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#### RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE APPOINTMENT OF A MUSHIR (ADVISOR) BY SULTAN ZAINAL ABIDIN III IN EFFORTS TO AVOID BRITISH INTERFERENCE IN THE GOVERNANCE OF TERENGGANU

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# Abstract

The placement of a British agent in Terengganu following the 1909 Bangkok Treaty marked the beginning of British intervention in the state. Although the British agent stationed in Terengganu did not wield the same power as the British advisors in Kedah and Kelantan, the presence represented a foreign element in Terengganu's government machinery. The British agent's presence raised Sultan Zainal Abidin III and Terengganu's officials' awareness of a potential British threat to the state's administration. The Sultan took several actions to prevent British interference, including 'borrowing' a British officer to serve in Terengganu's government. This officer, known as a Mushir (advisor or counsellor in Arabic), was incorporated into Terengganu's governance structure. This study aimed to examine Sultan Zainal Abidin III's intent in requesting the appointment of a Mushir and the appointee's role in Terengganu's administration. This qualitative study adopted the historical research approach, with content analysis as the data collection method. Findings reveal that Sultan Zainal Abidin III successfully borrowed a British officer to work in Terengganu's administration. His aim of delaying direct British intervention was achieved, as he was not obligated to follow the advice of the Mushir (British officer), given that the officer was only loaned to the Terengganu government. When the British realized that the officer's position did not yield the desired influence over Terengganu's administration, the officer's service was then terminated.

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#### Introduction:-

The British successfully expanded their influence over the northern Malay states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu after reaching an agreement with the Siamese government to transfer Siam's sovereignty over these Malay states to the British government through the Bangkok Treaty of 1909, which was signed on March 10, 1909. Siam ceded Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu to Great Britain, represented by Prince Devawongse Varoprake, the Siamese Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Ralph Paget on the British side. Article 1 of the Bangkok Treaty stipulated that the Siamese government will transfer all rights of suzerainty, protection, administration, and control they have over Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Perlis, and the nearby islands to the British government (Maxwell & Gibson, 1924). The British achieved their ambition to monopolize power in the Malay Peninsula without jeopardizing their relations with Siam. The Bangkok Treaty demonstrates that the British recognized Siam's

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authority over the northern Malay states. The Malay Sultans' perspectives and position, especially that of Sultan Zainal Abidin III of Terengganu, were disregarded in the drafting of this treaty. The tradition of sending the Bunga Mas and Bunga Perak was still regarded by both parties as a symbol of Terengganu's recognition of Siam's authority, even though the Sultan of Terengganu asserted that Terengganu was an independent state.

#### Placement of A British Agent in Terengganu

The Siamese government did not have a representative who could negotiate with the Sultan of Terengganu regarding the transfer of power to the British on behalf of the Siamese Government in Terengganu after the 1909 Bangkok Treaty. Sir John Anderson, on behalf of the British, informed Sultan Zainal Abidin III that Siam had appointed two officials, namely Phya Rajvinitchai and Luang Rangsansarakitch, as representatives to negotiate with the Sultan and inform him that Siam had ceded its rights over Terengganu to the British government. Meanwhile, the British appointed W.L. Conlay as their representative to formally accept Siam's right over Terengganu on behalf of the British government. Sir John also explained the implications on the Terengganu government to Sultan Zainal Abidin III following the recently concluded British-Siamese treaty (C.O. 273/350, 1909).

He also informed Sultan Zainal Abidin III that under the agreement, the British government would acquire the same powers or rights over Terengganu as previously held by the Siamese government. He reminded the Sultan of Terengganu that the sending of the Bunga Mas as a tribute to Siam symbolizes his recognition of Siamese sovereignty. Sultan Zainal Abidin III promptly replied that the Bunga Mas is merely a gesture of friendship, a statement supported by his cousin, Tengku Petra, who was also present at the meeting (C.O. 273/350, 1909). He further clarified to Sultan Zainal Abidin III that the British government did not intend to interfere in Terengganu's internal administration, provided it was well-managed. However, as a condition for the protection or suzerainty that the Sultan would receive from Great Britain, Sultan Zainal Abidin III was required to meet two conditions. First, he could not establish relations with foreign powers except through the British High Commissioner, and second, he could not grant land or concessions to foreigners without consulting the British High Commissioner. In addition, the British government did not require the Sultan to send any Bunga Mas or other forms of tribute (C.O. 273/350, 1909).

