

The Role of Batam Island during the Period of the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation

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This article discusses the role of Batam Island during the period of Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (1964-1966), which in Indonesia was propagandised under the slogan “Ganyang Malaysia” (“Crush Malaysia”). The discussion focuses on why Batam Island was chosen as the command centre of the volunteer army in its mission to “Crush Malaysia”. The study shows that Batam Island’s strategic location was the main reason for its selection as the volunteer army’s base. The choice was also based on the island’s proximity to Sambu Island as the command centre of the KKO (the Indonesian Marine Corps). The two islands were prepared as the starting point of a planned attack against Singapore, then still part of the Federation of Malaysia. For Indonesia, Singapore was the most crucial part of the confrontation, and as part of the plan was to sabotage it, Indonesia chose Batam Island as the volunteer army’s base due to its proximity to Singapore.

Key words: *Existence, Batam, Confrontation, Indonesia, Malaysia.*

Introduction

Indonesia-Malaysia relations is unique because the people of both countries are believed to be *serumpun* (of the same Malay ancestral stock) (Jinn Winn, 2012: 6). However, the relation between both countries has not always been harmonious. Conflicts of different intensities have marked the history of their relation. From a historical perspective, the on-and-off conflict between the two countries is believed to be rooted in a Dutch and British colonial policy which demarcated their occupation of *Tanah Melayu* (literally Malay Land) according to the Treaty of London, which was signed in 1824. The treaty brought a significant impact on the integrity of the *serumpun* people of Indonesia and Malaysia, who became politically separated as people of the Dutch Indies and the Malay Peninsula. The tension during the colonial period, however, was much less intense than that during post-colonial times.

The hostility became more crystallised when the British formed The Federation of Malaysia, comprising The Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah. One of the factors that contributed to the formation of The Federation of Malaysia was the success of the government in eradicating communism in the Malay Peninsula, which had before been a threat to the position and rule of the Malay Kings in the Malay Peninsula (Efantino F & Arifin SN, 2009: 30). President Soekarno opposed the formation of the new state because he believed that the British would use it as a puppet state to maintain its grip over the Nusantara archipelago. In Soekarno's view, the Federation was the manifestation of what he termed *nekolim* (neo-colonialism). To stop such form of *nekolim*, Soekarno began his *Ganyang Malaysia* (Crush Malaysia) propaganda, which marked the beginning of the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation.

The confrontation itself ended in early 1966, following the succession of Soekarno by General Suharto. On 28 May 1966, the Bangkok Conference was convened, resulting in the signing of a Joint Communiqué stating that Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to end the confrontation and respect each other's national sovereignty. The Joint Communiqué was further entered into a peace agreement signed on 11 August 1966. After the signing of this agreement, the relation between both countries has remained harmonious except for several occasions when tension rose due to Malaysia's claim over Indonesia's sovereign territory, particularly the islands near the borderline between Indonesia and Sabah. During such tension, the *Ganyang Malaysia* slogan has always resurfaced as a form of propaganda voicing Indonesia's stance toward Malaysian political attitude and maneuver.

"*Ganyang Malaysia*" has been an important political jargon every time tension heats up between Indonesia and Malaysia. Another interesting aspect that can be highlighted from the period of confrontation between 1963 and 1966 is the position of Batam Island as the command centre for the Indonesian voluntary army. It was on the island that the members of the voluntary army received the commands to strike provocative missions in Singapore (then still an important region of the Federation) in order to crush the *nekolim* state. From Batam Island, two KKO (Indonesian Marine Corps) members Usman and Harun went on a mission to sabotage infrastructure in Singapore. Their mission would not have been successful had it not been meticulously planned in Batam. It is therefore interesting to discuss the role of Batam Island during Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation from 1963 to 1966.

Discussion

Indonesia warmly welcomed and recognised the Federation of Malaya as a new state following its independence from the British on 31 August 1957 (Kansil and Julianto, 1972: 78). The harmonious relation that had just begun to forge between the two neighbouring and ancestrally akin countries was shaken when on 16 September 1963, the Federation of Malaya

and the British agreed on the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia, merging together the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah (North Borneo). The idea was opposed by the communists in Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah (Efantino F & Arifin SN, 2009: 36). Taking into account the power of the communists, the British made a political deal with the Federation of Malaya, which among other things aimed to maintain the political stability in the Southeast Asian area. The intention was to include Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah (North Borneo) as part of the Federation of Malaysia and thus make sure that the communists would not be able to gain dominance in the three former British colonies. The joint plan of the British and the Federation of Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia was seconded by the US, which had its own political interest in Southeast Asia (Mohd Noor bin Abdullah, 1979: 30; Ismail, 2016: 67).

The plan gave rise to objection and support from the international world. In Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Indonesia strongly opposed the idea. Strong rejection also came from leftist groups in Brunei, Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah (North Borneo). Among those who opposed the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, four former British colonies, Parti Rakyat Sabah (Sabah People's Party), led by Azahari, voiced the strongest rejection against the merging of Sabah (Borneo) into the Federation of Malaysia (Fernandes, 1988: 156).

