

Advice to a Nation

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This paper examines the political thought of Sir Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien (also known as Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Waddien III) through his *Syair Nasihat* or Ode of Advice. The *syair* form of political writing has existed for a very long-time age *shi'r*, meaning poem.² Sir Omar was one of the most prolific contributors to the Bruneian heritage of *Syair* writing and was also known as the 'Royal Poet'.³ Among his many writings are *Syair Perlembagaan*, *Syair Asli Rajang Hari*, *Rampai Laila Syair* (which consists of *Syair Laila Hasrat*, *Syair Laila Cinta* and *Syair Laila Jenaka*), and *Syair Nasihat*. Of these, the 'advice' of Sir Muda Omar is most significant. His main objective in composing the *Syair Nasihat* was to counsel his children, and by extension, the nation, on how to govern the country in an Islamic way. It is composed as lines of advice from Sir Muda Omar on the fineries of statecraft and sheds much light towards understanding the evolutionary path leading to Brunei's eventual political conceptualisation in 1984 as a Malay Islamic Monarchy. This paper describes how Sir Muda Omar, from his writings in *Syair Nasihat*, fostered the institutionalisation of Islam by first making it as the nation's official religion, that allowed a government-led effort to instil an Islamic way of governance, and thus embed an Islamic way of life in Brunei Darussalam.

To examine Sir Muda Omar's ideas and aspirations for the nation, this paper plots the essentials of his advice onto an analytical matrix composed of four axes: the theological, juristic, Qur'anic values and culture.⁴ The matrix traces how Sir Muda Omar manifested the theological impulses that had been inculcated into

¹ The author is an Education Officer at the Ministry of Education and is currently studying on the Master in Public Policy and Management program at the Institute of Policy Studies UBD.

² Haji Kassim Haji Omar, *Pemikiran Muda Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien dalam Syair Nasihat*, (Brunei: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei, Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan, 2009), pg. 32. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, on the other hand, argued that Arab and Persian ode had significant roles in influencing the writing of Malay *Syair*. The structure of Arab and Persian ode were introduced to the Malay world through the mystic literature channel originated from Aceh – the learning centre of Islam in the 16th century. This had been the foundation of the inclusion of Islam in the writings of poems in the Malay world. See Haji Kassim Haji Omar, 2009, pg. 32.

³ Pehin Mohd Jamil Al-Sufri, *Royal Poet: Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien*, (Brunei: Brunei History Centre, 2010). Sir Omar showcased his writing skills in *Syair Nasihat* by utilising multiple techniques in the usage of pronouns, embedding questions, the adoption of foreign words as well as local dialects, and highlighted the significant contributions of prominent figures in the landscape of the Malay and the Muslim world. See Haji Kassim Haji Omar, pg. 31.

⁴ Amin Abdul Aziz, *The Madinian Polity: Visions of Islamic Governance*, Lecture series on the Master in Public Policy and Management, Institute of Policy Studies UBD, 2015.

him since young. Sir Muda Omar, like all the other Royal princes and princesses at the time, was educated in the palace and taught the traditional Brunei customs, etiquette, and good manners in accordance with Islam.¹ Sir Muda Omar grew to become a pious man and understood that a true Islamic leader bears the responsibility of ensuring the welfare of his people. It needs to be remembered, however, that although Islamic Governance is a relatively new concept in the Muslim world, an Islamic way of governing a country is not. There are clear parallels between Sir Muda Omar's advice in *Syair Nasihat* and those of al-Ghazālī's five objectives, or *maqāsid*, of the Shari'ah.² They are namely: (1) the preservation of Faith, (2) the preservation the intellect, (3) the preservation of the well-being, (4) preservation of progeny, and (5) the preservation of wealth.

Faith

Brunei Darussalam has practiced the teachings of Islam as the way of governing the country and His Majesty being part of the Royal Family was very well versed in the Islamic law.³ Sir Muda Omar reminded his children to learn and follow the teachings of Islam so as to be able to stay on the right path and be protected from calamities.⁴ Sir Muda Omar emphasised the importance of preserving and promoting faith for the people of Brunei through the practice of the Six Pillars of Faith (*Rukun Iman*). He says:

*Rukun iman enam perkara,
Gunanya besar tidak terkira,
Hendaklah tuntutan dengannya segera,
Supaya terlepas daripada mara.*

Sir Muda Omar's exhorted his children and the nation on areas that need to be considered and be taken into account in order to maintain and promote the status of Brunei Darussalam as an Islamic country, in particular the establishment of Islam as a way of life. Sir Muda Omar's religious exhortations were in reality an encouragement for the physical manifestation of *Tauhid* (Islamic jurisprudence). The manifestation of *Tauhid* occurred in the form of Sir Muda Omar striving to achieve the *maqāsid* of the Shari'ah.

