

The Last Brunei Revolt? A Case Study of Microstate (In-)Security

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The incident in the sights of this article is a hitherto unrecorded part of the modern history and international relations of microstate and Malay Sultanate, Brunei Darussalam, on the northern coast of the island of Borneo: seemingly the last feeble flourish of the populist nationalism which, in the 1962 revolt by Parti Rakyat Brunei, had come close to undermining monarchical power and achieving emancipation from Britain (though it had also helped to ward off absorption by the emergent Federation of Malaysia – to the monarchy’s eventual advantage). These aims all gained feasibility in concert with anti-colonial but also territorially ambitious forces of the region, notably Indonesia, motivated and equipped for infiltration overland. The revolt was put down with a degree of efficiency by British forces flown in from Singapore, but the trauma had left as its legacy not only a deep sense of insecurity on the part of the monarchy as an hereditary institution, but also in the minds of those with responsibility for defending Brunei as a territorial entity: so much so, that Britain had to cajole the Sultanate, in either sense, into acceding to independence in 1984.¹

¹ The PRB (Party of the Brunei People) was led by Sheikh Azahari bin Sheikh Ahmad. Its armed wing was called Tentera Nasional Kalimantan Utara (TNKU, National Army of Northern Borneo). Major texts which can be consulted on PRB and the Brunei Revolt are, in order of appearance: Zaini 1989 (a personal, nostalgic account by PRB’s second-in-command, hopeful of inspiring a revival); Chalfont 1989: (a commissioned work, whose 10 pages on the Revolt are contemptuous of the rebels, adulatory of the British army); Mohd. Jamil 1992: 105–135 (a work by Brunei’s official historian with 30 pages on the Revolt, which treat it as a dangerous diversion from the Sultan’s own, sage strategy for Independence); Horton 1995 (an admirable handbook of Brunei by the leading foreign scholar of Brunei, including a succinct and objective 8-page account of the Revolt); Hus-sainmiya 1995 (a monumental work, based on British records but written from Universiti Brunei Darussalam with due sensitivity to regime sensitivities; it includes one chapter of 43 pages on the events of the Revolt alone); Jamil 2003 (a day-by-day reconstruction, with some new, local insights); Harun 2007 (a succinct, objective and very readable survey). The PRB leadership were not totally naïve, for they were hoping (as much as the British

But was Brunei really so vulnerable, especially and precisely after it had ceased to be a colonial outpost? Did the abortive challenge from the nationalist remnants in 1990 prove anything more than their own weakness? Did it help, ironically, to consolidate the monarchy and state borders, in a regional environment by now highly conducive in any case to both the continuity of state structures and the sanctity of borders, under the non-interference principle of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)?

Is smallness a liability?

By way of a brief theoretical excursus: following on from the last statement, the question might first be asked whether there is even any place for ‘small state’ theory in addressing the kind of challenge to be considered here, beyond offering us a tentative, heuristic reference point? It is not as if disappearance from the world stage is a frequent occurrence for microstates in general. On the contrary. Indeed this perhaps surprising fact is exactly what has formed a prominent focus of small state theory recently, almost rendering itself redundant, some may think! Collectively, such states have a very good record of persistence in the international system. As Handel (1990: 257) has rather tritely declared, ‘A realistic analysis indicates that while the weak states are frequently more vulnerable than the great powers, they are not helpless.’ A typical observation clarifying this state of affairs declares that ‘Small states stand to gain from an international system in which regimes and institutions are central to the conduct of international affairs’, certainly much more than during the Cold War, when small states were prone to be intimidated by a super-power, or found it prudent to align with one (A Commonwealth Advisory Group [C.A.G.] 1997: xii; 2–5). Similarly, ‘in all cases, microstates have been able to secure their continued independence by relying on extantism and the determination of the international system to respect the independence and territorial integrity of all members of the global community’ (Hartmann 2002: 366). Or, in a somewhat less predictable statement: with inspired leadership and creative self-narrative a small state can turn smallness itself into a ‘resource’ (Browning 2006: 673–74; 677). Certainly, both the two overviews of the field just cited find the situation of small states today strikingly secure, albeit the latter

and the Sultan feared) that Soekarno’s forces would intervene on their behalf. Had PRB’s military wing not ‘jumped the gun’ by several weeks, Indonesian military intervention would very likely have materialised. The PRB’s prematurity seems to have been due to a conviction that the British, with the Sultan, in failing to convene the Legislative Council in which PRB held all seats were intent on proceeding with merger over its head.

writer still sees a need to revise academically ingrained 'realist' views of their vulnerability.²

Brunei Darussalam is certainly a microstate for which, still today, vulnerability is an indelible tenet of its self-perception as declared, or at least its doctrines for popular consumption, being used to add legitimacy to a non-democratic state structure ('guarantor of the people's survival!'), not purely to deter outside intervention against the territory through the prospect of formidable patriotic resistance. That Brunei dwells subjectively in a sea of perils and was uncomfortably reminded of traumas in its recent past when Iraq annexed Kuwait, was pungently stated by one commentary after that event (Dassé 1991: 135). It is true that Brunei also distinctly prides itself on making effective use of conducive features of its international environment, especially the regional association, ASEAN. Yet it seems at first sight bizarre that a Malaysian analyst, based in the Sultanate's new university, has gone so far as to declare that Brunei's manipulation of these opportunities is so astute that it virtually takes itself out of the category of 'small state', measured by conventional criteria (Shafruddin 1996).³ This perspective becomes even more challenging when we notice that the analyst maintains complete silence on Brunei's strategic continuity from British Protectorate to post-colonial British base (as if denying astuteness in this respect), in favour of emphasis on cultural and institutional continuity from a much deeper past. At the same time (as if now belying the very need for astuteness), his study denies any of the normal turbulence associated with decolonisation, i.e. in ignoring the revolt of 1962. Can it be that while the regime needs threat as a source of internal legitimacy, it must not in the process of constructing its defensive arrangements (e.g. those of a tacitly 'balance of power' kind) appear to have sacrificed any of the much-trumpeted 'independence' which is also so vital for its popular standing?⁴

² Browning argues his case with rather exclusive reference to Finland, whose historic quandary, now essentially solved, has been how to survive in the shadow of a dominant neighbour, Russia. Conventional assumptions of vulnerability are better borne out by the continuing need for ingenuity, and experience of disappointments, among the many small states at the UN (when UN membership stood at 189, no less than 84 member-states had populations of under 5 million): Ross 2001. Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006: 665) also find a constant need for imaginative manoeuvre by small states in the EU, but affirm that old analytical categories are less and less relevant.

³ The 'conventional criteria' which Shafruddin judges to have lost their relevance for Brunei include land area (5,765 square kilometres) and population (today standing at 381,371, including non-residents).

⁴ On the practice of balance of power in ASEAN see especially Michael Leifer's papers reprinted in the section 'ASEAN and Regional Order', in Chin and Suryadinata (eds.) 2005, pp 87–188 (and within this set, most succinctly and pointedly of all, Leifer 1996, on

At any rate, it cannot be completely otiose to try to fit the challenge of 1990 into a framework of imagined danger and requisite defence derived from the decolonisation experience, while of course allowing for any significant changes in the international and internal environment since 1984. These may, for instance, have contributed to an enhanced sense of both security and pride within the regime, though not perhaps shared by the Sultan's subjects.

