

**A GLIMPSE OF THE EARLIEST FORMS OF MALAYA'S
RELIGIOUS ADMINISTRATION IN THE PRE-
INDEPENDENCE PERIOD: SIR IBRAHIM'S MASONIC
AFFILIATION AND HIS ENDORSEMENT TOWARDS
JOHOR'S ISLAMIC ADVANCEMENT**

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Abstract

In British Malaya, one sees a more developed form of Freemasonry in action; following its 'De-Christianization' move in India in the 18th century, had begun to admit native rulers into its fold. One of the Malay rulers initiated into the fraternity and who consequently played an important role in the development of his state was HRH Sultan Sir Ibrahim of Johor. His initiation into Freemasonry served to reinforce his political authority in his state without invoking British animosity. However, he was most influenced by the Masonic teaching of "making good men better"; from this, he published *The By-Laws of Johore Royal Lodge* in 1922, in which he integrated Quranic admonitions with Masonic principles. The Sultan sought to improve the administration of his kingdom using the exposure to efficient European bureaucracy he was exposed to in Freemasonry, and gave Islam a more omnipresent influence in Johor through providing Islamic education, and endorsing Islamic rituals throughout the year. Thus, Sultan Ibrahim has shown us how it was possible to find a common ground between Islam and Freemasonry, and to use Freemasonry to make one not only a good man better, but also a good Muslim better.

Keywords : Freemasonry, British Malaya, Sultan Sir Ibrahim Johor, Johor Religious Schools, Johor Royal Lodge

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Abstrak

Freemasonry dalam sejarah berkembang seiring dengan perkembangan global Empayar British. Dalam British Malaya, kita melihat Freemasonry dalam bentuk yang lebih maju dalam tindakan; Freemasonry, berikutan langkah “De-pengkristianan” di India pada abad ke-18, telah mula mengalukan individu bukan Kristian dan politeis (penganut Hindu dan Buddha) ke dalam fraterniti tersebut, dan semakin banyak penguasa tempatan juga telah dilantik sebagai ahli. Salah satu daripada raja-raja Melayu yang menyertai fraterniti itu dan telah memainkan peranan penting dalam pembangunan negara ialah DYMM Sultan Sir Ibrahim Johor. Kemasukkan Sultan Ibrahim ke dalam Freemasonry bertujuan untuk mengukuhkan kuasa politiknya di negeri beliau tanpa menyeru permusuhan British. Walau bagaimanapun, beliau paling dipengaruhi oleh ajaran Masonik “menjadikan orang yang baik lebih baik”; daripada ini, beliau menerbitkan Undang-Undang Kecil dan Sejarah Johor Royal Lodge pada tahun 1922, di mana beliau telah bersepadukan nasihat Al-Quran dengan prinsip Masonik. Dari itu, DYMM telah memperbaiki pentadbiran kerajaannya menggunakan pendedahan sistem birokrasi Eropah yang telah didedahkan dalam Freemasonry, dan telah menyerlahkan pengaruh Islam di Johor dengan menyediakan pendidikan Islam. Kesultanan Johor juga telah menganjur dan mengambil bahagian dalam hampir kesemua upacara Islam yang telah dianjurkan sepanjang tahun di Johor. Oleh itu, penglibatan aktif Sultan Ibrahim dalam Freemasonry telah menunjukkan kepada kita bagaimana ia adalah mungkin untuk mencari titik persamaan antara Islam dan Freemasonry, dan telah menggunakan Freemasonry bukan sekadar menjadikan seorang yang baik lebih baik, bahkan juga menjadikan seorang Muslim lebih baik.