¹ Pehin Jamil Al-Sufri, *Royal Poet, Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien*, (Brunei: Brunei History Centre, 2010)

² The term 'Maqсад' (plural: Maqāsid) refers to a purpose, objective, principle, intent, and goals of the Islamic law are the objectives/purposes/intents/ends/principles behind the Islamic rulings.

³ Pehin Jamil Al-Sufri, *Royal Poet, Al-Mahrum Sultan Haji Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien*, pg. 11

⁴ Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien, *Syair Nasihat*, (Brunei: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei, Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan, 1957); pg. 6-9

Physical Well-Being

During the seventeen-year rule of His Majesty in Brunei, the country progressed and developed rapidly.¹ He promoted the preservation and promotion of faith to his children and his subjects to ensure that the country will continuously progress and develop steadily, and at the same time, continue to uphold the teachings and the practices of Islam. The first Five-Year Development Plan was introduced during His Majesty's reign with the aim to revive the livelihood of the people and upgrade the quality of the lives of the people of Brunei as well as improving their welfare. The proliferation of the Islamic religion was given impetus; mosques, *surau's* (prayer halls), government office buildings, as well as schools were constructed throughout the State. As a Sultan, His Majesty successfully manifested his individual tauhidic impulses to a state level; resulting the country to continue to embrace the Islamic religion and Islam is made the basis for the administration in Brunei Darussalam.

Sir Muda Omar also strove to safeguard, and promote, the people's physical wellbeing by emphasising the development of health, social, economic, and organisational sectors via the First Five-Year Development Plan (1953-1958). By providing these infrastructures, Sir Omar was also fulfilling his secondary obligations, which is the *fardhu kifayah* (social obligations), in order to establish a form of Islamic governance. The First Five-Year Development plan allotted nearly 22% on health, education, and welfare.² To this end, he mentioned in his Syair:³

*Hak dan kewajipan hendak sebayakan
Kewajipan dibuat hak dibetulkan,
Bangsa Negara kita jayakan,
Semoga dapat dilaksanakan.*

*Kepala Negara dan pembantunya,
Wazir cheteria termasuk semuanya,
Daripada puncak hingga ke bawahnya,
Anggota pemerintah itu namanya.*

*Tuhan kurniakan cerdik berotak,
Dapat menduduki tempat yang layak,*

¹ Pehin Orang kaya Amar Diraja Dato Seri Utama (Dr) Haji Awang Mohd. Jamil Al-Sufri, *Royal Poet: Al-Mahrum Sultan Haji Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien*, (Brunei: Brunei History Centre, 2010), pg. 20

² *Ibid.*, pg. 121

³ Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien, *Syair Nasihat*, pg. 20

*Martabat tinggi beranak pinak,
Walih daripada orang yang banyak.*

Intellect

During the rule of Sir Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien, the education system of Brunei developed rapidly. His Majesty improved the teaching and education of his subjects, because according to him, education and knowledge were most important in the development of a nation.¹ His Majesty was the first Brunei Sultan to establish a Government English School in 1951. His Majesty, in his *syair* expressed his hope that his children will gain knowledge, which he described as a weapon that would protect them.²

*Wahai anakanda emas tempawan,
Cahaya mata ayahandamu tuan,
Bersegera mencari ilmu pengetahuan,
Itulah senjata yang setiawan.*

*Ialah senjata yang amat berguna,
Dapat dibawa ke sini sana,
Walau dibawa ke mana-mana,
Tidak sekali terjena juajana.*

Sir Muda Omar knew that it is the responsibility of the leader to provide education for his subjects. By providing excellent education system in Brunei, he envisioned a well-educated nation, and good quality of human agencies to ensure that the Islamic obligations of a leader in preserving and promoting intellect are achieved. Sir Omar knew that by providing a good platform for the education system in Brunei would be the catalyst to a successful journey in ensuring the values of the people in Brunei are preserved and promoted.³ His Majesty articulated his thoughts as follows:

*Tuntutlah ilmu bersungguh-sungguh,
Disertai dengan hati yang patuh,
Ibarat tanaman patilah tumbuh,
Dapatlah nikmat buah diluruh.*

Wahai malaiku intan dikarang,

¹ Ibid., pg. 59

² Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien, *Syair Nasihat*, pg. 2

³ Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien, *Syair Nasihat*, pg. 10

*Carilah ilmu dari sekarang,
Tuntutlah ia ketanah seberang,
Jangan sekali hati goyang.*

Prior to composing *Syair Nasihat*, Sir Muda Omar negotiated with the British administration to secure for himself a role in the administration of the State and assume the position as the country's Supreme Ruler.¹

