

NON-INTERFERENCE POLICY WHICH WORKED WELL

# Powers behind the throne of Perak

LIFE for Frank Swettenham tended to be either thoroughly dull or excessively exciting.

As magistrate and commissioner of the Court of Requests at Penang he was more concerned with the mundane business of state administration, and at times his duties became so dull he was led to wonder whether the Colonial Service was quite his cup of tea.

April in 1874 was just beginning to look even duller than 1873 when he received orders to go off on a special mission to the Sultan of Perak — and life began for Frank Swettenham.

The political affairs of Malaya had become tangled to an extent not previously experienced.

## Opposition

The opening of the Suez Canal and increasing competition from Germany and Holland had turned interest, among the merchants of Singapore and the Straits Settlements, to the possibilities of vastly increased tin mining in Perak and Selangor.

Such a plan, however, involved capital investment on a large scale and that, in turn, demanded a social environment of peace and security within which such projects could prosper without fear of disruption.

Preliminary approaches to the Sultans of the two States, however, gave little promise of economic co-operation.

River tolls, debt enslave-

ment, and the sale of royal favours had been, for centuries, the normal sources of state revenue and the royal families of Selangor and Perak failed to see why the system should be changed.

## Rival claims

The introduction of European-type taxation system based upon written law had no appeal for them and neither Sultan was prepared to be diverted from established custom.

To make matters even more difficult, Perak at this time was torn between the claims of no less than three princes, all of whom claimed to be the lawful successor to the throne: Abdullah, Yusof, and Ismail.

When Sultan Ali died in 1871, therefore, there was a good deal of jockeying of position.

Abdullah, as Raja Muda, had probably the best claim but he had, some months before the Sultan's death, incurred his great displeasure by selling some Perak lands to a Penang trader without authority and, even more reprehensible, had sat back tamely, without the outburst of bloody vengeance and rage expected of a prince, when a prince from neighbouring Selangor ran off with his wife.

By this cowardly attitude he had placed himself beyond the pale in Malayan eyes.

The Raja Muda, nevertheless, was the traditional successor.

Raja Yusof was the son

of the Sultan before Ali and he had filed his suit as the next sultan of Perak by an appeal for help in this context with the British Government, some years before.

The third claimant, Ismail, was Bendahara and as such, next in line to the Raja Muda should that prince be passed over.

He was also old, pliant, and the ideal candidate for an electorate that required a sultan who would be only a figurehead.

And at this time there were several powerful magnates in the court entourage, quite ready to provide the power behind the throne.

In fact, his mild nature and desire only to please, made Ismail by far the most acceptable contestant of the three.

When Sultan Ali finally vacated the throne at Sayong, Abdullah was worst placed of the three, for he lived at Batak Rabit, well down-river and in order to attend the funeral he would have had to pass the residence of Raja Yusof at Senggang — and feared violence from that quarter.

## Stalemate

In order to prevent him from passing, moreover, Raja Yusof was unable to attend the funeral, for that would have opened the river to his rival.

This left Bendahara Ismail alone at Sayong with a funeral on his hands — and the succession undecided.

Royal tradition in Perak, however, made it essential for the heir to the throne to attend the funeral of the late Sultan as part of the ceremony of succession.

The dead King, moreover, could not be buried until the successor was elected.

And when the burial had been held up for more than a month with neither Yusof nor Abdullah showing signs of breaking their stalemate,

the impatient court decided to take matters into their own hands. They made Ismail sultan, and buried Ali with full ceremony.

British civil servants, faced with preparing the way for the peaceful extension of trade into Perak, thus found themselves confronted with the prospect of an elderly and indecisive sultan ruling the interior of Perak whilst two discontented and mutually hostile princes held sway in the country between him and the sea.

Perak was virtually divided into three independent states.

## Tin war

To make matters even more complex, the Chinese tin miners of Larut chose this highly inconvenient time to start a private war of their own which brought the production of tin to a standstill and even threatened to spread its lawlessness to Penang.

Governor Sir Andrew Clarke decided to take drastic measures to clear up the chaotic situation.

He called both sides to the Chinese dispute and representatives from all three would-be sultans to a conference at Pangkor Island and there reached a solution to the problem — which satisfied the Chinese miners but nobody else.

The assembled chiefs were invited to set aside the succession of Ismail and to nominate afresh a new sultan from among the three original claimants.

Abdullah was elected, but the well-intentioned Governor, satisfied with the result, was unaware that the chiefs who voted were almost all from Abdullah's territory.

The supporters of Yusof and Ismail, living far up river, had not attended.

The Pangkor Settlement, moreover, was based on the following provision, which



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Abdullah, anxious to become sultan, accepted without very much attention to its implications:

"The Sultan to receive a British Resident, whose advice must be asked and acted upon on all questions other than those touching Malay religion and custom, so that the collection and control of all revenues and the general administration of the country would be regulated under the advice of the Resident."

It was tantamount to direct rule of the native states by Britain and this, so far as Governor Clarke was concerned, gave rise to two anxieties.

Firstly, such interference with a Malay king had never before been tried by British authority.

And secondly, Clarke had no right to impose such terms anyway. The whole thing was quite contrary to policy in Whitehall.

## Tough task

It was not without reason, therefore, that young Frank Swettenham viewed with some apprehension the task that lay before him that April day in 1874.

For the Governor was sending him, with Mr Birch, the first Resident to Perak, to see Sultan Ismail. He was to inform Ismail that he was deposed in favour of Abdullah and request him to hand over the regalia to his successor. Swettenham found himself in very deep water from the outset.

His interview with Yusof was not in the least encouraging.

"He said he was very pleased to see us," he reported, "and asked what we were doing. Being told, he said at once, 'the Governor has made Abdullah

Sultan, but it is not right. I am the man who by birth and the custom of Perak ought to be the Sultan of this country.'

"I asked him to explain and certainly the explanation he gave of his genealogy entitles him, undoubtedly, by birth, to the Sultanship."

It was a *fait accompli*, however, that Swettenham had to offer and there was no turning back.

Sultan Ismail, when they met him, was even less accommodating.

He said that, of course, he would be only too delighted to deliver up the regalia. Abdullah was a great friend of his and nothing would delight him more than to see his friend invested as Sultan in his place.

There was just one little procedural snag to be overcome.

## Assassination

It was an unalterable tradition of Perak that the regalia could only be handed over at the place where it was situated at the appropriate time.

It so happened that the regalia was now at Kuala Kinta and Abdullah was way down river. It would be necessary, therefore, for Abdullah to make a little journey to Kuala Kinta.

Oh—and just one more little problem.

"When Abdullah came, then they would have to summon all the chiefs of Perak to a great conference and if they all agreed upon it then, and only then, could the regalia be handed over."

It was an admirable bit of evasion.

In the end, Abdullah became sultan without the regalia. And Birch became Resident with Swettenham as assistant.

It was Britain's first adventure into local Malay politics and before it was over some British fingers were badly burned. For Perak flared into open revolt against British intervention.

Birch was assassinated. Abdullah was exiled to the Seychelles. Ismail was imprisoned in Johore.

Yusof came off best, for he became Sultan of Perak.

And Swettenham — well, twenty years later he was Governor of the Straits Settlements and his policy, which worked very well, was based on strict non-interference with Malay affairs. — H.T.S.

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