Despite resistance from Indonesia and the Philippines, the formation of the Federation of Malaysia was proclaimed on 16 September 1963, uniting the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah. The proclamation triggered a strong reaction from President Soekarno, who on 25 September 1963 declared officially Indonesia's intention to "Crush Malaysia". Indonesia waged a campaign not only to reject the formation of the Federation of Malaysia but also to annihilate it because by forming it the Federation of Malaya and British had violated an agreement previously signed by the Federation of Malaya, the Philippines, and Indonesia. In Soekarno's view, the new Federation was a real manifestation of neo-colonialism (*nekolim*). Soekarno believed that the British-imposed ideology could endanger the Indonesian revolution (The Ministry of Information of the Republic of Indonesia, 1964). In his address, Soekarno said, "Malaysia is a danger, cause things to be dangerous, and endangers the Indonesian Revolution. Therefore, together and unanimously, we must all-out crush Malaysia" (ANRI, 1964: 2). Soekarno's thoughts and actions were the manifestation of his effort to fight the new forms of colonialism and imperialism popularly termed neo-colonialism (Sutrisno 2013: 629).

With a view to crushing Malaysia, on 3 May 1964 Soekarno issued *Dwi Komando Rakyat* (Dwikora, Double Command of the People) after diplomatic approaches had ended in deadlock. President Soekarno stressed that Dwikora was not meant to drive Malay people out of their country, but to oust and end the British influence from Malay and Southeast Asian regions (Hadiningrat, 1971: 40). In addition, by Dwikora, Soekarno also intended to awaken

the nationalism, militancy, and patriotism of the Indonesian people (Jatmiko, et al, 2001: 861). Dwikora was further strengthened by the issuance of Presidential Decree Number 95 Year 1964 concerning the deployment of Indonesian volunteers to crush the Malaysian neo-colonialism project. At that time, a large number of volunteers enlisted and were stationed for preparation in Riau Islands and Kalimantan (Saefuddin, 2017: 104).

To implement Dwikora, President Soekarno formed Komando Mandala Siaga (Mandala Alert Command, abbreviated Kolaga), a joint command assigned to coordinate a number of Indonesian armed troops prepared for military operations (Arsana, 2014: 45). President Soekarno appointed Marshal Omar Dani as Kolaga Commander and Mulyadi and Brigadier General Achmad Wiranatakusumah as Kolaga Deputy-Commanders from the Naval and Army components of the Indonesian Armed Forces (Irshanto, 2019: 91). As Kolaga Commander, Marshal Dani headed several offensive components, including Komando Tempur Siaga I (Kopurgatu, Combat Command I), which was based in Riau. Kopurgatu's main duty was to launch attacks and special operations to Malaya, especially Johor, as a strategic area from which to take down Singapore. Commanded by Brigadier General Kemal Idris, Kopurgatu consisted of twelve combat battalions, including three paratroop battalions from the Indonesian Air Force, one landing force from the KKO. A number of troops from KKO and Brigif 15 (Infantry Brigade 15) of the Tirtayasa Siliwangi Military Regional Command were stationed in several islands bordering Singapore from Batam and Sambu Islands (Sukardi, 2010: 140). Sambu Island even became a silent witness of the plan to dispatch Usman Janatin and Harun Tohir on a mission to infiltrate and attack Singapore (Saefudin, 2017: 105). After the successful attack, however, the actions of the two secret operatives were put to an end when they were captured by the Singaporean police (Ibrahim, 1993: 36).

The Command Troops were also reinforced by a Landing Brigade operating around the border area of Riau (Batam) and East Kalimantan (Kusmayadi, 2017: 28). It was in this context that Batam Island played its crucial role as a logistic basis during the confrontation or the period. The "*Ganyang Malaysia*" politics campaign by Soekarno between 1963 and 1965 kindled the patriotism of Indonesian soldiers, the people of Batam, and the personnel stationed in the island. The special troops that were sent to Batam were from the KKO (Operation Command Corps). According to Suheiri (2013) during the confrontation period, KKO troops were sent to Batam in several batches. The first batch was a company of the Brawijaya Military Regional Command under the command of Lieutenant Yusuf. After landing in Buluh Island, some of the first-batch soldiers were transported to Dendang Island in Belakngpadang, and Langkana Island was chosen as a volunteers' post.