Kata kunci: Johor, freemason, Lodge diRaja, pentadbiran, Muslim

Introduction

This article aims to illuminate the place Freemasonry occupied, and the political, social, and religious impacts it had on Johor’s colonial

history, covering the period from 1900 to 1957, when Malaya gained its independence from the British. However, this article focuses principally on two main propositions: first, that Freemasonry was a tool used to advance the political interests of not only the British who introduced the first lodge in Malaya, but also by indigenous rulers, specifically the Sultan of Johor, whose decision to become a Freemason had strong political motives – that is, to preserve his autonomy over the state of Johor without directly opposing the British colonizers. Second, the Sultan's strict adherence to the benevolent values Freemasonry preaches such as "Making good men better" resulted in the publication of the By-laws (*The By-Laws of Johore Royal Lodge*) during his tenure as Grand Master of Lodge Johor Royal, in which he demonstrated the compatibility between Masonic values and Quranic admonitions that similarly preach good Muslims to become better. Thus, the Sultan's adoption of Masonic values –perceived as inherently "Western" due to Freemasonry's Christian-Judaic origins – ironically resulted in Islam gaining an even more omnipresent influence in Johor, specifically in the area of politics and governance, education, and in daily religious practices and Islamic rituals. Thus, as will be demonstrated in this paper, Freemasonry has played a significant role not only in political developments throughout the colonial era, but also in socio-cultural and religious transformations of Malay-Muslim society, specifically focusing on Johor.

His Highness is the first Malay to become Master of a Lodge in the Malay Peninsula...he occupies the Chair of the only English Lodge...and to his intense pleasure the Hon. Dato Abdul Rahman has become a Brother Worshipful Master at the other side of the world, in the hub of the Empire... - Frisby A.W, 1958²

Historically, Freemasonry's role in the scheme of British colonial administration throughout its Empire demonstrated a vital impact with the help of Masonry's teachings of benevolence, charity, universality and cosmopolitanism. During the British rule in India, it began to admit potential native rulers into Freemasonry to establish a

2 Frisby, A. W. (1958). English Freemasonry in Malaya and Borneo 1765-1958. *The Pentagram*, 43.

common ground to welcome the natives in being part of the colonial enterprise. This article will explore how Freemasonry began to attract the attention of the Malay Sultans, in particular the Sultan of Johor in the early 1900s.

This is because archival Masonic records indicate that in the early 20th century, many lodges had initiated several prominent indigenous rulers and individuals. This article will thus discuss how the Sultan of Johor adopted Freemasonry to maintain close ties with the British while attempting to preserve his sovereignty and advance his own political interests and the development of his kingdom.

This article focuses specifically on HRH Sultan Ibrahim of Johor, who was the first Malay ruler to be initiated as a Mason and to be appointed Grand Master. Sultan Ibrahim's attempts in modernizing Johor were anchored deeply in the Masonic principle of "making good men better". This belief prompted him to become a better Muslim, and during his two-year tenure as Grand Master, Sultan Ibrahim published the *By-Laws of the Johor Royal Lodge* in which he integrated Masonic values and principles with Quranic verses that similarly preach benevolence, charity, and mutual aid among brothers. Furthermore, the Sultan's deep involvement in the Masonic circle widely exposed him to an efficient model of European bureaucracy that he attempted to implement in his administrative system in Johor.

I will provide a summarized study revolving around the By-Laws and we shall observe the impact of Freemasonry on the Royal Court of Johor. I have chosen to highlight this event, and specifically HRH Sultan Ibrahim's affiliation towards Freemasonry due to two reasons: first, his unique understanding of Freemasonry, and how he demonstrates cohesion of his Islamic faith and Masonic beliefs in the By-Laws; the second intention is that his installation as Worshipful Master of Johor Royal Lodge was the highest rank ever achieved by Malayan royalty during that period. His appointment as Worshipful Master may not only suggest that the Sultan was able to win the favor of the British, but also that the British may have begun to accord more respect and trust towards Malay rulers to allow them to lead such an important and influential organization within the colony (and the British Empire).

