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(Dis-)Connected History

The Indonesia-Malaysia Relationship

Frederik Holst

The development of relations between Indonesia and Malaysia has gone through a number of stages oscillating from a common feeling of belonging and mutual cooperation to outright hostility or indifference. Analysing those relations therefore requires dissecting a conglomerate of different perspectives, especially those of locality and time. They need to be examined to understand why and how these two nations that laid their foundations on the same cultural *Nusantara* (archipelago) heritage have developed such differing relations towards each other in the past. The present of this relationship is inextricably connected to this past, but there have also been – and still are – tendencies to eradicate or disconnect these linkages for a number of reasons.

This article will look at certain key events in the Indonesia-Malaysia relationship that were defining for the development of these two countries and show how and why political actors proceeded in a way that alienated the two peoples continuously.

Research in this field certainly needs to be given more consideration, especially because history has been ‘interpreted’ by both governments according to their political interests, focussing more on separating rather than connecting viewpoints. In-depth work has been done on conflicts between the two states like *konfrontasi* (confrontation) in the 1960s (Poulgrain 1998, Mackie 1974) and similarly on the influence of Indonesia’s *reformasi* (reformation) movement on Malaysia’s corresponding developments (Weiss 2006: 192-239, Heryanto and Mandal 2003). But more encompassing views on this special relationship which also take pre-independence into account are scarcely found. Noor (2002, 2005) has been offering interesting perspectives on why this chapter of history for example has been blacked out in Malaysia’s ‘official’ history, whereas Liow (2005) has contributed a comprehensive analysis of the politics of Indonesia-Malaysia relations up to present times.

Pre-Independence

Historical linkages between what are now Indonesia and Malaysia stretch back several hundred years¹ in which the kingdoms of Srivijaya and Majapahit, the Sultanate of Malacca, the Minangkabau and the Bugis controlled the archipelago. Culture, religion and trade were further strengthening ties between the people of *Nusantara*. With the installation of colonial regimes by the Portuguese, the Dutch and later the British, boundaries and systems of control were created that effectively weakened intra-regional cooperation. Any kind of rebellion or resistance – be it political or economical – was met with retaliation, as could be seen in the Java War, the Aceh War and the Mat Salleh Rebellion in Borneo. Although local leaders like Diponegoro and Mat Salleh enjoyed widespread support locally, their influence on a larger scale remained constrained.

Apart from military and economic force, the British and the Dutch used treaties as a means for securing colonial spheres of influence and consolidating power, thus further tearing apart grown structures: The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 effectively divided the Malay world into two parts by ending Dutch influence in Malaya, leaving all options open for the British, while the Dutch regained Java after losing it in the course of the Anglo-Dutch Java War in 1811.

In the Burney Treaty of 1826 the British East India Company acknowledged Siam's claim over the Malay states of Kedah, Pattani, Kelantan and Terengganu in order to secure their position in Penang and unhindered trade with Kelantan and Terengganu. In 1909, the Anglo-Siamese Treaty led to another dissection by bringing Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu also under British control while leaving Northern Malaya, comprising Pattani, Narathiwat (Menara), Songkhla (Singgora), Satun (Setul) and Yala (Jala), to Siam. Local rulers of those states were not represented in these negotiations and present-day state boundaries were formed largely due to these colonial treaties.

Resistance against the colonialists was further weakened by embedding local rulers into the colonial administration. Although different in their enforcement, systems of indirect control were established by both the British and the Dutch and used effectively to rule their colonial territories. The aristocratic class, for example the Sultans in Malaya or the *priyayi* in Java, still held nominal power to a certain extent but despite their traditional prestige they were seen more and more as vassals, especially in Indonesia (Kubitscheck and Wessel 1981: 120). The British system of installing a 'resident' with the local sultans, starting from 1874 with the Pangkor-Treaty, still left the sultans with enough grandeur to ensure their loyalty towards the British, so that no real challenge occurred.