The second-batch KKO troops who were sent to Batam were a company of Siliwangi Military Regional Command led by Lieutenant Edy. They were then stationed in Buluh

Island to replace the company from Brawijaya, which was to be assigned to Tanjungriau. The third batch was the 2nd Battalion. They were dropped in Duriangkang from a helicopter. The arrival of the 2nd Battalion was followed by that of the 8th Battalion, whose members were to be stationed in Batuaji and Enjin Batu, Sagulung. During the assignment of the KKO troops in Batam, the Commander of the Indonesian Army made several visits to inspect the readiness of the troops that were being prepared to attack Singapore and Malaysia. Among the TNI (Indonesian Armed Forces) high-ranking officials who visited the area were Colonel Anwar, Colonel Ali Sadikin, General A. H. Nasution and Major General Soeharto. To inspect the field condition, KKO surveyed the Batam Island coastline using amphibious tanks. During his visit, General A. H. Nasution also made such an inspection.

To reinforce the organic troops, TNI also involved civilian fighters who enlisted as volunteers and were recruited as intelligence, logistic, and combat personnel, as well as infiltrators assigned in secret sabotage missions to Singapore and Malaya. Before assignment, they all were to undergo a short training by KKO and former Japanese Heiho soldiers. After completing the semi-military training, they were given uniforms as if they had been organic personnel of the Indonesian Armed Forces. Some of the volunteers were even armed. Among the civilian personnel were a number of volunteers of Chinese descent who were recruited because they had better knowledge and understanding about Singapore and were fluent in Chinese. Tony A. Samyong (Siam Hiang) and Hermawan Tio were two of the Chinese-Indonesian volunteers who were recruited.

After it was deemed that the volunteers had acquired sufficient knowledge and skills, the infiltration mission was launched. To avoid detection, bombs and other types of explosives were transported using boats that were usually used to ship rubber. The explosives were placed on the bottom of the boats, concealed by loads of rubber that would be sold to Singapore. The target of the mission was to sabotage the water pipeline along the Singapore-Malaysia border. The pipeline itself was used to channel water from Malaysia for the daily needs of the Singaporean people. The mission, however, failed. Several days after it began, two Indonesian operatives, Usman and Harun, were captured and sentenced to death. In Batam, the Indonesian flag was lowered to half-mast to honour their service.

The tensest incident that occurred during the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation period centered on the arrival of a British mother vessel at the Philips Straits in the early 1965. The mother vessel carried on it some fighter aircraft and arrived with a number of warships. The entire fleet and all the weapons on them were ready to launch attacks to Batam from the sea. To paralyze the British frog troops who were entering Batam from under the water, KKO prepared a series of attack using shotguns. The plan was that as soon as the British infiltrators had appeared from the sea, the Indonesian soldiers were to fire shots at them from the beach.

The agitated moment lasted a few hours. Ready for open combat, the KKO troopers were waiting from the instruction from the Indonesian Armed Forces Headquarters.

The Confrontation period was also a period of economic difficulty in Indonesia, including Batam. The cessation of trade between Indonesia and Singapore disturbed the economy of the people in Batam and Singapore. Batam people were no longer able to barter or sell their natural products to Singapore, and thus it was very difficult for them to get daily staples such as rice. The economic difficulty compelled the people of Batam and other islands in the Riau Islands to have recourse to alternative sources of food such as tubers, banana, and processed sago. Food made of sago became a favourite among people of Batam and the other neighbouring small islands, where sago was abundant. Sago came from Karimun and the other small islands nearby such as Kundur, Pulau Alai, and Tanjungbatu. As for rice, the people's sole hope was aids from the Indonesian government.

The difficult economic life during the Confrontation period prompted President Soekarno to voice another campaign under the slogan "*Berdikari*" (shortened from *Berdiri di Atas Kaki Sendiri* or literally Stand on One's own Feet). The campaign, which was addressed to all Indonesian people, including those who lived in Batam, was a call for all Indonesian people to fulfil their own needs without relying on foreign countries. One of the reasons behind the *Berdikari* campaign was Indonesia's resignation from the United Nations. In Batam, the campaign was implemented through the promotion of farming. People were encouraged to plant tubers, banana, vegetables and many other plants. Almost everyone started to turn their land to farm. Even fisherpeople, who usually went to the sea for a living, started to plant anything that could be planted.

During the period, people started to work in fields, clear forests, and convert them to farmlands. Large forest areas were cleared in a number of locations. The situation resulting from the policy enacted during the Confrontation period ended in 1966 after the succession of Soekarno by Soeharto. After the confrontation, the KKO troops stationed in Batam and other areas along the Malaysian borders, including Sarawak, Sabah, and Kalimantan, were withdrawn. Batam resumed its normal socio-economic activities.

Conclusion

Batam keeps historical stories that have yet to be explored by historians. One of them is the history about the activities and feats of the volunteers and KKO soldiers on the island during the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation. Its location made Batam a very strategic island. Batam was used as a logistic centre and as a place where secret meetings to plan secret missions were held. Its proximity to Singapore (then still part of Malaysia) made it easier for Indonesian soldiers to infiltrate and attack it. The Confrontation was a dark page in the



history of the Indonesia-Malaysia relation. Yet, history is not meant to be forgotten. Both countries now continue to maintain a good relation in various areas for the development and welfare of both countries and their people.



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