

# FROM HOSTILITY TO CONCILIATION: CHARTING SYED SHEIKH AL-HADI'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS COLONIALISM THROUGH THE ANALYSIS OF *AL-IMAM* AND *AL-IKHWAN*

*(Daripada Permusuhan kepada Perdamaian: Menelusuri Sikap Syed Sheikh al-Hadi terhadap Penjajah melalui Analisis al-Imam dan al-Ikhwan)*

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## Abstract

Syed Sheikh al-Hadi (1867–1934) is a central figure in the study of Islamic reformism in the Malay world. To propagate his ideas, he established three journals: *al-Imam* (1906–1908), *al-Ikhwan* (1926–1931) and *Saudara* (1928–1941). Among these, *al-Imam* has been the most extensively studied, while *al-Ikhwan* remains significantly overlooked as a primary source for understanding al-Hadi's thoughts. This neglect disregards critical insights into potential shifts and developments in his ideas, especially since *al-Ikhwan* was published nearly two decades after *al-Imam* ceased publication. Specifically, this gap has led to unsatisfactory conclusions regarding al-Hadi's attitude towards the British colonisers. Without accounting for any shift that had taken place over the decades, several existing studies either depict al-Hadi as fervently and consistently anti-colonial or conclude otherwise, directly contradicting each other. Through a textual analysis of *al-Ikhwan* and comparison with his earlier writings in *al-Imam*, this paper argues that a significant shift in his stance towards the colonisers had occurred from

hostility in *al-Imam* to conciliation in *al-Ikhwan*. Using a socio-historical analysis, it further demonstrates that this shift can be explained by the differing contexts in which al-Hadi was writing for each periodical. This highlights al-Hadi's critical approach to reform—one that was not merely an imitation of prominent reformists elsewhere, but firmly grounded in the circumstances he faced.

Keywords: Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, *al-Imam*, *al-Ikhwan*, Islamic reformism, postcolonial discourse, socio-historical analysis

### **Abstrak**

*Sheikh al-Hadi (1867-1934) merupakan tokoh terkemuka dalam wacana gerakan reformisme di Alam Melayu. Antara usaha dalam menyebarkan gagasannya termasuklah penubuhan tiga jurnal: al-Imam (1906-1908), al-Ikhwan (1926-1931) dan Saudara (1928-1941). Antara ketiga-tiga jurnal ini, al-Imam menjadi sumber kajian utama manakala al-Ikhwan kekal sebagai sumber yang terus terpinggir dalam usaha mengenal pasti pemikiran al-Hadi. Pengecualian jurnal ini menutup ruang dalam mengenal pasti perkembangan serta perubahan dalam cara pemikirannya, apatah lagi memandangkan al-Ikhwan diterbitkan hampir dua dekad selepas al-Imam dihentikan. Hal ini telah menimbulkan kesimpulan yang kurang memuaskan berkenaan sikap al-Hadi terhadap kuasa kolonial. Tanpa mengambil kira sebarang perubahan yang mungkin berlaku dalam tempoh dua dekad tersebut, beberapa kajian menyimpulkan bahawa al-Hadi menentang kolonialisme secara konsisten manakala kajian-kajian lain pula menyimpulkan sebaliknya, lantas menimbulkan percanggahan yang ketara antara kedua-dua kesimpulan ini. Menerusi kaedah analisis tekstual terhadap al-Ikhwan serta perbandingan dengan tulisan awalnya dalam al-Imam, makalah ini mengetengahkan bahawa terdapat peralihan yang ketara dalam pendirian al-Hadi terhadap kuasa kolonial: awalnya bersikap membantah dalam al-Imam lalu kemudiannya berdamai dalam al-Ikhwan. Melalui analisis sosiosejarah, makalah ini turut berusaha menjelaskan peralihan ini dengan meneliti perbezaan konteks yang melatari penulisan al-Hadi bagi kedua-dua jurnal tersebut. Hal ini menonjolkan pendekatan kritis al-Hadi terhadap usaha reformisme—suatu pendekatan yang bukan sekadar meniru mahupun mengimport gagasan tokoh-tokoh reformis asing, melainkan berlandaskan keadaan dan cabaran yang beliau hadapi sendiri.*

Kata kunci: Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, *al-Imam*, *al-Ikhwan*, reformisme Islam, wacana pascakolonial, analisis sosiosejarah

## INTRODUCTION

*Wahai sekalian Ikhwan timur yang sedang lenyak di dalam tidurnya. Wahai sekalian saudara kami yang sedang lena bersedap-sedap di dalam keelokan mimpinya. Memadalah. Memadalah. Memadalah tidurmu itu... Bangunlah segera. Sapulah mata daripada bekas tidur yang membunuh itu.*

(*al-Hadi* in Abdul Rahman, 2003, p. 18)

[O all the Eastern Brothers who are deep in their sleep. O all our brothers who are deep in their sleep, savouring the beauty of their dreams. Enough. Enough. Enough is your sleep... Wake up immediately. Wipe your eyes from that deadly sleep.]