¹ Yamin (1958) cites the colours red and white as one example for a common cultural heritage which were revered by inhabitants of the archipelago since around 4,000-6,000 B.C. These colours can still be found in the flags of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

In both systems, the 'dirty work' on the ground level was left to locals, so that they themselves had to sort out any disaffection.

The development of nationalistic movements was also hindered by these circumstances. Although groups like Budi Utomo (1908), Sarekat Islam (1911), Partai Nasionalis Indonesia (PNI, founded 1927 by Sukarno) or Kesatuan Melayu Muda (1938) among others were active before World War II, it was the victory of the Japanese over European colonial powers that signified a turning point in the struggle for independence. And it was then that in both colonies a future independent state comprising Malaya and Indonesia came into perspective. Despite their fighting against colonial powers, most of the future leaders in Indonesia and Malaysia had received a western-style education (Wessel 2005: 7; Noor 2004: 31), either overseas or at home, for example at the British-led Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) in Malaysia (Roff 1967: 144).

In Indonesia, the Japanese organised a committee for the preparation for Indonesian Independence, the Badan Penyelidik Usaha Persiapan Kemerdekaan Indonesia (BPUPKI), which included future leaders of independent Indonesia, like Sukarno, Hatta and Yamin.

Although it was not clear from the beginning whether an attempt would be made to include Malaya into the future Indonesian republic, a strong commitment developed during the negotiations in July 1945: in the second session on 11 July 1945, a majority of 45² out of 66 members voted for a territorial definition that would include the Malay Peninsular in the newly formed nation (Yamin 1959: 214) if the people of Malaya would be willing to join. For Sukarno security reasons played a major role and he argued that Indonesia would not be safe if the whole Straits of Malacca were not under the complete control of Indonesia (Sekretariat Negara 1995: 151). Yamin, one of the strongest supporters of a 'Greater Indonesia', stated that the territory should be determined according to pre-colonial boundaries, for example the kingdom of Majapahit (*ibid*: 55f), and cited also geopolitical reasons for the inclusion of Malaya (*ibid*: 136). Hatta, however, was more cautious on this issue. He would have rather seen the people of Malaya independent within a Greater East Asia, but would not have opposed it if there were a united free will to join (*ibid*: 147).

In Malaya, young Malay radicals of the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM, Young Malay's Union) such as Ibrahim Yaakob, Ahmad Boestamam and Burhanuddin al-Helmy, who had close ties to Indonesian nationalists even to the extent of being members of the PNI (McIntyre 1973: 78), were also aiming to unite the Pan-Malay peoples. In July 1945, Kesatuan Rakyat Indonesia Semenanjung (KERIS, Union of the Indonesian and

² In a number of sources (Jackie et al. 1974) only the 39 members who voted for a territorial definition consisting of the Dutch East Indies, Malaya, Northern Borneo, East Timor and West Papua are mentioned, but with regard to the inclusion of Malaya the six votes for 'Dutch East Indies and Malaya only' should also be taken into account.

Peninsular Peoples) under the leadership of Burhanuddin was founded, and an independent *Nusantara Raya*³ (Greater Indonesia) seemed to come closer to reality (Noor 2004: 38f), but on 12 August 1945 the Japanese Commander-in-Chief for Southeast-Asia rejected the territorial claims made by the BPUPKI (Dahm 1969: 301). At the subsequent meeting of Ibrahim, Sukarno and Hatta in Taiping plans for a united mother country were still discussed, but the sudden surrender of the Japanese and the return of the British, together with the unilateral declaration of independence of Indonesia on 17 August, forced the Malay nationalists to proceed with their struggle for independence on their own (Cheah 1979: 117).

The Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM, Malayan Malay National Party) was founded on the same day that Indonesia declared its independence. Led by Mokhtaruddin Lasso (a former member of the Malayan Communist Party, MCP) and al-Helmy, the party strove for immediate independence from British rule and still envisaged the formation of *Nusantara Raya*.

