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# ABSOLUTISM IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2020), the word “absolutism” can be defined as

*“...a political system in which a single leader controls all branches of government and has authority over everyone and everything in the country...”*

From the definition above, it shows that absolutism is a single-rule political system which the ruler, a single individual, is in control of the government as a whole, this includes the three branches of government which are the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary. The individual ruler will govern the state without any interference and its power is unlimited. Any interference here refers to other individuals within the state and the law of the state. The power of this one individual ruler will determine all of the state affairs such as in politics, economy, and society. Therefore, there is no political freedom of the individual as every decision within the state will be determined by the one single ruler (Kelsen 1948: 908).

Absolutism have been one of the oldest forms of government as seen in the early human civilization, the social hierarchy has stated the king as the righteous man to rule. As an example, referring back to ancient Egyptian kingdom where the king, the Pharaoh convince himself as God (Lehner 2000: 69). It can be seen that in the Ancient Egyptian kingdom, the Pharaoh is treated as God. Re, an Egyptian god who stated himself as the king of Gods which lead the citizen to worship him as God (Bryson t.th.). This can be seen throughout the history of absolute monarch where the king or the ruler will pronounce himself as a god or a son of God which will strengthen the sovereignty of the state. This shows that absolutism is highly related to religion as it will tighten the obedience of the citizen toward the king. Hence, in the doctrine of absolutism, there are two version of absolutist theory which are rationalist theory and theological theory.

The Rationalist theory of absolutism was brought to light by a French scholar, Jean Bodin (1529 – 1596) with his work in politics, *Les Six livres de la République* which can be translated as *The Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1576). This book pictured his

narrative of France amid the French Renaissance (Turchetti 2018). Bodin wrote on what has occurred in France during the French Renaissance. There was political instability due to the dispute occurred between two different groups, the Huguenots or the French Protestants and the Catholic royalists. This political instability conveys the idea of formulating a theory of where should the power be rested to prevent any threat to stability within a state. One of his great statements in his book,

*“...the absolute and perpetual power of a commonwealth... the highest power to command...”*

(Pennell n.d.)

Therefore, from the above statement, it can be concluded that Bodin’s approach in deciding which political entity should be vested its power is the one who is in absolute authority (Pennell n.d.).

If we look at the other version of absolutist theory, the theological version, it argues that the king has divine right to rule. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, a theological philosopher, he argues that the best kind of governance is which is governed by one or specifically one provided by a king. He also argues that kingship is the most natural and a representation of God in this world. In absolute monarch government is where the power of the ruler is undivided and unlimited to any action. Therefore, it can act effectively and efficiently without any interference. St Thomas also believes that monarchy is less likely to become a tyrant than government by several people such as democracy and aristocracy. This is because monarchy has less internal dispute and more prone to be a stable government (Dyson 2004:16). Hence, it is clear that absolutism can be supported theologically, with using religion as a justification for the political practice of absolutism.

Absolutism is an ancient form of government that most ancient state practice under the rule of absolute monarchy. The Sun King of France, King Louis XIV said his famous phrase “*L etat c'est moi*” which means “I am the state” (Kelsen 1948: 908). King Louis XIV is the longest ruling monarch in European history. He ruled for 72 years. He governs his absolute monarch government by upholding the idea of “Divine Rights of Kings” as his justification for his right to rule. Louis XIV came into absolute power after Mazarin’s death

in 1661. Mazarin was the chief minister who rules France with Louis XIV's mother, Aunt of Austria. Louis XIV's policy was rather different from past rulers. He maintains a good relation with the autocrats or the nobles by serving them with a luxurious lifestyle in his Palace of Versailles. By providing the wealth to the autocrats, he can strongly maintain his power as an absolute king. It is his strategy to prevent any autocrats from gaining the power to the point they can make their own ruling even in the smallest province. Hence, it clear how absolutism took place in ancient Europe and how the king used the idea of the right of king to rule as it is a God's gift to the king to rule (Onion, Sullivan & Mullen 2019).