To awaken the sleeping masses and transform the society—such was the noble vision of *al-Ikhwan*. Established in 1926, *al-Ikhwan* was the second of three periodicals founded by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, a pivotal figure in Islamic reformism in the Malay world. While naturally a critical individual from young, his intellectual stance was deeply influenced by great reformists from other parts of the world, such as Muhammad Abduh. As part of his reformist vision, al-Hadi was known for, among others, his advocacy for the use of *akal* (reason), his rejection of *taqlid* (blind imitation) and his call for rationality—ideas that did not sit well with traditionalists. Despite the staunch opposition from these traditionalist circles, his determination never wavered as he remained consistent in his advocacy for religious reforms, culminating in the establishment of three periodicals to disseminate his thoughts: the journal *al-Imam* (1906–1908) in Singapore; the magazine *al-Ikhwan* (1926–1931) in Penang; and the newspaper *Saudara* (1928–1941) in Penang.

On the one hand, the literature on al-Hadi's reformist ideas is rich, forming a significant part of the discourse on Islamic reformism within the scholarship of Malay religious thought. Existing studies often reference a myriad of his works with particular attention to his earliest periodical, *al-Imam*, and religious books such as *Ugama Islam dan Akal*. Unfortunately, on the other hand, *al-Ikhwan* remains a largely neglected source of study, receiving far less scholarly attention than it deserves. Thus, little is known about how al-Hadi conveyed his critical reformist ideas through *al-Ikhwan*. More importantly, there has been no substantial attempt to trace any shift in al-Hadi's thoughts which would, undoubtedly, have been shaped by changing historical and social contexts in which he wrote.

This gap extends to the existing study on al-Hadi's attitude towards the British colonisers (henceforth “colonisers”). With little attempt to compare his writings in *al-Imam* and *al-Ikhwan*—published nearly 20 decades apart—these studies have often

arrived at unsatisfactory conclusions that depict al-Hadi as a static individual whose perceptions remained unchanged over the years despite evolving circumstances.

This paper contends otherwise; it argues that al-Hadi's attitude towards the colonisers had, in fact, undergone a discernible shift from a hostile attitude in his *al-Imam* days to a tone of conciliation in *al-Ikhwan*. This shift can, and rightfully should, be analysed through a critical, multidisciplinary socio-historical lens.

### **Brief Biography of Syed Sheikh bin Ahmad al-Hadi**

Syed Sheikh bin Ahmad al-Hadi was born on November 20, 1867, in Kampung Hulu, Melaka. In 1874, he moved to Riau with his father, Syed Ahmad, where he attracted the attention of Raja Ali Kelana, who adopted him (Syed Alwi, 1999). Reflecting on his close relationship with the Riau-Langga aristocracy, al-Hadi wrote in *al-Ikhwan* (al-Hadi in Talib Samat, 1992, p. 31):

*Kita orang yang menanggung budi dan limpah kurnia Raja Riau daripada umur kita 15 tahun maka kita di dalam Riau tidak berubah daripada seperti seorang ahlinya yang kepercayaan yang mengetahui kebanyakan hal-ehwal rahsia perjalanan kerajaannya dan perikata hubungan kaum kerabat tiap-tiap seorang.*

[We are people who have borne the kindness and bounty of the King of Riau since we were 15 years old, so we in Riau have not changed from being his trusted members who know most of the secret affairs of his kingdom and the secrets of each person's family relationships.]

This close relationship proved to be impactful in al-Hadi's stance towards the colonisers, especially during his *al-Imam* days, as will be argued later.

Al-Hadi had early exposure to the Malay and Arabic languages from both his biological and adoptive fathers. Apart from attending Malay school, he attended *sekolah pondok* (traditional religious school) in Terengganu. However, he became weary of its education system, which emphasised rote memorisation, and would often raise critical questions to his teachers (Talib Samat, 2019). He also accompanied the sons of the Sultan of Riau and Raja Ali Kelana to Egypt and Mecca for their education and pilgrimage (al-Hadi, 1999). During these trips, he came into contact with prominent reformists such as Sheikh Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida and became attracted to their revolutionary thinking.

Al-Hadi moved to Singapore in 1901 and established *al-Imam* in 1906, marking the hallmark of his contribution to reformist thought. He also established Singapore's first *madrasah* (traditional religious school), Madrasah al-Iqbal Al-Islamiyyah, in 1908 (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 1994). Unfortunately, with little support and stiff opposition, both initiatives ceased within two years (Syed Alwi, 1999).

In 1917, al-Hadi moved to Penang and founded Madrasah al-Masyhur, serving as its first principal until 1919 (Ahmad Dzulfahmi & Mohammad Redzuan, 2020). More importantly, he founded *al-Ikhwan* in September 1926, initially printed by The British Malaya Company before his own Jelutong Press was established in 1927 (Talib Samat, 1992). In 1928, al-Hadi launched *Saudara*. Both periodicals ran concurrently until publications ceased in 1931 and 1941 respectively.

## Research Problem

This study addresses the neglect of *al-Ikhwan* as a primary source of data in existing scholarship when studying al-Hadi's reformist thoughts. In stark contrast to the understudied *al-Ikhwan*, al-Hadi's earlier periodical, *al-Imam*, has been extensively studied (e.g., Mohamed Fairuz Ahmad, 2010; Azyumardi Azra, 1999; Abu Bakar Hamzah, 1981) while the later *Saudara* has received some academic attention (e.g., Wan Suhana Wan Sulong, 2006, 2003).