One 'major resource' of small states which should not, admittedly, be overlooked if they have it, is internal cohesion (cf C.A.G. 1997: xi). But the sheer depoliticization of an untaxed population is surely also a phenomenon to bear in mind in assessing the survival chances of a rentier oil-state (Beblawi 1987: 53–54).⁵ The sense of vulnerability which the Brunei regime inculcates in the people includes the attraction of the oil wealth to predators, even though the people have no say or control over it! On the other hand, not only does the Commonwealth's public agenda prescribe democracy but it seems to cast a British aura of historical inevitability around it, while in some academic analysis a broad correlation is found between smallness and democratic practice – even if this may be suspected to be a consequence of smallness rather than cause of survival (Anckar 2002). In any event, neither interpretation can be applied to Brunei, as a non-democracy.⁶ Therefore, as the Sultanate lacks whatever advantage democracy might provide domestically, it seems even more surprising that any analyst should play down the conventional defence nexus with the United Kingdom (above all, the permanent stationing of a Gurkha battalion in the oilfield) as a top security resource for external purposes, predicated on latent threats. And yet, it is also notable that Brunei is willing to flout the democratic norm so blatantly, at the risk, additionally, of embarrassment to the U.K., its protector and frequent diplomatic sponsor on the external level (Kershaw 2003a; Kershaw 2009). Is it conceivable that the ruler of such a state could become personally so reassured by its strategic dispositions, on top of well-funded domestic

pp 152–154). As well as the British connection, the 'power-balancing' solidarity between Brunei and fellow microstate Singapore (shadowing its every diplomatic initiative, and allowing it a small military presence in Brunei) is neglected by Shafruddin likewise.

⁵ A Wikipedia calculation of GDP per capita in Brunei, as of 2008, is US\$51,800, while for Indonesia, a mere \$US3,900. Although the distribution of wealth in Brunei is grossly unequal, it cannot be disputed that the standard of living of the population leaves their regional neighbours far behind.

⁶ Possibly the writer did not look closely at Brunei, which he classifies as one among the world's 29 'small island states' (Anckar 2002: 377). However, 'truncated' or 'intersected' its territory certainly is (see Kershaw 1998: 83–85 for a basic historical introduction, and map) and there are territorial-waters issues with four other states.

controls and indoctrination,⁷ that the old spectres of foreign penetration of borders and democratic challenge to the monarchical vision can be ‘deleted from memory’, with proportionate lapses into complacency in both respects, as also in respect of reduced legitimacy if the public perceives independence itself as compromised? In other words, for the Brunei elite, subjectively, had Brunei six years after independence really begun to feel less ‘small’, on the scale either of territorial extent and international power or of the ideological viability of the regime in interactions with its own population?⁸

But by extension from such a hypothesis, it would be imperative to remain alert (a) to any sign that complacency had added back a factor of vulnerability which made thoughts of a subversive push look not totally futile to a handful of rebels and their external sponsor; but contrariwise also (b) to the possibility that if the rebels proved too optimistic in any vital respect, and the state learned lessons from the event and acted on these, the security of the microstate in question will have been enhanced for the future. As already intimated, the focus of this paper is a unique incident, not only in the international relations of this Southeast Asian microstate but also very possibly in its political consolidation. It is hoped that the incident will provide some illumination of the theoretical themes just broached, aside from any inherent interest as contemporary history, in that the incident at first revived a great sense of vulnerability, but in the outcome, contrary to the rebels’ intent and conventional assumptions of microstate weakness, may have helped the absolute monarchy to progress beyond either vision or complacency to fulfilment as ‘leader of nationalism’ in place of other classes, henceforth cultivating the internal foundations of security (equated, indeed, fundamentally with royal dominance) even more assiduously than the seemingly proven, protective ‘outer shell’.⁹

⁷ For an exhaustive study of the state ideology of *Negara Melayu Islam Beraja* (M.I.B.: a Malay Islamic Monarchy) see Braighlinn 1992.

⁸ More reassuring than the abstract phrasing of a Malaysian academic (Shafruddin) might be the soothingly crafted approach of the Minister of Religious Affairs, who in a book promoting the national ideology has vaunted Brunei’s membership of ASEAN, the UN, and several other international organisations, but completely omits the Commonwealth, let alone Brunei’s defence arrangements with the United Kingdom (Zain 1998: 306–337). Possibly, though, this cleric’s real purpose in omitting the British connection would be to avoid compromising the state legitimacy which danger engenders, by highlighting the ‘colonial-era’, hence non independence-compatible, mechanism which has helped to divert that danger. Thus he would be in step with Shafruddin, and logically, more alert to this potential pitfall than the Sultan.

⁹ For a case of unfulfilled vision in Czarist Russia, see Anderson 1983: 87. The author’s knowledge of the incident to be described arose by virtue of residence in Brunei at the time (as employee of the Ministry of Education, subsequent to leaving a British Southeast Asian Studies programme in terminal decline), but also (when visiting Kuala Lumpur on

Regime survival and territorial security

At first sight, complacency in the ruler seems improbable. Brunei Darussalam, fully if belatedly independent from Britain from 1984, faced its debut on the world stage with a sense of vulnerability so acute that its rulers had long resisted independence and the loss of 'protected status'. Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, went so far as admitting, in an unashamed declaration the following year, that independence had been forced on Brunei against its will.¹⁰ But the sense of vulnerability is connected not a little with Brunei's oil wealth, being a would-be trophy for regional predators. Malaysia indeed was only thwarted in its goal of absorbing Brunei federally in 1963 by the last-minute refusal of Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin – a refusal made as much viable as desirable by the discovery of off-shore oil strata, but prompted also by the popular hostility to Malaysia which the revolt of December 1962 had revealed. Malaysia continued to harbour pseudo-irredentist aspirations towards Brunei because of this rebuff, until a change in Malaysia's own leadership in the later 1970s. It was essentially transformation in the environment of the Malay Archipelago (including, since the late 1960s, the demise of the Soekarno regime in Indonesia and rise of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) that made it possible for Britain to cajole Brunei into acceding to independence. Even then, as elements in the leadership of Malaysia had dramatically 'sprung' the core of the leadership of the Brunei People's Party (PRB) (including its second-in-command Zaini Ahmad) from detention in 1973, had given them permanent refuge in Kuala Lumpur, and even sponsored their anti-colonial stand at the United Nations,¹¹ a microstate whose leaders' conception of 'security' is in fact inseparable from the survival of its internal political structure might still not find the 'assurance' extended by that physically encompassing neighbour fully reassuring. Nor would ASEAN's doctrine of respect for the sanctity of all its members' borders and internal political arrangements necessarily suffice after Brunei itself joined the grouping. However, a point not without significance was that the consensus of Third World states in the UN was, similarly, that independence from colonialism

local leave or in transit to and from UK on end-of-contract leaves) through encounters with Brunei exiles. As with the Anglo-Brunei strategic nexus ignored by Shafruddin 1996 and merely implicit in a passing reference to mercenaries by C.A.G. 1997: 116, the fact that the 1990 incident was completely neglected by an 'authoritative annual survey' of Brunei affairs (Doshi 1991) rather urges the need for a study.

¹⁰ To a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting at Bermuda. See Braighlinn 1992: 89.

¹¹ As noted above, in December 1962 the Sultan was promoting merger, while resistance to that, above all, defined the PRB. It was only later that roles were switched and the PRB remnants became, by dint of helplessness, clients of an opportunistic Malaysia in their quest for democracy.

was the correct criterion for recognition, not the practice of democracy (Leifer 1978). At the same time, Brunei's oil wealth could be turned from would-be security liability (a temptation to predators) into an asset, that is, by being mobilised to prevail upon distant (though recently colonial) Britain to deliver countervailing reassurance, internally as well as externally, by continuing to station the Gurkha battalion in the Royal Dutch-Shell oilfield at Brunei's expense.¹²

Although the founding Exchange of Letters of 1983 did not concede command of the battalion to the man who would pay for it, and reputedly excluded the Gurkhas from any internal security role whatsoever, the agreement was no mean achievement for Brunei. The mere presence of the battalion was calculated to act as a psychological deterrent to radical opposition internally, while its deployment in any scenario of external aggression was far more predictable, under the Anglo-Brunei Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, 1979. The wider context, be it noted, was one in which it would scarcely be a rational strategic calculation for Britain to perpetuate its regular presence in Asia after withdrawal from Hong Kong in 1997. But the Sultanate was able to play to an arguable weakness of Britain: the latter's chronic post-imperial yearning to 'punch above its weight' in spite of straitened circumstances.¹³

Successful though the relationship is, at first sight, for Brunei, it may not have been without a certain cost, in terms of tempting the Sultanate to 'posture above its weight' in turn and fostering a degree of complacency if not self-delusion. At the same time, independently of the assurance bought from Britain, but possibly counteracting it at least a little, wealth may buy in expensive and prestigious military hardware which, if it cannot be used, serves more as an advertisement of vulnerability and absurdity than as demonstration effect of indigenous defensive acumen. One thinks, for instance, of the BAe Hawks squadron, on order for years but never delivered, because

¹² It was the Revolt that had triggered the original deployment of British Gurkhas in support of the monarchy, and was followed by the permanent detention of the rebel 'hard core' – but excluding their leader, Sheikh Azahari, himself, who had sought refuge in Indonesia. Another sequel was Brunei's permanent State of Emergency.