Progeny

In 1957, the year *Syair Nasihat* was composed, was also the year Sir Muda was in the midst of negotiating the completion of Brunei's Constitution, which had been postponed for almost four years. His Majesty expressed in the *Syair Nasihat* elements of nationalistic feelings that he had shared with his children towards his love to the country and the people. In the above excerpt, His Majesty continuously stressed to the leaders in Brunei, including his children, the *Wazir's*, the *Chetaria's*, the *Manteri's*, the cabinet ministers, those who given positions in the Government, and in the community, are obligated to serve the *Ummah* and to look after the well-being of the people. He reminded them that they are not to abuse their positions for individual gain. In other words, His Majesty conveyed to his children that they have the obligation as ruler to the nation; they need to be just and equitable. Sir Muda Omar's writing skills were persuasive in expressing his thoughts through his composition; *Syair Nasihat* displayed his wisdom and visionary mind. He was a true Islamic leader who was on a personal quest to create a community conducive for the worship of Allah. He built the basic infrastructure to allow the people of Brunei to live comfortably, by providing good and free education for the people, while creating jobs for the people to support their own families. His Majesty also stressed on maintaining good relations with each other and the importance of maintaining peace which has always been the culture of Bruneians.² He said:

*Wahai anakanda muda teruna,
Delapan bersaudara emas kencana,
Inilah huraian tajuk mengerna,
Untukmu tuan mudahan berguna³*

¹ B.A. Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III and Britain: The Making of Brunei Darussalam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pg.68

² Haji Kassim Haji Omar, *Pemikiran Muda Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien dalam Syair Nasihat*, (Brunei: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei, Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan, 1996), pg. 64

³ Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien, *Syair Nasihat*, pgs. 2 & 24

*Allah menjadikan seklaian kita,
Manusia namanya nyata,
Walih daripada mahluk yang lata,
Kemuliaan kita ada berserta.¹*

*Budi perangai yang disebutkan,
Perbezaan elok dan kejahatan,
Disertakan doa dagang katakan,
Kemuafakatan yang diharapkan².*

Wealth

Sir Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien was a kind-hearted Sultan and was very concerned with the wellbeing of his people. When he ascended the throne, he made sure his role was more than just looking at the Islamic Marriage Law and was more involved in the administration of the country. He made sure the royalties gained from the oil industry were used for the development of the country. For instance, the state income was \$1.5 million in 1932 and it multiplied to a staggering \$276.6 million in 1952,³ and was the basis for a project of \$100 million Five-Year Development Plan. The broken-down⁴ of the Five Year Development Plan was as follows: 0.25% on Basic Surveys, 3.93% on agriculture, 59.78% on infrastructure, 21.77% on Health, Education and welfare, 7.81% on Administration and equipment and 6.41% on Miscellaneous. Sir Muda Omar shared his thoughts on the importance of having everyone in the country to work and carry the responsibilities of nation building together. He says:

*Bendera Islam pakin negerinya,
Ketua Negara benar tiangnya,
Rakyat sekalian jadi pasaknya,
Baharulah baik peraturannya.*

*Hak dan kewajipan hendak sebayakan,
Kewajipan dibuat hak dibetulkan,
Bangsa Negara kita jayakan,
Semoga dapat dilaksanakan.*

¹ Ibid., pgs. 2 & 24

² Ibid., pgs. 2 & 24

³ B.A. Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III and Britain: The Making of Brunei Darussalam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pg. 62

⁴ Ibid., pg. 123

Shura

Sir Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien demonstrated the role of a true Islamic leader who is just and equitable in the formulation of policies in Brunei Darussalam, for the good of the people. His Majesty's touched on the topic of governance and how administrators should practice *Shura* to gain good ideas and feedback.¹ He says:

*Menyebabkan dapat fikir berjalan,
Bantuan dari hamba taulan,
Dengan kehendak Malikuldayan,
Baru mendapat fikir handalan.*

Another instance where His Majesty had mentioned to the advisors of Brunei of the significance of *Masyuarah*² in order to come up with sound ideas are as follows:

*Jangan dikumpul fikiran singkat
Suburkan dia seberapa dapat
Misalan ikan jangan dipukat
bahas muzakarah dengan sepakat
Buat menyuburkan akal dan fikir,
Dalam perbahasan biar bertubir,
Fikiran baik banyak berkair,
Barharulah keluar akal ke bibir.*

What can be gathered at this point is that His Majesty wanted to remind the administrators of Brunei on the importance of having the interest of the people as their priorities when formulating policies. The process of policy formulation should always be conducted in consultation with the people to ensure balance and success in implementing them. Islamically, the process of policy formulation is always aimed to achieve justice and equity. These characters are crucial to achieve a society that is conducive to the worship of Allah.

