



# **The Constitutional Monarch and his Mini Zoo: The Case of Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah**

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## **Special Issue - ANIMAL PRIVACY: Historical and Conceptual Approaches**

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**Abstract**

*Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah, the Sultan of Kedah in Malaysia who reigned between 1959 and 2017, was renowned for his great love for animals. Throughout his reign, he took care of a number of species of exotic and non-exotic animals as his pets in a private—yet semi-public—mini zoo that he built within the garden of his castle. This article explores the discussion of animal captivity ethics in Islamic thought, highlighting the role of the mini zoo within the Malaysian context. Moreover, this study attempts to understand how the privacy of these animals was leveraged by the Sultan to make them function as 'mediators' between him and his human subjects, which in turn explains the concept of privacy on his behalf. With data collected from official government publications, books, online national newspaper articles, and social media postings related to the Sultan and the mini zoo, this article argues that the privacy (or lack thereof) of the non-humans in the Sultan's zoo reflects the Sultan's own sense of privacy as the monarch.*

**Keywords**

*Sultan – privacy – public – mini zoo – pets*

## Introduction

Through the investigation of the case of Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah, the Sultan of Kedah in Malaysia, who reigned between 1959 and 2017, this article will engage with an Islamic perspective of rulership and animal stewardship in order to tease out how the monarch and his animals relate to each other in their attempts at privacy. This analysis will provide new insights into the ethics of animal captivity and privacy according to Islamic precepts, demonstrating how human and non-human privacies are often entangled and negotiated with one another. Utilizing official government publications, books, online national newspaper articles, and social media postings related to the Sultan and the mini zoo, the present text will highlight how monarchy and human/non-human relationships get entangled when visibility becomes a requirement and a form of captivity.

Within Malaysia, due to the complex social, traditional, cultural, and political relations between the Sultan and the citizens, the Sultan was 'trapped' in his position as the ruler whose life had been 'bestowed' with privileges, protocols, and regulations. Known for his love of animals, Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (1927-2017) found ways to utilize the presence of the animals inhabiting his mini zoo to carve out moments of privacy for himself or tailor his public interactions to be more circumscribed and intimate. Considering the relation to non-human privacy, the article will discuss how the Sultan's mini zoo became a space for him to mingle with the public, and thus, to a certain extent, blurred the dichotomy between the private and public spheres while strengthening his position as the constitutional monarch of his country. Could it be said that the Sultan exchanged the animals' privacy for his own? How did his culture understand issues of animal keeping and exhibiting?

The question of what is private and what is public is not easy to answer, especially for a high-status person. The concept of "the king's two bodies," developed by Ernst Kantorowicz, describes the complex position of a monarch regarding what belongs to state matters and what constitutes personal matters.<sup>1</sup> The king's body is divided into "body natural" and "body politic." While the former experienced the effects on the person of the king, the latter represents the king as the embodiment of the state. Such dichotomy between private and public was also acknowledged by political philosophers ranging from the ancient Greek period to the modern era e.g. Socrates (c. 470–399 BC), Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), to name a few, especially when it comes to the question of morality.<sup>2</sup> For example, for Hobbes and Thoreau, individuals in public positions must not mix private morality with the decision-making process in the political sphere, as the latter involves public morality.<sup>3</sup> Such blurring of boundaries between private stances and what can be understood as the 'public good' is seen as unethical, a disservice, and a violation of the agreement or oath taken to serve the public. Even for Machiavelli, a political leader must know how to diffe-

1 Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton University Press, 1957).

2 Rushworth M. Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living* (Harper, 2003), 188.

3 Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*, 188; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Herbert Wallace Schneider (Bobbs-Merrill, 1958).

rentiate between virtue and *virtù*: the former belongs to the public, i.e., the moral-ethical standard to which they should adhere, while the latter is another internal ‘high-level’ standard for the leader to focus on in order to maintain power.<sup>4</sup> As such, a public/private divide seems to be deeply ingrained in the role of the monarch, at least from the perspective of Western philosophy. However, how does this divide translate into actual practices of monarchs of different periods and cultures? Which strategies could be used to ensure the protection of privacy for a ruler? And what is the role played by non-humans in the creation of private boundaries? This article will show that, despite the ideals of royalty with sharp public/private divides, individual regents in different historical and cultural contexts found different ways to negotiate the boundaries between their private and public spheres, including using humans and non-humans as demarcations of the thresholds between private and public spaces, moments, and interactions.

