existed between him and Sir Frederick Weld, the Governor of the Straits Settlements (1880-1887) in Singapore. The methodology employed in this paper is based on a historical presentation on the subject of discussion with the utilisation of primary sources complemented with secondary sources. The primary sources are mainly derived from the official British correspondence found in the Colonial Office Records, Volume 273 (CO273). The incorporation of the secondary sources refers to the existing writings by historians associated with the subject in discussion for the purpose of interpretation. This paper attempts to present the argument that Abu Bakar's personal credibility in resisting pressure was effective only as long as he conformed to suit the British colonial interests that were preoccupied with economic rather than political means. Hence, I assert that Abu Bakar was able to preserve Johor's internal independence as long as Johor remained economically dependent on Singapore and Abu Bakar was willing to abandon his economic means inside and outside Johor in conformity to the British colonial policy in the Malay states.

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini berfokus pada isu seputar kedudukan pribadi Abu Bakar (1862-1895) dalam melestarikan kemerdekaan Johor pada tahun 1880-an, yang akan mencakup diskusi tentang gesekan yang terjadi antara dirinya dan Sir Frederick Weld, Gubernur Straits Settlements (1880-1887) di Singapura. Metodologi yang digunakan dalam makalah ini didasarkan pada penyajian historis tentang subjek diskusi dengan pemanfaatan sumber-sumber primer yang dilengkapi dengan sumber-sumber sekunder. Sumber-sumber primer sebagian besar berasal dari korespondensi resmi Inggris yang ditemukan dalam Colonial Office Records, Volume 273 (CO273). Penggabungan sumber-sumber sekunder mengacu pada tulisan-tulisan yang ada oleh para sejarawan yang terkait dengan subjek yang dibahas untuk tujuan interpretasi. Makalah ini mencoba menyajikan argumen bahwa kredibilitas pribadi Abu Bakar dalam melawan tekanan hanya efektif selama ia menyesuaikan diri dengan kepentingan kolonial Inggris yang lebih mementingkan cara-cara ekonomi daripada cara-cara politik. Oleh karena itu, saya menegaskan bahwa Abu Bakar mampu mempertahankan kemerdekaan internal Johor selama Johor tetap bergantung secara ekonomi pada Singapura dan Abu Bakar bersedia meninggalkan cara-cara ekonominya di dalam dan di luar Johor sesuai dengan kebijakan kolonial Inggris di negara-negara Melayu.



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## INTRODUCTION

Johor is the most southern state in Peninsular Malaysia. It is the closest of all Malay states to Singapore, the British imperial seat in Southeast Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the years before the outbreak of the Second World War in Southeast Asia, Johor was recognised as an independent state, but it was also a protectorate of the British Empire. Meanwhile, during the same period, Singapore was just a subordinate entity within the British Crown Colony of the Straits Settlements together with Malacca and Penang. Singapore was constituted as the capital of the Straits Settlements governed directly under the authority of the Governor of the Straits Settlements.

In this respect, Johor, during the reigning period of Abu Bakar is regarded as unique by historians due to the fact that Johor was the last state to succumb to British colonial hegemony in 1914 when Abu Bakar's successor, Sultan Ibrahim (1895-1959) was forced to accept the appointment of the British General-Adviser in Johor. This circumstance is regarded as unique simply because despite being the closest state to Singapore, Johor was able to preserve its internal independence long after the Residential system was expanded to other Malay states since 1874. In the Malaysian historical context, the appointment of British residents and advisers in the Malay states is regarded as the British colonial mechanism that overshadowed the supremacy of the Malay rulers.

In the 1880s, Johor-Singapore relations were overshadowed by the friction between Abu Bakar as the ruler of Johor (1862-1895) and Sir Frederick Weld, the Governor of the Straits Settlements (1880-1887). This friction refers to Abu Bakar's victory in resisting Governor Weld's forward policy towards Johor to press ahead for the appointment of the British General-Adviser in the state in 1884-1885. In fact, Abu Bakar succeeded in obtaining the regnal title of the Sultan of the State and Territory of Johor with the consent of Queen Victoria under the signing of the Anglo-Johor Treaty of 1885. After being recognised as Sultan, Abu Bakar was also successful in refusing the appointment of the British Consular Agent in Johor even though it was prescribed under the 1885 Anglo-Johor Treaty in 1886-1887.

Thus, Johor was virtually an independent state because there were no British Resident or Adviser and British Consular Agent in the state. Nevertheless, years after the death of Abu Bakar in 1895, eventually in 1910, the Governor of the Straits Settlements finally succeeded to impose the ap-

pointment of the Consular Agent in Johor, followed by the appointment of the British General-Adviser in 1914. Under this circumstance, the presence of the British General-Adviser in the state was regarded as a colonial figure to overshadow its sovereignty. This is due to the fact that although the Sultan appointed this General-Adviser, he actually succumbed to the auspices of the Governor of the Straits Settlements who also acted as the High-Commissioner for the Malay states.

Although historians have written about the subject of Abu Bakar of Johor since the 1960s, this subject has hardly been given attention in recent years. The most recent writings on Abu Bakar can be found in (Yahaya, 2019) which discusses the scandalous relationship between Abu Bakar, known as Albert Baker, and an English lady, Jenny Mighel, in the 1880s. This was followed by Fakhirin, Rahman and (Fakhirin et al., 2020) who focus on the legal dispute between the US Consulate Officer in Singapore, Adolph G. Studer and Abu Bakar concerning the issue of land concessions in the district of Muar in the 1890s and (Abdullah, 2023) who argues that the political ambition of Abu Bakar to restore the ancient empire of Johor-Riau-Lingga under his hegemony is speculative.