¹³ Looking ahead from 1990, a new lease of life for the Gurkha Brigade as such has been made possible by the Sultan's 'largesse' since 1997 (i.e. 'post-Hong Kong'). It is today a moot question as to which of the two partners, Britain or Brunei, is now patron to the other, for the Sultan's government, when it very occasionally refers to the Gurkha battalion in communication with the public, includes it audaciously as part of 'the defensive capacity of the nation'. Attempts have been made to evoke the flavour of the Anglo-Brunei defence nexus, not only in terms of Brunei's presumption of freedom to embarrass (as intimated in the previous section), but also the concomitant reversal of patron-client roles, in Kershaw 2003, Kershaw 2009. On the portrayal of the Gurkha role in the official Brunei media, see Braighlinn 1992: 98–99.

Brunei has failed to muster a sufficient cadre of pilots.¹⁴ At a much lower level of waste and futility, but not without implications for the capacity of the Royal Brunei Armed Forces to prosecute jungle warfare efficiently, was the investment some years ago in a squadron of Scorpion armoured cars, which tend to take the onus off foot-slogging while themselves getting hopelessly bogged down, at least wherever unregulated logging has turned slopes and valleys into mud-slides.¹⁵

This failure is therefore perhaps more insidious than the more eye-catching examples, because it means that Brunei has not inherited or acquired the skills prescribed by its key strategic doctrine, i.e. that the most likely threat to security is by overland penetration, by units linking up with Brunei opposition elements in the jungles, as during Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* in the early 1960s.¹⁶ There may, to an outside 'defence studies' view, be a breathtaking insouciance in the Sultanate's almost total reliance, internally, on welfare backed up by indoctrination in neo-monarchical ideology, to secure the authoritarian political structure from subversion at successive stages of its consolidation.¹⁷ Possibly one should have been forewarned by the ritual aspects of a great deal of Brunei's military life: not only the neo-traditional titles bestowed on up-and-coming officers in the 1970s, but requirement on senior officers to attend the royalty for nocturnal badminton parties in the late 1980s, or the last-minute procurement of new shoulder flashes for Independence (with an almost impossible sewing deadline).¹⁸

At all events, if strategic planning and implementation appear sparse in relation to the overland infiltration scenario, it would be consistent if the gathering of intelligence about opposition exiles were also to be found to

¹⁴ It is also ironic that such jet fighters would be prone to infringe Malaysian airspace, and contribute to international tension, within seconds of taking off in certain directions. By even greater irony, in the late 1980s the government used footage of McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantoms in high-speed low-level flight to advertise, on TV, for young Bruneian men to volunteer for fighter-pilot training. Even more egregiously, three state-of-the-art off-shore patrol vessels, built by BAe Systems on the Clyde (Scotland), needed since 2007 to seek an alternative owner because they are too advanced for Bruneians to operate.

¹⁵ 'Unregulated' activity includes illegal logging from across the frontiers, whose security the armed forces have apparently not been mandated to guarantee in this connection.

¹⁶ It is Huxley (1987: 226–227) who has pointed out that the army's original equipment, including the Scorpions, was very much predicated on land-based operations in an Internal Security framework – even if the putative rebels are not allied with foreign forces.

¹⁷ Apart from Braighlinn 1992, see also reflections in Kershaw 2001: 124–127. Most audaciously, elections to the Legislative Council were abolished in 1970, and the Council as such 'suspended' immediately after Independence (see next section).

¹⁸ When Royal Brunei Malay Regiment was renamed Royal Brunei Armed Forces. The foregoing examples of the sometimes tangibly 'ritual' functions of the Brunei armed forces are elaborated in Kershaw 2011.

rank low on the Sultanate's scale of external priorities. Obviously, lack of financial means could not be a factor, but more likely the hubris bred of an all too buoyant cash flow, invested not only in conventional military capacity, directly or indirectly, but also in private assets abroad. Any absolute monarch who happened to be the principal strategic decision-maker but also tended to derive gratification from prestigious investments on his own account (while not making a very clear separation in his own mind, in any case, between the state funds which he controls but manages through a bureaucracy, and his rather more free-to-disburse private accounts), might well come to see himself as a significant international 'mover and shaker', blessed with influence which yields immunity from tiresome conspiracy. The conceptual merging of 'private' and 'public' munificence, and an accruing sensation of political invulnerability, could only be reinforced where a 'personal friendship' between that monarch and the head of a democratic government is tapped by the latter for the purpose of defending her country's currency from a wave of speculation, as reputedly happened in London in 1985; and this government then appears to reciprocate the favour by at once approving the contested purchase of a major business house, House of Fraser (owner of the prestigious store, Harrods), by an Egyptian entrepreneur, Mohamed al-Fayed (close friend of the monarch),¹⁹ while in the longer term exempting the sultanate from pressure to conform to international democratic norms.²⁰ The unctuous ministrations of a member of the British House of Lords may have supplied further reinforcement, even though commissioned and paid for by the Sultan himself.²¹ It is nevertheless striking if not astounding that the Sultan in his suspected dealings with al-Fayed seemed totally to overlook the provocative quality of luxury investments in London for the Brunei opposition – structural equivalent ('adjusted for inflation') of the culture of ruling class prerogative which was an underlying factor in the 1962 revolt.²²

¹⁹ He never convinced a Board of Trade Enquiry that his funds were a family inheritance. For an excellent introduction to these events and nexuses, starting with the massive purchase of sterling by the Brunei reserves, see Leake 1990: 83–84. Also Bower 1993.

²⁰ Kershaw 2003: 49–50 compares the permissive Commonwealth treatment of Brunei (flouting its own Harare Declaration) with the rigour imposed on Pakistan (whose first suspension lasted, correctly stated, from October 1999 to May 2004).

²¹ Chalfont (1989: 147–148) also obligingly purveys to the international audience the claim, so important for internal legitimation, that the Sultan's private wealth is inherited. Kershaw 2001: 128 adumbrates a more prosaic reality.

²² This was as seen by the British High Commissioner at the time, Sir Dennis White. See dispatch dated 20 December 1962, in CO 1030/1076 (quoted, at estimable length, by Horton 1995: 30–31). To be precise, White spoke of 'the hatred of the people for the local nobility'.

On the other hand, the extreme reaction of a powerful British (German-born) entrepreneur, Roland ‘Tiny’ Rowland (1917–98), al-Fayed’s rival for ownership of House of Fraser, would have been beyond the wit of most normal mortals to foresee. Even if the Sultan had been keenly conscious of his kingdom’s ‘external vulnerability’ he could hardly have conceptualised a potential threat from that flank, whatever Lonrho’s track record as an intervener in African politics. It is hoped, nevertheless, that academic specialists in International Relations may agree that Mr Rowland can be reasonably classed as an ‘international actor’, and his conspiracy as an event in ‘small state security’, though not precisely aiming for ‘regime change’ like one abortive, freebooter plot against Equatorial Guinea in 2004, and in any case failing in even his (Mr Rowland’s) quite modest objectives, as we shall see.