Thus, absolutism exists as an ideology that can order how a state governs and it is important to note that it is different from totalitarianism. Its power only vested in state affairs and does not dictate its citizen in terms of race, religion, and ethnicity. It is clear that absolutism is largely have been practice during early period of human civilization, in the ancient Egyptian kingdom. Furthermore, most parts of Europe adopt absolutism as a system of administering the state by the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, due to unjust monarch and the French Revolution emerge in 1789, absolutism in France falls. The ideology of liberalism arises and became the one of the most influential ideology as it did influence important events in human history such as the United States of America's The Declaration of Independence (Stoner Jr. 2005). Hence, absolutism has become unpopular in the modern world. However, there are still few states that hold the doctrine of absolutism to this day.

## **2.0 ABSOLUTISM IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM**

Brunei is a state located on the island of Borneo, in Southeast Asia that still practice absolutism in the existence of an absolute monarchy government. After World War II, the political realm in Brunei changes with the rising of two political groups. The first was under the monarch which was Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III while the other one was under *Parti Rakyat Brunei* (PRB) with A.M. Azahari as their leader. The Sultan's party gain supports and as the British Resident present the new constitution in 1959, the Constitution gave the Sultan powers in governing the state internally. However, PRB still demanding for constitution amendment which is by providing an electoral system for Brunei. Furthermore,

PRB also actively vocal in preventing Brunei from joining the Federation of Malaysia as it has been favored by the Sultan himself. PRB has a vision of forming the northern Borneo federation. Due to the Sultan's neglect, Azahari decided to use military power by using the *Tentera Nasional Kalimantan Utara* (TNKU) in order to get their constitutional demand. The Brunei Revolt 1962 was unsuccessful and lasted 10 days as the British come to overthrow the regime (Srinivas 1997: 71-72).

Brunei refused to join the Federation of Malaysia and in 1979, Brunei signed a treaty with British which transferred the powers of defense and foreign affairs and this was the turning point to Brunei's own independence in 1984. Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III gave his hereditary power to his son, Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzadin Waddaulah in 1967. Brunei forms a mixture of traditional and modern political systems. According to the 1959 Constitution, the Sultan is both heads of government and head of state. The Sultan shall have full executive power and this includes emergency powers which exist since the rebellion event in 1962. The Sultan shall be assisted by three main councils which are the Council of State, Council of Ministers, and the Privy Council. In the executive branch, the Cabinet consists of 21 members in 13 ministries. The sultan still holds important ministries such as the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Foreign Affair, and the Ministry of Defense. (Naimah 2002: 138)

In the era of modernization, the Sultan feel the need to adjust his traditional monarchy in the modern world. Although it has appeared the Sultan appoint his brother in a significant role to retain his royal power, readjustment has been made since 1986 in reshuffling the Cabinet. The appointment is made based on merit so that only the selected technocrats are being appointed. With this new adaption, it widens the political participation of the people. Therefore, the Sultan overcome the need of political participation of the people, the sultan practice good governance such as providing excellent social welfare incentives to the people of Brunei. The Sultan has shown its resistance to adopting democratic activity since the 1962 revolt. In 1985, *Parti Demokratik Kebangsaan Brunei* (PDKB) was formed and was led by Haji Abdul Latif Chuchu. The party advocates the idea of Islam and liberal nationalism. The Sultan was not keen of such idea and limits the influence by forbidding the civil servant to participate in the party's activities. Bruneian

was uninterested and with the good welfare the government is providing, it slows down the influence of PDKB. PDKB was later dissolved and Abdul Latiff Chuchu was arrested (Naimah 2002: 138).

During the Sultan's forty-fourth birthday in 1990, the idea of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) which means Malay Muslim Monarchy was mentioned. The idea of MIB was not new. It has been the basic foundation of Brunei Sultanate since the first Monarch, Awang Alak Betatar (1363 – 1402). The concept stresses the absolute power of a Sultan with using Islamic values to preserve the culture of Brunei Malay culture. By adopting this concept, it shows that it is one of Sultan's method to preserve its royal power over his state. Pehin Hj Abdul Aziz Umar (1992), a former Minister of Education stated that MIB as the National Philosophy of Brunei. He justifies his statement by emphasizing the uniqueness of Brunei's monarchy as it has been practiced justly for 600 years (Naimah 2004: 142).