In reference to Abu Bakar's success in his friction with Governor Weld, there is a tendency among historians to argue that the main factor in the preservation of the independence of Johor was the political talent of Abu Bakar in resisting pressure from the Singapore authorities. They argue that Abu Bakar was successful against the Singapore authorities by establishing diplomatic relations with the London authorities, notably the Colonial Office, which was used to play off Singapore. Nevertheless, attention was hardly given to the fact that Abu Bakar's personal credibility in resisting pressure was effective only as long as he conformed to the colonial framework as a whole. This can be referred to Abu Bakar's compliance with the British colonial trajectory that was preoccupied with economic interests rather than extending political hegemony to Johor.

From the existing historical writings, it can be said that Sultan Abu Bakar, the ruler of Johor with the title Temenggung (1862-1868), Maharaja (1868-1885) and Sultan (1885-1895), is the first Malay ruler to be portrayed as a national figure by the Malays. In the early days of Malay nationalism, in 1908, it was remarked by Syed Shaikh al-Hady who stated that:

Have we ever heard of persons who have left a good name in this world due to their medals and ranks? No! A person is remembered for his life-

time of work and knowledge that has benefited his community, leaving behind a foundation for others to continue the good work after his death. He worked hard and struggled to regain his community's rights and many other things that would continuously benefit his community and race. Does a rational man remember Johor's Sultan Abu Bakar [r. 1862-1895] because of his fine shirts, imposing palace and various medals? No! He is remembered for his glorious and honourable work rescuing an Islamic state that had fallen into a wild tiger's mouth. He founded a government for his community and descendants. He kept his government independent during his lifetime, while many others sold their states cheaply in the crowded market. (Gordon, 1999).

This remark refers to Abu Bakar's success in preserving Johor's independence from British colonial intrusion during his reigning period. It is a general consensus among historians to attribute this accomplishment to his political talent in establishing direct diplomatic relations with the Colonial Office in London. This idea was put forward by (Emerson, 1964) who stated that:

Recognising that Singapore was not the centre of the empire, they [Abu Bakar and his consorts] had made themselves at home in London and discreetly thrown their influence there into the balance against the officialdom of Malaya'.

Emerson's view is supported by (Thio, 1967, 1969) and (Sinclair, 1967b). Both of them had discussed in detail on the friction between Abu Bakar and Governor Weld by focussing on Abu Bakar's achievement in resisting the Governor's pressure on him to appoint a British Resident in Johor in 1884-85, and the British Agent with consular powers in 1886-87. This view is further concurred by (Gullick, 1992) who stated: 'Among the Malay rulers until 1920, only the Maharaja, later Sultan of Johor exploited the possibilities of playing off the Colonial Office against the High Commissioner'. Accordingly, it is understandable that this view is well accepted by the Malays (Basri, 1988) who viewed that Abu Bakar's success in resisting the appointment of a British Adviser and Consular Agent in Johor was mainly attributed to his political talent and diplomatic move against Governor Weld in the 1880s.

Nevertheless, few recent writings tend to discuss other aspects on Abu Bakar. This can be seen in the writing of (Yahaya, 2019) who focuses on Abu Bakar's scandalous relationship with an English lady namely Jenny Mighel. However, this particular piece of writing is irrelevant to the subject of discussion in this paper because the main concern of

the article is on Abu Bakar's personal affairs. Another aspect can be seen in (Fakhirin et al., 2020) who focus on the legal dispute between the US Consulate Officer in Singapore, Adolph G. Studer and Abu Bakar concerning the issue of land concessions in the district of Muar in the 1890s. The article reveals that the British authorities in Singapore and London had defended Abu Bakar on the grounds that he was the sovereign ruler of Johor and had the rights to revoke the concession due to the discrepancy in the deal. Another dimension was discussed by (Abdullah, 2023) who argues that Abu Bakar's ambition to restore the ancient empire of Johor-Riau-Lingga under his hegemony is purely speculative. This is because Abu Bakar realised that the British authorities did not permit him to extend his hegemony to other Malay states. He was only allowed to become involved in other Malay states' political affairs to enhance his prestige and gain recognition from other Malay rulers.

The primary purpose of this paper is to fill in the gap on this subject by emphasising the historical reality that Abu Bakar's compliance with the British colonial trajectory was due to the latter's economic interests rather than extending the political hegemony to Johor. It will show that Abu Bakar was able to preserve Johor's internal independence as long as Johor remained to be an economic dependency to Singapore and Abu Bakar was willing to abandon his economic means inside and outside Johor as a conformity to the British colonial policy in the Malay states. This dimension will be shown in the discussion on the historical circumstances concerning British colonial policy that still allowed Abu Bakar to resist Governor Weld's forward policy in Johor in the 1880s. It will examine the British policy towards Johor, the process of drafting the Anglo-Johor Treaty of 1885, Abu Bakar's refusal to the appointment of the British Agent in Johor and Abu Bakar's capitulation as a result of his compliance to British colonial interests in Pahang in the 1880s.