The seeds of conspiracy

Notwithstanding shortfalls in the ‘formal’ security ratings of this microstate, and (or defined as) its regime, as sketched above, five years after Brunei’s Independence the prospects for the former rebels of 1962 were also scarcely rosy. Kuala Lumpur had long made its peace with Brunei, and the position of the exiles in Kuala Lumpur was distinctly invidious, even if they were not barred from making statements to the press (Malaysia still paid them allowances – but the rate had not kept pace with inflation!). Time was against the exiles in terms of each individual’s lengthening years, as well as the week-by-week consolidation of the regime and the international relationships conducive to its survival. Could there be one last push?

There is not enough space to survey, in this paper, the political activities of the PRB’s second-in-command, Zaini Ahmad, during his time in Kuala Lumpur from 1973 until 1987.²³ What seems certainly germane is that during the years of struggle-in-exile, as the effective leader in the absence of Sheikh Azahari in Indonesia, Zaini had not outgrown a certain naivety or innate optimism about the prospects for converting the Brunei monarchy to a more democratic outlook. By the time of the death of the abdicated Sultan, Omar Ali Saifuddin, in 1986, Zaini had perhaps come to concede that the

²³ This being the year in which the present observer had the privilege of making his acquaintance. Also in contact with him at that period was the Australian historian, Bob Reece (see Reece 2008). After three historical interviews in October 1987, this observer again met Zaini on four days in February 1990 (and his comrades at two of these meetings). The last encounter took place on 21 December 1990.

latter would never forgive his acts of ‘treason’ in 1962 and later.²⁴ But hopes of a liberalizing streak in Omar’s son, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, seemed to ‘spring eternal’. And as late as late-1987, when democracy had still not been restored (even the unelected Legislative Council of 1970 had been discreetly ‘suspended’ less than three months after ‘Full Independence’ – and at minimal political cost to the regime, it was beginning to appear), Zaini could be heard declaring that PRB was still close to people’s hearts; he saw the proof of this in the failure of the two new political parties of Brunei to muster members, being not merely officially sanctioned bodies but actually government fronts.²⁵ The government would shortly realize that its tactic was a dead-end, Zaini mused. A sure omen of the Sultan’s interest in new openings was the return and rehabilitation, during 1987, of the thirty-two former students of Brunei’s SOAS (Maktab Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin) who had abandoned their secondary school studies in the mid-1970s in order to ‘struggle for Independence’ from locations abroad, including Libya where they received commando training. In fact Zaini saw PRB as deserving of the government’s indulgence as it had itself lately urged the young men to return from Malaysia. Zaini also pointed out that at Independence he had dissuaded the comrades of his generation from returning home at that moment, as their presence would create gratuitous turmoil. But his generation would be returning, provided, and as soon as, the government released all the younger returnees, which did not look like being far ahead. It would be possible to test or influence popular feeling by releasing the true national history, probably in 1988 – a work which he thought likely to achieve the status of a *kitab* (meditational text) for the Brunei people.²⁶

What Zaini strikingly did not, or could not, note in his allusions to ‘the boys from SOAS’ was the fact that in their public statements of retraction and repentance on RTB they had been required to declare that their struggle

²⁴ Of quite high family background, Zaini had been a protégé of the old Sultan during his student years, and was promised a glittering career in the civil service.

²⁵ Namely, Brunei National Democratic Party and a breakaway, Brunei National United Party. The latter became the sole party for a period, after the first was deregistered by the government in 1988 on account of ‘destabilising’ tendencies! Indeed one, perhaps the key, reason for the low membership of the first was that the government, on the day of its inaugural congress, warned all government employees not to attend, let alone join the party.

²⁶ The book referred to must be the text on his party’s nationalism in Malay (Zaini 1989), although Reece (2008: 93, 103) dates it at 1984 and treats 1989 as a reprint date. Certainly a text existed as of 1984, but apparently as an M.A. dissertation at Universiti Kebangsaan. Zaini’s optimism that he would be able to return to Brunei as of Independence, or at latest after the ex-Sultan, the Seri Begawan, had died in 1986, is related by Reece (2008: 93) too.

had been misguided in presuming to pre-empt the Sultan's lucid approach to the recovery of Full Independence, while inasmuch as any issues about which they had been agitated were not entirely imaginary anyway – had Brunei ever really ceased to be independent?! – *alhamdulillah*, Negara Brunei Darussalam was now indubitably independent and giving its people all the welfare, development and tranquillity for which they had been misled into 'struggling', and to a degree not seen in other countries of the region. In short, these were statements of total rejection of PRB and abject loyalty to the Sultan. Could Zaini and his generation find it in themselves to recant their past to that extent, as the condition of their return? The present observer forbore to put that blunt question to his new friend, but did gently hint that the people of the new Brunei that he knew, including those born since about 1962, seemed very much less willing to think independently, or at least articulate any thoughts openly, than must have been the case in the 1960s. Was this really a people itching for democracy, or the docile and deferential product of two-and-a-half decades of suppression, indoctrination and welfare dependency? Even the 'SOAS boys' were coming across on television (this observer felt) as somehow a more articulate and thinking group than was conceivable in the Brunei of 1987, even as they mouthed government-scripted platitudes.²⁷

Zaini also seemed rather too willing to place hope in rumours of division and conspiracies within the Brunei elite or royal family itself – some of them quite fantastical – as omens of inevitable upheaval and regime weakness which would push the Sultan to seek vital support from the people through democratic institutions, in place of the traditional and co-opted hierarchy. There seemed an element of 'whistling in the wind' here, by a group of exiles desperate for good news and tending to feed on each other's imagination or the titillating gossip of travellers passing through Kuala Lumpur, rather than solid intelligence about the country.

In the event, a capacity for fantasy may have been vital for the realization of the improbable alliance between PRB and Tiny Rowland that emerged. But having found an international partner who was willing to try to compensate for any weaknesses of the rebels, they needed at the least (one might muse) to consider in a focused way their aims and expectations from any crystallizing exercise. Appearing to assume, with Rowland, that the Sultan and his government could be rattled by some kind of challenge manifestly well-funded from outside, the PRB leaders also seemed to expect to gain, at the least, their own readmission to Brunei on honourable terms to

²⁷ When the present observer was introduced by Zaini to his most prominent fellow exiles in early 1990, he could hardly credit that men of such lasting dedication and articulate conviction, but also a profound gentleness, could be Bruneian at all.

which they had so long aspired. That such a bold challenge to the royal government might confirm the rebels' reputation for treachery and thus be wholly counterproductive, may have been overlooked in their euphoria at finding a way forward, if not of necessity dismissed from view in order not to let slip a golden opportunity or stand accused of timidity.

In this context, a reference could be made to further indications of a persisting streak of optimism, spiced with vanity, even in the midst of actions which contained a hint of an underlying desperation. While declaring that PRB would support the Sultan if he embraced reform of the political structure, Zaini asserted that in the event that foreign powers took advantage of growing instability or simply the lack of democracy in order to interfere, the PRB would not lift a finger to help the Sultan, except by first stating conditions, which would comprise a five-year timetable for preparation of a party system. PRB would not reject a 'dominant party' setup, as in Indonesia – he seemed to mean a party in which the Sultan would have a stake, as well as the returned exiles – but the ex-exiles could count on the Sultan's pliancy because he would have realized that he could not survive in the existing system, Brunei's citizens now being fully aware of the democratic example of the other ASEAN states. A symptom of their eagerness for change was seen, by the way, also in the way Muslim Bruneians (those of the male sex) resorted to Limbang for types of self-indulgence not allowed under Brunei's puritanical interpretation of Islam. Alongside (and almost prophetically contrary to) Zaini's vision of foreign interference providing the catalyst for protests, he gave an assurance that pressure in the form of demonstrations was unnecessary, because the Sultan would respond to the hand of peace, coaxed at most by a benign foreign power, the United States.

