

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GDN-21  
Brunei's Teapot Rebellion

12 Road 5/35  
Petaling Jaya, Selangor  
Malaya  
16 December 1962

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

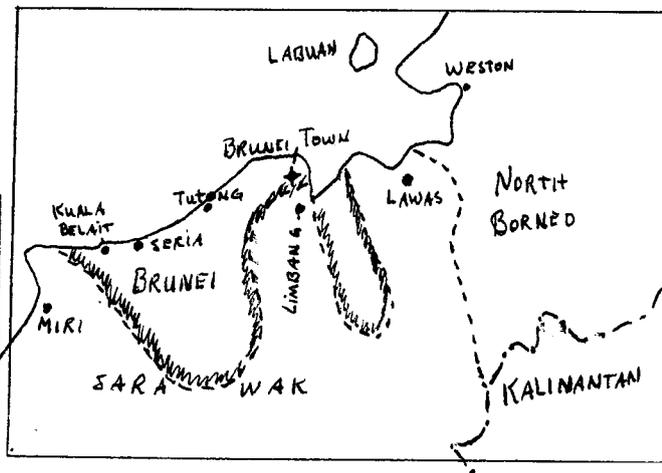
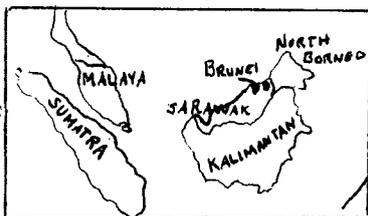
After my visit to Brunei in February, I wrote you about the popular opposition to government. (GDN-12) In October of last year a friend of mine found Brunei one of the maddest little countries in the world. Local leaders had drummed up considerable opposition when the Sultan broke his promise to hold elections. By the time of my visit, however, the opposition had given way to complete apathy. The leader, A.M. Azahari, was out of the country and it was generally believed that he had been bought off and would stay out of the country until Malaysia became a reality.

Then last Saturday night we learned that a rebellion had broken out and within a few hours the entire country was in rebel hands. Again Azahari was out of the country. From Manila he proclaimed the formation of the new revolutionary state of Kalimantan Utara (North Borneo), a unitary state composed of Brunei, North Borneo, and Sarawak, under a constitutional monarchy. Today the rebellion is over. The entire country is once again in the hands of the Sultan and the British troops; many rebels have been taken prisoner and the rest are fleeing to the jungles.

Though there is still much that is unclear about this teapot rebellion, we can piece together most of the actual events and make some guesses about the implications.

Events The rebellion began in the dark hours of the morning on Saturday, December 8th. Simultaneous attacks were launched on Brunei Town, Seria, Kuala Belait and Tutong in Brunei, on Weston in North Borneo, and on Limbang, Lawas, and Miri in Sarawak. Police stations, power and water plants were taken, but the rebels overlooked the radio station and telegraphic centers.

An attack was launched on the palace of the Sultan, just outside of Brunei Town. A few shots were fired and two rebel emissaries demanded an audience with the Sultan. He refused, rebel fire was returned, and the attackers left in great haste. A few days later the two emissaries surrendered to the police.



The police station in Brunei Town came under fire. During a lull in the fighting, the (European) police chief, Mr. Outram, walked out and demanded that the rebels lay down their arms and surrender; they did and were taken prisoner. Later Outram drove

his jeep around town collecting rebels. In all he took about 200 prisoners single handedly that day.

The British High Commissioner was also arrested by the rebels and tied up in his house. A few hours later some policemen arrived at his house and the rebels gave up without a fight.

Then the call went out to Singapore for help. (Both Malaya and Great Britain have assistance agreements with Brunei.) An initial force of 150 Gurkha troops was sent from Singapore. They took up positions guarding the airfield then began moving in to take the parts of town still in rebel hands. Malayan police were brought in to restore order in retaken areas, and more British troops began to arrive in a round-the-clock airlift.

On Sunday we heard that Azahari claimed the Sultan was in rebel hands and supported the revolt. But from Brunei the Sultan broadcast an appeal for the rebels to lay down their arms and surrender. He named the Party Rakyat as leader of the revolt, declared it illegal, and issued a warrant for Azahari's arrest.

Troops kept pouring in to Brunei. On Tuesday Seria and Kuala Belait were retaken. There was almost no rebel resistance except in Tutong. On Thursday five Royal Marines were killed retaking Limbang. (It was in Limbang that Sarawak's first Peace Corpsman, Frita Klattenhot was taken by the rebels. He is said to have rendered valuable assistance to wounded when the town was retaken. Poor old Peace Corps; they find it difficult to stay out of trouble!)

Early in the week Azahari warned that the Seria Shell oilfields had been mined and would be destroyed if British counterattacks persisted. On Thursday he warned that he would send in 100,000 Indonesian volunteers. The first proved to be an empty threat; the second causes considerable consternation.

Today all rebel held positions have been retaken. British and Gurkha troops, along with large irregular forces of Sarawak natives (Ibans, Kenyas, and Kayans) are rounding up rebels in the jungles between Brunei and Sarawak. They are trying to head off the potential of protracted guerilla warfare. Precautions are also being taken in all Sarawak towns, with increasing troop concentrations and the recruitment of forces of home guards.

The revolt appears to have been crushed, despite the grave failure of intelligence units to see it coming. It actually came dangerously near succeeding. If the rebels had got hold of the Sultan and the radio station, the course would probably have been entirely different. As it is, the revolt appears to have failed as much through the lack of internal organization and real will to fight as through the swift and powerful action of the British military once they defined this as an emergency.

Implications Why this rebellion? Azahari's Party Rakyat insists the revolt is not directed against the Sultan, but against the British and against Malaysia.