## **METHOD**

The research method employed in this article is based on qualitative observation. This involves a thorough interpretive process based on textual analysis on primary and secondary sources. Firstly, this article relies on extensive analysis on primary sources, notably the official governmental documents derived from the Colonial Office Records Series of CO 273, available at the National Archive at Kew, United Kingdom. The utilisation of this particular series is crucial since they contain important contemporary historical documents of the

1880s, which serve as supporting data for the findings presented in this article. In addition, another primary source that has been published is the Anglo-Johor Treaty of 1885, which is cited in the text. Secondly, an extensive utilisation of secondary sources is essential in interpreting and reinterpreting different views found in the existing writings of other historians associated with the subject in discussion. The findings will be presented by utilising both forms of historical sources by employing comprehensive content analysis.

### **ECONOMIC MEANS IN BRITISH COLONIAL POLICY**

In a broader context, the view that focuses on these particular events alone does not reflect the whole of the friction. It could be construed that historians are overwhelmed by Governor Weld's capitulation on the issue of the appointment of a British Resident and Consular Agent in Johor but they did not observe Abu Bakar's capitulation before, during and after these two events. Moreover, it is pertinent to point out to the fact that Abu Bakar's personal credibility in resisting pressure was effective only as long as he conformed to the colonial framework. Indeed, there is no evidence to indicate that Abu Bakar intended to go beyond the limitations imposed by the colonial rules in order to pursue his political ambition to retain Johor's independence.

What has not been discussed conclusively by historians is that the nature of the British policy itself also determined the preservation of the independence of Johor and Abu Bakar. The British authorities in London had adopted a policy that was described as the policy of non-intervention or limited intervention. This policy was adopted by the British to promote a strong, enlightened, independent ruler who was able to accommodate British commercial interests, which were their primary concern. It was still relevant to Johor even during the 1880s and should be regarded as one of the main reasons for Abu Bakar's success against Governor Weld, rather than his own personal capabilities.

It is evident that Abu Bakar had shown his willingness to serve for British economic interests even before Governor Weld's political pressure in 1884-1887. This can be seen when Abu Bakar had abandoned two major economic concessions granted to two different British investors in Johor in 1878 and 1882. This is on account of those schemes were proceeded without the consent from the Colonial Office authority in London. In fact, in 1884, the Colonial Office authority had proclaimed that the

British Government would not extend any official recognition for any concessions granted to those (Sinclair, 1967a)

It is interesting to observe why the Colonial Office had objected to Abu Bakar's move to grant those two major concessions despite the fact they were British investors. The fact of the matter is that Abu Bakar granted concessions directly to those companies. However, this was contrary to the colonial policy that required all economic concessions in the colonies and protectorates (self-governing territories) to be registered under the auspices of the Crown Agents. This Crown Agency was established in 1833 and the Secretary of State appointed all agents for colonies. In 1880, it was specifically assigned to conduct surveillance of all commercial activities related to financial and developmental aspects, such as banking, plantation and mining in the colonies and protectorates. The agency was entrusted with supervising all the supply of all non-locally manufactured public sector stores, organising the provision of external finance, managing colonial investments, supervising the construction of railways, harbours, canals, bridges and other infrastructures (Sunderland, 1999).

In other words, economically, Johor was treated as a colony since it did not possess internal independence in this aspect. Abu Bakar's conformity to this economic surveillance was pragmatic in advancing his political move to preserve Johor's independence in the 1880s. The same circumstance still prevailed when he had to accommodate the British to extend their colonial hegemony to Pahang where he had to abandon his economic gains in the state. This will be discussed later.

### **THE BACKGROUND OF SULTAN ABU BAKAR AND GOVERNOR FREDERICK WELD**

Abu Bakar (1833-1895) was the son of Temenggung Daing Ibrahim. He succeeded his father as the *Temenggung* of Johor in 1862 with the title *Temenggung Sri Maharaja*. In 1868, he adopted the title *Maharaja* after being sanctioned by the British, which ascended his status to a sovereign ruler of Johor. In 1885, with the consent from the Queen, he adopted the title the Sultan of Johor. He established friendships with all Governors of the Straits Settlements before 1880. Nevertheless, during Governor Frederick Weld's tenure, the relationship was not as cordial due to Weld's insistence on having a British Resident in Johor. In 1866, with the assistance of Governor Cavenagh, Abu Bakar became the first Malay ruler to visit England and was honoured audience with Queen Victoria of England (1837-

1901). From there, he also managed to form friendships with Queen Victoria and other English royal members, including the Prince of Wales. In 1876, he was invited to join the delegation of the Prince of Wales to India in order to commemorate the inauguration of Queen Victoria as the Empress of the colony. Subsequently, he continued to pay several visits to England and Europe from 1878 until his death in London in 1895 (Abdullah, 2011)

Sir Frederick Weld 1823-1891, was born in England in 1823. He served in three colonies from the 1860s until his retirement in 1887. He began his profession as a farmer in New Zealand in the 1840s and 1850s. Then in the 1850s and 1860s, he became a politician and ultimately ascended to the office of the Premier of New Zealand from 1864 to 1865. Then, he was successively appointed as the Governor of Western Australia from 1869 to 1875, Governor of Tasmania from 1875 to 1880 and lastly, the Governor of the Straits Settlements in Singapore from 1880 to 1887. As the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Weld and other governors since 1874 were also assigned with the responsibility of the High Commissioners of the British-protected states in Malaya. During his tenure, Weld was active in promoting internal development in other Malay states, especially the construction of the first railway in Perak in the 1880s. This railway ran from Taiping to Port Weld (Kuala Sepetang). Weld was also keen to pursue British forward policy in Malaya in the 1880s with the appointment of British Residents in Pahang and Johor (Lady Lovat, 1914).