The By-Laws of Lodge Johore Royal

HRH Ibrahim's efforts in establishing connections between Freemasonry and Islam was made clear via this *By-Laws*. In it, Freemasonry was justified using 101 Quranic verses which pertain to each subject that the page confers to. For example, the connection regarding 'wisdom' between Quranic verses and Masonic values is explicitly made in the opening of the first chapter of the book, in which the by-laws of the lodge is laid down, with a verse that reads, "*He giveth wisdom unto whom he pleaseth, and he unto whom wisdom is given hath received much good*" (The Koran pages 32-33, cited in *By-Laws of Johore Royal Lodge*). Another example is regarding the Reference Committee, where the By-Law states that the committee shall attend to all questions of management, and investigate the qualifications of new candidates for initiation, joining members and honorary members; and underneath it, HRH Sir Ibrahim has put the Quranic verse regarding the value of assistance; "*Assist one another according to justice and piety*" (The Koran at page 82, cited in *By-Laws of Johore Royal Lodge*).

Inside the record of his Installation as Worshipful Master was also filled with Quranic verses, linked with every subject it represents; its first page lists 4 Quranic verses, all representing Grandeur, companies, guidance, and duty, suitable for the role of the Worshipful Master;

The Book of the Majesty (Al-Qadr): *And what will make you comprehend what the grand night is. The grand night is better than a thousand months.*

The Book of The Companies (Al-Zumar): *And those who are careful of their duties shall be conveyed in companies, and its doors shall be opened and the keepers of it shall say to them: - Peace be upon you, you shall be happy.*

The Book of Muhammad: *He will guide them and improve their condition, and cause them to enter that which he has made known to them.*

The Book of The Rangers (As-Saffat): *For the like of this then let the workers work.*

The By-Law then continues to describe the Worshipful Master as according to the Quran;

The Book of the Elevated Places (Al-A'raf): *There was a party who guided people with the truth and thereby did they do justice.*

The Book of Joseph (Yusuf): *Surely I saw eleven stars and the sun and the moon. I saw them making obeisance to me.*

The Book of Yasin: *And the sun runs on to a term appointed for it. As for the moon we have ordained for it stages.*

The Book of the Cattle: *We sent to you a writing on paper then they had touched it with their hands.*

Its next page was the section for “Rulers Supreme and Subordinates”, and above it was a Jawi written word that reads فمرنته (which means The Ruler); underneath it are the Quranic verses, supporting each chair of the Masonic body:

The King Emperor; *Thou givest us a good one, we shall certainly be of the grateful ones* (Elevated Places, Al-A'raf). The Sultan of the State and Territory of Johore: *Have you received from us an agreement confirmed by an oath* (The Book of the Pen, Al-Qalam). The Army and Navy, and the Johore Forces: *They are on a right course from their Lord, and these it is that shall be successful* (The Book of the Cow, Al-Baqarah).

The By-Laws and the Record thus stands as one of the by-products of Masonry's “Making good men better”. For instance, an English Mason might refer to his Bible constantly as guidance, because that is what Freemasonry has taught him to be, because a Mason shouldn't be an “irreligious libertine” (Anderson, 1734), thus if a Mason believes that his God exists, which is noble, then, in making him better, he shall be more religious. Similar to the Muslims, then if he were to believe in Allah's existence, then he shall be more committed, or more Islamic as means for him to be a better Muslim ruler, better in his administrative role, and better in his diplomatic ties and policies. HRH Sir Ibrahim understood this philosophy very well, which inspired him to compile these 101 Quranic verses into the By-Laws of the Lodge, and yet it was due to this philosophy that

for one of the reasons made the state of Johor greatly Islamic in its administration compared to other Malay states in the modern era. Johore at that time was a modern-Islamic state at its peak, and its Sultan, was a Mason.

An Islamized State of Johor

HRH Sir Ibrahim improved Johor's Islamic administration by establishing the Johor State Religious Department, along with other departments. This reorganized Johor's Islamic affairs under new and improved system, after having the Islamic Leader, Mufti, and Great Kadhi system to oversee its Islamic concerns which was established during his father's reign (Borham, 2002).

