

## **Rebellion in Brunei: The 1962 Revolt, Imperialism, Confrontation and Oil**

HARUN ABDUL MAJID

London, I.B. Tauris, 2007

xi + 200 pp., ISBN978-1-84511-423-7 (£47.50 hardback)

In the early hours of 8 December 1962, the North Kalimantan National Army (TNKU) mounted a coup in the sultanate of Brunei. The TNKU was the military arm of the People's Party of Brunei led by the charismatic A.M. Azahari. Its forces overran the oilfields at Seria and much of Brunei Town (Bandar Seri Begawan) to move through the rest of this tiny British protectorate and into the neighbouring colony of Sarawak. Despite a wealth of intelligence indicating an imminent uprising, the British had been caught off-guard. As Lord Selkirk (Britain's commissioner-general in the region) informed Harold Macmillan, 'the revolution came within an inch of being completely successful'. The rebels, however, lacked leadership, organisation and military experience and, once the Gurkhas and Royal Marines had arrived and General Walter Walker had assumed command, unrest was easily subdued and dissidents swiftly rounded up.

Forty-five years later questions are still being asked about the causes, conduct and consequences of the rising, about its significance for the subsequent development of the sultanate and its wider, regional repercussions. Was its target what Selkirk called 'the decadent remnants of a feudal society', or the neo-colonialism of Brunei-Shell, or the scheme to bundle Brunei (along with the rest of British Borneo) into the Anglo-Malayan 'grand design' of Malaysia? Did the rebels hope to topple the sultan or place him at the head of a popular movement? Did they aspire to modernise Brunei or to restore its

ancient glories? There is debate, too, about the amount of popular support which the TNKU enjoyed in Brunei and the degree of assistance it received from Indonesian irredentists or communists in Singapore and Sarawak. As for the principals, some have suggested that the sultan himself was implicated in the rising. Others have cast doubt on whether Azahari, who was in Manila at the time of the insurrection, can have been its effective strategist. And in the shadows of the controversy have lingered the British security services, blamed at the time for their 'supineness on the ground' but since accused of dirty tricks.

Much of the uncertainty surrounding the episode stems from a dearth of information on the Brunei side. Nevertheless, an account of revolt and reaction together with a plausible interpretation of the central yet enigmatic role played by His Highness may be constructed from documents at The National Archives, Kew. It is indisputable that, for all his prevarication, Sultan Omar was steadfast in the defence of the royal ascendancy. His decision not to parley with TNKU emissaries sealed the rebels' fate and ensured that his regime would emerge from the disturbances more haughty than ever. Indeed, the British were disappointed in their hope that the revolt would frighten Omar into democratising his government and seeking safety for his kingdom in the new federation of Malaysia. Their relief at the sultan's survival was soon replaced by exasperation over the costs and criticism which they now incurred by assuming responsibility for what seemed to be the indefinite protection of a discredited autocrat.

This latest account of the Brunei rebellion was researched by Harun Abdul Majid while at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. He himself was a child growing up in Bandar Seri Begawan during the events about which he writes and he has

supplemented British archives with the memories of his family as well as interviews with participants and their sympathisers on both sides. This in itself is a remarkable achievement since for many years the revolt remained too sensitive to be discussed openly by Bruneians. These testimonies are certainly of interest but the book as a whole falls short of being the comprehensive history advertised by the publisher. The text is short, occasionally repetitive, lightly annotated and neglectful of some recent, relevant publications. While he judiciously draws a distinction between the rebellion itself (which, he writes, lies 'somewhere near the bottom of one of the lower divisions' in any league table of rebellions) and its wider consequences, his treatment of these wider consequences is under done. As regards the Malaysian dimension, the claim that the 'main impetus' came from Malaya's Tunku Abdul Rahman under-estimates Lee Kuan Yew's drive, while the analysis of Sultan Omar's involvement in the negotiations adds little to existing accounts. Furthermore, although attention is drawn to the 'controversial' influence of Brunei-Shell on British policy-making, exploration of this issue stops a long way short of either substantiating or refuting a link between oil and imperialism. Discussion of the possible connections between the revolt and the origins of Indonesian Confrontation is similarly inconclusive and veers off into a tribute to General Walker, the Gerald Templer of Borneo.

A.J. STOCKWELL

*Royal Holloway, University of London*