The First Pan-Malayan Malay Congress on 1-4 March 1946, in which PKMM took part as one of the largest groups, led to the formation of the United Malays Nationalist Organisation (UMNO) on 11 May 1946 which “quickly developed a reputation as a conservative-traditionalist organisation that was feudalistic in character” (Noor 2004: 50). After ideological and personal differences, the left-wing nationalists of PKMM left UMNO during the second UMNO General Assembly (29-30 June 1946) and UMNO soon assumed a dominant position as the main negotiating partner of the British (Noor 2002: 98). The sultans also sided with UMNO rather than the PKMM which had close links with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) through Boestamam and Yaakob (who was in exile in Indonesia by that time), fearing that they might lose their power in a leftist political environment.

With the departure of PKMM no further attempts for a unified independence were made. The aristocratic-traditional elite of UMNO saw the concepts of *Nusantara Raya* as a challenge to their position and “the subservience of Malay interests to those of a proclaimed egalitarian Indonesia-inspired nationalism, which they felt was a cover for Javanese hegemony” (Liow 2005: 68). The end of the war and UMNO’s rise thus dashed all hopes of a pan-Malayan state.

³ The terms *Melayu Raya*, *Malaya Raya*, *Indonesia Raya* and *Nusantara Raya* all refer roughly to the area of the Southeast Asian Archipelago. Although *Melayu Raya* and *Indonesia Raya* are more commonly used, it is argued by some scholars that it might connote a dominance of one group within the area, thus, in this article, the more neutral – although less commonly found – term *Nusantara Raya* will be used.

Dissent and Conflict

While Indonesia finally gained independence after five years on the battlefield against the Dutch, UMNO negotiated Malaya's independence over the years which was 'delivered on a silver platter' by the British on 31 August 1957 and this turned out to exemplify the position taken in world politics. The directions of the two governments during the Cold War seemed to differ more and more: Indonesia's dominant role in the Bandung Asian-African Conference in 1955 and the developing Non-Aligned Movement strengthened its position in the anti-colonial struggle and it was perceived as a role model by other countries striving for independence. In this context, on the one side, Malaya's subtle support for the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and its defence agreements with the British were seen as a form of collaboration with its former colonial masters. On the other side, Malaya, heavily fighting communist groups like the MCP during the so-called Emergency, regarded Indonesia's non-aligned stand as bowing to communism and feared to end up in a position where it had to submit to Indonesian dominance.

Despite this, an Indonesia-Malaya Treaty of Friendship was signed on 17 April 1959, the only one of its kind ever ratified by Kuala Lumpur (Liow 2005: 86) and for a short time an even greater entity, the *Maphilindo* confederation, consisting of Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia, was discussed during the Manila talks in 1963. But just a few months later both countries reached an all-time low in their relationship with each other, during the intermittent war of *konfrontasi*.

The plan to create a new federation of Malaysia incorporating the British colonies in Borneo and Singapore was first brought up officially by Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister of Malaya, on 27 May 1961. The inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak was important for the UMNO-dominated government under the Tunku to maintain a nationwide *bumiputra* (Malays and other indigenous people) majority, since a union of Malaya and Singapore alone would have resulted in giving the Chinese the upper-hand.

At first, Indonesia was not alarmed by the proposed merger, but Sukarno, portraying himself as a leader of the 'newly emerging forces', saw the new formation as a project of 'neo-colonialist forces' which had to be opposed.

