

Review

Some lessons from the White Rajahs of Sarawak: Identifying and strengthening local capacities for peace in the deep South of Thailand

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The present paper explores some of the lessons that can be learned from the reigns of the first two Rajahs of the Brook dynasty of Sarawak. They ruled over a realm populated by Malays, Dyaks, Chinese and Europeans with great wisdom and skills. Rajahs James Brooke and Charles Brooke both identified important local capacities for peace and strengthened them so as to keep their multiethnic state together. Comparing and contrasting the rule of a British dynasty in Southeast Asia during the colonial period to the post-colonial colonialism of the Thai State in the Deep South shows that some characteristics of traditional colonial rule as exercised by the White Rajahs of Sarawak were more likely to lead to sustainable peace and development than the excesses of post-colonial nationalism.

Key words: Sarawak, colonialism, capacities for peace, development, ethnic conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been said and written about European colonialism in the East Indies but most of the research has concentrated on the role of the East Indies Companies and of the Dutch Colonies. Comparatively little research has dealt with the curious case of the White Rajahs of Sarawak (Neher, 2002). This dynasty of British origin ruled with absolute power over the small realm of Sarawak with little European military support (Payne, 1995). They ruled with the support of their subjects and the recognition of their Asian peers in the region. From the middle of the 19th century until the end of World War II the Brookes were an integral part of the political life of Sarawak and Borneo. The first Rajah, Sir James Brooke, was made Rajah of Sarawak with the blessing of the Sultan of Brunei and controlled territory inhabited by Muslim Malays, head-hunting Dyak tribes, and Chinese traders and miners (Payne, 1995). Each group had their own religion, their own local leadership, and their own traditional laws (Mulder, 1996).

Comparing and contrasting the governance of Sarawak by the White Rajahs to that of the former Sultanate of Patani by the Thai government is very fruitful in that both territories were and still are multiethnic and have large Muslim communities (Neher, 2002). The first Rajah had contact and visited the Kingdom of Siam as well as the Sultanates in present day Malaysia and met the famous

English teacher, Anna who helped introduce modern education in the Southeast Asian Kingdom (Wyatt, 2003).

The following sections will provide a brief summary of the system of government used by the first two Rajahs in Sarawak and how they were designed to identify and strengthen local capacities for peace. Then another section will compare their system of government to that used by the Thai State since the beginning of the 20th century and to show how some best practices can be learned and applied to deal with the Malay unrest in the Deep South of Thailand.

GOVERNANCE UNDER THE WHITE RAJAHS

The White Rajahs of Sarawak had to deal with a very diverse population. Sarawak was not only home to the refined Muslim Malays but also to the simple head-hunting Dyaks and the enterprising Chinese. When Rajah James Brooke took over as acting Rajah in the late 1840s, the capital of his realm, Kuching, was a small village with no bureaucracy in the modern sense. There was no professional army other than a small guard and borders were ill defined. Each ethnic group had its own leaders and customs and lived together but at different developmental stages. The Malays historically held politi-

cal power and were highly cultured in Islamic traditions and had refined manners and dress. On the other hand the Dyaks lived in the forests and practiced head-hunting (Payne, 1995). The Chinese worked in the mines and commerce. In terms of governance, each group had their formal and informal rules. Malays had their princes and an overarching representative to the Rajah. Dyaks had their local chieftains controlling thousands of warriors, and the Chinese had their leaders and were part of the powerful secret societies. Each group also had their own religion and traditional customs which ranged from cutting and drying the heads of enemies for display as trophies in houses to the smoking of opium pipes.

The Rajahs had to rule over about 200,000 native subjects spread over a territory of about the size of England and Scotland by the time of Rajah Charles with the help of less than fifty European administrators (Payne, 1995). No occupying army was needed simply because the Rajahs were recognized as the natural rulers of the land and enjoyed the absolute loyalty of the majority of their subjects. There were no religious revolts since the Brooks, while remaining Christian and appointing a Bishop for Kuching, did not promote proselytizing. Each ethnic group was given their local autonomy under the suzerainty of the Rajah. Dyak Chieftains and Malay Princes were mobilized to undertake needed public works and an army was raised composed and led by members of all groups. Antimony was mined and traded for the benefit of the entire realm. Only general laws were promulgated in order to set a minimum standard and slavery and headhunting were prohibited. The Brookes were not very rich and were not very concerned about money so they did not live in opulence. Their simple residence, the Groove, resembled an austere country house rather than a palace. Most of the revenues collected by the State were used for the benefit of the entire realm in projects such as the construction of bridges, the development of the mines, the protection of villages, and public inoculation (Payne, 1995).

It is interesting how Rajah James and later on Rajah Charles instinctively identified important capacities for peace and connectors which were used to govern the country. The common good was always emphasized by the Rajahs and basic needs such as security and identity were always protected. Dyaks knew that their way of life, with the exception of headhunting, was respected and protected by the Rajah. Malays could practice their religion with no interference from the government, and the Chinese could engage in commerce with the protection of the government. The third Rajah, Sir Vyner Brooks, clearly summarized the philosophy of governance of his predecessors during his accession to the throne.

I make known to you Datus, Pengirans, Abangs, Inchis, Chiefs and all classes of people in Sarawak that I will on no account interfere with the Mohammedan faith or with any other religions or

faiths of the people. As the white labu and the kunder fruit show white when they are split,

so too is my heart unblemished towards you. My people, rich and poor, never be afraid if you are in trouble and have anything to complain of. I wish you all to tell me so that I can help you: therefore never be afraid to come to me (Payne, 1995). Thus spoke Rajah Vyner on May 24, 1917.