The Sultan emphasized Johore's Islamic development by translating the state's constitution; the Turkish *Majallah Ahkam al-Adliyyah* from Arabic into Malay, making it easier to understand and to be implemented thoroughly. The *Majalah* was an adaptation from the Ottomans' syaria regulations, brought to Johor and was implemented during Sultan Abu Bakar's reign. Johor was able to gain such guidance from the Caliphate due to Sultan Abu Bakar and his son's frequent visits to Turkey which gratified their diplomatic ties. In 1913, the *Majallah* was translated into Malay by the Mufti, and officers of the Islamic Department of Johor, it was presented to the Sultan and accepted, and it was later on printed under the Government and was renamed to *Majalah Ahkam Johor*. The Sultan then applied the code as the official reference for all courts of Johor (Borham, 2002). The Mufti of Johor reiterated Sultan Ibrahim's statement regarding his enforcement in practicing the *Majalah*;

The Royal Highness Sultan Ibrahim, master of the state and territory laws in respect of Johor government body in clauses 49 and 57 and with the consent of the office of justice and religion had command and allow to be used and applied by all officers, magistrate judges of Johor the "Majalah Ahkam Johor" and all its contents regarding all syariah reference in Johor.

The *Majalah Ahkam Johor* faced no difficulties in practice since Malay Muslims operated the court and religious department. Johor during that time was considered as one of the earliest state to have

established a strictly modernized administration in supervising its religious affairs in Malaya. Johore then however embraced British intervention in its law code The Undang Undang Tubuh Negeri Johor of 1908; the Sultan adapted the “Penal Code” and the “Civil Code” extracted from British law codes, and in it, the term “law” was referred to the British law (Borham, 2002). Sir Ibrahim was very dedicated in Islamizing his state, and with implementing the *Majallah Ahkam* the Sultan took full responsibility pertaining Johor’s religious affairs by endorsing almost all Islamic functions that Johor host such as the *Marhaban*, *Maulidur Rasul Parades* (Prophet’s Birthday), Quran reading competitions, and etc.

In the year 1954, with encouragement from the government and Johor’s Religious Department, a total of 10,000 Johoreans celebrated the Prophet’s Birthday in Johore Bahru. The festival promoted harmony of different races when among the procession of 5,000 people which started from the Government Office, a group of Chinese Muslims carried banners with Quranic verses inscribed in Chinese characters. The procession then joined the crowd of 5,000 at the Supreme Court field. Lectures regarding the Prophet’s life were given in Malay, Chinese, English, and Tamil. Attendees of the festival then continue the celebration with procession towards the Sultan Abu Bakar’s Mosque, where a prayer was held, a *Kenduri* (feast) was served for all Muslims afterwards (Straits Times, 1954). Until now, the Royal Court of Johor still sanctions the *Maulidur Rasul’s Parade* in each of Johor’s cities by attending each location personally, the cities include Johor Bahru, Batu Pahat, Kluang, Segamat, Kulajaya, Kota Tinggi, Muar, and etc. Distinctively, with an average of 5,000 attendees every year (10,000 attendees are usually present in the capital; Johore Bahru), marks the celebration as part of Johor royalties’ tradition; many important ceremonies and declarations of the royalties were held coinciding the *Maulidur Rasul*. For example Tunku Idris Iskandar, the third son of Sultan Ibrahim Ismail was declared as the Tunku Temenggong on 26th February 2010 by his father the Sultan when giving a speech during the Maulid Parade at Masjid Sultan Abu Bakar¹ (MPJBT, 2010). The Maulid Festival of Johor gained more focus when in 2012, the current Sultan, Sultan Ibrahim Ismail ibni Sultan Iskandar declared Muar as *Bandar Maharani*; carrying the honor of being Johor’s royal town (The Star, 2012).

In the next section I will deliver one of the biggest influence of Sir Ibrahim's Islamization efforts in Johor, which carries a great significance in the kingdom's educational department, which is the Religious Schools.