During the Brunei revolt in 1962, the relationship between Malaya and Indonesia were already tense. Indonesia was accused by Malaysia of being involved in the rebellion and as a result Indonesian Foreign Minister Subandrio announced "a policy of confrontation" against Malaysia. The Manila talks led to a short-term lowering of tensions, but when Malaysia was finally formed on 16 September 1963, while a referendum in Northern Borneo as agreed during the Manila talks was still to be held, the stage for a larger-scale confrontation was set. The next day Malaysia broke off diplomatic ties with Indonesia and the Philippines for not recognising Sabah and Sarawak as part of its territ-

ory and a month later Sukarno coined the term *ganjang Malaysia*. Often translated in an outright hostile way as ‘crush Malaysia’, Poulgrain (1998: 9) points out that “the word *ganjang* implied a degree of hostility, yet the inherent oral emphasis [of *ganjang* meaning ‘to devour’] was indicative more of characteristic presidential banter than any *ultima ratio regnum*. Sukarno was willing to embark on a political argument, an oral exercise but not a war”.

The reasons, motivations and aims of the different parties involved in this conflict are manifold and still highly controversial: Mackie (1974: 10) does not hide his sympathies for Malaysia and assumes that Sukarno was seeking territorial gains and a cause to detract from internal political tensions. Noor (2005: 274-277) also notes the role of internal tensions in Indonesia that led Sukarno to proceed with *konfrontasi*. But it should be acknowledged that especially the former colonial powers had their own agenda, too: in the eyes of the British Foreign Office, for example, Sukarno was seen as a strong ally of the Soviet Union, compared even with Hitler in his striving to become a major power in the Pacific by seizing the whole of Melanesia including Malaya, the Philippines and the remaining half of New Guinea, thus action needed to be taken against him (Edwards and Pemberton 1992: 258).

Poulgrain (1998: 4-6) argues controversially that the British preparedness for the upcoming conflict suggests that it was not the “outcome of a calculated strategy” by Indonesia, but that genuine interests of the British in the region were the establishment of new leaderships “amenable to continued British investment” and that “the political environment [...] did not include Sukarno as leader of neighbouring Indonesia”. He even comes to the conclusion that *konfrontasi* was “a joint program set by British and American intelligence, at times overriding lesser-ranking individuals in the Colonial Office”.

In the end, it was Malaysia who benefited most from the outcome of the crisis: firstly, the nation was formed as the Tunku and the British had wished (except for Brunei that remained with the British) with the side-effect that due to the external pressures the culturally distant states of East and West Malaysia closed ranks. Secondly, the governments made it clear that loyalty could only be shown to one or the other country, but not to an ideology that was aiming at overcoming these boundaries. This not only effectively sidelined leftists as well as supporters of *Nusantara Raya* like Ibrahim Yaakob who saw the conflict as a last means for the struggle to achieve a united country, fighting against colonial powers. It also set the stage for another round-up of opposition politicians and activists (Noor 2002: 61, 109) which further strengthened the position of the UMNO-led government.

And thirdly, the 1965 *coup d'état* in Indonesia not only put an end to Sukarno's rule and subsequently to *konfrontasi* in 1966, it also marked a turning point in the perspective in the respective relations: although relations between both countries shifted back to a

more cooperative level, Malaysia was no longer the *adik* to *abang* (younger brother/older brother) Indonesia.

From Brothers to 'Illegals'

Present-day relations are often described as positively 'special' and close co-operations exist – on a bilateral level as well as within ASEAN. However there is no doubt that both countries focus on their own interests when conflicting issues occur.

One very significant development between Indonesia and Malaysia centres around labour migration from Indonesia to Malaysia. This primarily economic matter not only has an impact on the political and cultural sphere as well, it also demonstrates how Malaysia sees itself in a dominant position nowadays towards Indonesia.