Values

A good policy maker is one who shows compassion, patience, generosity, and is gentle in his dealings, is caring and self-denying towards those who are affected by the policies they formulate. The role of Qur'anic values is to calibrate juristic injunctions such that social justice and harmony can be achieved. In his *Syair*

¹ Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien, *Syair Nasihat*, pg. 5

² *Ibid.*, pg. 20

Nasihat, Sir Muda Omar constantly emphasised the culture and values of the Brunei people, who seek peace, harmony, and unity living in a community.

*Menyebabkan dapat fikir berjalan,
Bantuan dari handai taulan,
Dengan kehendak Malikuldayan,
Baru dapat fikir handalan.¹*

*Dengan kehendak Rabbulizzati,
Berasa lapang fikir dihati,
Sanak saudara datang mendekati,
Sama berfikir bersatu hati.²*

*Itulah adat kita di dunia,
Bersatu fahaman sangat berguna,
Bersatu hati jalan yang kena,
Berserta dengan niat yang baina.³*

It cannot be stressed more of the importance of Qur'anic values in calibrating the implementation of law. His Majesty forewarned his children, and the people, not to be arrogant and pretentiousness when administering the country:

*Takbur dan ria habisnya pani,
Sombong dan bongkak semuanya sunyi,
Gagah perkasa tiada berani,
Terlebih kecut daripada jerami.⁴*

*Jangan sekali perasaan takbur,
Sombong dan bongkak jangan didulur,
Hasad dan dengki biar dilebur,
Buatlah ibadat berserta syukur.⁵*

Sir Muda Omar constantly reminded his children, and by extension, the people of Brunei, to understand the importance of preserving and promoting the Faith, intellect, physical wellbeing, progeny, and wealth in order to achieve the

¹ Muda Omar Ali Saifuddin, *Syair Nasihat*, pg. 5

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., Pg. 6

⁴ Ibid., Pg. 8

⁵ Ibid., Pg. 9

objectives of the Shari'ah. The *maqāsid* of the Shari'ah¹ must be achieved to create a society that is conducive to the worship of Allah.

The *Syair Nasihat* contained within it Sir Muda Omar's vision for his country, Brunei Darussalam, that of an Islamic utopia reminiscent of al-Fārābī's 'Virtuous City'. According to al-Fārābī,² the "Virtuous city" is achieved when the spiritual and intellectual qualities of the ruler are aligned towards the attainment of happiness. Al-Fārābī also believed from his philosophical perspective, happiness³ can be achieved when the relational dynamics between the leaders and the followers are congruent.⁴ Sir Muda Omar a clear vision, from which he created for Brunei an awareness of the importance of Islam towards achieving true happiness. Sir Muda Omar expressed the principal components of governance through his skilful writing, by putting together his ideas in an eloquent manner in the *Syair* and weaving his critical thoughts seamlessly for his children and the nation. The principal mechanisms that His Majesty addressed in *Syair Nasihat* are Religion, Administration, Justice, and Equity; as well as advice for the younger generation. *Syair Nasihat* is also the fundamental political thought that conceptualised Brunei Darussalam as a Malay Islamic Monarchy.

His Majesty's aspirations contained in the *Syair Nasihat* are verification of his greatness as a ruler, an Islamic political thinker, as well as a philosopher. His Majesty's meticulous way of thinking can be seen from the technique he used in organising and usage of words in the *Syair*. From his writing, His Majesty communicated and emphasised the theological importance in governance towards the attainment of social harmony, so that the people of Brunei can live in peace and unity while preserving their culture and values. His Majesty also pointed out the heavy responsibilities of the ruler and administrators in carrying out their duties to serve and protect the people of Brunei with justice and equity. Through *Syair Nasihat*, His Majesty exhibited his patriotism and love for his country and this was the message that His Majesty hoped would reach the people

¹ Pehin Jamil Al-Sufri, *Royal Poet, Al-Mahrum Sultan Haji Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien*, (Brunei: Brunei History Centre, 2010), Pg. 10

² Abu Nasr ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Tarkhan ibn Uzlag Al-Farabi; and he is referred to as Farabi, Alfarabi, Ibn Abi Rabi, and Abu Nasr by writers in the 20 centuries. He was born towards the end of the ninth century, between 257-339 C.E. in the small town of Wasidj in Farab, now Otrar in Kazakhstan, in Turkish Transoxiana, and died in December 870-950 C.E. in Damascus at the age of eighty

³ For Al-Farabi, happiness is the highest degree of human perfection. Once we attain happiness, we are in need of nothing else to accompany it. Just like the rank, happiness is the preferred good, the greatest and the most perfect end that man has ever desired (Al-Farabi, 2007, 104-105)

⁴ Amin Abdul Aziz, *The Madinian Polity: Visions of Islamic Governance*, Lecture series on the Master in Public Policy and Management, Institute of Policy Studies UBD, 2015

of Brunei Darussalam, that is, to be patriotic to the country and to love the religion of Islam.