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A New 'Sultan' of Sulu in Malaysia: Implications for Politics and Bilateral Ties

By Farish A Noor

Synopsis

For decades there have been many contenders to the title of the Sultan of Sulu. Recently a Malaysian citizen has proclaimed himself to be the 'real Sultan of Sulu'. The consequences of this proclamation will be felt in Malaysian domestic politics and may affect Malaysia-Philippine ties.

Commentary

FOR DECADES there have been many contenders to the title of the Sultan of Sulu. Since late 2010 the debate over who was the rightful heir to the throne arose again in the East Malaysian state of Sabah. Then the self-styled 'Prime Minister of the Sultanate of Sulu', Datu Albi Ahmad Julkarnain, announced that the 'Sulu government' would soon declare the identity of the real inheritor to the throne of Sulu, and by so doing desist in all its claims to Sabah.

The New 'Sultan of Sulu'

In the first week of February 2011 a local Sabahan sub-contractor and businessman Datu Mohd Akjan bin Datu Ali Muhammad, was declared as the real 'Sultan of Sulu' at a ceremony in Kota Kinabalu. The event was witnessed by 60 representatives from the various Tausug communities of Tawi-Tawi, Palawan, Sulu and Sabah. With the proclamation of Datu Akjan as the reigning Sultan of Sulu with the title Sultan Paduka Mahasari Maulana al-Marhum Sultan Shariful-Hashim II, the Sulu 'government' officially relinquished its claims to Sabah. The rationale was that since the 1970s the Malaysian government had been kind to Sulu exiles who fled from the Philippines.

Immediately after the proclamation, local politicians from East Malaysia raised the question of how a Malaysian citizen could unilaterally declare himself as the sovereign of another country. The former Sabah chief minister Yong Teck Lee of the Sabah Progressive Party urged the Malaysian government to clarify the matter, citing the allegations against Mohd Akjan and stating that he had once been allegedly detained for fabricating identity cards in Sabah.

The former chief minister also noted that it was highly irregular to have a Malaysian citizen proclaim himself to be the Sultan of a separate state and head of a foreign government-in-exile, and not to pledge loyalty to the King of Malaysia and the Malaysian constitution. Other Sabah politicians including former senator Chong Eng Leong also added that this recent development might contribute to more foreigners coming to settle in Sabah.

Problem of an extinct kingdom

The problem of Sulu is a complex one. The Sultanate of Sulu – it once covered an area that extended from the Sulu and Palawan islands, across the Spratly islands, Basilan and parts of North Borneo, including present-day Sabah – ceased to exist after its last ruler Sultan Muhammad Fadzlun was forced to surrender his power in 1862. When Sabah became part of the Federation of Malaysia in 1962 the Philippines was initially hostile to the move as it claimed that Sabah was once part of the kingdom of Sulu, and that Sulu was part of the Philippines.

From 1962 to the late 1990s, many Filipino citizens had fled the conflict zone of Southern Philippines and settled in Malaysia. Critics of the new 'Sultan of Sulu' have claimed that he falls into the same category of citizens of ambiguous origin. According to local media reports, 'Sultan' Akjan was born in Jambangan, Nipah-Nipah on 23 November 1957 but his Malaysian identity card states that he was born in Sabah on 7 July 1957.

The complications that may arise from this curious event are manifold:

Firstly, it raises the question of the dual loyalties of those former Philippine citizens who were allowed to settle in Malaysia and to assume Malaysian citizenship. 'Sultan' Akjan's detractors in Sabah have presented him as a foreigner who has lived in Malaysia under the protection of Malaysian law, but who now claims to be the ruler of a separate state – thereby raising questions related to the loyalty of Malaysian citizens to the King (Yang di Pertuan Agong) of Malaysia and the Malaysian constitution.

Secondly, this new development has further raised the political temperature in Sabah where opposition leaders and parties have tried in recent months to rekindle feelings of Sabahan solidarity and opposition to the Federal government of West Malaysia. Sabah politicians like Yong Teck Lee have once again raised the issue of the granting of Malaysian citizenship status to foreigners in Sabah, which local Sabah opposition leaders claim has led to the relative shrinking of the size of the original Sabahan population thanks to the influx of foreign migrants, both legal and illegal.

Implications for Malaysia-Philippines relations

Thirdly it raises the thorny question of how the Philippines would react to the claim by Datu Mohd Akjan/ Sultan Shariful-Hashim II. The Philippine government had already installed its own monarch in Sulu, whom Manila claims to be the rightful Sultan of Sulu. At the investiture ceremony in February 2011, both Datu Mohd Akjan/ Sultan Shariful-Hashim II and his Prime Minister Datu Albi Ahmad Jolkarnain claimed that the Sulu Sultanate was not a part of the Philippines and has never been a part of the Philippines – a move that was bound to upset the Philippine government in Manila.

By claiming themselves to be the real (albeit virtual) government of Sulu in exile, Sultan Shariful-Hashim II and Datu Albi Ahmad were also claiming by extension that the present-day rulers and government of Sulu who are backed by the Philippine government are illegitimate. They insisted that the matter would eventually be brought to the International Court of Justice and the United Nations, and that one day the Sultanate of Sulu ought to be recognised as an independent Sultanate in its own right.

Thus what began as a seemingly obscure and trivial matter may have long-term repercussions and consequences to the internal politics of Malaysia/Sabah as well as Malaysian-Philippines relations.

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