### Sultan Abdul Halim Mu’adzam Shah and his mini zoo

Malaysia’s political system is categorized as a mixture of constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy. Although having both a political and religious function, present-day Sultans exist at a different level of connection with divinity. They are not seen as earthly equivalents of the Prophet Muhammad – not only is the Sultan not a prophet by vocation, but he can also literally not be compared to *the* Prophet, who is by definition incomparable. Moreover, given the drastic changes in societal structure through the ages, present-day Sultans also cannot be regarded as the *Khulafa’ al-Rashidun*, or ‘rightly guided’ caliph (successor of the Prophet), a title which was more applicable to monarchs in the early days of Islam. Therefore, the monarch—or the Sultan—of Malaysia is not an absolute monarch. Altogether, there are nine Sultans in the country, each representing one of the nine states: Selangor, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, Kelantan, Perak, Perlis, Kedah, and Negeri Sembilan. Through a system of internal rotation every five years, each sultan takes a turn to become the *Agong*, the paramount ruler of all the Sultans.<sup>5</sup> The *Agong* is the head of state, and his duties include the headship of Islamic religious affairs and the military, although he is not directly or completely in charge of other political matters.<sup>6</sup>

The Sultan who is the subject of this article is the Sultan of Kedah, namely Al-Sultan Almu’tasimu Billahi Muhibbuddin Tuanku Al-Haj Abdul Halim Mu’adzam Shah ibni Almarhum Sultan Badlishah, also known as Sultan Abdul Halim Mu’adzam Shah (November 28, 1927–September 11, 2017). He is the only Sultan to have become the *Agong* twice (he was the 5<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> *Agong*) in his lifetime. He was the Sultan of Kedah for 59 years and was popular among the people as the Sultan who loved animals. This was evident when he built a mini zoo within his palace, the *Istana Anak Bukit* (Anak Bukit Palace) in Alor Setar, Kedah. As reminisced by one of the commoners:

4 John Lotherington, “Introduction,” in *The Prince* (Race Point Publishing, 2017).

5 Abdul Rashid Moten, “Society, Politics and Islam: An Overview,” in *Government and Politics in Malaysia*, edited by Abdul Rashid Moten (Cengage Learning Asia Pte Ltd, 2013), 12–13.

6 Moten, “Society, Politics and,” 13–15.

My father had a good friendship with the main driver of His Majesty. His [the driver's] house was in the castle's compound. There were certainly many pets in the castle's backyard.<sup>7</sup>

As a matter of fact, his close connection with animals had developed since he was a young boy/prince. As highlighted by another local:

During his primary education at the Titi Gajah School, my late grandfather was one of the Sultan's closest friends. There were four of them, and they always rode their bicycles patrolling around the village surrounding the Anak Bukit Palace. My grandfather said that sometimes the Sultan would come to the school by horse if a car had not been sent. Afterwards, among the four friends, although two went on to hold high positions, only my grandfather preferred to work in the village, working the paddy field he had inherited.<sup>8</sup>

The 2.4-hectare mini zoo consisted of, among other exotic and non-exotic animals, a wreathed hornbill named Johnny and a pair of parrots, which were the Sultan's favourites. Additionally, there were some 100 other species of birds (including peacocks, *cenderawasih* or "birds of paradise," and blue and gold macaws), a white-handed gibbon (*Hylobates lar*) named Melati, monkeys, five dragon fish (*Araipaima gigas*) between 8 and 11 years-old brought from the Amazon river in Brazil, deer, cats (including two Persian cats named Tomoi and Ref who were the Sultan's favourites, and Maine Coon cats), horses, porcupines, crocodiles, sheep, marmosets, ferrets, black and white swans, and rabbits.<sup>9</sup> The mini zoo, therefore, included animals from overseas, demonstrating the international reach of the Sultan.<sup>10</sup> In a way, the inhabitants of the mini zoo reflected the Sultan's connections, becoming at the same time cherished members of his menagerie and representations of his diplomatic range.

7 All translations from Bahasa Melayu to English are the author's own. Man Zailani, "Ayah saya dulu b'kawan baik dgn driver utama tuanku.rumah dia dlm kwsn istana.mmg byk haiwan peliharaan d blkg istana," Facebook, October 18, 2020, [https://m.facebook.com/groups/malaysiakuduludulu/permalink/661202207873388/?comment\\_id=663239324336343](https://m.facebook.com/groups/malaysiakuduludulu/permalink/661202207873388/?comment_id=663239324336343).

8 Gul Hayya, "Arwah atuk dulu kawan baik Sultan masa sekolah rendah Titi Gajah. Dorg 4 sekawan, selalu jugak membonceng basikal ronda kg sekitar Istana Anak bukit. Atuk ckp kdg2 Sultan dtg ke sekolah berkuda kalau tak di hantar dgn kereta. Dlm 4 sekaawan 2org pgg jawatan tinggi lps tu, cuma atuk sj lebih suka kerja kg bendang pusaka," Facebook, October 18, 2020, [https://m.facebook.com/groups/malaysiakuduludulu/permalink/661202207873388/?comment\\_id=662017261125216](https://m.facebook.com/groups/malaysiakuduludulu/permalink/661202207873388/?comment_id=662017261125216).