Meanwhile, whereas their capacity for naively misreading the prospects may have been a precondition for the Brunei rebel group going into partnership with a celebrated British business maverick who had his own unique motives for wanting to destabilise the royal regime, it has to be said that Mr Rowland may never have taken the trouble if he had not been misled by PRB about the level of 'ferment' in the Brunei population. At least the rebels had moved as far as grasping that events would never move their way without some cajoling from outside. Whether or not this conclusion arose from their own spontaneous reflections on the inexorable consolidation of royal power, or from an approach initially by Mr Rowland, the present observer is completely unaware. At any rate they could not overlook the fact that they crucially lacked, after Malaysia had backed out, any other foreign sponsor with both a motive to interfere and money to spend – and were unlikely to find one, seeing that Indonesia, too, was pursuing policies of internal stabilisation and co-existence with neighbours. But to see hope in an

alliance with a privately motivated non-state actor certainly speaks of an unusual optimism, if not desperation. It is only true that as such an intervention from abroad could never have been anticipated, even by a more acute ruler (assuming that such a one would have indulged an expensive spending habit in the first place), it had the great advantage of total surprise.

As for Mr Rowland's optimism, it may have owed a little, also, to the distorting effects of an all-consuming anger that al-Fayed had deprived him of his cherished prize, Harrods.

This is not to say, however, that intervention on the ground was obviously part of his plans at first. The scene of the first broadsides against al-Fayed and the Sultan was London, and they took the form of pamphleteering out of the office of London and Rhodesia Mining and Land Company (Lonrho), for the attention of British politicians and media. (If by chance James Bartholomew's *Richest Man in the World* was in some way a fruit of friendship between that author and the tycoon, it may also have a claim to consideration for inclusion within the scope of the saga.)²⁸ But even before the joint operation with PRB, action at the London end had achieved a historic coup within Brunei, in the form of Margaret Thatcher's mobilisation to advise the Sultan to release a number of detainees of 1962 vintage, which he did both speedily and unconditionally at the beginning of January 1990, just in time to avoid the odium of holding a 'free world' record for length of detention once the imminent release of Nelson Mandela had materialised.²⁹

²⁸ The epic struggle between Rowland and al-Fayed is recounted, blow by blow, in Bower 1998 as well as Bower 1993, while Bartholomew (1989: 138–154) has an excellent chapter (quite belying the 'titillating' title of the book!). But Bower was not close enough to Brunei itself to be able to report Rowland's direct vengeance against the Sultan, played out in 1990 (his first book discusses events in Africa up to 1992 but Brunei drops from view after 1988). As for Bartholomew's fact-finding visit to Brunei, it had taken place in advance of the 'Day of Vengeance'. Nevertheless, Bartholomew (1989: 166) reveals a very creditable proximity to the action in London by mentioning the distribution, at Lonrho's A.G.M. in March 1988, of the first of the series of pamphlets (Lonrho n.d./a). (All are listed in the References section of the present study in an estimated order of appearance, but in the absence of any dating, the sequence is slightly subject to guess-work.) An oddly competitive volume, Martindale 1989, is as well researched as Bartholomew's, with more than a touch of 'insider' insight but also more fearlessly polemical vis-à-vis the Sultan.

²⁹ A study with which the present author can claim a significant connection may contain the first published reference to the Sultan's tactical retreat (Braithlinn 1992: 85–86). It is relevant that five of the names of the six released had been submitted to the British Prime Minister in early December 1989: see Lonrho n.d./e: 34. The haste, and the embarrassment, surrounding this event can be judged from the fact that, according to Zaini, in personal communication in February, the detainees had turned up at their homes totally unannounced. Consistently, RTB in its evening bulletin on 2 January 1990 failed (just as

The 'joint operation', to follow shortly, would represent even stronger retribution for the Sultan's oblique and improper intervention in London's up-market property world, as Tiny Rowland understood and judged the facts.

The 'joint op' by night

The action within Brunei took the form basically of a nocturnal distribution of Lonrho literature attacking the Sultan, some of it translated into Malay, on the night of 16–17 January 1990, possibly only on that night. The event proved to be unusual, not least, as one about which the government decided fairly early to break silence.³⁰

In the first of the writer's two meetings with Zaini in February 1990, the latter himself would not even admit to knowledge of the Lonrho publications being distributed around Brunei in mid-January. Yet in a second meeting the visitor's account of the dramatic event may have filled the PRB leader with pride and stimulated an urge to take some credit for it. He was willing to admit that PRB had played a part in arranging the translation of Lonrho publications into Malay, and that vice versa Tiny Rowland had sought his permission to use passages from his book on Brunei nationalism. Not only was translation into Malay provided by PRB but who else (one might initially wonder) but a PRB second echelon on the ground could have laid on the distribution service, without which Mr Rowland's ideas of using his publications to (presumably) rattle the Sultan into withdrawing his (presumed) funding from al-Fayed, and more virtuously to strike a blow for the liberty of the Brunei people, would have been mere pipe-dreams?

That the Sultan's government could be coerced a little, by concern for Brunei's international reputation (at least when a warning was delivered precisely and authoritatively, by a British prime minister, for instance), has already been seen in the release of six long-term prisoners on 2 January 1990. But on the other hand, on the following day one read in the government newspaper of the banning of two of Zaini's recent books: surely a

the *Pelita Brunei* report on 10 January would do) to proffer visual evidence of the loyalty-pledging ceremony in the presence of their families of which it spoke – strangely contrary to the usual practice on these occasions, which is to supply such footage for public edification, with reference, not least, to the Sultan's 'compassion'.

³⁰ A step-by-step presentation of the event, as the author learned about it, would convey a flavour of the obstacles, at least for a foreigner (though resident), to learning about any Brunei event which for reasons of state is excluded from report in both official and commercial media (this applied, at first, in the 1990 case too), and which many Bruneians are nervous to talk about. However, for reasons of space, a shorter account will be given.

signal to the opposition still abroad not to expect any indulgence in face of whatever further tricks they might have in store. Not that one need imagine that the government had got wind of anything in particular, but the opposition had no good reason to expect that a hitherto self-indulgently complacent government would somehow cave in, even if rattled, once the PRB-Rowland project was sprung upon it later in the month.³¹

One of the first, if not the very first, of the pamphlets to be dropped off had the title *Si-Bodoh dengan Hartanya*, which was notably free with its criticisms of the Sultan's personal extravagance with national funds.³² The government does not usually panic about flying letters (*surat layang*): in fact they are a valuable source of knowledge about issues which are agitating the public, and individual ministries will keep files of those which comment on their own area of administration. Nevertheless, on this occasion the Special Branch did not apparently regard it as 'just another flying letter' but set up police road-blocks around Kuala Belait on 17 January. This was an exercise serious enough to cause immense traffic jams and delay many journeys. Drivers who were affected could tell that the police were not on a drugs bust, because they searched Malay cars (drivers with *haji*-caps) for preference!³³

The contents of another pamphlet, it was heard, comprised attacks on (a) overproduction of graduates by the new local university; (b) the astronomical salaries of Permanent Secretaries and Ministers; (c) gambling and wanton expenditure by the royal brothers when abroad (the name of Prince Sufri and his wife Mazuin, a Malaysian ex-pop singer, was particularly mentioned); and (d) the vaunted One-Stop agency for foreign investors, whose goal of industrialisation, in the name of diversification, would in fact create jobs for immigrants rather than Brunei citizens.

Also in circulation was a fly-sheet comprising (a) an allegation that prostitutes from Limbang offer their services gratuitously to Border Police in order to get into the country; (b) the grievance of a man of Temburong who had applied for some land under temporary occupation licence (T.O.L.),

³¹ The two books banned were his *Pertumbuhan Nasionalisme* and the novel of the rebellion, *Triwarna*. The banning order was publicised under the heading 'Dua buah buku diharamkan' [Two books banned], *Pelita Brunei*, 3 January 1990. And it was six days later that the report of Zaini's press conference, in which he called for the release of all remaining detainees, was excised from copies of *Straits Times* entering Brunei.

³² This has to be rendered back into English under the equivalent Lonrho title by which, or by the contents whereof, it was obviously inspired, *A Fool and his Money* (Lonrho n.d./a), although *harta* might normally represent 'property', 'wealth'.