The Sultan of Terengganu formally agreed to sign the treaty with the British on April 22, 1910. Although the British had failed to obtain Sultan Zainal Abidin III's agreement to sign the treaty on July 24, 1909, W.L. Conlay was stationed in Terengganu to negotiate on behalf of the British government. Thus, Conlay remained in Kuala Terengganu while performing his duties as a British agent and monitoring developments in the state, particularly regarding British interests in mining and agriculture concessions (C.O. 273/350, 1909). Consequently, the British agent's position was unaffected regardless of whether the Terengganu government accepted the treaty with the British, as his salary was not paid by the Terengganu government. The Sultan's willingness to sign the treaty acknowledging Great Britain's suzerainty was, for the British, only a formality. W.L. Conlay himself acknowledged that the British were not particularly eager to compel the Sultan to sign the treaty, as there was little consequence at stake beyond granting the British agent the authority to adjudicate cases involving British subjects in court alongside a Malay judge. Conlay had already received this letter of authority in December 1909 (C.O. 273/360, 1909), well before the treaty between Terengganu and Great Britain was finalized.

The Anglo-Terengganu Treaty was signed on April 22, 1910, in Singapore. Sultan Zainal Abidin III, representing the Terengganu government, and British High Commissioner Sir John Anderson, representing the Government of Great Britain, signed the agreement on behalf of their respective parties. The treaty was produced in two versions, one in Malay and the other in English. Sir John Anderson noted that the English version was somewhat inaccurate because it was translated in short notice and rather haphazardly from the final draft submitted by the Sultan of Terengganu (C.O. 273/361 1910). Sultan Zainal Abidin III agreed to the provisions of the Bangkok Treaty and accepted the placement of a British official in his state. His willingness to sign the treaty with the British formally placed Terengganu under British protection. A British agent with consular status was officially appointed to serve in Terengganu. However, prior to the 1910 Treaty, W.L. Conlay had already been serving as a British agent in Terengganu, a role he held until April 18, 1910. He was subsequently replaced by Walter D. Scott, who became the first British agent officially appointed in Terengganu following the 1910 Treaty (C.O. 273/362, 1910).

# The Purpose of Appointing A Mushir in the Terengganu Government

Presence of the British agent in Kuala Terengganu allowed him to act as the 'eyes and ears' of the British by overseeing developments in Terengganu's administration. Moreover, the British agent proactively advised Sultan Zainal Abidin III and Terengganu's nobility on administrative reforms to help the state advance abreast with other

Malay states. Sultan Zainal Abidin III and his officials understood the British motives and were aware of what was occurring in other Malay states. He observed that Johor's administration faced minimal British pressure, a result of the Westernization policies of Sultan Abu Bakar and later Sultan Ibrahim in Johor. The Johor rulers also maintained diplomatic relations with major powers, such as the British and Ottoman empires (Ermy Azziaty, 2020).

Sultan Zainal Abidin III and the Terengganu nobility adopted a cautious stance toward the British threat to Terengganu's governance and sovereignty following the 1909 Bangkok Treaty. Hence, they took appropriate measures to counter this. In 1911, Sultan Zainal Abidin III, along with the Terengganu nobility, drafted Itqan al-Muluk bi Ta'dil al-Suluk as a constitution to safeguard Terengganu from foreign dominance (Nik Haslinda, 2014). This draft was influenced by the establishment of the Johor State Constitution by the Johor government in 1895 (Hanif, 2018). Sultan Ibrahim also approached the matter of British intervention in Johor with extreme caution by striving to outrightly reject British interference in his administration. When eventually compelled to accept British involvement, he set specific conditions, agreeing only on May 12, 1914, to accept a British advisor after assurances that the British official appointed in Johor would, in fact, be in the capacity of a Johor government officer (Mohd Samsuddin, 2013).

