

COMMENT

NEW STRAITS TIMES: Gawai, Kaamatan express the uniqueness of Sarawak, Sabah, in an era of change

Celebrating togetherness

THE last week of May and the first week of June are the worst and best times for visiting Sabah or Sarawak. The worst, because flights, hotels and even riverboats, are in great demand, and the states are teeming with people. The best, because this is the time for the local harvest festival. Tadau Kaamatan is celebrated by the Kadazandusuns, the natives of Sabah, while Gawai Dayak is celebrated by the Dayaks — the native peoples of Sarawak. Although previously tribes had separate harvest periods and therefore separate celebrations for them, modern politics has drawn the tribes and the festivities together, resulting in one united festival.

Both are thanksgiving celebrations to the rice gods for a bountiful harvest, and prayer for a good harvest in the coming year. For instance, the Sabahan observance started way back in their animist past, when Kinoingan, the Almighty Creator, sacrificed his only daughter, Huminodun, so that his people would always have food. It was from her body parts that padi grew, so, every year after the harvest, the people would hold ceremonies in honour of Bambaazon, Huminodun's spirit that is embodied in the rice, to give thanks for the sacrifice that had been made for their sake. With the spread of organised religion in both states, some rituals have been set aside or become secular in practice.

Even so, what remains is plenty to celebrate. At the zenith of the celebration, the people will clean their communal home and spruce it up with tribal artwork, wear traditional clothes, sacrifice a cockerel and conduct other elaborate rituals. The Kadazandusuns will dance the *sumazau*, and the Dayaks will have strongman competitions and beauty pageants. It is during this time, too, that traditional food is cooked and consumed, and *tapai* or *tuak* (rice wine) is offered to the spirits and to guests, and a good time is had by all.

The intricacies of these native rituals, the free-flow of tuak, and the inclusiveness of the celebrants in sharing their joy have made Gawai and Kaamatan something of a tourist attraction, with the potential of becoming an annual tourism fixture.

But, for all that, Gawai and Kaamatan are first and foremost a homecoming festivity. Even though many have moved away from padi farming, and, in the case of the younger generation, away from the villages, the harvest festival is the time where all set aside other concerns and return to their roots.

To the soil that has nurtured their generations, to the family, friends and culture that form the core of each human being, and to the ancestors whose buried remains turn a mere piece of land into "home".

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Moscow saw the Saudi king as an ally in its plan to liberate the people of Asia from the hold of European empires. The economic benefits were not lost on the Kremlin.

How the Saudis stopped the Soviets

COLLAPSE IN RELATIONS: This would have a profound impact on the modern world, writes Dr Sean Foley

THE signing of the Peace Accord in Hat Yai on Dec 2, 1989, was a key turning point in the modern history of Malaysia and the wider world. It signalled the end of the Malayan Communist Party's half-century campaign to establish a communist government by force in Malaysia — a war known as the "Malayan Emergency" from 1948 until 1960 and the "Communist Insurgency" or the "Second Malaysian Emergency" from 1968 until 1989. But the Hat Yai Peace Accord, the military campaign of the Malayan Communist Party, and the history of the nation in general might have turned out very differently had the visit of Saudi Arabia's Prince Faisal to the Soviet Union starting May 30, 1932 been a success.

When the Saudi prince arrived at Moscow's Belorussian-Baltic railway station, he was greeted by several senior Soviet diplomats, the foreign diplomatic corps, two battalions of saluting soldiers, enormous crowds, and bands playing the national anthem of his kingdom and the "International". The flag of Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union adorned the railway station along with a sign in Arabic that read *Ahlan Wa Sahlan* (welcome). Faisal was only the second member of a royal family to pay a state visit to the Soviet Union since the Russian Revolution in 1917.

When Faisal arrived in Moscow, Soviet leaders hoped that his visit would help them forge an alliance with his father, King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud. In 1925, the king conquered the Hijaz, a coastal territory in Arabia that includes Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, and is the site of the annual Haj pilgrimage. Moscow, which championed anti-colonialism, saw the Saudi king as an ally in its plan to liberate the people of Asia from the hold of European empires. It hoped that he could rally Muslims from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, including Muslims in what is today Malaysia.

Over the next week, Faisal and his

party met the Soviet elite, visited military bases and factories, and attended plays at the Bolshoi Theatre. They then went to Leningrad and other areas of the Soviet Union, where the prince marvelled at the country's many industries and modern technology. He cabled home that he had been especially impressed by the oil derricks and the techniques of getting oil in Baku, the capital of the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan.

Faisal's visit to the Soviet Union in 1932 greatly concerned American and European officials, who viewed the Soviets as a competitor in Arabia and the wider Muslim world. Saudi Arabia was close to Iran, Iraq and other states in the Middle East where Britain had important strategic interests. Thousands of British Muslim subjects from Southeast Asia and other regions of the British empire made the Haj pilgrimage annually, and British officials were concerned that Moscow would spread anti-British propaganda among the pilgrims.

Dutch officials were also concerned that Moscow would use the Haj to support the independence movement in its vast East Indies colony after Soviet diplomats in Jeddah aided refugees from the 1927 independence revolt in

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Strategy helped contain Russia

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the vast archipelago. For its part, Washington had only recognised King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud's government in 1931 and had just begun to realise the economic potential of his kingdom.

Fears about the Soviet influence in Saudi Arabia, however, were exaggerated. Although the Saudi government was broke, it refused to accept Moscow's terms for a loan and the write-off of substantial debts.

