WAWASAN BRUNEI 2035: A NATIONAL NARRATIVE OF MODERNITY IN TRADITIONAL NORMATIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Brunei Darussalam maintains its absolute monarchy system by integrating its well-established Islamic values into national ideology while calculating strategic plans to progress. Wawasan Brunei 2035 embodies collective national objectives that tie Brunei together as a nation amidst the future’s challenges. This pathway is viewed as a paradox of modernity and tradition. Using a qualitative method, this study provides perspectives on how Brunei Darussalam maintains its unique political stand in this fashion by looking into its formation of national identity and examining Wawasan Brunei 2035 as a national narrative. The study finds that Wawasan Brunei 2035 guides the nation and keeps it on track to retain its prosperity. As the idea of progress is translated into this development vision, Brunei carefully selects the element of modernity to sustain its standing.

KEYWORDS: identity, monarchy, traditionalism, modernism

INTRODUCTION

There are only a few surviving absolute monarchies in the world, all of which maintaining religious belief as their national ideology, including Brunei Darussalam. Scholars view it as a way of preserving tradition while questioning how they navigate their position in a modern socio-political landscape along with globalization influences. Historical and existing values are considered important in this pursuit. Tradition refers to any “precipitate” or “filament” of past practice or past belief that is transmitted, learned, and reenacted from generation to generation (Jacobs: 2007). As Brunei Darussalam gained its independence in 1984, it declared Melayu Islam Beraja as the sole underlying ideology of the nation that is based on long-established Islamic principles to guide Brunei Darussalam towards prosperity. It is described interchangeably as a national philosophy, a concept of the nation, and national ideology (Muller: 2016). Mong (1983) points out his view that this question is closely linked to the lack of state credentials required in a democratic system. The standard of modern states often includes institutionalized democracy to enable communication between people and the government as well as recognition of human rights. An effective modern government also needs a check and balance function to ensure the credibility of the government. The enactment of Islamic law does not satisfy this parameter as it is viewed to bear elements that potentially violate human rights.

The idea of modernity is closely related to progress while the conception around it is often identified with enlightenment, the need for recognition from one’s social environment
As developments and economic advancement become associated with this notion, Southeast Asian nations including Brunei Darussalam compromise their cultural values and traditions to some various degree of extent to pursue economic prosperity and to assert their position in the global arena. Hence, there is a mix of contradictory paradigm between modernity and tradition. Mong (1983) further suggests that although the Brunei political system is shown in a combination of traditional and modern forms, it is essentially a testimony to the effort of preserving traditional political structure. The declaration of Melayu Islam Beraja incorporates Islamic identity in national ideology. Simultaneously, Brunei embraces modernity by pushing developments and put a focus on international engagements. Muller (2016) argues that Brunei undertakes paradoxical normativity by embracing modernity and traditions as Brunei institutionalizes Islamic Law into the principles of state organizing. Traditions are maintained as a protective response to “external threats” against local values. Southeast Asian countries view globalization brings about external ideas that potentially shake the existing traditional values and threatens the status quo (Ullah and Ho: 2020). Brunei Darussalam maintains these traditional values, in the form of Islamic norms, to guard the national narrative of Brunei under the umbrella philosophy of Melayu Islam Beraja. Stuart Hall pointed out that identity is defined as a collective and shared history among individuals affiliated by something stable such as race and ethnicity as well as by something metamorphic, various similarities and differences in a constructive manner. Thus, identity can be performed as a means of positioning.

While its Islamic values are in place as a set of national ideology, Brunei Darussalam remains an economically strong country with the highest GDP in Southeast Asia. It upholds its determination to pursue prosperity and to tackle the globalization challenges by increasing national capacity. In 2007, the Sultan of Brunei launched Wawasan Brunei 2035 or Brunei Vision 2035. It is Brunei’s nation-state vision to ensure the development and continuation of national prosperity that is laid on the groundwork of Islamic identity as a national ideology. It also functions to provide the nation with political narratives in envisioning the future of Brunei Darussalam amidst the globalization dynamic. Muller’s previous argument on paradoxical normativity provides a perspective to view Brunei’s standing. To furnish the previous findings, this study aims to further examine this contradictory paradigm in play in the form of visionary objectives. It reveals that Brunei curates the elements of modernity paradigm as reflected in Wawasan Brunei 2035. The analysis will support the idea that by upholding traditions and carefully identifies elements of modernity as envisioned by Wawasan Brunei2035 narrative, Brunei is aiming to remain a strong and prosperous nation. A discussion on this topic provides an understanding of how Brunei Darussalam as one of the few surviving monarchies in the world maintains its unique political stand in this fashion. This study employs a qualitative method to examine how Brunei shapes its identity and its translation into the national narrative. This method is used to collect research data from relevant literary studies, books, journals, articles, and online resources.