The limited study on *al-Ikhwan* disregards critical insights into al-Hadi's reformist ideas, especially since this periodical was published nearly two decades after *al-Imam* ceased. Moreover, it ignores potential shifts and developments in al-Hadi's ideas. Additionally, existing studies are often quick to frame al-Hadi's contributions within the broader Islamic reformism movement as though all figures are monolithic. Pertaining to al-Hadi's attitude towards the colonisers, the neglect of *al-Ikhwan* has contributed to the lack of a comprehensive and holistic conclusion that fail to account for a significant shift that he reflected in his writings throughout the years.

At the same time, this paper acknowledges that the limited accessibility of *al-Ikhwan* has likely contributed to the lack of comprehensive studies on this periodical thus far. Nevertheless, this study is only possible following the National University of Singapore (NUS) Library's acquisition of 18 volumes of *al-Ikhwan*, thus exemplifying the important role universities play in proactively making resources accessible for researchers.

## Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the understanding of Islamic reformism in the scholarship of Malay religious thought by utilising the Jawi texts of *al-Ikhwan*. It fills a significant gap in the existing literature by situating *al-Ikhwan* as the primary source of study. By way of comparison, it discerns shifts in al-Hadi's ideas, as articulated in *al-Imam* and *al-Ikhwan*, particularly in his attitude towards the colonisers—an endeavour yet to be fully undertaken in existing scholarship.

Additionally, instead of simply categorising him as part of the wider “reformist” or “modernist” movement, this study demonstrates that al-Hadi was neither one who merely imitated nor imported ideas from prominent reformists abroad. Instead, he appears to be a complex individual whose ideas evolved over time, shaped by changing circumstances in which he lived and wrote.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As aforementioned, works that focus specifically on *al-Ikhwan* as a primary source of study remain sparse. For one, Marina Merican (1960) explores al-Hadi’s ideas vis-à-vis women’s emancipation in *al-Ikhwan*. Written in Malay, Merican provides her critique of al-Hadi’s ideas on women’s societal roles, education, wealth, prostitution, freedom and donning of the hijab. While deserving of recognition for spearheading academic study on al-Ikhwan, the limited scope of her thesis leaves room for further exploration.

Additionally, Merican’s criticisms of al-Hadi seem to stem from her own contemporary standards without comprehension of the context in which al-Hadi was writing. For instance, she suggests that al-Hadi exaggerated women’s plight in terms of their careers, cynically questioning: “Is Sayed Shaikh really well-versed on the facets of life in his community?” [*Adakah Sayed Shaikh betul-betul mengetahui chorak kehidupan di dalam masharakatnya?*] (Marina Merican, 1960, p. 58). One would find this accusation unfitting when developments of al-Hadi’s time are considered. Writing at a time when women were commonly confined to the domestic sphere, al-Hadi was, in fact, addressing an actual pressing issue. Merican’s accusation thus departs from Carr’s (1986) pertinent emphasis on the importance of situating works in specific contexts.

A significant work that provides a personal account of al-Hadi’s life is Gordon’s (2018) book. It features writings of al-Hadi’s son and grandson, providing intimate narrations of al-Hadi’s life experiences and struggles. Additionally, it compiles 21 of al-Hadi’s writings, with 12 articles from otherwise inaccessible volumes of *al-Ikhwan*, making it a relevant and important resource.

Ibrahim Abu Bakar (1994) delves into a detailed biography of al-Hadi as well as his ideas for socio-religious reform in terms of ritualism, education, women and politics. He comprehensively analyses al-Hadi’s ideas, going beyond mere descriptions to situate them within both local and global contexts before offering his own critiques.

Specifically with regard to al-Hadi’s attitude towards the British, existing literature lacks a comprehensive analysis. On one hand, studies on *al-Imam* suggest that he was fervently anti-colonial. Linda Tan (1999), for one, describes that al-Hadi “had a definite dislike for foreign” and viewed surrendering to the Europeans as



the surrender of dignity. Talib (1992) adds that al-Hadi condemned the British for not providing sufficient education to the Malays, while Ibrahim Abu Bakar (1991) suggests that al-Hadi described the colonisers as manipulative hypocrites. Likewise, Hashim Ismail (2019) opines that al-Hadi, like other *Kaum Muda* members, turned to writing as a medium to propagate anti-colonial ideas.

On the other hand, referencing limited quotations from *al-Ikhwan*, other works suggest that al-Hadi was amicable towards the colonisers. Among others, he supposedly praised the British and “exhorted (locals) to think about the good things that the British government had introduced into Malaya” (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 1994, p. 155). Shaharom TM Sulaiman (2003) extends the argument to conclude that al-Hadi was “tolerant towards the British possibly because he previously had the opportunity to run his business and movement in Pulau Penang and Singapore” (p. 66). Others such as Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail (2003) put forth that al-Hadi even praised the British for their significant contributions to the local Malays.

However, given the limited accessibility of *al-Ikhwan*, the latter group of studies either referred to a small selection of its articles or, more commonly, cited excerpts previously referenced by earlier works—especially those of Ibrahim Abu Bakar. Hence, there is a lack of fresh insightful citations drawn from the wide range of *al-Ikhwan* volumes.

