LAWRENCE ROSS (U.S.A.)
University of Malaya

DEMI AGAMA, BANGSA, DAN NEGARA (FOR THE SAKE OF RELIGION, RACE, AND NATION): ARTICULATING MALAY-NESS THROUGH SILAT IN MALAYSIA

In June 2011, roughly two weeks before a mass rally by Malaysian opposition parties and NGOs on the streets of Kuala Lumpur, organized by a group called Bersih, calling for “clean and fair elections,” Omardin Mauju – the mahaguru, or “grandmaster” of the country’s largest silat martial arts organization – publically announced that his 50,000 fighters were ready to wage war on behalf of the federal government against those “traitors” he said were “spreading chaos” (Utusan Online, 2011). His words echoed those of Prime Minister, Najib Tun Razak, who in addressing a national silat gathering eight months earlier, called them a “third line of defense” (after the military and police) whom he confidently believed “would be ready to fight against those who wish to challenge our country’s peace, security and sovereignty” (Abd Rahman, 2010). A week later, Ali Rustam, president of the national federation of silat groups (PESAKA), and governor of Malacca State, amplified the threat. Speaking to silat teachers at the Sultan Sulaiman Club in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur – a site of deep historical significance to Malay ethnic nationalists – he warned that if the rally were not cancelled, it could descend into “extreme chaos on the order of May 13, 1969” (Faizatul, Muhd Amirul & Latifah, 2011), a widely understood reference to an infamous episode of racial rioting in the capital and elsewhere.

What is intriguing about these statements is not their martial tone – something that is, understandably, intrinsic to silat – but that they are revealing of the prominence and influence this martial art occupies in national discourses. Provocations such as these also illustrate important, yet under-explored aspects of silat: how it has been as an important component of Malay political struggles and for furthering ideologies within a Malaysian Malay worldview, and how it has employed violence in the pursuit of objectives. This paper is thus a preliminary examination into the sometimes-menacing recent history of silat. It is presented as a timeline showing the involvement of certain ideological groups that have coalesced around silat during the latter-twentieth-century. What is of particular interest is their relationships with notions and discourses intertwined with local Malay “struggles” (perjuangan) – commonly articulated in a trinity of ideals by the oath “demi agama, bangsa, dan negara,” (for the sake of religion, race, and nation). In understanding the contexts that give rise to martial silat, we might better understand its potential to affect Malaysian politics and society.

Ethnicity in Peninsular Malaysia

Long before the arrival of Western colonialism, Malaysia has been populated by multiple ethnic groups, including the Malays, a people defined in particular religious, cultural, and linguistic