This study relies on Ernest Renan’s and Benedict Anderson’s substantial concept of nation to analyze Brunei’s national narrative. Renan’s classic theory sets out a fundamental idea that a nation is a political formation that consists of individuals living shared history and common future goals. Anderson defines a nation as an imagined political community and
soverign (Anderson: 1983, Calhoun: 2016). Anderson defines a nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who accept and recognize themselves as part of that community, even though they do not know one another. This suggests that a nation is a socio-political construction. By construction, it means that it has no definite boundaries or can be deconstructed. Anderson's imagined community implies that a nation needs to be reconstructed to sustain its legitimacy thus become sovereign. The idea that individuals are part of the group is in line with Renan’s theory of nation, a political formation consisting of individuals having a similar historical journey and pursuing common future goals. Both Renan’s and Anderson’s concept of nation similarly highlight that a nation’s community shared these principles that bind them together. The narrative of shared historic heritage, ideals, and goals are established with the help of mass media campaigns to communicate the state’s interests despite the ever-changing dynamic in society.

Around the period of his study, Anderson provided context that the state narrative of a nation was organized through print-media capitalism. In the contemporary environment, the media as an instrument of political expression has been undergoing major changes in many aspects due to the arrival of digital technology, making information is delivered and perceived diversely. The construction process allows the state to make a political expression in the form of narratives. These narratives maintain the idea of nationalism as an imagined community. This is where nationalism is created as dialectic, a result of two-way street communication between the members and the state forging a national identity in the political sphere. Nationalism explains the attitude of the individuals of the nation being aware of their national identity collectively. As identity itself is complex and layered, a mixture of given and constructed formation, it requires a continuous process.

The Formation of National Ideology Melayu Islam Beraja

Historically, Brunei Darussalam was known as the Empire of Brunei covering the area of Sabah, Sarawak, and southern region of modern-day Philippines in the 14th to 16th century. Brunei had seen the formation of religious-based institutions when Sultan Hassan ruled the empire, with Islam as the primary religion in the region. Islam was already considered fundamental to establish of a prosperous sultanate. During that period, Brunei had the Islamic law, principally known as Islamic Qanun Law, incorporated into the Brunei canons, providing regulations and fundamental constitutional laws for the sultanate. In 1955 the Sultan formed Islamic Religious Council and Kathis Court that were established upon Islamic law. The council’s main function is to advise the Sultan regarding religious affairs. In 1959, Islam was declared Brunei’s official religion. These enactments substantiated the formation of administrative state organizing based on religious law. Jabatan Hal EhwalUgama was formed to promote Islam among the community while maintaining its position as the official religion (Imri: 2013). This means that Islamic identity was systematically sustained, ensuring that the ideology of the nation was also preserved. Islam became a key part of the political and governance landscape of Brunei.

During the 19th century, the power of the empire declined due to internal conflicts and intensifying British colonial pressure. Brunei became British Protectorate in 1888. The colonial
power became more prevailed, making Brunei sign the Supplementary Protectorate Agreement in 1906. As a result, the sultanate sovereignty was compromised by the British Protectorate rule, leaving the executive authority of the Sultan to British Resident. The Resident advised the Sultan on all matters except for religious affairs. This strategy was done for two reasons. First, stepping away from religious affairs allowed British colonial authority to assert authority on the political grip. Second, British colonial power had the opportunity to propagate British values among the community (Imri: 2013). Britain considered local traditions and religion as a way of life. However, politically, the British Residency system still granted authority for the colonial ruler to influence Brunei administrative governance by orienting the religious law enactments by the Sultan. The executive authority was fully under the Sultan as Brunei created Brunei Darussalam Constitution in 1959. Brunei Darussalam became a sovereign nation on 1 January 1984 when it gained independence from the United Kingdom.

Brunei Darussalam’s absolute monarchy remains imperishable even though the neighboring countries have undergone various transformations towards the democratic state or constitutional monarchies. Melayu Islam Beraja was officially declared as the national philosophy of Brunei on the day of independence while the Sultan’s position was further strengthened as the head of state and the head of government. The stance of Brunei’s proclamation was made clear that the nation will forever remain as an independent, sovereign, and democratic Malay monarchy. Melayu Islam Beraja lies upon three principles of identity (1) Malay language, culture, and customs, (2) the teaching of Islamic values, Islamic laws, and (3) monarchy, which must be upheld and practiced by all.