Nevertheless, despite clearly contradicting each other, both groups of studies regard their conclusions of al-Hadi’s attitude towards the colonisers as consistent, framing him as either a steadfast supporter or unwavering critic of the colonisers. Only Hafiz Zakariya (2017) has pointed out an apparent contradiction in his attitude but simply dismisses it as “complex”; while convenient, this study finds his conclusion inaccurate, arguing that a shift in al-Hadi’s attitude had taken place and this shift can be explained.

Hence, a common limitation in present studies is the lack of attention to shifts in al-Hadi’s attitude towards the British since a comparative analysis of his earlier and later works has yet to be attempted.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts library research, employing a close reading of 18 volumes of *al-Ikhwan* available in the NUS Library. Written in the Jawi script, relevant quotations from *al-Ikhwan* is transliterated into romanised Malay. For comparison, the data is supplemented by secondary works, particularly those that discuss al-Hadi’s attitude towards the colonisers.

Al-Hadi’s ideas are analysed using E. H. Carr’s socio-historical approach to the history of ideas. Carr (1986) argues that history is a discourse of the past that involves “a continuous interaction between the historian and his facts” (p. 24). Emphasising the importance of situating works within specific contexts, he points

out that “the development of society and the development of the individual go hand in hand and condition each other” (Carr, 1986, p. 26). Relatedly, he highlights that works are essentially a refraction “through the eyes of the recorder” (Carr, 1986, p. 38), foregrounding the need to acknowledge the writer’s inherent inclinations and biases. It is, therefore, important to know the specific social and historical environment(s) in which al-Hadi was writing in order to accurately situate his works within the wider context.

The relevance of Carr’s socio-historical approach lies in its emphasis on a more nuanced understanding of ideas by situating them within the interplay between ideas, social contexts and historical events. It recognises that ideas, far from being static and isolated, are moulded (and constantly remoulded) by surrounding forces and lived realities of the time.

By paying close attention to social and historical contexts, this study is better equipped to explain the shift in al-Hadi’s ideas that inevitably occurred over the years. Carr’s socio-historical approach is therefore adopted as a valuable framework to offer a more nuanced understanding of al-Hadi’s ideas, ultimately recognising its complex and revolving nature. Through this approach, this study steers away from merely describing his writings. Instead, a critical analysis is offered by situating these ideas within the specific contexts and developments in which he was writing.

For clarity, al-Hadi’s “attitude towards the colonisers” in this paper is primarily derived from the sentiments he expressed in his written works, specifically in *al-Imam* and *al-Ikhwan*. However, in interpreting these works, this study also considers his external relationships with the colonisers beyond the texts as well as the broader context.

To define “hostility,” this study draws reference to the work of psychologist Timothy Smith, who describes hostility as “a negative attitude towards others, consisting of enmity, denigration, and ill will” (Smith, 1994, p. 26). On the other hand, “conciliation” here is used as a broad term that refers to the disposition to reduce conflict through understanding and making concessions. In some instances, this may also reflect sentiments of accommodation when one expresses approval or even praises the other party. In this paper, hostility and conciliation represent contrasting attitudes towards the colonisers—the former characterised by outright opposition and the latter providing room for engagement and sometimes favourable descriptions.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Shift in al-Hadi’s Attitude towards the Colonisers

*Tidakkah kita lihat Umat Timur ini telah beratus-ratus tahun kena rampas bukan hartanya sahaja. Maka awal masuk bangsa Ajnabi itu dirampasnya kekuatan*



*harta... Kedua, dirampasnya kekuatan askar... (dan) ditutupnya pintu ilmu... supaya orang jangan jadi bijak dan cerdik.*

(*al-Imam* in Abu Bakar, 1981, p. 90)

[Don't we see that for hundreds of years, the Eastern people have been robbed of not only their wealth. So when the foreigners first entered, they were robbed of their wealth... Secondly, they were robbed of their military strength... (and) the doors of knowledge were closed... so that people would not be wise and clever.]

*Hanya bangsa Inggeris ini tentera daripada Tuhan Rabbulalamin disuruhnya ke mari supaya mengeluarkan kita daripada gelap-gelita penjara kebodohan, kezaliman, kejahatan dan kebengisan pemerintah-pemerintah bangsa kita yang asal. Kerana bangsa Inggeris ini kaum yang pandai dan menghormati peraturan pemerintahan dan peraturan keamanan dan makmurkan dunia.*

(*al-Ikhwan*, 1926/2018)

[Only the English people are soldiers from God Almighty, sent here to bring us out of the dark prison of ignorance, tyranny, evil and cruelty of our original rulers. Because the English people are a clever people who respect the rules of government and the rules of peace and prosperity of the world.]

Upon juxtaposing the two quotes above—the former from *al-Imam* and the latter from *al-Ikhwan*—a striking contrast in al-Hadi's attitude towards the colonial power becomes apparent.

### **Al-Hadi's Stance on the Colonisers in *al-Imam***

Clearly, the excerpt from *al-Imam* above features al-Hadi's hostile stance towards British colonial power—an attitude that recurs throughout this periodical. Here, al-Hadi perceives the colonisers as exploitative oppressors who came to seize not only material wealth, but also the military strength and intellectual potential of the locals. Resultantly, the locals were left in a state of ignorance and vulnerability, only to create a fertile ground for persistent colonial exploitations.