### **BRITISH POLICY IN JOHOR**

At the beginning of the 1880s, Governor Weld had sought to pursue his own forward policy in the Malay Peninsula by having the possibility of extending the Residential system to Johor. Many would believe that it was Abu Bakar's personal credibility that had contributed to the success in rejecting this policy. Nevertheless, Abu Bakar's personal credibility in opposing Governor Weld's policy was actually nominal. Generally, the British authorities had consistently adopted the policy of retaining Johor's independence in its internal affairs in the nineteenth century. The Colonial Office continued to maintain the policy of leaving Abu Bakar to remain independent in its internal affairs while retaining its control of the economy. In fact, this policy was actually a continuation of the longstanding policy, in which Johor was excluded from the policy of intervention during the 1870s and 1880s.

The British authorities in London were consistent in implementing their policy to support Abu

Bakar as their ally because they considered it a pragmatic measure to secure their colonial interests in Johor. Thus, the British in Singapore also had to be bound to this policy (Cavenagh, 1884). Abu Bakar had benefited from the support of Governor Offeur Cavenagh (1859-1867) and Governor Harry Ord (1867-1873), thus giving him a free hand in the internal affairs of Johor. The status-quo required his credibility to govern the state in accordance with the practice of 'civilised' nations, his willingness to maintain friendly relations with the governors, and his readiness to place Johor's resources at British disposal (Ord, 1868).

This criterion was still relevant to Abu Bakar when Weld became the Governor in 1880. In 1884, A.M. Skinner, the acting Colonial Secretary of the Straits Government, wrote that:

Though Johore is not possessed of the rich mineral resources of most of the other States, yet by the security of its position in the close neighbourhood of Singapore and through its present chief's just rule, and his care for life and property, Johore has attained some prominent and exceptional prosperity amongst the Native States of the Peninsula' (Skinner 1884).

However, during his leave in England in 1884, Governor Weld had proposed to the Colonial Office an extension of the Residential system to Johor. He pointed out that the appointment of the Resident in Johor was necessary to improve the unsatisfactory condition of Johor's administration, especially its administration of justice (Weld, 1884A).

Thio and Sinclair believed that the decision of the Colonial Secretary and Permanent Under-Secretary to reject the proposal of Governor Weld, that Abu Bakar accept a British Resident in Johor, was Abu Bakar's achievement in his diplomatic offensive against Weld. Both historians suggest that this decision was due to Abu Bakar's judicious moves, because he managed to counter Weld by inviting Cecil Smith to visit Johor. The main factor for the Colonial Office in reaching this decision was Smith's favourable report, which dismissed the charge of maladministration in Johor, and thus weakened the case for interference in Johor's internal affairs.

Indeed, Smith's report was helpful in strengthening Abu Bakar's counter argument against Weld. In March 1885, in his despatch to the Colonial Office, the Acting Governor, Cecil Smith, reported that he had visited Johor Baharu on 12-14 March at the invitation of Abu Bakar. Smith expressed his satisfaction after inspecting the public institutions and public works in Johor Baharu.

Smith stated that there were evident signs of good organisation and progress in many sections of the public office, similar to services found in the Straits Settlements. Smith was highly impressed with the Survey Department that was responsible for public works, and the survey office, under the supervision of a European officer, Mr. Garland. He also expressed his satisfaction with the condition of the hospital in Johor Baharu, as he described it as in 'fair order'. In the same despatch, he also reported on several social development projects that were in progress in Johor. He informed the Colonial Office about the construction of a reservoir that was three miles in length, at an expenditure of \$30,000. This reservoir was being constructed on the outskirts of Johor Baharu for the purpose of obtaining a supply of good water, and its completion was due within six months. The construction of this reservoir was under the supervision of a Malay engineer. Alongside the reservoir was the construction of a vault, estimated at about 100 feet in length, that was supervised by Mr. Garland for the same purpose. Smith also informed the Colonial Secretary that Abu Bakar was always willing to accept his advice (Smith, 1885).

It is a matter of fact that the issue of maladministration highlighted by Frederick Weld was not the major concern of the officials in the Colonial Office. The Colonial Office in London was more concerned with other major issues relating to the economic affairs and the possibility of foreign intrusion in Johor. Robert Herbert, the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Colonial Office was willing to consider Weld's suggestion to extend the Residential system to Johor only if Weld was able to justify his claim of the danger of foreign intrusion.

Abu Bakar acknowledged that the main concern among the British Officials was the threat of foreign intrusion into Johor. In the correspondence to Lord Derby, the State Secretary for Colonies, Smith informed him that Abu Bakar agreed to entrust his foreign affairs to the British, if it was concerned about the possibility of foreign intrusion. Smith explained that this offer was made after Abu Bakar heard a rumour that Weld would come back from his leave with the authority to extend the Residential system to Johor. Smith told Derby that Abu Bakar asked the British not to force him to accept a Resident because he had done much for them. Smith then stated that despite his promise to Abu Bakar that the British would not annex Johor or force Abu Bakar to accept a Resident, Abu Bakar still took the rumour seriously and decided to proceed to London to present his case to the Colonial

Office (Abu Bakar, 1885).