In the October elections (1962) Azahari's party won 15 of the 16 elected seats in the legislative council; the one independent pledged to support Azahari. Though the Sultan has a formal majority of one, appointed over elected seats, Azahari's political power was clearly demonstrated and it is doubted that the Sultan would have acted against any clear stand taken by the party.

Since the party was strongly against Malaysia, it looked as though Brunei would not be a founding member next August.

The Malayan government has maintained that Brunei is free to enter or to stay out as it desires, an official stand shared by the British. The Malaysians certainly want Brunei to enter, and appear to have made some clandestine offers to the Sultan to effect this, but they have scrupulously avoided any public stance other than that of friendly detachment.

If Azahari's objective were simply to stay out of Malaysia, it seems he could have achieved this without a rebellion. Nor does it seem that a rebellion was necessary to free the country from British rule. As it is the British are now only in charge of defense and foreign relations. Their dominant desire seems to be to get out as easily and as quickly as possible, nor would they really be in any position to resist demands to give up their prerogatives if Azahari's party made strong demands for this in the legislature.

It is argued here that Azahari's real aim was to take all three territories and to set up a twentieth century version of the grand Brunei Sultanate. From his Manila claims, he apparently thought the rebellion would spread throughout the three territories. However, these pronouncements were so far from the truth, or even from the remotest possibility it now seems, that one must ask what led Azahari to believe the rebellion would spread so far, or even that it had any real chance of success in Brunei itself.

Here the combination of Azahari's own personality and the Indonesians enter the picture. Azahari attended one meeting of the legislative council early this year, before elections. He made three motions, one of which was that the British recognize the Sultan's sovereignty over North Borneo and Sarawak, but all were rejected. He reported that he was downcast and disillusioned over his lack of success as a nationalist and would exile himself to continue his work abroad. He did return for a few months, apparently to have a hand in forming his army, but made no more moves in the legislature that his party controlled. Whatever genius Azahari has, it is unfortunately not in parliamentary manoeuvre. In a recent interview in Manila he distinguished himself by his facility at moving from fierce threats to flowing tears.

For their part the Indonesians have given at least moral support to the rebellion. Both President Soekarno and Information Minister Abdulghani have expressed strong support for the rebellion. It is fully accepted that Indonesians have helped to train the rebels, and have actually had a hand in the early, successful, stages of the rebellion. It is doubted that this could have taken place without the knowledge of the Indonesian government, though that government is certainly no model of efficient control, especially in any area outside of Djakarta. It is also clear that Azahari is not the only, and perhaps not the most important, leader of the rebellion. The attack was launched while he was away, and no one has ever made any claims about Azahari's military or organizational genius.

It seems probable that Azahari has been used as a tool by some elements in the Indonesian leadership, a task facilitated by Azahari's own instability. The minimum objective would be to obstruct the formation of Malaysia and to split North Borneo from Sarawak. There was even probably some hope that chaos if not rebellion would spread, giving the Indonesians the opportunity to intervene and to "liberate" another territory from the colonial yoke.

In all of this the rebellion might prove to have been a grave miscalculation,

quite aside from the miscalculation of timing and resources. Before the rebellion the opposition to Malaysia in Brunei was certainly legitimate. Now the party that championed this opposition has been declared illegal because of its use of non-constitutional means to achieve its objectives. This will give the Sultan the opportunity, if he desires to use it, to identify opposition to Malaysia with opposition to the throne and the state.

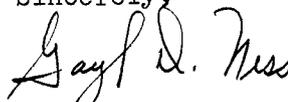
This would be unfortunate for all concerned, for the opposition to Malaysia does have some base in popular sentiment. The opposition will be weakened, but not destroyed, by getting itself tied to an illegitimate organization. It is bound to come out again in some form.

The other aspect of the miscalculation lies in the effects of the rebellion on North Borneo and Sarawak. Aside from making opposition to Malaysia illegitimate, it demonstrates one real alternative to Malaysia in the form of pressure from Indonesia. This has been understood and feared by North Borneo's indigenous leaders for some time. There have been no indications on Chinese sentiments on this issue, but they can easily be guessed. There can be little doubt of Communist influence in the Chinese opposition to Malaysia in Sarawak. Ideologically this calls for close relations with Indonesia and aversion for Malaya, but in this case nationality may prove to be the more powerful ideology (as it generally does). Not even an ideologically pure Chinese Communist could view with anything but consternation the possibility of alliance with Soekarno's strongly anti-Chinese (not anti-Communist) government. Thus the rebellion may do little more than to drive Sarawak and North Borneo closer together, to commit them more strongly to Malaysia, and to make them more vigilant of the security of their borders with Indonesia.

Some people see in this rebellion the beginning of a protracted guerilla war against the British, the Sultan, and Malaya. I have grave doubts about the possibility of this type of conflict developing, but I have been known to be wrong about these things before. My doubts arise from what I consider to be the essential ingredients for this type of war: good leadership, good organization, and some commitment to a cause. I see none of this in either the Brunei Malays or in their Indonesian accomplices. If either the Chinese or the Communists were involved, a protracted conflict would certainly be possible, with the outcome not at all certain. Under present circumstances there might be an occasional flair of organization, some heroics, and even the ferocity of a fanatical religious movement, but none of the organization and discipline needed for real warfare.

Brunei was taken so quickly by the rebels only because the authorities were completely unprepared for the rebellion. It was retaken by the British so quickly and with so little bloodshed because the rebels were completely unprepared to keep what they had taken. In a more general sense, they even seem to have been completely unable to accept what they themselves had done. If they could not accept their own successes, it seems unlikely that they will be able to accept their failures

Sincerely,

  
Gayl D. Ness