Despite recessions in the 1980s and 1990s, Malaysia managed to achieve sizeable economic growth rates. The subsequent rising standards of living and cost of labour led to increased labour migration, both legal and *sans-papiers*⁴, mainly in the construction, plantation and domestic service sectors. Ramasamy (2004: 273-4) states that “two million workers constitute about 23 percent of the total workforce in Malaysia, mostly from Indonesia and the Philippines. [...] Not all the estimated two million migrants have legal status, nearly two-thirds are illegal migrants”. Although this actually describes an interdependence between the economies of the two countries, it was most often used as a sign of dominance on Malaysia's side: As long as unemployment in Malaysia was not a major problem and the middle-class was expanding, it was made clear to the Indonesians and their government who was giving the instructions, sometimes in a more accommodating or generous way as in Mahathir's so-called Prosper-thy-Neighbour Policy⁵, but sometimes also threatening.⁶ However, when the employment situation worsened in Malaysia, especially through thousands of unemployed graduates (although these would never have wanted to work in the same sectors as migrant workers did), the government felt compelled to appear as if it were acting against this.

The consequences have been several larger and smaller actions against the *sans-papiers*. The first major crackdown occurred in 2002: before major changes to immigration laws which included whipping and jail sentences upon conviction came into force in August 2002⁷, a four-month amnesty led to the repatriation of nearly half-a-million people.

⁴ The term 'illegals' is avoided in this text unless used in quotations because of its derogative connotation. Instead, the less discriminating French term *sans-papiers* is used, meaning without documents.

⁵ Prosper thy neighbour policy in action. In: *New Sunday Times* 02.11.1997; PM: Help each other become prosperous. In: *Business Times* 04.11.1997.

⁶ See for example: Jakarta must play by the rules for mutual benefit (V. K. Chin). In: *The Star* 18.02.2005.

⁷ 18,000 illegal immigrants whipped in M'sia. In: *MalaysiaKini* 16.08.2004.

Two hundred thousand Indonesian workers were stranded in camps near the border after their deportation and this led to serious criticism against President Megawati who was travelling overseas during that time. In order not to face such a situation again, the Indonesian government even asked Malaysia for a postponement of a subsequent deportation measure in 2004 during the Presidential elections when Megawati was hoping for re-election and Indonesia was 'grateful' that Malaysia agreed.⁸

Although many Malaysian companies, especially in the construction and plantation sectors, were virtually unable to continue their businesses in 2002 and the government had to fast-track hundreds of thousands of applications from migrant workers⁹, the government pushed for action: the 2004 operation, codenamed *Ops Tegas* (lit. operation strict), aimed at "eliminating all foreigners working illegally in Malaysia"¹⁰ according to Home Minister Azmi Khalid. A total number of more than half-a-million enforcement officers from police, Immigration and RELA (Ikatan Relawan Rakyat, People's Volunteer Corps) were involved in the operation.¹¹

Whether the approximately 1.2 million *sans-papiers* workers in the country were really the prime concern of this policy remains doubtful. The amnesty had been extended several times¹² and it was made clear that "the Home Ministry will facilitate the quick return of legalised Indonesian workers so that Malaysian employers and businesses will not suffer"¹³. Whatever the reason given for the need to deport these people, it is unlikely that the circumstances had changed after their expected return a few weeks later.

The political mileage that the Malaysian government hoped to gain from this exercise might have been one of the driving forces behind *Ops Tegas*. The way in which the mainstream media used to stir up sentiments against foreign workers from neighbouring countries in a context that forbade anything that could incite 'racial hatred' within the Malaysian society was compelling. According to the Representative of the UNHCR in Malaysia, Volker Türk, the media campaign led to significant numbers of people leaving the country before authorities started their deportation exercise.¹⁴

The language in which the *sans-papiers* as well as the government agencies were described comes close to propaganda of its worst kind. In July 2004, when the govern-

⁸ M'sia told not to deport workers during Indon polls. In: *MalaysiaKini* 28.07.2004.

⁹ Gov't approves recruitment of 369,000 foreign workers. In: *MalaysiaKini* 28.10.2002.

¹⁰ Gov't plans huge new crackdown on illegal workers. In: *MalaysiaKini* 12.07.2004.

¹¹ A proper crackdown. In: *New Straits Times* 01.03.2005.