Worse, al-Hadi witnessed how the exploitative colonisers had robbed the dignity of the locals and reduced them to mere slaves. He wrote in *al-Imam* (al-Hadi, 1907, p. 25):

*Apakah terjadiannya pada kita sekalian di sini? Diam sekalian kita kemudian kita serahkan pula kepada mereka itu kemuliaan kita dan hukuman kita dan harta kita dan kemegahan kita maka memada kita bahawa jadi kita bagi mereka itu kuli atau khadam seumpama anjing yang menjaga atau kuda yang menanggung.*

[What has happened to us all here? We all remain silent and then we hand over to them our glory and our punishment and our wealth and our splendor, so it seems to us that we become to them coolies or servants like guard dogs or packhorses.]

Al-Hadi resolutely condemned the immoral colonisers for treating the locals as *anjing* (dogs) or *kuda* (horses), illustrating how the latter were reduced and dehumanised to mere animals valued only for their unquestioning service to their masters. In doing so, he depicted a depressing picture of a society whose freedom and dignity are suppressed and subjected to the whims and approval of their (unworthy) “masters”—the colonisers.

This vivid description of the dehumanising effect of colonial oppression mirrors Freire’s (2000) reflection: “for the oppressors, there exists only one right: their right to live in peace, over against the right, not always even recognised but merely conceded, of the oppressed to survival” (p. 28). It becomes unsurprising, therefore, that al-Hadi would later describe the colonisers as “people who are said to have lost their minds, people ignorant of emotions, who are dead” [“(kaum) yang dikatakan akal yang sesat, kaum yang jahil perasaan, yang telah mati”] (al-Hadi, 1907, p. 28).

Yet, al-Hadi, a critical observer of his society, recognised how a significant number of locals were easily swayed by the manipulative colonisers, eventually coming to view them as a noble class. Exposing the hypocritical nature of the colonial rule, he wrote (al-Hadi in Abu Bakar, 1981, p. 89):

*Dan tiadalah ajaib mereka itu [umat Timur] memuliakan ajnabi dan menghinakan bangsanya dan menyangkalah mereka itu mulia kelakuannya dan tinggi martabatnya sebab menghormati bangsa ajnabi itu pada hal bangsa itu memperolok-olokkan mereka itu dan bermuka-muka... dengan wajah tipu daya.*

[And it is no wonder that they [the Eastern people] glorify foreigners and humiliate their own people and think that they are noble in their conduct and high in their dignity because they respect the foreigners when the people mock them and show off... with a face of deceit].

In a sharp critical voice, al-Hadi described the colonisers as *bermuka-muka* (literally “many-faced,” or hypocritical) and full of deceit. The colonisers, to him, only put on a pretentious front, presenting themselves as superior in all aspects, yet beneath this façade lie their malicious slanders and ulterior motives. To him, they were unworthy of the respect accorded to them by the deceived group of locals.

Here, embedded in this biting denunciation of the manipulative regime lies a deeper concern: his unwavering commitment to awaken the consciousness of the masses. This concern for re-humanisation of society is what, in Freire’s (2000)

words, “leads at once to the recognition of dehumanisation, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality” (p. 20). Indeed, *al-Imam* served to reclaim the dignity of the locals—a dignity that had been stripped away by the oppressive colonial rule.

### **Al-Hadi’s Stance on the Colonisers in *al-Ikhwan***

While the above undoubtedly reflects al-Hadi’s hostile attitude towards the colonisers in *al-Imam*, it would be a grave oversight for one to assume that this stance remained consistent throughout his life. Quite the contrary, the analysis of *al-Ikhwan*—an endeavour largely overlooked in existing scholarship—reveals a discernible contrast in his attitude towards the colonisers.

This is testified, among others, by the way he dignified Sir Hugh Clifford when the latter was appointed as the Governor of the Straits Settlements in 1927. To him, the arrival of Clifford marked a turning point that revived aspirations for positive changes. In his words (al-Hadi, 1927a, p. 202):

*Suatu tarikh yang mengembalikan atau menghidupkan angan-angan atau pengharapan yang besar yang telah dicita-cita oleh ahli-ahli negeri ini bagi kehidupan kaumnya. Kerana Tuan yang terutama ini sangat masyhur namanya di dalam kaum Melayu ini dan sangat masyhur mahabbah kasih sayangnya akan kaum yang sangat-sangat miskin pada serba-serbi perkakas kehidupan dunia ini.*

[A date that restores or revives the great dreams or hopes that have been aspired by the members of this state for the life of its people. Because this distinguished Master is very famous among Malay people and is very famous for his love for the people who are extremely poor in all the various tools of this worldly life].

Clifford was highly praised for “his love for the people who are extremely poor” [“*mahabbah kasih sayang akan kaum yang sangat-sangat miskin.*”] This admiration for Clifford resurfaced in 1929 when al-Hadi described him as “a single head of government who is very, very/exceptionally friendly and understands Malay affairs, yet never once possess the tyrannical nature of Malay kings” [“*seorang kepala pemerintah yang tunggal yang sangat-sangat mesra dan mengerti hal ehwal Melayu tetapi tiadalah padanya sekali-kali tabiat istibdad raja Melayu*”] (al-Hadi, 1929a, p. 219).