Johor's Early Educational System

The Sultan was determined in creating a modernized and Islamized state of Johor with the help of his ministers and Malay advisors. This was also consistent with the Masonic aphorism of "making good men better" that he adhered to, which also prompted him to become a better Muslim ruler. This is first seen in his integration of Johore Royal's By-Laws with 101 Quranic teachings; since its publication, almost gradually all religious functions and purposes had to be endorsed by the royal court of Johor, and no religious affairs were ever conducted in Johor without the royal family's presence. Johor by then was the earliest Malay government that had established a constitutionalized Islamic Court Law administrated by its own religious council, and had its own system of religious school.

The kingdom stressed education as one of their priorities provided for Malay communities. As a result of cultural factors, Johor's educational system was divided into three; the Quran School or Religious School, Malay School, and English School (Basri, 1985). Started in Johor's former capital city Teluk Belanga, Singapore, Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim, the father of Sultan Abu Bakar received much help from Rev. Keasberry in advancing Johor's education. With this, Johor's ruler was considered as the first Malay monarch to have focused in providing education to its people during the mid-19th century. J.T. Thomson who witnessed Perak, Selangor, Pahang, and Kedah during the 1860s concludes that the rulers of those states ignored in guiding their children, leaving them live as they please³. However Johor in 1850 had witnessed the development of its education scene when its Sultan encouraged the growth of schools throughout the state. During those times that the young Abu Bakar was offered by the Straits Office to pursue his education in England, an offer which Temenggong Ibrahim had refused since an English School for Malays was already established in Singapore. Supported by the

3 *Sequel to Some Glimpses into Life in the Far East, London, 1865*

London Missionary Society, Rev. Keasberry practically run the school under private initiative. It was then allocated under governmental support (Basri, 1985). Apart from Keasberry School, Johor children at the age of 10 have had Islamic tutoring in Quran School⁴ (Alias, 1928), a tradition which was handed down to generations, thus from here on that the Sultan Abu Bakar was influenced in modernizing the Religious School. Unconcerned British government in Malay education resulted the Temenggong to take some matters in his own hands when in 1855 he made a substantial donation of \$1,500 for school establishments, specifically for the Malays. The Governor, too, realized the Government's inactive part in this, made a spontaneous donation with another \$1,500. Two schools were then consecrated from the donation, each in Teluk Belanga, and Kampung Gelam (Basri, 1985). By the 1880s Johor relocated its governing city to Johor Bahru, resulting the "people of Temenggong"⁵ from Teluk Belanga to move as well. Within years Johor Bahru had increased its population, among it the growth of schools, continuing its course similar to Teluk Belanga (Basri, 1985). With the integration of all three schooling systems, these pupils shall soon be admitted as Johor's governing functionaries (Basri, 1985) and adapted both western and Islamic bureaucracy into the state successfully.

By 1935, Johor's Malay elite was united in supporting the idea of expanding English inside schools, a meeting was then concurred in 19 February 1935 at the Menteri Besar's office, with leading Johor Malays participated commending that free afternoon English schools should be started in Johor Bahru, Muar, Batu Pahat, and Segamat. This shall enable Malay children to study English like children of other races, as well as focusing on the study of Malay and Islam (Winstedt, 1992).

Johore Religious Schools (1885-1955)

Islamic education in Johor was a necessity, endorsed by Sultan Abu Bakar inside Johor's written constitution since 1885; the Islamic curriculum since then became one of Johor's main cultural and religious assets. This demonstrates the Sultan's effort in ensuring

4 Mohamad Haji Alias, *Tarikh Datuk Bentara Luar, Johor Bahru*, 1928

5 The Temenggong's political supporters.

his citizens achieve a structured Islamic education, organized under the kingdom's supervision, very much in contrast to other Malay states whose Maahad and Madrasahs were independent from their ruler's authority and followed an independent syllabus. If Sultan Abu Bakar had pioneered Johor's Religious Schools, his son, Sir Ibrahim perfected it.