¹² First amnesty period: 29.10.-14.11.2004; first extension 31.12.2004; second extension 31.01.2005; third extension 28.02.2005.

¹³ Quick return. In: *The Star* 17.02.2005.

¹⁴ Interview with UNCHR's Representative in Malaysia, Volker Türk, 12.09.2006.

ment came up with the decision, *sans-papiers* were made responsible for all sorts of social evils:

The government would definitely go hard on the illegal immigrants because they were causing a threat to the nation's security with many being involved in crime, setting up illegal settlements and stealing water [...] the police were also highly stretched with the presence of illegal immigrants and with the crimes they committed [...] many of them violating the country's laws and posing a danger to the locals [...] doctors in government hospitals who were already overloaded with work were now faced with the pressure of having to treat illegal immigrants.¹⁵

The plight of local marginalised groups like the *orang asli* (indigenous people) or small farmers was suddenly highlighted and their deplorable situation was apparently caused by foreign workers as well¹⁶ and a rise in dengue and TB cases in mid-2004 was also attributed to foreigners¹⁷, to the extent that they themselves were being described as “cancer”¹⁸.

But it was not just the negative impact on society that those foreigners and therefore especially Indonesians were accused of, which is startling, but also the terms used in reference to their expulsion were no less: words like “flush out illegal Indonesians immigrants”¹⁹ connoted a toilet flush, a “hunt for illegals”²⁰ in which “no one will be spared”²¹ degraded the *sans-papiers* to animals that one could hunt down, a “nationwide sweep of illegals”²² resembled the sweeping of dirt from the floor, violent language like “leading the assault on the estimated 1.2 million illegal foreign workers in the country”²³ declared those workers to be enemies that needed to be fought in military style, as in “D-Day for the remaining 400,000 illegal immigrants in the country”²⁴.

By declaring that all this was not only done in the interest of the (Malaysian) people, but because of their own will, the government conveniently absolved itself from any moral responsibility: “Malaysians [are given, F. H.] the opportunity to *participate in solving the problems arising from the presence of illegal immigrants* in the state. ‘Now they have the chance to go to the ground and arrest the illegal immigrants themselves’²⁵. For those not wanting to particip-

¹⁵ Illegals: Cabinet to act. In: *New Straits Times* 24.07.2004.

¹⁶ Orang Asli feeling the pinch as foreign workers cash in. In: *New Straits Times* 28.07.2004.

¹⁷ Chua: Illegals contributing to rise in TB and dengue cases. In: *The Sunday Star* 05.09.2004.

¹⁸ Illegals problem in Sabah like ‘cancer’. In: *MalaysiaKini* 03.08.2006.

¹⁹ Deportation put on hold. In: *New Straits Times* 19.08.2004.

²⁰ Hunt for illegals. In: *The Star* 30.01.2005.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Illegals beware, Ishak's on your trail. In: *The Sunday Star* 05.09.2004.

²⁴ Feb 28 – it's final. In: *The Star* 15.02.2005.

²⁵ Rela, RT in op against illegals. In: *The Star* 17.01.2005.

ate directly, a hotline would be set up for the public to “receive information [...] on the hideouts of illegal foreign workers”²⁶.

However, it was not only the government that was making use of this language, commentaries in the government-owned newspapers did ‘their part’, too: when New Sunday Times commentator Chow Kum Hor spoke about “*flush[ing] out the borders of illegal immigrants*”²⁷ or V. K. Chin from The Star was unhappy about the prolonged amnesty period because “for months, government leaders and enforcement agencies have had been telling the people that *no mercy* would be shown against offenders. *Naturally*, the people have felt that the authorities had let them down as they were keen that the number of illegals be kept to a minimum. *They do not feel comfortable with so many foreigners around*”²⁸, showed that it went beyond the unquestioned printing of government statements that was common in the Malaysian media.