In fact, al-Hadi’s amicable attitude extended beyond his regard for Clifford; he also commended the British administration as a whole, describing them as “clever and knowledgeable about administrative rules, regulations for peace and in making the world prosperous” (al-Hadi in Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 1994: 159). His conciliatory expression of the British is further exemplified when he asserted (al-Hadi, 1929b, p. 199):

*Masa kita ini... banyak sangat firaun yang sombong akan kebesarannya dan tertipu daya dengan kemegahan pangkat darjatnya. Jikalau tidak adalah tangan kerajaan British menepuk kepala sekalian firaun-firaun itu, nescaya sentiasalah kita melihat nyawa orang-orang yang (menegur itu) berterbangan.*

[In our time... there are many pharaohs who are arrogant about their greatness and deceived by the splendour of their rank. If it were not for the British government's hand patting the heads of all those pharaohs, we would always see the lives of those who (reprimand) fly away].

Here, the British are described as saviours from immoral local rulers, whom al-Hadi refers to as “arrogant pharaohs.” In a later work, he similarly described the British as saviours, but this time from the corrupt *ulama* (religious leaders). Critical of the slanders and misguidance spread by these unscrupulous *ulama*, al-Hadi praised the British (al-Hadi, 1930, p. 143):

*...bangsa yang sedar akan kebesaran bahaya yang diberi kepada ketua-ketua ugama... (lalu) meruntuhkan kekuasaan ketua-ketua ugama itu serta mengikat akan kekuasaan rajanya di dalam perkara-perkara yang am.*

[...the only nation that is aware of the great danger posed to religious leaders... (then) undermines the power of those religious leaders and binds the power of its king in general matters].

Beyond that, as the owner and editor of al-Ikhwan, al-Hadi's inclusion of articles advocating for a conciliatory attitude towards the British further reinforced his own stance. Among others, Za'ba highlighted that life under the local rulers before the British's arrival, was unimaginably worse. As he explained (Zainal Abidin Ahmad, 1927, p. 151):

*Tiada syak lagi bahawa keadaan kehidupan Melayu pada zaman kerajaan raja-rajanya terdahulu daripada kedatangan British ini sangatlah dipenuhi oleh kesempitan, azab sengsara dan kebuasan yang tiada terderitakan... Beratus-ratus tahun lamanya mereka telah kena diperabdikan dan kena picit dan perah dan ramas di tangan pemerintah-pemerintahnya yang pada zaman dahulu itu - iaitu pemerintah-pemerintah daripada bangsa mereka sendiri.*

[There is no doubt that the living conditions of the Malays during the reign of their kings prior to the arrival of the British were filled with hardship, suffering and unimaginable cruelty... For hundreds of years they had to be enslaved and squeezed and crushed and trampled upon at the hands of their rulers in those days—rulers from their own race.]

In the above excerpt, Za'ba describes life before British rule as full of torment (*azab*) and unrelenting suffering as the locals became slaves of exploitative local rulers. Once again, the British are depicted as saviours from the oppressive local rulers whom Za'ba describes as *buas* (savage), likening them to immoral and heartless creatures who were indifferent to the suffering of the masses. Reinforcing his stance, he further wrote that if it were not for the British, the locals would have been wiped out once and for all due to the cruelty and power of their savage and wild lords (Zainal Abidin Ahmad, 1927, p. 152):

*...kelak (akan) hapus sekali tersapu wujudnya daripada hitungan jadi satu kaum di antara kaum-kaum manusia di muka bumi ini dengan sebab kezaliman dan kekuasaan tuan-tuan penghulunya yang buas dan liar itu.*

[...later (would have been) wiped out once and for all from the count to become people among the human on this earth because of the cruelty and power of the savage and wild lords].

In this regard, al-Hadi's decision to include Za'ba's critical work, which features a strong amicable attitude towards the colonisers, is likely indicative of his own conciliatory attitude.

As such, it becomes unsurprising that beyond describing the colonisers favourably, al-Hadi asserted that it would only be a rightful response for the locals to express immense gratitude towards the British for saving them from oppressive local rulers. In his words (al-Hadi in Talib Samat, 1992, p. 125):

*Hanyalah yang patut bagi kamu pada masa ini mengucapkan terima kasih kepada Kerajaan Inggeris yang maha besar itu sebab dengan kerananyalah terlepas kamu daripada perhambaan sekalian pembesar-pembesar kamu serta mendapat kamu kebebasan di bawah undang-undang yang tidak sekali-kali menjadi sekatan atau larangan di antara kamu dengan perjalanan kemajuan bagi kehidupan perhimpunan kamu yang sempurna.*

[It is only fit for you at this time to express your gratitude to the great British Government because it is through it that you have been freed from the slavery of all your rulers and have gained your freedom under laws that have never been a barrier or prohibition between you and the progress of your perfect community life.]

Moreover, al-Hadi exhorted the locals to “improve (them)selves by making (them)selves suitable, qualified and reliable people able to assist the [British] Government in all of its projects which bring benefit to our country and nation” (al-Hadi in Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 1994, p. 159).