Having been nominated as the highest authority to protect and serve his citizens using the teachings of Islam, as according to Johor's constitution, Sir Ibrahim was crucially determined in putting the *Majallah* into practice (Borham, 2002). One of his most recognizable efforts was the Religious schools of Johor, also known as the *Sekolah Agama Johor*, which he formally sanctioned its advance circa 1913 (Basri, 1985). The early Religious School was formerly named Quran School, a continuous form of Islamic educational system which took place during Teluk Belanga times (Basri, 1985). The school admitted children as early as 8 to 10 years old. The Quran School continued to grow alongside with Malay Schools during the 1880s and were held inside Malay Schools in the evening, some were held inside mosques (Basri, 1985). In 1901 a Religious School was constructed in Johor Bahru, making it one of the earliest to have its own building, more Religious Schools were then established and co-existed inside Malay School buildings. By 1906, 8 religious schools were reported to have existed in Muar⁶, some were in Jalan Bakri, Parit Saksi, Parit Raja, Parit Bakar, Parit Jawa, Tangkak, and Kesang⁷. In 1913 the Sultan restructured and reorganized all Quran Schools, making the schools officially and completely under the kingdom's endorsement (Basri, 1985).

Being under the kingdom's administration, its facilities and curriculum were taken into account by Johor Religious Council, various subjects were taught afterwards. The Religious School were open to all Malay Muslims and charged no fees, having originally named Quran School⁸; due to its teaching that focused only on the

6 Singapore and Straits Directory (SSD), 1901

7 *Ibid*

8 *Sekolah Agama Kerajaan Johor*, G.A.J, August 11, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.mahasiswajohor.my/2012/08/sekolah-agama-kerajaan-johor.html>

Quran, it was restructured to *Sekolah Kitab* (Kitab School) when in 1920 new syllabus were added that included the study of the Quran, Tauhid (Theology), Ibadat and Sufism⁹. In 1923 the Religious School functioned on evenings, and was renamed as *Sekolah Agama Petang* (Evening Religious School), giving way for English education and Malay during the morning. More subjects were added in the curriculum; Fiqh Muamalat, Munakahat, Faraid, Jenayah, Akhlak (Values and Ethics), Tarikh (History), Jawi Writing, and Arabic Language¹⁰. During the same year a Darjah Khas (Special Grade) was created as an institution of Johor Religious Education, which acted as the final optional course for the secondary grade¹¹. Built upon the philosophy of Johor's Religious School, it is meant to provide knowledge of Islam for students who only attends secondary vernacular schools, and to fulfill the requirements for their future careers. The Special Grade however is held one day per week for a period of one year only, whereas the Religious School paralleled with vernacular schools, stretching its students in attending two schools per day throughout the week.

The successful establishment of Religious Schools instilled the desire to give their children a religious education in the people of Johor. In November 1951 attendance of the schools were overcrowded, leading to the demand of 15 more Religious Schools¹². The Religious Affairs Department voiced out this demand to the State Government – ten for boys and five for girls – to be established in Johor Bahru, Batu Pahat, and Muar districts. 100 more teachers – 60 men and 40 women – were also requested by the department. Enrolment had also increased since the previous year from 19,607 pupils to 20,680 pupils by mid-November¹³. One of the factors of encouragement drawn by the Department was also to oppose and hinder the children of the state from ideologies of Communism, Haji Osman said;

9 *Ibid*

10 *Ibid*

11 *Ibid*

12 *Muslims want 15 more schools*, The Straits Times, 28 November 1951, pg. 4.

13 *Ibid*

“Our religious schools are a formidable bulwark against Communism...the more attention we pay to religious education the less effect will Communist doctrines and propaganda have on the Muslim people...”¹⁴

By that year, the total number of religious schools in Johore had reached 189 schools, and an overall of \$700,000 had been allocated for religious schools by Johor Government in that particular year¹⁵.