Melayu Islam Beraja consolidates the three principles of Brunei traditional identities into one primary national identity of Brunei Darussalam while the Islamic aspect is considered the ultimate principle. It is the quintessence of the dominant cultures that have been prevailing in Brunei society for a long period of time. Bruneian scholars have argued that Melayu Islam Beraja was not entirely a newly invented concept when Brunei Darussalam declared sovereign. Islam is a deep-rooted value as the people of Brunei have a strong link to its heritage, which can be seen in the strength of its polity-sultanate (Mansurnoor: 2012). It is argued to appropriately define the upright nature of the sultanate’s centuries-old tradition as a political and cultural imperative, legitimizing the concept of Melayu Islam Beraja to be forever upheld by the nation.

The legitimacy of Melayu Islam Beraja was built over the years since Brunei’s independence. Education plays a role in national identity building, bringing state narrative to the citizen in an institutionalized fashion. Islamic education has been a pivotal part of integrating Islamic values into society since the arrival of Islam (Fareed: 2020). The core principles are part of the national education curriculum and are incorporated into various academic grounds from elementary to higher education. In the correlating aspect, Brunei uses Jawi script as the co-official script together with Latin. Jawi writing is the legacy script that has promoted the Malay language to an esteemed position and plays a significant contribution during the Malay-Islam civilization era (Rahman: 2017). Nowadays, formal Jawi education is taught through Jawi education under the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education. This way the citizens internalize the value of their identity legacy and experience it in their everyday lives. While public offices are at the forefront of propagating this philosophy
on varying occasions and civic engagement programs, mass media helps consistently actualize the concept values of Melayu Islam Beraja in a broader public environment. The focus of the dissemination remains the norms of Melayu Islam Beraja being valued to hold the nation’s sovereignty.

Anderson’s concept of nation pointed out the important role of media, especially print media in the period when his theory was conceptualized, in constructing nationalism and national identity. Media channels national narratives and discourse massively in the same language so that every individual can follow and engage in discussions that carry nationalism. The state can maintain its national future aspiration narratives as national goals that are shared by all citizens. Print media serves record about the dynamic of cultural pathways, history for national recollections as well as their future objectives. History and cultural values crafted Brunei’s national identity that is institutionalized in the way it governs the nation. This is related to the installation of Islamic ideology into its state administration that has been strongly rooted long before the independence.

Wawasan Brunei 2035: A National Narrative of Tradition and Modernity

Signs, symbols, and slogans connect powerfully to individual and collective imaginations, things that affirm a matter of identity (Thompson: 2015). In that case signs, symbols and slogans can be utilized to create a politically resonant social identity based on the rational ideas of shared conception as imagined communities. It is defined as symbolically charged imagined communities. Wawasan Brunei 2035 serves the purpose of creating a collective goal as a nation, the imagined communities of Brunei. Institutionalizing religious symbols into government bureaucracy affirms Brunei’s national power (Muller: 2020). Long-term vision helps the nation shape a long-term power, which potentially strengthens the government’s legitimacy.

Wawasan Brunei 2035 was formulized by Council for Long-Term Development Planning. It was launched by the Sultan as an economic vision in 2007. The council was assigned by the Sultan to shape a future vision of Brunei Darussalam while detailing account of technical, financial resources, and strategic necessities to achieve the vision. The official website of the government of Brunei Darussalam further states the goal of the vision as follows:

Consulting the public, the Council for Long-Term Development Planning identified Brunei’s collective aspirations as to maintain the political stability in Brunei Darussalam; to preserve social, cultural, spiritual and historic values; to help people meet the practical challenges of the modern world successfully and to give families and communities confidence in the future (https://www.gov.bn/)

The vision is harmonized with a new theme called Negara Zikir, meaning a nation that upholds God’s law, practices good deeds and moral values among the citizens as well as the nation’s approach towards other countries (Saim: 2013). Wawasan Brunei 2035 clearly states the vision to transform Brunei Darussalam to be known throughout the world as a nation whose people
are highly skilled and educated, falling in the category of successful measured by the highest international standards and able to enjoy a good quality of life as the world’s top ten countries while having a dynamic and sustainable economy. The vision is targeted to build collective aspiration at a national level to ensure political stability, preserving cultural, moral, and spiritual values by ensuring that the citizens are equipped with tools to face global turbulence.

This way Brunei is framing the vision that defines the nation’s future and how it will look like in which the citizens remain prosperous based on Brunei’s spiritual values. It is an assurance to keep the citizen’s confidence towards the nation’s capacity by taking into account modern economic standards. The state details the requirements towards this path to give clear indicators that highlight the relevance to the people’s needs, ensuring that the nation will be able to meet people’s expectations. In order to maintain relevance, the government needs to keep track of the progress of the Wawasan Brunei 2035 framework. The Sultan formed Majlis Tertinggi Wawasan Brunei (Supreme Council of Wawasan Brunei 2035) in 2014.