The reforms implemented by Johor's rulers were an attempt to avoid British pressure to establish a Western-style government (Ermy Azziaty et al. 2020). Inspired by Johor, Sultan Zainal Abidin III took similar steps in Terengganu to delay British intervention. At this stage, the Sultan tried to adopt a model similar to Johor's by engaging a British officer from within the Terengganu state administration. In September 1915, Sultan Zainal Abidin III requested the British High Commissioner to provide a 'British expert' to serve the Terengganu government, aiming to introduce administrative reforms that aligned with British expectations. C.N. Maxwell reported that Sultan Zainal Abidin III outlined his plans to the British High Commissioner, requesting to hire a British officer for Terengganu at the state's expense. The British officer would serve as the Ketua Mesyuarat Negeri (Suk. Tr., 2/1134; C.O. 273/428, 1915), or, as recorded in British documents, the 'Chairman of the Terengganu State Council' (C.O. 273/428, 1915; C.O. 840, 1915). However, Humphreys once translated this role as the 'instructor of the State Council' (C.O. 273/444, 1915).

The British High Commissioner, Sir Arthur Young, viewed Sultan Zainal Abidin III's request for a British officer to assist in reforms in Terengganu as rather unusual. While other Malay rulers were trying to avoid British officials serving in their states, the Sultan of Terengganu took the exceptional step of requesting a British officer to serve in his administration. Sir Arthur reported to the Colonial Office that during his meeting with Sultan Zainal Abidin III in Singapore on September 25, 1915, the Sultan expressed his hope that the British official loaned to Terengganu would contribute to the state's progress and welfare. The British officer's role was to supervise the functioning of state departments and assist the Sultan in ensuring these departments are managed properly (C.O. 273/428, 1915). The High Commissioner agreed to loan C.N. Maxwell to the Terengganu government, effective December 8, 1915 (C.O. 840, 1915). He confidently assured the Colonial Office of Maxwell's ability to influence Sultan Zainal Abidin III to follow his guidance and advice. Young was optimistic that the Sultan would soon request even more British officers to assist in managing various state administration sectors (C.O. 273/428, 1915).

Sir Arthur Young emphasized that it was somewhat unusual to continue having a British agent in Terengganu alongside the new appointee, but this arrangement proceeded due to the Sultan's urgent request. He hoped that the presence of a British agent and the President of the State Council would lead to the appointment of a British Advisor in Terengganu. This increase in British officers, he believed, would help address the administration's shortcomings in Terengganu (C.O. 273/428, 1915; C.O. 273/444, 1915). On December 8, 1915, Sultan Zainal Abidin III officially welcomed C.N. Maxwell as the 'President of the State Council' in a ceremony attended by J.L. Humphreys and W.G. Maxwell, who conveyed the British High Commissioner's hopes for the initiative's success (C.O. 840, 1915).

Sultan Zainal Abidin III's initiative to borrow a British officer aimed to align Terengganu's administration with British expectations and avoid direct British intervention in the state's governance. The Sultan was cautious to prevent a full-scale British control that other Malay states faced, which would require Terengganu to accept British regulations. This decision to enlist a British expert for state reforms was not made hastily; however, C.N. Maxwell claimed that the Sultan had shared his idea of borrowing a British officer during a private conversation with the British agent, without the presence of state nobility. Maxwell suggested that the Sultan was hesitant to act independently due to his concern about the views of the nobility, many of whom were his close relatives (C.O. 273/428, 1915).