One might try to dismiss this as just another way to divert attention from crises faced within the Malaysian society. In Malaysia’s multi-layered spheres of political influence this could have been true to a certain extent. Besides, ‘othering’ foreigners, especially migrant workers, is nothing unique to Malaysia and, contrary to some European countries, Malaysians are not perceived as being outwardly xenophobic. Possible reasons could have been an economic slowdown (Ramasamy 2004: 286), the aforementioned rapidly rising number of unemployed graduates, or the need for ‘Mr. Nice’, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, to ‘show some steel’.

It is in this context that one needs to put ‘solutions’ like the one offered by a Member of Parliament of the ruling Barisan Nasional government to “implant a microchip in illegal immigrants or make them wear an unremovable bracelet to prevent them from returning to Malaysia”²⁹.

There have also been times when foreigners were welcomed, however as a useful tool for internal politics in Malaysia: in the first two decades after independence, an influx of migrants mainly from Indonesia and the Philippines was regarded as beneficial to maintain a Malay majority in the country (Ramasamy 2004: 284). This later became obsolete when the birth rates of non-Malays and Malays turned very much in favour of the latter.

The current policy against migrant workers does show some effect on the Malaysian public: a major indicator of this is the fact that thousands of ordinary people have participated in the raids as members of RELA after being given the power to do so. There

²⁶ Hunt for illegals. In: *The Star* 30.01.2005.

²⁷ Amnesty may not prevent future influx of illegals. In: *New Sunday Times* 31.10.2004.

²⁸ Let’s see if softer approach will work on illegal workers (V. K. Chin). In: *The Star* 04.02.2005.

²⁹ MP suggests microchip implants for illegals. In: *MalaysiaKini* 30.08.2006.

have been numerous reports of cases of violence³⁰ and extortion³¹ and civil rights groups have repeatedly highlighted these cases.³²

As serious as the government-concerted actions against migrant workers is the impact on the perception of foreigners, especially Indonesians, in everyday life and the perspective on the cultural ties between the two countries.

Indonesian women have been the first choice as domestic workers among upper middle-class Malaysians. It was seen as an advantage that there is hardly a gap when it comes to culture and (official) language. This no longer seems to be the case as the Women, Family and Community Minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil is planning to conduct a study on the “impact of Indonesian maids on the children they care for, including whether they change the youngsters’ ‘cultural values’”³³. Home Affairs Minister Mohamad Radzi Sheikh Ahmad adds that Malaysians “are now very dependent on their Indonesian maids and leave everything to them, to the extent that our children are now speaking like Indonesians”³⁴.

‘Indonesian culture’ is therefore being perceived almost as a threat in its difference from ‘Malay/Malaysian culture’. Malay is no longer seen as a cultural group encompassing the whole archipelago, but rather is exclusive to Malays in Malaysia. The definition of a Malay in the Federal Constitution still has a wide scope in defining a Malay as someone who speaks Malay, follows Malay customs and professes Islam. And although the limitation to a Malay being a Muslim by definition had already excluded for example Hindu Malays in Bali, it would still apply for a large majority of Indonesians. However, an Indonesian who claims to be Malay would face a disbelieving raise of eyebrows from his Malaysian counterpart.

The low importance of history in school also plays a role in the progressing disconnection. Especially in Malaysia, history is taught through the eyes of the government and, when asked why historical facts and persons are omitted in the syllabus, the Education Ministry replied that “students were not interested in history, they had difficulties understanding facts [...]. We [the Ministry] decided to *consolidate the facts* to make the subject *less boring*”³⁵. So it does not come as a surprise that university students from Indonesia and Malaysia asked at random in personal communication about *Melayu/Indonesia*

³⁰ Rela rampage: Eyewitnesses tell of madness, brutality. In: *MalaysiaKini* 01.03.2006; Demand to see ID of Rela officers during crackdown. In: *MalaysiaKini* 01.03.2005.

³¹ Rela members to face background vetting. In: *New Straits Times* 21.12.2004.