9 Z. Zulkifli, "Sayangkan Haiwan, Almarhum Bina Zoo Mini," *myMetro*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.hmetro.com.my/mutakhir/2017/09/262742/sayangkan-haiwan-almarhum-bina-zoo-mini>; Abdul Halim Taib, *Tuanku Abdul Halim Mua'dzam Shah: Making a Return* (AHT Minda Karya Enterprise, 2013), 152; Bernama, "Mangkatnya Sultan yang Memerintah Kedah Selama 59 Tahun," *Astro Awani*, September 11, 2017, <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/mangkatnya-sultan-yang-memerintah-kedah-selama-59-tahun-154947>; "Caring for Animals," *The Star*, June 2, 2012, <https://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2012/06/02/Caring-for-animals/>; See also "Almarhum Seorang Pencinta Haiwan," video, 1:33, Youtube, posted by Astro Awani, September 13, 2017, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q13WQtYLBuQ>.

10 Zulkifli, "Sayangkan Haiwan."

The Sultan's routine was to spend between thirty minutes and two hours at the mini zoo in the morning before he left for his office (between 8:30 am and 10:30 am) and an hour or two in the evening when he returned from office (after 4:30 pm) or whenever he wanted to have a break from his daily routines as a Sultan. On such occasions, he filled his time with activities such as feeding the animals and walking around the mini zoo with Melati, the pet gibbon whom he had kept since it was six months old.<sup>11</sup>

The Sultan aimed for the mini zoo to be relatively accessible to the public. Although the space was open for a period without the need for an appointment, this policy changed in the later period of his reign. Visitors included people from surrounding areas as well as school students who came, by appointments, to see the animals and to meet the Sultan in person. As recalled by Mahfuz Omar, one of the Members of Parliament for Pokok Sena, a federal constituency within the state of Kedah:

Long live the King! This place [the mini zoo] is beautiful. In the old days, when I was a small child, there were specific days when this place was opened to the public to visit and to take pictures. [We] bought Pak Awang's *rojak* [a Malaysian fruit-snack] and ate it while walking around the palace. At this old age, I feel like going there [again], but now you can't. In any case, I believe many of the people of Kedah have sweet memories of the Anak Bukit Palace. May Allah bless Our Highness and the royal family.<sup>12</sup>

In 2008, some of the birds in the zoo were stolen by commoners.<sup>13</sup> This might have been the reason behind the Sultan's decision to open the mini zoo only to school and university students, thus limiting the range of commoners allowed to enter the zoo. The Sultan's decision meant that people who belonged to other social groups could no longer enjoy the privilege of visiting the zoo and observing its inhabitants.

Unlike contemporary Western zoos, the Sultan's mini zoo was personally curated, with the animal inhabitants being perceived more as the Sultan's pets than as representative specimens of their species for public observation. Existing between this private relationship and the public function that both the mini zoo and the Sultan himself had to perform, this space becomes fertile ground to examine how human/non-human entanglements impact rulership, privacy, and the negotiation of boundaries in the particular context of an Islamic state. Understanding how Islamic ideals impacted how the Sultan could

11 Abdul Halim Taib, *Tuanku Abdul Halim*, 70–71, 152; Zulkifli, "Sayangkan Haiwan," "Caring for Animals," *The Star*; "Ungka tangan putih kurniaan Sultan Kedah ditempatkan di THLL: Melati tarikan baharu Langkawi," *Kosmo*, April 19, 2019, <https://www.ketsa.gov.my/PustakaMedia/Keratan%20Akhbar/Melati%20tarikan%20baharu%20Langkawi.pdf>.

12 Dato' Mahfuz Bin Omar, "Daulat Tuanku. cantik tempat ni. dulu2 masa Patik kecik2 tempat ni ada hari dibuka utk org ramai p melawat dan ambik gambaq. beli rojak Pak awang p mkn sambik berjalan kelilin kawasan istana. mai tua2 ni teghingin nk p. tapi tak boleh dah. apa pun Patik percaya ramai rakyat kedah ada kenangan manis di istana anak bukit. Moga Allah merahmati Tuanku dan keluarga DiRaja," Facebook, February 14, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/1894184137272876/posts/14-februari-2021-alor-setar-kebawah-dymm-tuanku-sultan-kedah-dan-kebawah-dymm-tu/4090696164288318/>.

13 "2 Ditahan Curi Burung Sultan," *Berita Harian*, February 29, 2008, <https://www.klik.com.my/item/story/4246126/2-ditahan-curi-burung-zoo-sultan>.

engage with both his human and non-human subjects is crucial for the present analysis: What are the views of the *ulama'* (Islamic scholars/theologians) on owning exotic animals that are expensive not only to acquire but also to feed and take care of? What about the privacy of the animals that were being kept in cages as pets? Would not such confinement be contrary to their nature as free-living creatures? In the following section, this article will analyze the Islamic teachings regarding the care and keeping of animals, and the impact these views can have on how privacy between different species can be negotiated.