Religious school also provided co-curriculum activities in which all Religious Schools throughout the state shall compete with each other, these activities consists of Quranic Recitation, Arabic Oral Competition, Quranic Tafsir Competition, Zanji Competition, Quranic Memorization Competition, Tahrim, Azan, and Iqamah Competition, and Calligraphy Competition. With these activities held, Johor's religious activities among Muslim communities became necessary, and enhanced, uniquely under royal arms¹⁶. In 1950 for example nearly 1,000 people attended a Quran reading contest for religious schools held at Kota Tinggi, a total of 16 religious schools of Johor competed resulting the Tambatan Tinggi Religious School as the winner (Straits Times, 1950).

The Sultan did not limit his concerns only to the state's religious schools, in 1948, the Arabic Schools¹⁷, which is more private in its nature, had received attention from the Sultan with intentions to help and construct more Arabic Schools in Johor¹⁸; *“This step has been taken at the express wish of the Sultan who wants Arabic schools in the State to be increased and helped by the Government.”*

A Commission of Inquiry dispatched by the Religious Department of Johore then visited Arabic Schools in Muar, Segamat, and Kluang

14 *Ibid*

15 *Ibid*

16 *Sekolah Agama Kerajaan Johor*; G.A.J, August 11, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.mahasiswajohor.my/2012/08/sekolah-agama-kerajaan-johor.html>

17 The difference between Arabic School and Religious School is that Arabic Language is used as its main medium in teaching and is considered higher in its standard of education than the Government Religious School, which is taught in Malay.

18 *Johore to Aid Arabic Schools*, The Straits Times, 18 December 1948, Page 4

to “find how these privately run schools can best be aided by the Government.”¹⁹

After years of strengthening its foundation, Johor’s religious schools was top notch in its arrangement, the Singapore Free Press reportedly praised Religious School of Johor’s system as being the best in all federate states in 1955;

*Most Advanced in Federation: Johore is the most advanced state in the Federation regarding religious instruction for Muslim children...*²⁰

With this exemplary progress, religious schools in Johor had already gained attention from other states and is considered as a model since 1950. Kedah, Terenganu, Selangor, and Pahang had already sent representatives as observers to study the religious educational system of the State²¹. Its attendance by then had increased to 21,831 boys and 5,293 girls. With this expansion also came opportunities for job vacancies, 286 male teachers had been admitted along with 96 female teachers to serve religious schools;

*At present, 21,831 boys and 5,293 girls attend religious schools in Johore, and are taught by 286 male and 96 female teachers.*²²

Johor Religious Prison School

Until today, the Royal Court of Johor continued to endorse Johor’s religious education that Sir Ibrahim had paved the way for. The State Government continues to express concerns regarding the religious education of its people; recently, in collaboration with the Johor Religious Department, Johor Islamic Council, and the Prison Department of Malaysia, the State Government realized that the prison community needed education regarding religious affairs the most. In December 2013, the Kluang Prison Department established its first religious school behind bars and was named Sekolah Agama Tarbiyah Husnul Khatimah. It was sanctioned and launched by the

19 *Ibid*

20 *Most advanced in Federation*, The Singapore Free Press, 5 January 1955, Page 7

21 *Religious classes for Johore schools*, The Singapore Free Press, 23 October 1950, Page 5

22 *Ibid*

Sultan of Johor, Sultan Ibrahim Ibni Almarhum Sultan Iskandar²³. By offering Islamic education to its inmates of whom 75% are Muslims, the religious school pioneered its way as being the first and only religious prison school in Malaysia. With full support of the Home Minister Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, he considers this an important form of recovery for inmates of Kluang²⁴;

“Most of them have poor religion knowledge and we are happy with the setting up of the religious school which we believe faith-based programs provides most effective tools to help individual reshape their lives.