³³ As against this impression, the car of a visiting German academic or teacher had been searched in Seria in January, and it was the perception of expatriates at that end of the state that Shell employees fell within the scope of police interest.

came all the way to the Land Office in Bandar in the belief that a decision was awaiting him, but then found to his dismay that it was still pending. While this fly-sheet may have overlapped with the previous one to some extent, if it was not the same one, this cannot apply to a reported tract, mainly about the Sultan, and apparently reflecting *The Richest Man in the World*.

For the present writer the sensational revelation from colleagues was not as to the content or original sources of these materials, but regarding the fact that copies had been thrown out along Jalan Tutong. This prompted the obvious question about the logistical capacity behind such a distribution, in bulk, along a major artery of the country – the one which leads out of the capital in the direction, ultimately, of Seria, but passes through many small centres of population for the first few miles of the journey, that is, villages which have become partially urbanised. It soon transpired that this was a question agitating the minds of the Special Branch. Not the least of their natural concerns had to be the possibility that one or more Land Rovers, driven fast through the night, had been involved, and that these vehicles were ‘on temporary loan’ from the army if not the Royal Brunei Police itself. And how had the consignments reached Brunei: by boat from Labuan; or by vehicle, in runners’ back-packs, or by helicopter, across the land border with Limbang; or (obviously relevant for Kuala Belait/Seria) by main road from Miri?³⁴ In any of these scenarios Malaysian territory would have had to serve as a staging-post, which raised highly disturbing questions, in turn, as to any Malaysian Government involvement. Questions like this were causing not a little agitation and alarm also in the minds of some more cosmopolitan officials on the threshold of, or already at, Permanent Secretary rank. Brunei’s ‘security’ was proving hopelessly permeable.³⁵

Jalan Tutong was not in fact the only dropping-off route. The fly-sheet on government industrialisation strategy and the life-style of the royal brothers was also reported from Jalan Kebangsaan, more or less within the

³⁴ The large number scattered around the Seria shopping centre explains why the police set up the massive roadblocks in the Seria/Kuala Belait area and even took an interest in foreigners’ cars.

³⁵ However, one Special Branch officer, seeing that the Lonrho publications clearly identified their place of printing as UK, wondered whether the British High Commission might know anything about the background, from its intelligence – a question that was geographically well-focused, yet futile in presupposing that HMG still had a lively interest in al-Fayed, let alone that its interest extended to the affairs of Lonrho (even after Tiny Rowland had made direct contact with Margaret Thatcher – an occurrence of which neither the Brunei Special Branch nor the British Foreign Office would have been aware anyway). Generally, the Special Branch was more interested in a line of hypothesis that led to the Royal Brunei Armed Forces as the source of the trouble.

capital. Government alarm was reflected in the action of Departmental Directors in calling in their Heads of Section and directing them to tell all staff to hand in any copies of this subversive literature to their Directors, for forwarding on to the Ministers. It was said that the Ministers had themselves been called in by the Sultan, enraged to hear of the development on his recent return from UK. This was an exercise in futility in the sense that no minor official or teacher would hand in such a document and expose himself to the risk of being branded as complicit in the distribution! But the government would have gathered a rich harvest if they had all complied, for it was becoming generally known that the distribution had struck virtually ‘everywhere’. People were by now assuming, with confidence, that the army must be involved, being the owner and supplier of Land Rovers fitted with slits, through which the books had been pushed onto the verges of highways. The car-parks beneath some blocks of urban flats had also been visited by the distributors (followed in short order by policemen on the look-out for any copies on the roofs of cars or in stair-wells which had not yet been picked up by the public), while government servants living in the more salubrious type of detached government bungalow (i.e. including senior officials up to Minister level) had found copies of *Si-bodoh*, *The Richest Man*, and a text called *Hero from Zero*, on their gardens and driveways. A whole pile of *Si-Bodoh* had been set down at the airport for anyone to help themselves to.

Rattled but resilient – and not removed

In the event, the regime’s response suggested alarm at what the opposition had carried off with such aplomb, but no panic – surely the rapid mobilisation of the police for damage limitation cannot be called ‘panicky’, and it shows that the Chief of Police was ‘on board’, not a conspirator.³⁶ The Sultan used the occasion of the prize-giving ceremony of the National Quran Reading Competition in the splendid International Conference Centre, as early as 31 January, to deliver a rallying speech to the Brunei people, replete with warnings about ‘bad elements’ intent on destroying state and nation (in

³⁶ Albeit one of the most imaginative conspiracy theories, outside the Special Branch, had it that the Royal Brunei Police were only able to seize caches of subversive publications with such heroic speed, to the enormous personal credit of the Commissioner of Police (Pengiran Putera Negara Pengiran Haji Omar), because his force itself (NOT the army!) had been the major agent for distribution. This was inferable from the ‘discovery’ of one cache in a remote location in Temburong, far from any population. ‘PPN’ was thought to have a need to both alarm the government and distinguish himself as its saviour in order to forestall the ‘wing-clipping’ transfer of himself to an ambassadorial post abroad which was widely believed to be in the offing.

Brunei's political vocabulary state and nation are not distinguished: both answer to the term *negara*). Such warnings are in fact uttered with a certain regularity in contemporary Brunei, they are part of the defensive repertoire of the regime, and are often met with boredom or mystification by the very few who notice ('what was the danger H.M. had in mind?'). However, on this occasion people immediately understood the context, for in fact the Sultan was quite open in referring to the 'dissemination of pamphlets and propaganda full of lies and falsehood'.³⁷ Thus they could take the speech as indicative of three aspects of regime thinking or what the regime would like the people to think in face of a very specific situation: (a) it was facing a challenge; (b) it would stand up to the challenge resolutely; (c) it 'expected' every citizen to extend loyal cooperation to the ruler in their mutual interest. No matter that after years of depoliticization of the citizenry cooperation with the government had taken on a distinctly passive cast, like spectators at an entertainment if not a tribe of cynics (as a few of the educated could be characterised to be), or acutely cautious if not fundamentally fearful (probably true of the majority), this is all perfectly functional to regime purposes: it means that any opposition movement will find the people's cooperation with its purposes simply not forthcoming. The government's preference for passivity over any kind of activism (although a 'sincere and active' commitment would be welcome, the government can manage without this) is seen in its intensive efforts at all times to foster love of order through Islam.³⁸

The present writer's own impressions of the meaning of the 31 January speech, as one of the television audience, were reinforced by some re-

³⁷ See full text, under the religiously focused banner, 'Kita boleh menjauhi kemungkaran dan mendekati kebahagiaan' [We can distance ourselves from immoral acts and come closer to happiness], *Pelita Brunei*, 7 February 1990. Even more explicit than the Sultan's speech was the strong editorial on the same page, with its title, 'Diayah palsu tidak mendapat tempat' [There's no place for false propaganda]. As the government was unusually open about this threat, it occasions no surprise that the English-language press made reference to it as well: 'Sultan warns of 'jealous' trouble-makers', *Borneo Bulletin*, 3 February 1990 (a front-page report with banner headline). Further afield and at one more remove, the Singapore press was not totally indifferent to Brunei affairs either: cf. with a Brunei date-line, the tantalising 'Brunei Sultan slams anti-govt group', *Straits Times*, 2 February 1990.

³⁸ It is intriguing that fear of being compromised by association with 'trouble' goes, for some, with an extreme suggestibility about the imminence of the very public disorder against which the government is issuing warnings. Thus the National Day celebrations in the stadium on 23 February were rumoured to be likely to see a clash between infiltrated demonstrators and the police. Naturally, any who were afraid on that account, and might otherwise have attended, stayed away; thus, ironically, the government did not achieve the large turnout on the public benches which it normally did a great deal to mobilise. However, on this occasion the Sultan's speech already avoided further reference to the event, though complimenting the people on their contribution to tranquility.

markable 'body-language' at the end of the prize-giving, when the Sultan descended from the stage but instead of proceeding with his entourage straight down the central aisle towards the exit and awaiting motorcade, took time to approach every one of the government Ministers (who had just stood up from their seats in the front row of the hall) and accept their obeisances in a manner which conveyed a conscious appreciation instead of the normal, cool *hauteur* – as if a bond of warmly felt, mutual respect existed between them, or at least needed to be affected for public consumption: 'Total unity at the top!'