For these reasons, it could be argued that the threat of the extension of the Residential system to Johor had become irrelevant even before Abu Bakar arrived in London in May 1885 because the Colonial Office took the view that the readiness of Abu Bakar to entrust Johor's foreign affairs to the British was sufficient to secure their interests in Johor, thus making the appointment of a British Resident unnecessary. In addition to this assurance, Abu Bakar also expressed his readiness to do everything to favour the British. For instance, in April 1885, his brother, Engku Abdul Majid, informed Cecil Smith that the Government of Johor was prepared at any time to offer all necessary military assistance, to place the resources of Johor at the British disposal (Engku Abdul Majid, 1885). The offer of military assistance appeared to be related to political tension among the European powers in their colonial expansion in Southeast Asia. The British were very concerned over the French, who were seeking to consolidate their position in Indochina, and the fear of their aggression towards Siam, and increasing German interest in the Pacific.

In these circumstances, Abu Bakar's diplomatic offensive should be regarded as a minor factor. The success or failure of any governor to pursue his forward policy in the Malay Peninsula was dependent on the approval from the Colonial Office in London. A similar situation was faced by Governor Harry Ord (1867-73), who failed to convince the Colonial Office to pursue an intervention in the peninsula before 1874. His successor, Andrew Clarke (1873-75), implemented the intervention only when he received the sanction from the Colonial Office.

In fact, even in the 1880s, when Weld was seeking to pursue his forward policy in Johor, there is strong evidence that the State Secretary for Colonies, Lord Derby, together with Robert Herbert, the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Colonial Office, did not support this policy in Johor (Lord Derby, 1883). It appears that their resolve reflected the position of Gladstone, the British Prime Minister (1880-85), to denounce the policy pursued by his predecessor (Eldridge, 1978). The immediate consequence of this was that Weld had to abandon his intention to push on with his forward policy in Johor.

Thus, Derby's lack of support for Weld's forward policy should be considered the primary reason why Weld failed to extend the residential system to Johor. In 1885, when Abu Bakar was in London to negotiate the treaty with the Colonial Office,

Derby was still the State Secretary for Colonies. Although Weld's forward policy towards Johor was supported by several officials in the Colonial Office, such as De Robeck and Robert Meade, the final decision was still in the hands of Derby. In this circumstance, Weld was not able to convince Derby to support his policy towards Johor because he clearly had mishandled his case with the Colonial Office.

Another aspect of British policy was that it appreciated and inspired Abu Bakar's smaller efforts to promote economic development within Johore but objected to his efforts to introduce outside capital by granting large and monopolistic concessions. When Governor Weld was pressing for the appointment of a Resident in Johor in 1884, the immediate concern of the Colonial Office was a particular provision in the Malay Peninsular Agency Charter of 1882, in which the Agency was granted the sole rights to issue bank notes that were to be the sole legal tender in Johor.

Weld expressed his concern that Abu Bakar had become more and more under the influence of Messers. Rodyk and Davidson, who acted as Abu Bakar's legal advisers and agents. Weld believed that their advice to Abu Bakar sought to accommodate their own commercial interests in Johor. In presenting this case, Weld extensively referred to Thomas Braddell memorandum, that was enclosed (Weld, 1884B). Moreover, in the same letter, Weld expressed his concern over the possibility of foreign intrusion into Johor through the grant of economic concessions, which might involve financiers who were linked with other European powers.

The officials in the Colonial Office, especially De Robeck, were also very concerned about the participation of Messers. Rodyk and Davidson in this agreement. De Robeck disapproved of the clause in the 1882 Charter that gave banking rights, and the right to issue legal tender in Johor to the Agency. He wanted Johor and the Straits Settlements to have the same banking system and legal tender, to avoid confusion. Despite acknowledging that the British had no right to interfere in this issue, he told the Governor that the British would never give recognition to the Agency (De Robeck, 1884). It was quite certain that the Agency did not commence its operations after Lord Derby expressed his objection through the Governor. The message was that Abu Bakar was not to negotiate with the Agency without consulting the Straits Government. In the same dispatch, Derby also stated that the British would not extend recognition to the Agency (Lord Derby, 1884A).

The quiet reaction from Abu Bakar towards

the interference from the Colonial Office on economic concessions in Johor should be regarded as the main factor in preserving the British policy of retaining Abu Bakar's status of substantial political independence. Abu Bakar's compliance with the demands of the Colonial Office to withdraw from the economic concessions showed that Abu Bakar was not prepared to confront the Straits Government if the Colonial Office did not support it. In principle, Abu Bakar had a right to exercise freedom on economic concessions in Johor because it was regarded as an internal affair. Thus, the British could not interfere in this issue. In fact, it was admitted by the officials in the Colonial Office that they had no legal right to interfere in the scheme, even less in the 1882 banking scheme (Herbert, 1884; Lord Derby, 1884B).