## Role of the Mushir in Terengganu's Govenance

Sultan Zainal Abidin III did not accept the appointment of C.N. Maxwell as Mushir until the British fulfilled conditions that he himself had set. This demonstrates the careful planning by the Sultan and his officials regarding the British officer's appointment. Sultan Zainal Abidin III used provisions found in Terengganu's Constitution to limit the authority of the British officer appointed to the Terengganu government. The Sultan acted firmly in accordance with the Constitution when he sent two of his officials, Tengku Chik and Haji Ngah, to further discuss the matter with the British High Commissioner in Singapore. This action was initiated upon discovering legal obstacles in Terengganu's Constitution when appointing C.N. Maxwell as 'President of the State Council' (Suk. Tr., 2/1134, 1334). Just as the Sultan had meticulously drafted the 1910 Treaty, he carefully planned the borrowing of a 'British expert' to assist in Terengganu's administration.

Sultan Zainal Abidin III did not accept this officer's appointment without first establishing boundaries for the British officer's role. The title of 'President of the State Council', as noted in British records, could imply that the British officer held significant authority as the 'Head' of Terengganu's State Council. However, in a letter to the British High Commissioner Sir Arthur Young, the Sultan clearly stated, "...I have come to meet with my dear friend in Singapore and requested a knowledgeable individual who would work under the laws of the Terengganu government, serving as my officer just like a native of Terengganu, and my dear friend agreed to assist as much as possible. Now, as the agreement between me and my friend has not been fully honored, I am sending Tengku Chik and Haji Ngah to meet with my friend and explain the matter, hoping my dear friend will agree..." (Suk. Tr., 2/1134, 1334).

The Sultan ensured that the British officer was 'on loan' to him before accepting Maxwell's appointment, meaning that he would serve as an officer to the Terengganu government, not the British government. The Sultan scrutinized the extent to which the officer could operate with Terengganu's administration. He refused to appoint Maxwell until the British met his conditions, delaying the British officer's appointment. This postponement of Maxwell's appointment as Head of Terengganu's State Council also delayed J.L. Humphreys' appointment as the new British agent. Although Humphreys was appointed on November 8, 1915, his tenure did not begin until December 8, 1915, due to Maxwell's delayed appointment (Suk. Tr., 2/1134, 1334). In Terengganu's internal records, Maxwell was referred to as a Mushir by the Sultan and his officials, with no record labeling him as the President or Head of the State Council.

In the agreement between Sultan Zainal Abidin III and C.N. Maxwell, it is stipulated that, "the Terengganu Government would receive a loan from the British Government, where Maxwell will become the President, or Mushir, of the Terengganu State Government Meeting in accordance with the laws of the Terengganu Government". Meanwhile, Maxwell acknowledged that he would adhere to the laws of the Terengganu Government and be loyal to the Sultan and the Terengganu Government (Suk. Tr., 2/1134, 1334). The use of the title 'Mushir' (Arabic word meaning 'advisor') (Madina, 1973) or political reference expert (al-Munjid fi al-Lughah wa al-A'lam, 1986), highlights its significance. For example, in Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) cabinet, some companions were referred to as mushir or advisors to the Prophet in terms of governance, especially pertaining to political and military matters (Mazhar, 1993). The agreement clearly states that C.N. Maxwell is the Mushir, or advisor, to the Terengganu State Government Meeting. This indicates that Sultan Zainal Abidin III's purpose of borrowing a British officer to serve in Terengganu's administration was to showcase the British system of governance to himself and the Terengganu nobles. However, the Terengganu Government was not obligated to comply since the officer was an advisor serving the Terengganu Government.

Thus, the British system would not be accepted in its entirety; instead, it would be modified to align with the requirements of Islamic law and the customs of Terengganu, considering that the Sultan of Terengganu as well as his trusted secretary and most trusted nobleman, Haji Ngah, were deemed as religious scholars with a high level of Islamic knowledge. The mushir was not permitted to act independently or bypass the decisions of the meeting. An example of a mushir's action that was not approved by the Terengganu Government occurred when the State Meeting decided that the State's budget estimate No.1335 should be prepared by a committee consisting of the mushir, Tengku Ali bin Mustafa, and Haji Ngah. However, the mushir prepared his own budget estimate without the presence of the appointed committee. This led to the State Meeting to conclude that the budget estimate should be reviewed by the Ministerial Assembly or a committee consisting of three appointed members, namely Tengku Embong, Tengku Chik, and Tuan Haji Ngah (Suk. Tr., 197/34, 1335).