### **The Islamic view of privacy, consent, and security**

Islamic law and theology were concerned with the welfare of animals since their formative years.<sup>14</sup> The *ulama'* have deduced that it is not wrong to keep animals as pets, particularly those animals that are beneficial to human beings (such as birds whose songs can have therapeutic effects). However, Islam also prescribes that human beings, especially Muslims, must not torture or adversely impact in any way the life of animals,<sup>15</sup> since in the hereafter, during Judgment Day, the tortured animals will be resurrected and will give their statements in front of Allah, and consequently those Muslims who oppressed them will be consigned to hellfire. Their rights to live freely according to their nature must be respected and protected. By letting animals live in their natural habitat, humans protect them, i.e. to be able to continue to survive without the threat of extinction. As such, is it in line with Islamic precepts for the Sultan to keep pets in his mini zoo?

The key to answering this question is to examine the issue of captivity. Did the animals feel stuck or uncomfortable living in those cages? Even though we might not have the ability to understand their language, we can try to sense their feelings by looking at their responses, behaviour, and health conditions. If the health of these animals began to deteriorate—if, for instance, their bodies became skinny, their appetite decreased, they were continuously afraid or acted defensively each time they saw the presence of humans—we may then want to consider placing them in more suitable and proper settings. In the case of the Sultan's mini zoo, according to its keepers, all the animals were extensively cared for by the Sultan—good and quality foodstuffs were provided, the animals were maintained in proper enclosures and aquariums, and their health was taken care of. Therefore, one might say that the animals, despite being captive in the confines of the zoo, were not being tortured, and as such, abide by the Islamic prescriptions. While the ethics of keeping wild animals captive in the context of zoos have been widely debated, there are multiple cultural and ecological factors to be considered when addressing if, when, and how their privacy is violated in this context, and to what extent the protection of other animal needs must be taken into account in contrast to their need for privacy.<sup>16</sup> Simply releasing the animals of the mini zoo back into their wild environments would not

14 Kristen Stilt, "Animals," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Law*, eds. Anver M. Emon and Rumea Ahmed (Oxford University Press, 2018) 861–884.

15 See Richard C. Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures* (Oneworld Publication, 2014); Basheer Ahmad Masri, *Animals in Islam* (The Athene Trust, 1989).

16 See Andrea Ringer, "Baby Watch: Capitalism, Technology, and the History of Maternal Privacy and Livestreamed Surveillance in Captive Animal Spaces," *Privacy Studies Journal* Special Issue: Animal Privacy (2026), and Michelle Szydlowski et al., "The Ethics of Privacy and Consent in Anthrozoo-

necessarily be ethical, as having their needs attended to as pets would have severely impacted their ability to survive in the wild.

As mentioned, according to the *ulama'*, Islam permits the keeping of animals as pets as long as they are not hurt by human agents. However, the concept of "hurt" is itself contested. One Islamic position contends that animals have a lesser reasoning capacity (known as *'aql* in Islam) than human beings. Thus, from this point of view, it is acceptable if animals such as birds are caged because they do not have the same level of thinking as humans and, therefore, do not interpret their caging as oppression. Similarly, animal privacy and its violation would operate at a different level than human privacy – without the same level of reasoning, privacy becomes a lesser concern than the more direct necessities for wellbeing, such as the absence of unnecessary pain, hunger, or lack of access to suitable space.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that for Muslims, this is not an open-and-shut case. In Islam, there are numerous occasions in which both the Qur'an and the *hadith* observe that animals actually do possess a certain capacity for reasoning that enables them to understand and think like human beings. An example of this is the story of the Prophet Sulayman (Solomon) and the ant leader. This story narrates that when Sulayman was travelling with his armies on horseback, the leader of a group of ants began to give orders to the other ants, asking them to be careful since the armies might not be aware of the existence of the ants and might thus accidentally stomp on them. However, this conversation was heard by the Prophet, who ordered His men to be careful while riding through the territory of the ants and to ensure that they were not trampled on. As recorded in the Qur'an (27:18–19):

At length, when they came to a (lowly) valley of ants, one of the ants said: 'O ye ants, get into your habitations, lest Solomon and his hosts crush you (under foot) without knowing it.' So he smiled, amused at her speech; and he said: 'O my Lord! so order me that I may be grateful for Thy favours, which thou hast bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may work the righteousness that will please Thee: And admit me, by Thy Grace, to the ranks of Thy righteous Servants.'

Thus, we can see that according to Islam, ants are invested with the capacity to think rationally—a fact inscribed in the Qur'an itself. There is another story about Sulayman and the hoopoe that further confirms the status of animals as rational beings. During the regular assembly of his armies (which included animals, humans, and also djinns), Sulayman realised that the hoopoe was missing from the line of birds. Enquiring about the whereabouts of the bird, Sulayman promises to punish the bird unless it explains its absence. Upon its return, the bird says (Qur'an, 27:20–28):

'I have obtained knowledge of things of which you have no knowledge. I have brought sure information about Saba. There I have seen

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logical Investigations," *Privacy Studies Journal* Special Issue: Animal Privacy (2026). An error in this reference has been corrected since the publication of this article.

a woman ruling over her people: she has been given all sorts of provisions, and she has a splendid throne. I saw that she and her people prostrate themselves before the sun, instead of Allah!' Prophet Solomon said, 'We shall just now see whether what you say is true, or that you are a liar. Take this letter of mine and cast it before them; then get aside and see what reaction they show.'