Majlis Tertinggi Wawasan Brunei was established to provide intensive and systematic support towards the effort and implementation of actions towards realizing the objectives of the Wawasan Brunei 2035. The major roles of the Supreme Council are to ensure the achievement of the main goals of the Vision, to provide policy direction towards achieving Brunei Vision 2035 and to ensure the implementation of policies and strategic Vision are consistent, coherent, and sustainable. (http://www.wawasanbrunei.gov.bn/)

Majlis Tertinggi Wawasan Brunei 2035 supports and works with other institutions to deliver outputs towards achieving the vision. Getting the entire government system onboard is key to get the message across as a collective national narrative. In addition to Majlis Tertinggi Wawasan Brunei 2035, the Sultan also installed Peneraju Strategi, a committee consisting of ministers and executives assigned to identity strategic aspects that need to be strengthened as well as the potential to impact positively towards the nation’s objectives based on National Key Performance Indicators. Thirteen strategic developments have been identified, namely (1) education, (2) economy, (3) security, (4) institutional development, (5) local business development, (6) infrastructure development, (7) social security, (8) environment, (9) health, (10) religion, (11) land use, (12) infrastructure and info-communication technology, and (13) manpower planning.

Economic prosperity remains of the key issues Brunei wants to address given the fact that energy export is reducing. The country’s dependency on oil and gas exports has become a prevailing challenge for Brunei (Muller: 2020). Wawasan Brunei 2035 is expected to become effective tools to prevent economic fallout due to the decrease of energy commodities. The narrative of development is integrated into the continuity of economic prospects as sustainable.

Another important aspect of Wawasan Brunei 2035 also concerns its approach towards globalization and international engagements. Brunei’s foreign policy is made in line with this domestic interest. Since 1984, the focus of its foreign policy objectives has been maintaining key aspects within the dimensions of sovereignty, cultural and religious identity, security, and economic prosperity. It involves cautious navigating towards political liberalization in terms
of global relations. Brunei is required to diversify its economy and move towards Wawasan Brunei 2035 vision in order to ensure its long-term survival and maintain welfare and political order (Druce & Julay: 2020).

Human capital is developed to support this objective. Brunei envisages a highly competent, well-educated workforce to help Brunei compete in the global sphere. Brunei invests significantly in education by providing scholarships for its citizen, including for them to study abroad. According to statistics, at least 38% of Bruneian students participated in various types of study abroad in 2013, even reaching the figure of 57% in 2010 (Statistika: 2016). The strategic focus is harmonizing the education with development planning by providing the appropriate training relevant to the current demand while anticipating the future’s global competition.

Brunei’s development priority on economic prosperity is evident, an important measure of modernity that determines its position in the global landscape while simultaneously legitimizing the nation domestically. Brunei equally focuses on protecting its traditional features by filtering the adverse effects of globalization and by taking a strategic position on foreign relations, focusing more on bilateral relations. Brunei adapts to the global economy by actively integrating local identities, preserving local values in its national consciousness (Ullah & Ho: 2020). It employs a selective approach towards globalization and reformulating the elements into policies that ensure people’s well-being in all aspects without principally destroying its well-established values. Wawasan Brunei 2035 frames modernity and tradition in a curated fashion, setting to secure national consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Brunei Darussalam is the only surviving absolute monarchy state which strongly upholds its Islamic values as a national ideology in the politically dynamic region of Southeast Asia. As Brunei gained independence in 1984, it declared Melayu Islam Beraja as the only philosophy of the nation that is based on long-established Islamic principles. It marked the establishment of institutionalized tradition into the nation-state narrative to help Brunei navigate its national and international policies the way forward. Melayu Islam Beraja rests upon three pillars of identity (1) Malay language, culture, and customs, (2) the teaching of Islamic values and laws, and (3) monarchy. This philosophy consolidates the dominant cultures of Brunei in one national ideology.

This state ideology is reflected in Brunei’s long-term development vision, Wawasan Brunei 2035 which consists of clear objectives on how Brunei envisions itself to tackle the challenges of globalization and secure political stability. Economic prosperity and well-being remain the key objectives. This vision is a narrative maintaining legitimacy of Brunei as a nation and keeps it on the right track of sustaining its prosperity. In Renan’s and Anderson’s theory of nation, collective aspirations, expectations, and future objectives framed in a perspective narrative shape a sense of communion. In the case of Brunei, the well-established identity is also strongly embedded in the state ideology. The idea of progress in the notion of modernity is in a paradoxical paradigm with the existing tradition and religious values within this development vision. Yet, Brunei carefully curates the element of modernity to fit its traditional values in order to sustain the nation’s standing.
REFERENCES