Outside the Malay world, al-Hadi commended the treaty between the Saudi and British which, to him, marked an alliance of friendship (*perikatan persahabatan*). Highlighting the benefits for the Muslim world to be in alliance with the British, he wrote (al-Hadi, 1927b, p. 222):

*Bermula kita sekalian rakyat Inggeris sangatlah gembira hati mendengarkan persetujuan dan perikatan persahabatan di antara kedua kerajaan ini (Hijaz dan Inggeris) kerana Mekah (dan) Madinah itu kiblat agama kita dan kerajaan Inggeris raja kita yang telah kita menerima cukup pemeliharaannya itu... tuah kita sebab jika Mekah itu kiblat agama kita, maka Mesir itu kiblat pelajaran agama dan dunia juga. Maka dengan persetujuan dan muafakat (ini),... hilanglah kelak segala bahaya yang ditakuti menjadi bencana ke atas anak-anak yang pergi belajar ke sana.*

[The English people are very happy to hear of the agreement and alliance of friendship between these two kingdoms (Hijaz and England) because Mecca (and) Medina are the *qiblah* of our religion and the English kingdom is our king whose protection we have received... we are lucky because if Mecca is the *qiblah* of our religion, then Egypt is the *qiblah* of religious and worldly learning as well. So with this agreement and consensus, gone are all the dangers that were feared to be disasters for the children who went to study there.

For al-Hadi, this alliance symbolised a guarantee for Egypt's political stability, ensuring the safety of students from the Malay world studying there.

Needless to say, *al-Ikhwan* featured al-Hadi's conciliatory attitude towards the colonisers, marking a distinct shift in his stance when compared with his earlier *al-Imam*. To further prove this stand, Syed Mohamed Alwi—al-Hadi's own grandson whom he raised during his *al-Ikhwan* days—recalled, "Never during the thirteen years I was brought up by him, did he say any bad thing about the British" (al-Hadi, 1999, p. 92). This thus raises the question of how one can comprehend this apparent contradiction in his attitude towards the colonisers.

### Understanding The Shift in al-Hadi's Attitude

While it would be convenient to conclude that a shift in al-Hadi's attitude simply reflects his nature as a "complex" individual, such conclusion does little justice in understanding his thoughts, let alone effectively utilise the tools available in the social sciences for a more nuanced and meaningful study. Instead, this paper argues that the shift in his stance can, and must, be studied by accounting for the differing social and historical contexts in which al-Hadi was writing for each periodical.



On the one hand, al-Hadi's writings in *al-Imam* (1906–1908) were heavily influenced by the backdrop of fierce anti-colonial sentiments surrounding him. This could be attributed to several interconnected factors.

The first and most logical attributing factor is the influence from renowned reformist scholars with whom he had connections during his trips to the Middle East. Abduh, for instance, “insisted that Europeans must be resisted because their lofty principles do not tally with their treatment of their subject people” (Haddad, 2005, p. 35), while his earlier counterpart Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani had “picked up the trend for Islamic revival and solidarity (in the 1880s) as a weapon against British rule” (Keddie, 2005, p. 19). Even more convenient would be to conclude that *al-Imam* was merely a mirror of Abduh and Afghani's magazine *Al-Urwat Al-Wuthqa* in France, which strongly condemned the British colonial rule through its critical and harsh writings (Talib Samat, 2019).

Afghani's anti-colonial stance found its root in the context of rising confrontation with the West in the mid-1800s. From a young age, he personally observed the exploitations and injustices of the colonial rule and was determined to stand up against them (Meriboute, 2009, p. 150). Among others, he witnessed firsthand the open discrimination faced by Muslims in India, particularly in government appointments, religious institutions and education (Bashiri, 2023). He came to believe that the British were actively seeking to undermine Islam and replace it with Christianity (Keddie, 2005, p. 15). It is no surprise, therefore, that “the most consistent theme in Afghani's life is hostility to British rule in Muslim lands” (Keddie, 2005, p. 15). In fact, this strong anti-colonial sentiment was deeply instilled in his disciples, including Abduh.

Abduh, in turn, was aware of the decline of Muslim societies, especially when contrasted with the progress in Europe (Haddad, 2005). Beyond that, he saw the hypocrisy of the colonisers: while they preached on noble principles, their treatment of the locals reflected otherwise (Haddad, 2005). Like Afghani, he called for Muslims to view the colonisers as aggressors who are unfit to govern Muslim societies since “they are different in religion and it is inappropriate to submit to them” (Abduh in Haddad, 2005, p. 35).

These circumstances certainly shaped their attitudes towards the colonisers, influencing al-Hadi in his earlier *al-Imam* days. However, by the time al-Hadi had arrived in Penang and published *al-Ikhwan*, it appears that he may have encountered different realities that shifted his perception; more shall be discussed later.

Second, *al-Imam* had depended greatly on the support of the Riau Sultanate, which included his adoptive father, Raja Ali Kelana, who had, himself, contributed pieces to the periodical (Hafiz Zakariya, 2017; Gordon, 1999). In fact, before and during his time running *al-Imam*, al-Hadi was appointed by Raja Ali Kelana to

manage the latter's Batam Brick Works, a supplier known for their high-quality bricks (Talib Samat, 2019). Raja Ali Kelana was known to be an important figure in the Rushdiah Club, which was formed to express strong resistance against the colonial powers through non-violent means; in fact, al-Hadi himself was a member of this club (Hafiz Zakariya & Wiwin Oktasari, 2017). Further proving Raja Ali's unwavering anti-colonial stance was the fact that he was rejected to become the Sultan of Riau in 1899 due to his strong opposition towards the colonisers (Shaharom TM Sulaiman, 2003).