Hence, again we see that in the Qur'an animals do have the ability to talk and, therefore, converse properly, just like human beings. Given the Qur'an's inclusion of stories where animals are shown to be thinking, rational subjects, how can we say that animals do not have feelings and are thus suited to be caged for human beings to benefit from them? As the stories about Sulayman illustrate, it is the human beings who are ignorant rather than the animals. Human beings are inherently fallible, and by failing to understand that animals can think and feel just like them, they fail to live up to the standards prescribed by the Prophet.

Based on this perspective, it is not moral to keep animals in cages since it is not in their nature or *fitrah* to live in confinement. In addition to rationality, Islam also stresses the importance of maintaining the *fitrah* of every creature created by Allah. For instance, the *fitrah* of human beings is to get married, eat, drink, sleep, clip their nails, take baths, shave the pubic hair, and so on. Only by following such *fitrah* can we live a happy and comfortable life. The same injunction should be applied to animals—they, too, must be allowed to live their lives according to their nature. Impeding animals from enjoying their natural state is seen not only as an abomination but also as oppression in Islam. At the same time, according to the examples in the Qur'an, it is part of their natural state that the animals negotiate their boundaries with humans and with each other. To be in accordance with this Islamic principle, the Sultan put significant effort into providing the animals with an adequate environment, creating the space for this negotiation by observing the inhabitants of the mini zoo on a daily basis, noticing their preferences, feeding patterns, and whether any of the needs required for their well-being were failing to be met. The Sultan and the animals had to create certain bonds that showed mutual respect for their needs. For example, the Sultan was described as extremely gentle when feeding the animals. One of the caretakers, Nur Shafaizal Zahari, recalled how he was reprimanded by the Sultan for not feeding the animals properly and/or gently. The Sultan then taught him the correct way to feed the animals, adding that the fish should only be fed by the palm of one's hand and not simply by throwing the breadcrumbs into the pond.<sup>17</sup> As we will see, both the Sultan and his animals had traded their privacy, less by choice than by a requirement of their position. Although the level of agency in these negotiations cannot be considered equal between the Sultan and his pets, their situations mirror one another. In the power imbalance of their relationship, the Sultan also had the opportunity to leverage the lack of privacy of the mini zoo inhabitants for his own ability to engage in private with selected commoners.

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17 "Caring for Animals."

## The challenge of being a constitutional monarch

The Kedah Sultanate is arguably the earliest and longest-running sultanate still in existence, having operated in the Malay Archipelago since the period of the Kedah Tua (Old Kedah) in the second century.<sup>18</sup> It is also argued that the Kedah Sultanate is the only one in *Tanah Melayu* ("Malay Land," predominantly located in the Peninsular Malaysia) with an 'original' Sultan as the other sultanates had either been switched with other bloodlines, such as with those of the aristocrats (in the materialist sense) and traditional ministers through the support of the former British colonial power, or with the Orang Laut (Sea People) or foreigners and non-Malay commoners, who joined the bloodlines via matrimony.<sup>19</sup>

Due to the current system of constitutional monarchy, reigning Sultans cannot have direct political influence over the people. In order to avoid diminishing their political influence and relevance in the eyes of the citizens,<sup>20</sup> these Sultans have chosen a number of indirect ways to maintain such monarchic elements, especially to win the consent and support of the population. These strategies include, among other things, engagement in sports and other hobbies. For example, the organization of football, hockey, and polo tournaments is one of the primary responsibilities of the Sultans. This is especially true in the case of football, the most popular sport in the country. The Sultans, especially the young princes, usually go on to become the head of their respective state's football association. By doing so, these young princes can demonstrate their ability to govern through running these popular organizations, which are always closely watched by the people. When the football associations manage to secure a win for their states' football teams in important competitions, the young princes are viewed as capable leaders and thus gain loyalty, love, and strong support from the people.

18 Tunku Sofiah Jewa, *The Return: An Authorised Biographical Rendition of the Life, Times and Thoughts of His Majesty Al Sultan Almu'tasimu Billahi Muhibbuddin Tuanku Alhaj Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah ibni Almarhum Sultan Badlishah the Fifth and Fourteenth King of Malaysia* (Arkib Negara Malaysia, 2012), 21.