#### **THE NEGOTIATION OF THE ANGLO- JOHOR TREATY OF 1885**

Historians tend to give Abu Bakar credit for his diplomatic shrewdness in negotiating the 1885 Treaty (Allen et al., 1981). Sinclair noted Weld's failure to force the Colonial Secretary and the Permanent Under-Secretary to agree to his recommendation that Abu Bakar be forced to accept a British Resident. But they did require the appointment of an agent with consular authority, who was to reside in Johor, as stipulated in the 1885 Treaty. Sinclair stated that Abu Bakar had to fight hard during the negotiation with the Colonial Office, which still insisted he accept a British (Sinclair, 1967b). However, the documents relating to the negotiation do not show that the issue of appointing a British Resident in Johor was raised (Meade, 1885; Weld, 1885). Understandably, this issue was no longer relevant. The negotiation was more centred on the appointment of an agent with consular powers, which Abu Bakar accepted.

In relation to the same issue, (Thio, 1967) highlighted the achievement of Abu Bakar, who was assisted by his personal adviser, Abdul Rahman bin Andak. During the negotiation of the treaty, Abu Bakar insisted that he would accept the agent, having functions similar to those of a consular officer, only at the request of the Secretary of State for Colonies. Thus, he managed to have the treaty signed by the State Secretary for Colonies instead of the Governor of the Straits Settlements. Indeed, this point enhanced Abu Bakar's credibility, as the signature of the State Secretary for Colonies signified a distinction from the treaties with other Malay rulers, signed merely by the Governor of the Straits Settlements. This mechanism reflected the political

reality of the Malay Peninsula in those days when Abu Bakar was above other Malay rulers.

However, the signature also showed that Abu Bakar was given a favourable treatment if he did not go beyond the colonial framework. In fact, theoretically, he could have pressed for the treaty to be signed by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, which would signify his status as a completely independent ruler, not merely a protectorate. Hence, he was still within the British colonial framework. Moreover, Abu Bakar did not detect other aspects of colonial superiority imposed on him. The treaty was actually between Johor and the Straits Government, rather than with London. Thus, in longer terms, it would give space for the Governor to exploit any ambiguity that could suit British interests.

This political reality was reflected in other provisions that became major concerns to the Colonial Office. The negotiation indicated that the major issues that still occupied the British officials were the possibility of foreign intrusion in Johor and its economic concessions. It was evident that the British took precautions to ensure that Johor would be secured from foreign intervention. Abu Bakar did not resist the terms and conditions imposed on him. His motive here was to obtain recognition as Sultan of Johor from the British. This recognition was stipulated in the last article of the treaty. Nevertheless, the negotiation indicated that the British had their own wish to give such recognition. Governor Weld and Robert Meade argued that such recognition should be used as a tool to exclude foreign concessionaires from Johor. They saw that the recognition of Abu Bakar as Sultan of Johor was necessary to prevent Abu Bakar from selling the right to the throne of Johor to outsiders, due to financial problems.

Under Article 6 of the 1885 Treaty, Abu Bakar agreed to surrender his freedom to grant economic concessions in Johor. Abu Bakar was not to make any grants or concessions to other than British subjects or companies.

The officials in the Colonial Office admitted that the British Government had no right to impose this particular restriction on Abu Bakar. However, during the negotiation, Governor Weld had proposed this particular clause, and he received the support from Robert Meade, the Assistant Under-Secretary. Both officials considered this provision necessary to prevent foreign intrusion in Johor through the participation of any investor who had non-British connections. Robert Meade had made special reference to the danger of French interference on behalf of the Saigon Chinese, and Dutch

interference, "or worse still a German man of war 'when Germany has absorbed Holland'" (Meade, 1885; Weld, 1885).

Other provisions relevant to Johor's foreign and economic affairs were only matters of formality. In Article I, Johor entrusted its foreign affairs and defence to the Straits Government, and also the extradition of any offender. Such provisions were normally dealt with through the Foreign Office. In addition, Article IV stipulated that Johor should use the currency of the Straits Settlements.

#### **THE ISSUE OF THE APPOINTMENT OF A BRITISH AGENT**

It was evident in the negotiations of the 1885 Treaty that Governor Weld hoped to develop the agent into something akin to a Resident. Weld's failure to force Abu Bakar to accept the British Agent was due to the fact that Weld was not able to secure support from the Colonial Office (Weld, 1886; Holland, 1887). In fact, until the end of Abu Bakar's reign, the appointment of a British Agent to reside in Johor, as stipulated in the 1885 Treaty, did not take place. This belief was based on Weld's failure to insist that Abu Bakar accept the agent, which was also due to Weld's lack of tactful diplomacy towards Abu Bakar. This also argued that Weld would not be able to get the upper hand over Abu Bakar on the appointment of the agent, even if Weld had better personal relations with Abu Bakar. This is because the decisive factor in determining relations between Abu Bakar and the Straits Government was Abu Bakar's personal influence in the Colonial Office and his friendship with the British royalty. Consequently, Weld's immediate successor, Cecil Smith, did not insist on this appointment. The Colonial Office continued to adopt a patient and indulgent disposition towards Abu Bakar, in contrast with their treatment of other Malay rulers (Thio, 1969).