Not only was Saudi Arabia, a devout Muslim government, worried about being associated with a government that promoted atheism, but it was also in no position to alienate Britain, whose subjects dominated the Haj pilgrimage, the chief source of Saudi Arabia's income before the discovery of oil. Saudi-Soviet diplomatic relations were eventually suspended in 1939 and resumed after the Cold War ended in the 1990s.

The limited duration of Saudi-Soviet diplomatic ties, however, does not diminish the importance of the relationship.

The Soviet Union supplied much of Saudi Arabia's oil in the 1930s. But these ties were not enough to overcome the ideological chasm between the two states and the unease of British diplomats. In 1933, just a year after Faisal marvelled at the Soviet oil fields, an American oil company won the right to explore for oil in Saudi Arabia.

The collapse of the Soviet Union's ties with Saudi Arabia was a setback for Moscow that would have a profound impact on both nations and the modern world, including Malaysia. It would pave the way for the rise of the US-Saudi alliance — an alliance born with Riyadh's selection of a US company to develop the kingdom's oil fields.

After 1945, that relationship blossomed into the most important of its kind in the world. It was a lynchpin of Washington's strategies during the Cold War era to contain Soviet expansion, to revive the global economy and to help Malaysia and other nations become prosperous.

Ultimately, the Cold War might have turned out very differently in Southeast Asia and the fortunes of the Malayan Communist Party been considerably brighter in 1989 had Faisal's trip been a success and a Soviet company rather than an US one had won the contract to develop Saudi Arabia's oil fields in 1933.

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Sri Lanka not holding out for another war hero

SARATH FONSEKA IS NOT MAHATMA

GANDHI: The country needs reconciliation and better democratic institutions

ACROSS Sri Lanka, ecstatic crowds have welcomed the release of former army commander Sarath Fonseka from jail, and it is intriguing to see whether his presence will help the fragmented opposition shift President Mahinda Rajapakse's firm hold on power in the country, or will indeed perpetuate his rule.

In a surprise move President Rajapakse used his extraordinary executive powers to pardon and release Fonseka last month. Fonseka, who led the Sri Lankan military forces in the final decisive years of the 30-year civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, is the country's premier war hero. Rajapakse fell out with his trusted army chief after the war was won by the state when Fonseka received public adulation for his role.

Fonseka was then shunted out of the army commander's position and placed in the largely ceremonial position of chief of staff. Fonseka chose to leave and contest Rajapakse in a presidential election three years ago as the sole opposition candidate.

Rajapakse won that election easily and shortly afterwards Fonseka was arrested and convicted of a slew of offences by military and civilian courts.

Fonseka and his supporters say this was an act of vengeance by Rajapakse, and it did show up the president in a bad light.

The Rajapakse administration is the most powerful in Sri Lanka's history. The president was at one time supremely popular. But that popularity is waning as the cost of living rises speedily and rampant corruption and an erosion of confidence in the judiciary eats away at public morale.

So why use presidential power to release a potential rival at this time?

Fonseka claims the president had no choice because there was overwhelming demand for his release from his supporters, including religious and business leaders.

There are unconfirmed reports that Rajapakse had been pressured



Sri Lanka's former army chief Sarath Fonseka waving to his supporters as he leaves Welikada prison in Colombo on May 21. Fonseka walked out of prison after being granted a pardon by President Mahinda Rajapakse. Reuters pic

by the United States to release the general, which had listed him as a political prisoner. This has been denied by the government.

The release seems more like a Machiavellian tactic by Rajapakse to bolster his popularity and throw a cat among the pigeons of the opposition.

Although he was a war hero and hailed as such during the past presidential election, Fonseka was paradoxically supported by two major political parties opposed to military action.

They are the main opposition United National Party and the Tamil National Alliance which dominates the northern and eastern regions which are predominantly Tamil.

The UNP is split three ways, with its leader Ranil Wickremasinghe hanging on to power despite being drubbed by the governing party in successive elections. The TNA and the other opposition parties are too small to challenge Rajapakse.

So it would seem that Fonseka is a figure that the opposition could

coalesce around. But the conditions of his release are that he cannot contest public office, although he can vote and support other candidates.

In the euphoria of seeing the cheering crowds around him Fonseka said being unable to contest did not matter.

He told the Colombo *Daily Mirror* that he did not need to be in office to make a difference. "If you look at people like Mahatma Gandhi in India, he created a huge impact on the politics of the country."

It seems an odd comparison. Fonseka was a fierce, hard-driving army chief with a reputation as an autocrat. As an army commander he made statements that often upset minorities in the country.

If the UNP were to back Fonseka and help build a broad, multi-ethnic opposition front to challenge the Rajapakse juggernaut, with the former general as its leader, Wickremasinghe would have to take a backseat. Or there could be infighting among these opposition

parties to claim Fonseka. This would certainly strengthen Rajapakse in time for parliamentary general elections rumoured to be held next year.

Many Sri Lankans are tired of the country's corrupt and thoroughly rotten political culture, where those in power act with mind-numbing impunity.

Fonseka's declaration promising to bring an end to impunity and corruption has struck a chord amongst many.

Right now, Sri Lanka does not need another war hero. It needs men and women who can manage the economy, honestly make an effort towards reconciliation between the majority Sinhala and the minorities and have a clear vision to restore shattered democratic institutions, restore freedom of expression and bring back the judiciary and law enforcement authorities to their former standards.

Rajapakse's team is failing in those areas.

The need for change is strong and apparent among Sri Lankans. Could Fonseka be the catalyst that brings together a visionary team that would bring about that change?



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