It is not unlikely that al-Hadi felt indebted to his adoptive father who had significantly contributed not only to his intellectual journey where he met great reformist scholars, but also financially, albeit indirectly, to *al-Imam* through al-Hadi's management of Batam Brick Works. As such, it is argued that al-Hadi's stance in *al-Imam* was heavily influenced by Raja Ali Kelana as well as their involvement in the Rushdiah Club. Snouck Hurgronje even went so far as to argue that al-Imam had become a platform for Raja Ali Kelana to "publish his desires and grievances" (Azyumardi Azra, 1999).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that *al-Imam* was also patroned by the Sultan of Riau himself, which may explain why its articles did not deviate far from the court's ideals (Azyumardi Azra, 1999). In fact, several scholars have suggested that *al-Imam*'s publication "would not be possible without strong financial assistance from Raja Ali Ahmadi, a member of the Sultanate of Riau-Lingga" (Abu Bakar Hamzah, 1991, p. 19). In short, al-Hadi's stance was influenced not only by the strong anti-colonial sentiments that surrounded him through his close ties with the Riau Sultanate, but also by his reliance on their financial support.

On the other hand, one could argue that al-Hadi had greater autonomy when writing in *al-Ikhwan*. By this time, al-Hadi had separated from Raja Ali Kelana who remained in Johore when al-Hadi had left for Penang (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 1994).

Furthermore, *al-Ikhwan* was, for the most part, printed by al-Hadi's own Jelutong Press (Marina Merican, 1960). With his own independent printing press funded by the success of his novel *Faridah Hanom*, al-Hadi no longer relied on others for funding. In short, he was not under any pressure and influence to propagate anti-colonial sentiments.

In fact, prior to the establishment of Jelutong Press in 1927, the first few publications of *al-Ikhwan* were done by the British Malaya Press for several months; a note of gratitude was also published in one of its volumes: "We give our deepest appreciation to the head as well as members of the British Malaya Press for their patience and assistance in accomplishing the publication of *al-Ikwan* magazine nine months ago" ["*Kita sangat-sangat memberi terima kasih kepada ketua dan sekalian*

*ahli-ahli syarikat British Malaya Press atas sabarnya dan pertolongannya pada menyempurnakan keluaran majalah al-Ikhwan sembilan bulan lalu”]* (Muhammad Tamim Abdul Qadir, 1927, p. 186). This suggests that al-Hadi may have credited the British, at least in part, for his ability to continue propagating his reform ideas.

At the same time, however, it would be too far-fetched to conclude that al-Hadi was a fervent supporter of the colonisers. Instead, the author would concur with Alatas’s (2005) argument, that is, it was a matter of choosing the lesser of two evils: the British or the local Malay rulers. Having consistently criticised the local Malay rulers from his early *al-Imam* days, al-Hadi likely believed that independence from the British would only result in a worse outcome. As a rational thinker who valued clear foresight, such a prospect was certainly troubling for him.

Additionally, in stark contrast to the circumstances faced by Afghani and Abduh as aforementioned, al-Hadi may have observed positive developments brought about by the British administration—something he thought the Malay rulers were incapable of. For instance, Malaya’s economy grew rapidly with its total revenue multiplied by more than nine times from 1896 to 1936, alongside the introduction of English education (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 1994). Although the actual benefits of these developments for the local population are debatable, they nonetheless, as suggested by Ibrahim Abu Bakar, could have contributed to al-Hadi’s conciliatory attitude towards the colonisers in this time period.

Given the above discussion, the simplistic conclusion that al-Hadi was either a steadfast supporter or outright opponent, as found in present scholarship, is far from accurate. This reinforces the importance of studying his works in their entirety to detect shifts and nuances in his thinking over time. These shifts must then be interpreted and contextualised by understanding the specific contexts in which he was writing. After all, “the development of society and the development of the individual go hand in hand and condition each other” (Carr, 1986, p. 26). Equally important, this reinforces the fact that it is insufficient to understand al-Hadi’s thoughts by simply categorising him as part of a singular movement (i.e., Islamic reformism) for it risks disregarding his distinct stances.

## CONCLUSION

All in all, this paper has shed light on al-Hadi’s evolving attitude towards the colonisers over the years. On one hand, he displayed a rather hostile attitude towards the colonisers when writing in *al-Imam*. Yet, on the other, he returned nearly two decades later to project an amicable stance in *al-Ikhwan*. This paper thus argues that this shift can be explained by the differing social and historical contexts in which he was writing. Al-Hadi’s evolving position reinforces the necessity to analyse the broader shifting socio-political contexts when attempting to understand the ideas

embedded within the written words of any historical figure. To ignore these shifting contexts is to undermine their intellectual labour in crafting ideas relevant to the needs of their time and society, let alone acknowledge their intellectual agency.

With that, this study of *al-Ikhwān* has indeed shed light on crucial insights into al-Hadi's thoughts. It has presented al-Hadi as a dynamic reformist whose ideas are neither a cheap importation nor blind imitation of prominent reformists elsewhere, but are instead shaped by the unique individual circumstances he navigated. Such should be the mark of an exceptional intellectual—one capable of crafting (and re-crafting) his ideas in response to changing contexts. While constrained by the limited accessibility of *al-Ikhwān*'s publications, this study hopes to spark new interest in examining *al-Ikhwān* as a valuable material for future research on Malay religious thought.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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