The British found that the appointment of C.N. Maxwell as Mushir or President of the State Council did not benefit them. The presence of this British officer in Terengganu's state administration did not change or improve the governance of Terengganu according to British standards as they desired. This British officer had to submit to the wishes of Sultan Zainal Abidin III and the nobles. He complained to the British agent, Humphreys, that all proposals submitted to the Terengganu Government since his appointment in December 1916 had yet to be approved (C.O. 273/445, 1916). This illustrates the success of Sultan Zainal Abidin III's political strategies and the Terengganu nobles in managing the threat of British colonization in Terengganu. The British failed to influence Sultan Zainal Abidin III when the Sultan requested a British officer to be loaned to the Terengganu Government. Moreover, they did not succeed in taking advantage of this situation to implement reforms in Terengganu's administration according to British standards through this attempt. The cooperation between C.N. Maxwell, Sultan, and Terengganu nobles to advance the state of Terengganu in the foreseeable future (C.O. 840, 1915) did not materialize as expected.

#### **Ending the Services of the Mushir**

The steadfastness of Sultan Zainal Abidin III in defending his opinions and decisions regarding the governance of his state became evident when he informed J.L. Humphreys of the numerous challenges that hindered him from accepting the advice of his advisor, C.N. Maxwell. He directed state officials accompanying the Raja Muda of Terengganu to communicate these difficulties to the British High Commissioner, explaining why the Terengganu government could not accept Maxwell's counsel (C.O. 273/459, 1916). This indicated that the Sultan of Terengganu and his nobility did not blindly follow the recommendations of the British officer assigned to them. Consequently, the British found that the presence of the Mushir or British advisor in Terengganu did not yield any advancements in the state's administration. The High Commissioner's ambition for this appointment to pave the way for more British officials to serve in Terengganu's administration was not realized. Observing these developments, the British terminated Maxwell's loan contract on February 19, 1917 (C.O. 840, 1917).

However, according to Haji Hitam bin Haji Ngah Muhammad, Sultan Zainal Abidin III dismissed Maxwell for violating Terengganu's state regulations (Abdullah Zakaria, 1996). Allen (1968) described it as a resignation, noting that Maxwell was subsequently transferred to Perak. Sir Arthur Young commented that Maxwell's position in the Terengganu government did not benefit either party (C.O. 273/460, 1917). This conclusion led the British to admit that after nearly seven years of attempts to introduce changes in Terengganu's administration, the system remained stagnant and this led to Terengganu's underdevelopment compared to other Malay states (C.O. 840, 1917). The British attempted to assert control over Terengganu by seconding a Mushir requested by Sultan Zainal Abidin III, which ultimately failed. Nevertheless, the Sultan's actions successfully delayed British intervention at least until his death in 1918.

# **Conclusion:-**

Placement of a British agent in Terengganu created an opportunity for British influence in the state's administrative machinery. The British agent's presence allowed for indirect involvement in the state's governance and the provision of advice. This presence also signalled an increasing threat of British intervention in Terengganu's governance. Sultan Zainal Abidin III and the state nobility took steps to avoid British interference by adopting strategies similar to those used by the Johor government by bringing in a British official to work in Terengganu's administration. This approach eventually led to the British agent's appointment as the Mushir (advisor) to the Terengganu government. The Sultan and Terengganu's officials hoped that by appointing a Mushir, they could prevent British intervention. The British, meanwhile, entertained Sultan Zainal Abidin III's request with the hope that the Mushir could influence or advise the Sultan towards implementing British administrative systems in Terengganu. However, the Mushir's role failed to meet British expectations, leading to the termination of the position. Therefore, the failure to achieve reforms in Terengganu's governance did not stop the British from continuing with their plans to assert control by assigning a British Advisor to Terengganu.

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