19 A. Murad Merican, "Kedah, an Unbroken Malay Kingship," *New Straits Times*, June 12, 2014, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2015/09/kedah-unbroken-malay-kingship>; "The Origin of the Malay Sultanate," *The Star*, July 20, 2024, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/07/20/the-origins-of-the-malay-sultanate>. See also Richard O. Winstedt, "History of Kedah," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 81, (1920); and Richard O. Winstedt, "Notes on the History of Kedah," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 14, no. 3, (1936): 187; Muhammad Izuan Abdul Rahman and Mahani Musa, "Penguatan Kedaulatan Dinasti Temenggung dalam Kesultanan Melayu Johor 1855 – 1895," *Sejarah: Journal of History Department, University of Malaya* 29, no. 1, (2020): 3; Akiko Sugiyama, "Women and Maritime Piracy in Premodern Island Southeast Asia," *Sejarah: Journal of History Department, University of Malaya* 30, no. 2, (2021): 5–6; William A. Linehan, "A History of Pahang," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2, no. 125, (1936): 60; Crystal Tai, "Why are Malaysian Princes in Love with Foreign Brides?," *South China Morning Post*, April 19, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/3006779/why-are-malaysian-princes-love-foreign-brides>; Azlina Othman, "Darah Campuran Tidak Luntur Identiti Melayu: Permaisuri Johor," *Sinar Harian*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/44014/edisi/johor/darah-campuran-tidak-luntur-identiti-melayu-permaisuri-johor>.

20 Marie-Sybille de Vienne, "Malay Kingship in Contemporary Malaysia: From Cultural Legitimacy to Social Proficiency," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Political Norms in Southeast Asia*, eds. G. Facal et al. (Palgrave, 2024), 425.

However, Sultan Abdul Halim did not choose sports as the main means to gain popularity. Instead, he chose to keep animals as pets. There were other Sultans who used animals as their symbols. The Sultan of Johor (who later in 2024 became the 17<sup>th</sup> *Agong*) had tigers as their popular pets, perhaps to reflect the official “state animal”—that is, the Southern Malaysian tiger—and to represent the symbol of strength and bravery. The Sultan of Kelantan (who was the 15<sup>th</sup> *Agong*) kept lions. However, no other Sultan kept as many species as Sultan Abdul Halim,<sup>21</sup> whose interest in animals became another way of showing his loving and caring qualities. In turn, he was able to guarantee the love and affection of his people to an extent which was perhaps even stronger than what had been kindled by his sponsorship of sports teams. The mini zoo and his love for animals was often brought up in relation to Sultan Abdul Halim, even when the conversation subject was different altogether:

The late Kedah’s Sultan, Sultan Abdul Halim Mu’adzam Shah Ibni Almarhum Sultan Badlishah was really admired in the photography world during his lifetime. This is the memorial picture of the Majesty together with the Kedah Photography Club’s members. There are many interesting pictures being showcased for the Kedahans and Malaysians to see at the Kedah Royal Gallery. When Abg Slen [I] was a kid, I was always brought by my late father to visit the mini zoo that belonged to the Kedah’s Sultan in the Anak Bukit’s Castle because His Majesty really loved animals. Prayers to the late Tuanku dan Tuanku Sultanah Bahiyah.<sup>22</sup>

Because he kept these pets, people viewed him as a noble and caring sultan. In the eyes of the people, a Sultan who cared about animals was definitely a virtuous monarch.<sup>23</sup> This unique approach, on the one hand, just like sports, can be viewed as a means to maintain his influence over the people and their support, as we will see in more detail below. The animals were fed and treated well by the Sultan, who characterized himself as a carer who loved his pets, improving his public image. Furthermore, the shared love of animals by both monarch and commoners had allowed the Sultan to use pets as a means to be closer to his subjects, thereby permitting him to override the royal protocols that had placed restrictions on his privacy. For a thorough appraisal of how this human/non-human relationship impacted both of their privacies, it is necessary to look at the Sultan’s keeping of the zoo from the angle of monarchical privacy. The analysis that follows will switch between a view from different cages, be they literal (as the enclosures for the non-

21 Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Iskandar. “Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Iskandar with his pet tiger,” Facebook, July 31, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/share/866nD32qTtqJUjIn/?mibextid=oEMz7o>; Bernama, “Sultan Kelantan bela 3 ekor singa,” FMT, April 11, 2017, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/bahasa/2017/04/11/sultan-kelantan-bela-3-ekor-singa/>.

22 Slen Fadzil Kedah, “Almarhum Sultan Kedah, Sultan Abdul Halim Mu’adzam Shah Ibni Almarhum Sultan Badlishah ketika hayat dulu sangat meminati dunia fotografi. Ini gambar kenangan Tuanku bersama ahli Kelab Fotografi Kedah. Banyak gambar2 menarik ada dipamerkan untuk tatapan rakyat Kedah & Malaysia di Galeri Diraja Kedah. Ketika Abg Slen masih kecil dulu, Abg selalu dibawa arwah bapak melawat mini zoo milik Sultan Kedah di Istana Anak Bukit kerana Tuanku sangat sayangkan haiwan. Al-Fatihah untuk Almarhum Tuanku dan Tuanku Sultanah Bahiyah,” Facebook, October 18, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2636870373241542&set=gm.661202207873388>.