It has been said that the favourable treatment of the officials in the Colonial Office was determined by Abu Bakar's credibility and his diplomatic offensive, rather than the nature of British policy towards Abu Bakar. This was certainly not the political reality. Evidently, the Colonial Office was less supportive of Governor Weld, which has made Abu Bakar appear more favoured. The State Secretary for Colonies, apparently following the advice of Robert Herbert, advised the Governor to take measures to improve his relations with Abu Bakar, in order to secure his personal influence over the ruler (Lord Stanley, 1886).

This also pointed out that the Colonial Office



was doubtful about the advisability of appointing an agent in Johor because of divisions of opinion within the Legislative Council in Singapore, which was composed of the official (government of the Straits Settlement) and unofficial members (non-governmental). The opposition to the appointment came from the unofficial members. This opposition faction was led by Thomas Shelford, whose firm Paterson, Simon, and Co., who was acting as Abu Bakar's agents in Singapore. He was also a senior member, as the representative of the Chamber of Commerce. He alleged that the Governor wished to use the agent to spy on the Sultan (Thio, 1967). The Colonial Office concurred with the views of the unofficial members of the Legislative Council.

It was believed that Abu Bakar's success against Governor Weld was due to the former's use of Johor's Advisory Board. According to Thio, the Advisory Board was established by Abu Bakar in 1886, while he was still in London. This board was headed by a chairman who was appointed by Abu Bakar. The first Chairman was Lieutenant-General William Fielding, a cousin of Robert Herbert, who then became Chairman after retiring from the post of Permanent Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office.

This explained that the purpose of Johor's Advisory Board, which was based in London, was to enable Abu Bakar to communicate directly with the Colonial Office, and it was to advise the Sultan on important matters so as to usurp the role played by the Governor of the Straits Settlements vis-à-vis other Malay States. This advisory board allowed Abu Bakar to improve the machinery for obtaining advice from the British without adopting a subordinate position to the colony, or submitting to formal control. Thio pointed out that Abu Bakar once forwarded his objections to Weld through the Chairman of the Johor Advisory Board, on the grounds that the Governor intended to use the agent to spy on his movements (Thio, 1969).

Thio's point was further supported by Gullick. Gullick pointed out that although the Governor continued to send despatches criticising Abu Bakar, especially his extravagant personal expenditure, to the Colonial Office, it was difficult for the officials in London to deal with their former senior colleagues on the Advisory Board, acting on Abu Bakar's behalf (Gullick, 1992). However, there is no evidence to suggest that the Johor Advisory Board influenced the policy of the Colonial Office on the issue of the appointment of the British Agent in Johor. The advisory board would have been unable to present Abu Bakar's case if the Colonial Office

had determined to support Weld.

#### **ABU BAKAR'S COLLABORATION IN BRITISH EXPANSION IN PAHANG**

Colonial Office support for Abu Bakar in his friction with Governor Weld over the appointment of an agent in Johor was not the main concern of the British in the Malay Peninsula at that moment. During the years 1885-87, when Governor Weld brought this issue up, it was regarded as less important by the Colonial Office, because it was more occupied with the prospect of extending control to Pahang. Pahang was believed to be possessing large deposits of gold and tin, while Johor apparently did not possess rich deposits. In the eyes of the British, mineral deposits in Pahang were considered more important than the agricultural resources of Johor: thus, Johor was perceived as the less wealthy state (Swettenham, 1880)

Clearly, they intended to use Abu Bakar to achieve this course. In this circumstance, Abu Bakar's role in accommodating the British expansion in Pahang in the 1880s was the reason why the Colonial Office adopted leniency towards Abu Bakar on the appointment of a British Agent. It was fortunate for Abu Bakar that Weld's pressure for the appointment of the agent in Johor was coincidental with the forward policy in Pahang. The coincidence of these two events gave Abu Bakar the opportunity to express his loyal support to the British who were seeking to extend their control into Pahang. Without Abu Bakar's association with the British expansion into Pahang in 1886-88, Abu Bakar would have found it more difficult to resist Weld.

Abu Bakar's influence over Sultan Ahmad of Pahang became prominent, especially when the British resumed their efforts to extend their influence into Pahang. In 1885, Swettenham went to Pahang to persuade Sultan Ahmad to accept a British Resident, but was refused by the Sultan. Swettenham was suspicious that the Sultan's refusal was much influenced by the Chief Minister of Johor, who was acting under the orders of Abu Bakar (Swettenham, 1885). Originally, Abu Bakar was willing to see if Wan Ahmad could maintain his position in Pahang without interference. This is because Abu Bakar feared that British interference would jeopardise his position and economic gains in Pahang. However, Abu Bakar also realised that his influence in Pahang had been limited by the Anglo-Johor Treaty of 1885, which prohibited him from interfering in the politics and administration of other Malay states. At the same time, he too was facing pressure from the British to accept a British

Agent. Due to the increasing pressure, he had to utilize Pahang in order to secure his own position in Johor.

Moreover, the Straits Government was also critical of Johor's intrusion into the economy of Pahang. In 1885, Cecil Smith, the acting Governor during the absence of Weld in London, reported to the Colonial Office that Wan Ahmad had granted Abu Bakar a gold mining concession in the district of Raub in Pahang. Smith repeatedly expressed his opinion that Abu Bakar should neither obtain nor be mixed up with the concessions in Pahang (Smith, 1885A). Apart from this concession, Swettenham also informed Smith that Jaafar Haji Mohamed, the Chief Minister of Johor had also acquired a concession over the rights to all wood in Pahang (Swettenham, 1885).