In a polity so wedded, normally, to silence about its inner workings, and which even in the 1990 crisis was not taught a lesson about any virtues of transparency (if anything, the opposite), a foreign observer is forced to resort to speculation about the motives behind the actions of government from time to time. As the regime did not admit to the existence of a 'crisis' as such, one would meet no admitted linkage between it and certain actions which have the look of efforts at damage limitation or countervailing propaganda. There is no local, independent press to point out or speculate about such linkages. While the government hates rumour – especially when rumour misinterprets innocent or routine actions – it still sees more advantage in secrecy, and normally feels able to live with *surat layang*. In this situation one can do no more than record four 'interesting' but only in one instance very plausibly crisis-related actions, apart from the Sultan's speech: (a) unlike previous practice in relation to ordinary training exercises, on 13 March the government put out a TV flash recalling the army reservists; (b) contrary to the normal monopoly of the Department of Religious Affairs over the distribution of *zakat*, Prince Jefri's aides in the Ministry of Culture staged an ostentatious hand-out of charity to the poor, 'out of his own pocket', on the eve of 'Aidilfitri – almost counter-productively in security terms, as the great rush of would-be 'poor' at more than one location threatened to become a crush with attendant fatalities;³⁹ (c) going beyond the routine format for these pep-talks, but in tune with the Sultan's pronouncement on the motives of the opposition, in early February (about midway between the first two actions) there was a warning by the Director of Broadcasting and Information that linked current mischief-making to a threat to Independence – that is, from jealous, externally-based or externally-linked, elements who called in question the gains for the people of the Independence which the present government had achieved;⁴⁰ (d) conceivably, though not cer-

³⁹ The Police Reserve Unit was scrambled to one of the four locations to control the crowd. See 'Children hurt as crowds scramble for cash handouts', *Borneo Bulletin*, 5 May 1990.

⁴⁰ 'Villagers warned: 'Watch out for trouble-makers', *Borneo Bulletin*, 7 April 1990.

tainly, accelerated from beyond earlier intention, the Sultan announced the coordination of existing Brunei law with *shari'ah*.⁴¹

Whether or not these actions contained special or unusual messages to the people (a warning of regime resolution; an assurance of royal compassion; an appeal to racial and national solidarity against 'enemies of Brunei's independence'; and a strengthening of the regime's Islamic legitimacy, respectively), the present writer would judge that the regime stood to lose credibility less from the substantive challenge from abroad than from secondary rumour about plotting by either the police or the army against the Sultan, or against each other – hardly a proof of regime cohesion. The most serious loss was arguably in terms of the regime's standing in the eyes of the diplomatic missions (and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs or Defence behind them, if they cared), after proof of such egregious incompetence in either gathering intelligence of the looming event, or being able to identify its perpetrators when it happened and arrest those who had operated within Brunei. For the United Kingdom, with its diffuse 'security commitment', the regime's failure was even potentially chilling, for if the event had succeeded in inspiring and mobilising numerous Bruneians, to the point of creating a situation of distinct insecurity, an embarrassing appeal to 'the British commitment' from a panicky or paranoid Sultan was not beyond the bounds of possibility.

However, no such situation did materialise. Domestically, at least, no lasting harm was done. The regime was saved ultimately by the ingrained passivity of the Brunei people. The event demonstrated more than anything else how wrong Zaini was about the nature of Brunei 27 years after the historic revolt. The crux of this passivity is that however culturally obedient or politically intimidated the mass of uneducated may indeed be, the key stratum is the educated but secure and comfortable minority employed in the government service. There is virtually no educated native segment except within the ranks of government service. Typically, these Bruneians are extremely cautious about anything that might compromise their employment, promotion prospects and right to government housing. As an educated stratum, they include some members who are indubitably lucid, even cynical, about the dynamics of power, and capable of speaking about it among close friends. But they do so not in a spirit of anger or revolt at 'abuse of power', but more as an audience attending an entertainment – one laid on by a state

⁴¹ 'Islamic ways to be given pride of place in Brunei soon', *Borneo Bulletin*, 28 July 1990. In fact the Pakistani jurist appointed to advise the government in this area had begun work earlier, so the information from the Sultan, at Muslim New Year, was to some extent retrospective. But this need not rule out that the programme, or its acceleration, had some connection with the crisis earlier in the year.

(though no mere ‘theatre state’) over which they do not expect or demand any right of control. In addition to this, some of them, and certainly their parents and living grandparents, have poignant memories of the 1962 revolt, experienced not least as a civil war, which form a significant deterrent to involvement in kinds of political activity which might result in a repeat. (It was not exactly to the advantage of PRB remnants, in trying to revive radicalism, that it was their very organisation that had unleashed the suffering on the previous occasion!)⁴² With hindsight, nothing more than passivity could have been expected in the 1990 crisis, for even during the scandal of the missing Brunei Investment Agency funds in the later 1990s the population, though agitated for the first time about the behaviour of royalty, accepted the ‘adjustments’ in the direction of ‘greater transparency’ carried out by the Sultan’s faithful servant Pehin Abdul Aziz, who took over control of Brunei Investment Agency from the disgraced Prince Jefri for a period. More important still, the fact that total and unscrutinised control of the national reserves was granted to Prince Jefri in the first place stands to demonstrate that monarchical hubris had taken a new lease of life from the 1962 victory over the PRB.⁴³

Making peace

Ten months after the ‘historic event’, on his next passage through Kuala Lumpur the writer agreed to act as a minor courier to Tiny Rowland, by bearing a silk scarf (Zaini’s gift for Mrs Rowland) and of course bringing an expression of kind and respectful regards (to confirm the bond between ‘Brunei Rebel and Rebel Tycoon’, as it were!). But it came as a considerable surprise, after the absence of unrest in Brunei in the intervening months, let alone a mass uprising, to find Zaini once more in ebullient mode, at least in terms of his own prospects for return to Brunei and honourable rehabilitation. He was in fact speaking of his hopes of securing an ambas-

⁴² From the writer’s extensive contact with Dusun society in Tutong District, he knows how local PRB activists intimidated Dusuns in the 1962 elections by warning them of retribution, after the PRB took power, if they did not vote appropriately. Chinese all over the state were even more alarmed by what they saw of the ‘ugly face’ of an expropriating Malay nationalism.

⁴³ On sundry ramifications of the crisis of 1998, see Kershaw 2001: 129–135. When it was suggested as of mid-1998 that the very survival of the regime might hang on the incapacity of the people to conceptualize either the degree or the enormity of the diversion of state assets which they themselves were alleging against the brother of the Sultan (Kershaw 2000: 149), the point being made was that the ‘incapacity level’ would almost certainly be sufficient to ensure regime survival. And so it has turned out.

sadorial appointment. How this could plausibly be achieved after the audacious but failed challenge earlier in the year, defied easy comprehension. For that matter, was his desire to return so overpowering that he would do so on almost any terms, indeed without any government guarantees of safe-conduct? One could also wonder how Zaini's surrender, even if justified in his own mind as an 'honourable compromise' with the Sultan, would be read by Tiny Rowland after the latter's substantial investment in Zaini and the PRB, emotionally as well as financially. Conceivably Zaini believed or hoped that Mr Rowland had always grasped his desire to return home as his minimum, and most precious, objective in their joint endeavour, even if it had never been pointed out to Mr Rowland, nor even necessarily admitted by Zaini to himself until defeat finally stared him in the face. Had the approach of his 56th birthday in any way concentrated his mind on the tragic prospect of dying in exile, never to see his native land again?