23 Zulkifli, “Sayangkan Haiwan.”

humans) or social (the protocols of the Sultan), aiming to understand what privacy could have meant for both humans and non-humans in the context of the Sultan's mini zoo.

### **Pets as a means to maintain and deepen influence**

The first view on this relationship between the Sultan, the pets, and the question of privacy concerns the possibility of the Sultan leveraging these animals to gain public support, which is essential for maintaining power. As mentioned, as constitutional monarchs, Sultans must expend effort to make their royal institution appear relevant and necessary in the eyes of the public. This is important for the survival of these traditional institutions, not only within the current era of globalized liberal capitalism, but also given the multi-ethnic and multireligious context of the country. Therefore, unlike the other Sultans who preferred sports, Sultan Abdul Halim may have preferred these animals, kept in his mini zoo in his private palace, as a means of launching the sort of 'soft power' required to gain the people's support.

The move proved to be effective, as many Malaysians across the country, especially amongst the Kedahans (the people of Kedah), came to the mini zoo to watch the animals as well as to meet the Sultan himself, if they were lucky. The mini zoo popularized the Sultan as a loving steward who took great care of animals. If he could be so kind even to animals, how much kinder he could possibly be to the people! This view was also popularized by the zoo staff. Even the Sultan's emotions were publicized. For instance, it was reported by Zahari Ibrahim, one of the mini zoo's caretakers, that the Sultan himself was deeply saddened when two of his five dragon fish died.<sup>24</sup> Zahari also highlighted that the Sultan had personally brought home an injured bird he had found by the roadside to be treated at his mini zoo.<sup>25</sup> The care that the Sultan gave to his animals was highlighted in the press, with first-hand accounts from his staff, in order to validate his position as a caring and competent ruler. This publicization of his relationship with the animals, however, was also framed as a view of how the Sultan behaved in private. In this case, his personal habits and emotions were used to frame his role as a statesman – the private becoming the lens with which the public could assess the Sultan's competence as a monarch, and the animals becoming a proxy for the care he would take of all of his subjects. This perspective can be read with a certain cynicism – as if the Sultan's care for animals was a simple ploy to garner popular support. As we will see below, however, the Sultan was very much concerned with caring for his animals in ways that actually aimed to create boundaries and extend his private sphere.

In what follows, we will see that it was not easy to handle the boundaries between what is private and what is public, especially in a small place like the mini zoo—similar to other historical cases of privacy in confined spaces.<sup>26</sup> The human constraints imposed on

24 Zulkiffli, "Sayangkan Haiwan."

25 "Caring for Animals."

26 Amélia Polónia and Rosa Capelão, "Women and Children on Board—The Case of the *Carreira Da India* in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Privacy at Sea: Practices, Spaces, and Communication in Maritime History*, ed. Natacha Klein Käfer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

the monarch brought him closer to his pets as both he and the animals had to define the thresholds of their privacy within the controlled space of the mini zoo. Their interactions with each other and with the public created forms of approximation and distancing, and tacit rules of how humans and non-humans could engage with one another.

### The paradox of privacy

The view that the Sultan was deliberately leveraging the mini zoo (and, by extension, the privacy of the animals) as a means to maintain his political influence can justifiably attract criticism about the infringement of the rights of animals and their privacy. Moreover, it can raise questions about the Sultan's private morality, especially regarding animal rights, which by extent could skew the view on his rulership. How could we confirm that these animals were happy to live in such confined and compressed places? For this discussion of animal tutelage and the role of privacy for animals kept as pets, we also need to take into account the particular religio-cultural circumstances of the Sultan's mini zoo. In Malaysia, a *fatwa* (Islamic ruling) has been issued by one of the country's *fatwa* councils stipulating that animals are allowed to be kept as pets as long as the animals are well cared for by their owners.<sup>27</sup> Given his position as the head of state as well as the religious head of Islam in the country, the Sultan's act of keeping animals as pets was thus considered legitimate in the eyes of his Malay Muslim subjects, who constitute the majority of the country's population. This further justified his action and solidified his status as the noble pet-loving Sultan who was compassionate and kind towards his subjects, be they human or non-human beings. However, organisms, both human and non-human, are all naturally born into this world to live freely, and not in cages. It is possible that these animals were not comfortable being the objects of such visual tourism.<sup>28</sup> Imagine that every day they had to live by the feeling of being watched, just like in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, as described by Michel Foucault.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, here we find a striking parallel between the challenges that the Sultan himself was facing.

The Sultan had to constantly adjust to a power structure that adversely limited his privacy as an individual and as a monarch. Existential circumstances 'trapped' monarchs within their social, cultural, and political position, and this is shown when we study the dimension of their privacy.<sup>30</sup> According to Malay tradition, the Sultan would have to *mencemar duli*—a colloquial expression for 'getting one's foot dirty'—whenever he wanted to join a public event or simply when he wanted to be within the public sphere. In other

27 Umar Mukhtar Mohd Noor, "Al-Kafi #668: Hukum Pelihara Burung di dalam Sangkar yang Kecil," *Pejabat Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan*, January 10, 2018, <https://muftiwp.gov.my/ms/artikel/al-kafi-li-al-fatawi/2190-al-kafi-668-hukum-memelihara-burung-peliharaan-dalam-sangkar-yang-kecil?templateStyle=17>. For example, birds can benefit us through their sound which will cheer and gives us serenity.