³² Migrant crackdown could lead to torture, executions: AI. In: *MalaysiaKini* 15.02.2005; Tenaganita slams plans to arm Rela members in migrant crackdown. In: *MalaysiaKini* 25.01.2005.

³³ Study on impact of Indon maids on kids. In: *MalaysiaKini* 30.08.2006.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ MP: History books do not reflect nation’s past. In: *New Straits Times* 30.08.2006.

Raya hardly have any knowledge about this. Those who claimed to know a bit about it gave answers like: “Indonesia started a war against us [Malaysia] because we did not want to join Indonesia”, or “because the Malays did not want to join, Indonesia had to go on by itself”³⁶.

This lack of understanding of the common cultural heritage – for which the students cannot be held responsible – will make it difficult to reverse the trend of alienation, even more so as long as it remains in the interest of the governments, especially in Malaysia.

Conclusion

The people in the *Nusantara* archipelago share a long and deep common history on many levels such as language, culture, customs and religion. The concept of Pan-Malay-anism included an understanding that went beyond ethno-nationalism by regarding the Indon-Malay people as having the same broad racial and cultural identity, who would be willing to de-racialise also the divisions between Malays and non-Malays through a broader definition of Malay culture encompassing the different cultural groups of the Archipelago (Noor 2002: 90). Political and economic interests, however, have led to an adverse impact on these relationships that is disconnecting histories: the territorial boundaries set by the colonial powers and their economic exploitation destroyed century-old migration and trading lines within the archipelago that also provided for cultural exchange. The different ways of achieving independence in Indonesia and Malaya combined with the fact that both governments preferred different alignments in world politics have further ended hopes for a common future after the end of colonial rule.

The events in 1965 in Indonesia also changed the power balance between the two states and Malaysia took on a more distinctive role in international politics, to the extent that it is no longer Indonesia which is seen as a strong voice by developing countries but rather Malaysia. Mahathir Mohammad’s outspoken criticism of the West and his priority on South-South relations for example through the ‘Langkawi Dialogues’ with African countries since the 1980s were important factors in that changing perception. Chairing the Non-Alignment-Movement (NAM) and also the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) gave further credentials to Malaysia’s role.

The relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia has always been described as ‘special’ and usually in a positive connotation. As has been outlined in this article, this did not prevent the governments (in this case of Malaysia) from abusing the relationship for political gains. This has led to continuous alienation and increasing prejudices between the people of Indonesia and Malaysia. The stereotype of the ‘Indonesian troublemaker’

³⁶ Interviewing Malaysian and Indonesian students, 28.08.2006.

is often recalled when the political need arises: demonstrations and the Malaysian *reformasi* movement are linked to the developments in Indonesia which are often described in a negative manner. Migrant workers in Malaysia, most of whom originate from Indonesia, are being blamed for all sorts of social ills, but also Indonesian university students face the prejudice when they are called ‘troublemakers’, for example when returning later to their hostels than their Malaysian counterparts.³⁷

The relations between both countries are nowadays largely defined by rivalry, thereby neglecting the fact that it was the common feeling of belonging to the same cultural group that fuelled the aspirations of the struggle for independence of people like Ibrahim Yaakob, Ahmad Boestamam and Burhanuddin al-Helmy, who are now ‘forgotten’ in official history.

Pointing at this blind spot in historical perception or highlighting UMNO’s late emergence and not giving it all credit for independence still causes an uproar among the ruling elite.³⁸

The different interpretations of common history are emphasising the disconnection from a common background which leads to the effect that the term ‘Malay’ as a symbol for a unifying belonging is no longer applicable to the people in both countries in the same way.

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³⁷ Interviewing Indonesian students, 19.08.2006.

³⁸ Press statement of Democratic Action Party (DAP) International Secretary Ronnie Liu, <http://www.dap-malaysia.org/english/2005/Aug05/bul/bul2803.htm> (03.09.2005).

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