Back at a freezing Cheapside, at a meeting with Tiny Rowland and Sir Edward du Cann, M.P., 10 January 1991, the writer attempted to explain why the distribution of Lonrho materials, although physically a sensational success, had not been, perhaps could never have been, followed by an outbreak of rebellious actions among the people. Both gentlemen seemed bemused by an account of Brunei society so much at odds with what they had learned from Zaini Ahmad. Mr Rowland's feeling that he had been sadly misled was tangible, both in respect of the level of political awareness, not to say simmering anger, in Brunei society, and in terms of the strength of commitment of Zaini and his colleagues themselves. It may not be going too far to suggest that he felt betrayed.⁴⁴

Zaini Ahmad returned to Brunei on 1 April 1993 without any government assurance whatsoever that he would not be punished.⁴⁵ He suffered detention for three more years but was released under a royal pardon, on 19 July 1996.⁴⁶ This date being four days after the Sultan's fiftieth birthday, one is tempted to wonder whether clemency was bestowed as part of the

⁴⁴ The writer learned at this meeting that the sum invested in Zaini (together with – most interestingly – the Sabah politician Harris Salleh) was half a million pounds sterling. Mr Rowland claimed to be still unaware of what became of the money, and was thus at least gratified to hear of the success of the book distribution. Mention was also made of a key meeting for setting up the exercise (possibly the only meeting between the parties), which took place in Spain as Zaini was unable to rely on gaining admittance to UK. Perhaps Tiny Rowland would have avoided disappointment, and the present writer some astonishment, if both had had access to a certain frank and prophetic declaration of Zaini about willingness to serve the Sultan, two years before Independence: see Tasker 1982: 27.

⁴⁵ There was no announcement in any of the Brunei media, official or commercial.

⁴⁶ Reece (2008: 92–93) gives the detail (but wrong year) of Zaini's difficult choice and its consequences.

customary marks of Grace and Condescension associated with the Royal Birthday, such as award of honours and rank. Yet even if so, this political prisoner was noticeably denied a dignified acknowledgement about the happening in the official government newspaper. Virtually a ‘non-event’ for an ‘Unperson’!⁴⁷

Whether his acceptance, after release, of a position at the Brunei History Centre, can be interpreted as a form of unspoken apology as well as acknowledgement of comprehensive defeat, not only in 1962 but in 1990, is more a matter for moralists to ponder.⁴⁸ Ironically, the Lonrho-funded attempt at a non-violent replay of revolt against royal power strengthened the monarchy counterproductively by proving, irrevocably, the hopelessness of the prospects for opposition. Tiny Rowland’s only tangible success, on his terms, was to engineer the release of the six long-serving detainees; and even this was done through the offices of Margaret Thatcher, not by conspiracy, and saved the Sultan himself from a grave international embarrassment.⁴⁹ The regime’s action in recently admitting another leading fighter, the ageing former TNKU General, Yassin Affendi, to a role in a tutelary revival of political parties, speaks volumes about its power and its self-confidence in the continuing exercise thereof.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In terms of the framework proffered at the beginning of this paper, Brunei’s strategic proximity to London did not need to be invoked in the 1990 incident, because an external intervention against the regime, although itself provoked by a more private form of proximity to the British capital (po-

⁴⁷ The release and self-abasing apology and oath of loyalty are reported in *Pelita Brunei*, 24 July 1996.

⁴⁸ The leading Brunei historian, Director of the Centre, is the author of two studies which treat the Revolt from a strongly pro-royal perspective (see note 1, above). The fact that Zaini was able at the Centre to work on a version of his University of Malaya doctoral thesis, for publication in Brunei (Zaini 2003), is a sure token of the ex-rebel’s conformity, not official acceptance of a resistance narrative.

⁴⁹ Aided very specifically by *Golden Silence* (Lonrho n.d./e), as Mr Rowland pointed out to the writer. The book was slightly rushed into publication, he admitted, in order to be in time for the Sultan’s Christmas holiday in London, December 1989.

⁵⁰ On his pledge of loyalty to the Sultan, rehabilitation and emergence as head of the National Development Party (NDP), see Mohd.Yusop 2007: 105. A more high-profile rehabilitation than that of either Zaini or Yassin, but of similar underlying significance (deemed not likely to stir opposition), comprised the return and public reappearance of Prince Jefri, at and after *Aidilfitri* in September 2009. Schottmann 2006 gives a succinct overview of both the ideology and its stabilising achievement to date.

tentially a grave foreign policy error), lacked the element of local backup so vital for success by any definition and, if anything, strengthened the hand of the regime. But the passivity of the population certainly reflects in part the oil-wealth of this microstate – yet, importantly, more the component that is assiduously invested in welfare and ideological propagation (including religion) than the funding of mercenary forces. Thus, a ‘unified nation under monarchical leadership’, even though significantly exaggerated by the official ideology and in relation to the past more a case of historical invention than a plausible construction, has become increasingly reified in recent years, to the point of possibly demanding attention, in its own right, as a serious resource in the survival of this territorial entity, over and above the regime itself.

Meanwhile, the triumph of the monarchy in the internal contest for power will be finally beyond doubt if the foreign policy disaster over Limbang in 2009 (proof, surely, of a persisting ‘small-state vulnerability’) unleashes no nationalist backlash, or even enhances popular solidarity with the beleaguered regime.⁵¹ The latent, balancing, danger is that, somewhat like the close ties with Britain but with no compensation in return, the disaster will expose the emptiness of Brunei’s ‘independence’, thus interacting damagingly with the ‘internal’ legitimacy which cannot be isolated from the Sultanate’s independence myths. Already in 1990 the regime imprudently suppressed the one hundredth anniversary of the Limbang annexation in the media. Can these failures of ‘performance’ be overridden by the apparent, general access of ‘external’ hubris post-1990, behind which, indeed, lurk further risks to performance? One highly diagnostic event in external relations was the Sultan’s state visit to Russia in October 2009, with an entourage consisting of the extended royal family and evoking nothing so suggestively as a return of the Romanovs to Moscow! If *faux-pas* as gross as this can be overridden, and do not re infect domestic behaviour with increments of excess – being an example, of course, of transfer of domestic courtly behaviour onto the international stage in the first place – then indeed the ‘internal’ components in security and survival (essentially, neo-traditional monarchy and, not least, the pompous mockery of the wholly nominated parliament revived in 2004) will have vindicated, countervailingly, the pre-

⁵¹ Limbang, intersecting Brunei between its districts of Brunei/Muara and Temburong, was annexed by Charles Brooke on 17 March 1890, and ultimately inherited by Malaysia. Lengthy negotiations between Brunei and Malaysia, over a maritime dispute as well as territory, concluded with what the Malaysian government understood to be Brunei’s abandonment of the Limbang claim, although the Brunei government denied to its public that the issue had even been discussed! (Cf front-page banner, ‘Isu tuntutan Limbang tidak dirundingkan’ [The issue of the Limbang claim was not discussed], *Pelita Brunei*, 21 March 2009.)

cedence which they have generally received. Reverberations for the political structure from events in the Middle East in February 2011 are impossible to exclude completely, but as of December 2010 the Sultan, even at an international Democracy Forum in Bali, was still at ease in invoking the trauma of 1962 both as grounds for a diffuse sense of vulnerability, and as justification, in that light, for continuing to refuse democracy for Brunei 48 years later.⁵²

However, if the Arab situation were to impinge on the Brunei popular consciousness, it could, bizarrely and as with earlier examples, be a sign of self-subverting audacity or dangerous complacency on the part of the Sultan if he then utters no hint whatsoever of concessions. The absence of an imminent and tangible external threat to Brunei's present territory would make his position more, rather than less, vulnerable.

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⁵² The English text of the Sultan's speech at Bali is available on the website of The Prime Minister's Office Brunei Darussalam: see '3rd Bali Democracy Forum', 9 December 2010. A Malay translation was attempted, under the heading 'Keamanan, kestabilan menjadi impian' [Peace and stability are our dream], in *Pelita Brunei*, 15 December 2010.

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