He added that the education offered by the school shall be useful for the inmates' future;

“Opening the school came in time because there are needs for inmates to prepare themselves with skills, knowledge and spirituality to face various challenges when they leave the prison later. Besides giving them a normal school education for human capital development, knowledge on religious could help them to stay away from wrongdoings.”

Among those who attended the ceremony were Johor's royal family; Tunku Mahkota Johor Tunku Ismail, Tunku Temenggong Johor Tunku Idris Iskandar and Tunku Panglima Johor Tunku Abdul Rahman, Chief Minister of Johor Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, and Prison Department director-general Datuk Seri Zulkifli Omar²⁵.

Conclusion

In the early 1900s, Johor participated in the global modernization of its bureaucracy, heavily influenced by European-styled administration, which helped in creating Johor as one of the most advanced states in Malaya through its economy as quoted from the *Mail* on 10 July 1934: “The financial position of Johore must be

23 *Prison starts first religious school for inmates*, The Star, 3 December 2013

24 *Ibid*

25 *Ibid*

considered stronger than that of any other of the Malay States. It has for instance, no public debt. Its balance sheet shows cash in having investments totaling \$37, 745, 999,” political stability, education, and administration. It was also not possible without these three influences; first, Sir Ibrahim’s initiative and interest in European methods of administration which had brought new ideas regarding how to further develop Johor and to expand the State’s governing bodies. Second, influences of Malay nobles such as Abdul Rahman Andak, Dato’ Onn, Ungku Abdul Hamid, Dato Abdullah bin Jaafar, the Muftis and Kathis of the religious body, and others, who realized and promoted Johor’s potential in Islamic education, culture, and administration. Third was the growing British influence within the kingdom itself that had made Johor eager – and more confident in its ability – to stand up on its own. It is to be noted that Sultan Abu Bakar’s efforts in modernizing and constitutionalizing Johor was an important strategy to hinder the British by the sidelines (Noor, 2002), but it also cannot be denied that British investors were an important contributor to Johor’s stable economy.

The Sultan’s affiliation with Freemasonry however proved to be more than just a strategy to rise among the ranks of the British elites, for he also sought to preserve Johor’s political autonomy from the British and to protect the Malay culture, religion, and the rights of its people. Freemasonry, however did play an important role in influencing Sir Ibrahim to be religiously oriented in his administration and rule, under the slogan “making good men better”; had he not been more religious, it is impossible to bear the fact that he had published a Lodge Johore Royal’s By-Law with 101 Quranic verses, all paralleling every by-law the book teaches. The systematization of his kingdom’s religious affairs under an official governing body also was a result of being exposed to the workings of European bureaucracy in Freemasonry, its organized system of networking, and fragments of idealism from the Enlightenment Age. All in all, he successfully managed to integrate both a form of Islamic and ‘Western’ ruling system, enabling him to keep Johor’s sovereignty from the hands of the British. With very limited authority during British intervention in Johor, joining Freemasonry was one of his strategies to declare himself as part of the British

family, thus allowing him to gain the favor of the British, and to use what's left of his power to achieve stability in Johor's economy and in his own political rule. Sir Ibrahim envisioned that Malays could achieve higher ambitions with the right education. He did not fight the British directly, from whom Johor had much learn; instead, what he did was taking advantage by building close ties with the British through joining the Empire Lodge, from which he gained exposure to European bureaucracy, and to Western Masonic values of charity, benevolence, and cosmopolitanism.

During the years preceding Malaya's independence, the Sultan in fact believed that the British still have a lot more to offer to the Malays, and resented the idea of Johor being part of the Federation as being independent from the British would be a disaster considering the Malays were not ready to govern themselves. Indeed, this cynicism was based on the fact that Johor became one of the most developed states in peninsula with the help of Malay advisors to the Sultan with strong British influence and a Sultan who looked up to the British in his efforts to advance his state and his people; he therefore saw little reason why this productive partnership should end so soon.

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(Endnotes)

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