Governor Weld insisted Wan Ahmad accept a British Agent to reside in Pahang, similar to the terms that had been ratified for Johor under the 1885 Treaty. Realising that Wan Ahmad was highly dependent on the advice of Abu Bakar when facing pressures from the British, Weld tried to use Abu Bakar to persuade Wan Ahmad to agree to these terms. Weld eventually managed to use Abu Bakar to influence Wan Ahmad to accept a British Agent in Pahang in 1887. Weld received support from the State Secretary for Colonies, Sir Henry Holland, in this forward policy towards Pahang (Weld, 1887).

Indeed, that Wan Ahmad consulted Abu Bakar on affairs involving the British was revealed in the *Hikayat Pahang* (Jeran, 1986). Thus, on the advice of Abu Bakar, who sent the Chief Minister of Johor and Mohamed Al-Sagoff, Abu Bakar's Chief Financial Associates, to Pahang in 1887, Wan Ahmad informed Governor Weld of his willingness to accept the British Agent (Wan Ahmad, 1887). However, the British continued to put pressure on Wan Ahmad to appoint a British Resident in Pahang. Again, as revealed in the *Hikayat Pahang* and confirmed by Linehan, on the advice of Abu Bakar, in August 1888 Wan Ahmad finally agreed to accept a British Resident (Jeran, 1986) (Linehan, 1973).

Thus, on 30 August 1888, Smith sent a despatch to the Colonial Office expressing his confidence in Abu Bakar's loyalty and good faith in the Pahang affair. Then, in the same despatch, Smith also recommended to the Colonial Office the suspension of the proposal to appoint a British Agent with consular powers to Johor at that time (Smith, 1888A).

From Abu Bakar's point of view, the expansion of British control to Pahang was against his

own wishes, because he had long been seeking to extend his commercial interest in that state. However, he had to render this service to accommodate the British in Pahang, because he realised that this was the only way he could preserve his independence in internal affairs. As a result of his cooperation with the British mission to extend the Residential system to Pahang in 1888, his relations with Governor Cecil Smith remained close, and in 1888 Smith sent a despatch to the Colonial Office expressing his satisfaction with the progress in Johor's administration and other social development, similar to his report in 1885 (Smith, 1888). Thus, there is every reason to believe that the Colonial Office decided to leave Johor alone, and the policy towards Johor would be revised only after Abu Bakar's death (Thio, 1969)

## CONCLUSION

Having examined the development of the relations between Abu Bakar and the British authorities in Singapore, it could be said that Abu Bakar's success in resisting the pressures from Governor Weld was actually dependent on his willingness to comply with British colonial interests that were primarily occupied by economic matters in Malaya during the second half of the nineteenth century. This can be seen in his willingness to be bound by the pressures from the British authorities, which caused him not to pursue any action that would make Johor economically independent from Singapore and abandon his economic interests outside Johor. Abu Bakar's ultimate aim was to preserve Johor's independence, which was highly dependent on his working within the British framework. In fact, although he deserved credit for his political talent and subtle diplomacy in resisting the pressures from Governor Weld, there is every reason to believe that his response was not totally resistant, for he had done everything to accommodate colonial interests. In other words, his success in preserving Johor's independence was achieved through his continuous compliance with British policies.

The main reason why Johor enjoyed a greater degree of independence compared to other Malay states in the late nineteenth century was the readiness of its rulers to comply with the requirements of as well as to accept guidance and advice by the British on a larger scale. In fact, the British authorities, especially the Governors of the Straits Settlements (except for Governor Weld), continued to abide by the policy of preserving Abu Bakar's independence in internal affairs, as long as Abu Bakar continued to be loyal. This made Johor excluded

from the advance of colonial rule. Even though he refused to carry out the 1885 Treaty obligation to appoint a British Agent with consular authority, Abu Bakar did not take any action that could cause injury to British interests. Where any action was perceived by the British as a threat to their interests, such as the economic concessions in Johor in 1882, Abu Bakar was willing to retract to avoid confrontation with the British, especially the Colonial Office. Furthermore, Abu Bakar's success in securing the support from the Colonial Office was not dependent on his diplomatic skills alone, but even more on the Colonial Office's appreciation of Abu Bakar's role in persuading the Sultan of Pahang to accept a British Agent (later Resident).

In fact, Abu Bakar's willingness to sign the Anglo-Johor Treaty of 1885, which made Johor as a British protectorate, signified his compliance to British imperial framework. Although Johor was recognised as an independent state, its status as a British protectorate certainly meant that it had to surrender its external affairs to the British High Commissioner in Singapore. This undoubtedly overshadowed its sovereignty. This is due to the fact that the High Commissioner, as the Governor of the Straits Settlements, was the highest-ranking colonial officer in Malaya at that time. Since Johor became a protectorate in 1885, Abu Bakar was subjected to the supremacy of the Governor of the Straits Settlements. Abu Bakar's status as a sovereign ruler had limited capacity because of Johor's status as a protectorate that was unlike other monarchs of independent nations, such as Siam and Japan during the nineteenth century. Considering the different status quo of Johor under Abu Bakar as a British Protectorate and Siam as an independent nation at that time, such comparative study of both Abu Bakar and King Chulalongkorn could become a prospect for further research. This comparative study could illuminate the differences between a protected state and an independent nation.

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