The previous quote shows how the Rajahs respected the right of the native inhabitants to practice their faith and to communicate directly with the Rajah and his officials about any possible complaints. In other words, he ruled for their sakes not for his own sake. This reflects the combination between Eastern Traditions of paternalism and the Western ideals of enlightened despotism. In other words, the Rajahs considered themselves the first servants of the people and respected their rights to continue their traditions.

SOME BEST PRACTICES THAT CAN BE EXTRACTED FROM THE GOVERNANCE OF SARAWAK UNDER THE WHITE RAJAHS

Several simple best practices can be learned from the experience of the White Rajahs in Sarawak. It can be argued that the Brookes ruled under some of the most difficult conditions possible. They were foreigners in a distant land. Some did not speak the native languages when they began to rule. Their resources were limited and they lacked an occupying army. Even under those serious constraints they managed to gain the trust and loyalty of the local population and to rule a peaceful and prosperous realm for more than one hundred years.

What was their secret? The Rajahs respected the local inhabitants and tried to learn about their traditions and customs. Attempts were made to communicate with each ethnic group by using their own rituals and traditions rather than imposing a foreign system by force (Payne, 1995). Negotiation and compromise were commonplace under the Rajahs. Each ethnic group had leaders who advised the Rajah on issues of importance to their group and to the entire realm. Moreover, the Rajah kept the peace between the groups by establishing some minimum rules such as the prohibition of head-hunting and theft. Proselytizing was not encouraged and the role of the Rajah was one of *primus inter pares* among the Malay Princes and Dyak Chieftains. Development projects and the common defense against pirates and invaders brought together the different groups in order to tackle common problems under the guidance of the Rajah. Finally, the Rajahs lived an austere life with little luxury and in direct contact with their subjects.

The previously mentioned smart practices of government under the Rajahs can be stated as general guidelines. It is advisable to respect the traditions and religions

of the population. Local leaders should be brought into the fold of government so that they can better rule their ethnic groups. Overarching goals should be stressed and tackled together by the entire realm. Finally, there should be good and sincere communication between the ruler and the ruled. Another optional but recommended caveat is that the ruler should set the example by leading an austere life when his realm is not overly prosperous.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE RULE OF THE WHITE RAJAHS OF SARAWAK AND THAT OF THE THAI GOVERNMENT

The Thai government annexed the formerly independent Sultanate of Patani in the early 20th century and immediately thereafter started to forcefully resettle ethnic Thais into the region (Wyatt, 2003; Liow, 2006; McCargo, 2008; Ungpakorn, 2007). Buddhist Temples were built and a public education system was established. The public education system taught a version of civic education claiming that Thailand was the land of the Thais and that other ethnonationalities were simply guests in the land. Buddhism was compulsory in the Thai education system and the local language, Melayu Patani, was not and is still not taught in public schools (Liow, 2006; Ungpakorn, 2007; Somwung, 2005; Askew, 2007; Jory, 2007; McCargo, 2004; Mydans, 2007; Storey, 2008). The territory was militarily occupied and all governance was carried out by officials sent by the central government who did not understand the local population nor wanted to adapt to local conditions (Jory, 2007). The result was the underdevelopment of the region and the growing resentment of the population (Ungpakorn, 2007). As a response to increasing calls by the local population to a greater degree of self-governance, the central government sent more army divisions and declared a state of emergency and military law was imposed (McCargo, 2004). The cost of the government policy in dealing with the unrest in the border provinces has been more than 3000 deaths since 2004 and billions of dollars wasted on military armaments (Askew, 2007). Needless to say the violence has not subsided.

The differences between the best practices of the White Rajahs and that of the Thai government in dealing with a multiethnic society are great. Thai nationalism has historically favored the assimilation of minority groups through a national propaganda campaign and compulsory education (Somwung, 2005; Jory, 2007; Mulder, 2000). While the Rajahs allowed each group to practice their religion as they pleased the Thai government has historically discouraged the practice of religions other than Buddhism and greatly restricted their activities.

Another important difference is that the Thai government has historically appointed officials from the central government to administer even the minutest local details rather than including locals in the government structure. The White Rajahs did the complete opposite; they in-

cluded traditional leaders into the government and thus gained their alliance. Furthermore, the Thai government discouraged local culture by promoting a homogeneous view of Thai national culture while the Rajahs showed respect to all ethnonational groups within their realm. Benefits of government projects under the Rajahs were meant to benefit all groups rather than limited elite in the capital, the opposite was and still is true in Thailand (Askew, 2007). Finally, the Rajahs lived very austere lives in direct contact with their subjects so as to show that they shared the good and bad fortune of the entire realm; the opposite has been the rule in Thailand (Wyatt, 2003; Ungpakorn, 2007; Chye, 2008; Pongsudhirak, 2008).

CONCLUSION

It is very useful to compare the two cases because they show two very different philosophies of government. The White Rajahs were already intuitively applying concepts such as local capacities for peace, self-determination, and sustainable development more than one hundred and fifty years ago (Payne, 1995; Anderson, 1999). Participatory development was the rule rather than the exception and sustainable development was already a concern before the turn of the 19th century. Rajah Sir James Brooke visited Siam in the 19th century and met the famous teacher Anna Hariette Leonowens and the heir to the throne, Prince Mongkut (Payne, 1995; Wyatt, 2003). It would be interesting to hear what Rajah James Brooke and Mrs. Leonowens would tell the Thai government about the unrest of the Deep South if they were alive today. Most likely they would recommend greater respect for local customs, religious freedom, and the strengthening of local institutions (empowerment); very modern and postcolonial concepts indeed. The unrest in the border provinces of Thailand is a very complex situation but it has certainly been exacerbated by virulent postcolonial nationalism combining the worst of historical Eastern despotism with the excesses of 19th century European nationalism. Maybe the end of colonialism does not lead to post colonialism but rather to an aberration called postcolonial colonialism.

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