Hence, it is clear that Brunei practice absolutism in its state by using theological approach. By using religion as its justification in its practice of absolute power, the Sultan manages to charter his people's support by providing good governance in terms of education and healthcare. Although absolutism is an old political ideology that is not practiced widely throughout today's modern-day, absolutism is still feasible to practice which will come with its own political challenges. These political challenges refer to the monarch's struggles in preserving its power over the state and maintain its people's support.

### **3.0 ANALYSIS ON ABSOLUTISM IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM**

From the previous discussion, it has proven absolutism in modern-day can still work even though it is can be label as an anomaly. Absolutism in Brunei has its positive and negative attributes. Looking at the positive side of absolutism, it can be seen that absolutism can serve good governance. In Brunei, abiding to its vision of *Wawasan Brunei 2035*, the Ministry of Health is moving forward in improving its healthcare services. By implementing the use of ICT in the health care system, it will help to run the process smoothly (Government of Brunei). Looking at the case of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), by 19 November 2020, there has been total number of 148 cases and 3 deaths

(Brunei's Ministry of Health 2020). In combating COVID-19, the Brunei government is efficient in taking precautions steps such as reducing in and out flights to China in February 2020 (Bodetti 2020). Thus, it is clear that with absolute power and an efficient Monarch, good governance can be achieved as the decision can be made swiftly due to the power of one. This type of government is very needed in a state of emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

On the negative side, absolutism is indeed prone to becoming a bad despotic government. This can be seen throughout human history and Brunei is no exception to such action. Although the people of Brunei are very keen of His Majesty, the Western world thinks otherwise. In a world where Western media are highly influential, these stories cover on the Sultan need to be discuss as it will affect the absolutism in Brunei. Many western media outlets have cover stories of Brunei especially when the Sultan decided to implement the Shariah Law in Brunei. Western media have been criticizing the Sultan as a hypocrite as he lives a lavish and luxurious life and his implementation of Syariah Law in Brunei. One of them is Jullian Lauren, in her book "*Some Girl: My Life in a Harem*" which pictured Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah's brother, Prince Jefri recruited her for prostitution. However, the Brunei government has been denying Lauren's claims (Bostock 2019). In 1997, a former Miss USA, Shannon Marketic sued Prince Jefri and the Sultan for sexual assault but the brothers claimed diplomatic immunity, and the charges were dropped (Callahan 2014). By having these claims thrown around, the Sultan has to act despotically to save his royal imagine as a Sultan.

By adopting the concept of MIB, most will argue that the Sultan are prone to commit misjustice towards the people. However, it can prove that the Sultan is more prone to change and adjust as the world criticize. In April 2019, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah was widely condemned by Western media and celebrities because of his action of imposing a new panel code where homosexuals shall be punished by stoning to death. As a response, the Sultan first ask for the international public to respect his decision which was said to only discourage the Islamic forbidden act rather than punishing. However, on May 5, the Sultan makes an announcement the punishment will never be imposed (Bostock 2019). This shows that the Sultan are ready to adjust and adapt to a more liberal world to maintain his royalty.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Absolutism is one of the political ideologies that embrace by the political system of absolute monarchy. Absolutism is a single-rule political system which the ruler, a single individual, is in control of the government as a whole, this includes the three branches of government which are the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary. The power of this one individual ruler will determine all of the state affairs such as in politics, economy, and society. Therefore, there is no political freedom of the individual as every decision within the state will be determined by the one single ruler (Kelsen 1948: 908). By understanding the basic concept of absolutism, we have a great picture of what is like to live in a single-party ruling or absolute monarchy system.

Furthermore, the author explains how absolutism work in Brunei Darussalam's setting which was very different from other absolute monarchy states. By adopting the concept of MIB, Brunei manages to maintain its power by providing a nation-state identity. Although the idea of absolutism is very old and is not widely used in many other countries, it is still feasible by being flexible and adapt to modernization. this value was done by Brunei Darussalam and it is one of the ways the Sultan sustain its political power to this day.



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