28 Brett Mills, "Television Wildlife Documentaries and Animals' Right to Privacy." *Continuum: A Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2, (2010): 195. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304310903362726>.

29 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, 1995), 205; Mills, "Television Wildlife Documentaries," 196.

30 Dustin M. Neighbors, Lars Cyril Nørgaard, and Elena Woodacre, eds., *Notions of Privacy at Early Modern European Courts: Reassessing the Public and Private Divide, 1400-1800* (Amsterdam University Press, 2024).

words, the Sultan was willing to get his feet dirty by virtue of being amongst the commoners. It is worth mentioning that *menjunjung duli*—to ‘uphold the foot’ (of the sultan)—is the official response whenever a subject receives the Sultan’s order. Therefore, it was difficult for the Sultan to act like a commoner, as every public place he wanted to visit would be considered a place where he was officially willing to breach his ‘private-sacred’ sphere. He could not act like the commoners.<sup>31</sup> He could not openly mingle with the people within the public sphere without being escorted by his bodyguards or policemen. Throughout his lifetime, he had to be mindful of the official protocols that surrounded his position as Sultan.

Therefore, to have a lesser constraint in terms of the official protocols (and thus the opportunity to at least act more like other people), he turned to—and benefited from—the mini zoo as an effective venue for him to transform his private space into a public space and vice-versa whenever he wanted to. The mini zoo, thus, was some sort of ‘chameleon’ space for the Sultan. There, in Derridean terms, he managed to deconstruct and, to a certain extent, neutralize the private-public binary that he had to abide by outside the zoo. By mingling with the public present at the zoo, he could experience a controlled environment that allowed him to enjoy and live in the moment outside of his role as ruler, closer to the commoners.<sup>32</sup> Hence, the mini zoo was an effective intermediary between the Sultan’s private sphere and the public, which, to a certain extent, allowed for the circumvention of official protocol.

In a way, the social cage imposed on the Sultan mirrored the animal enclosures of the mini zoo. The strategies for privacy within these constraints depended on careful human and non-human interactions. Through a shared love for and curiosity about animals, the Sultan could create common ground with the commoners within the circumscribed space of the mini zoo. At the same time, the Sultan created a bond with the non-humans kept there, as both the Sultan and the animals were limited by imposed constraints—social limitations of the title, for the Sultan, or captivity in the private zoo, for his pets—both finding a ways to negotiate boundaries within the curated environment that provided ways of approximating or distancing across species.

However, these negotiations of boundaries were not made equally. While the Sultan was extending his own private sphere, the privacy of the caged animals either remained the same or shrank as the visitors began to view them for the sake of entertainment or for educational purposes. Being in a private zoo, the animals therein were exposed to more interactions with humans than in institutions that aim to keep wild behaviours in the zoo inhabitants. The animals even had their own official caretakers, with four people dedicated to attending to them.<sup>33</sup> Even though they had to live in cages, the Sultan aimed to ensure that their needs were met and that they were able to have the most comfortable life possible for their circumstances. In those curated environments, they developed their own preferences for how they would like to interact with humans, how they prefer to be fed, and the times they prefer to engage or disengage. The non-human inhabitants of the

31 See Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*.

32 Barry Stocker, *Derrida on Deconstruction*, (Routledge, 2006), 188–89.

33 Zulkifli, “Sayangkan Haiwan.”

mini zoo exist, then, in a unique interspecies relationship compared to members of their species in the wild, or even in other forms of zoos. When considered as wild animals, the circumstances of their privacy are completely different. When considered as pets, the human/non-human relationships and their access to privacy change in this cultural context of required visibility.

## Conclusion

On the one hand, after considering the aforementioned arguments, we cannot simply say that keeping animals in confinement is permissible, especially from the Islamic perspective, even if they are being taken care of properly. On the other hand, the question of the privacy of these animals—which is closely related to the question of their nature or *fitrah*—must not be dismissed. Moreover, as exemplified by the Qur'an's stories about Prophet Sulayman, animals are able to engage in discussions not only with human beings but also with their fellow animals. This indicates that they also have the capacity to think (*aql*) and possess feelings that must not be sidelined by our human gaze. In light of these considerations, the verdict allowing the caging of animals as given by the *ulama'* may need to be revised. On the other hand, it is also clear that we need a deeper understanding of the social, political, and cultural contexts in which humans function when we make judgements about them. In the case of Sultan Abdul Halim, his entrapment within the structures of permuted Islamic society, conservative politics, and Malaysian cultural traditions help us understand his interactions with both humans and non-humans. As I have argued, the Sultan used the mini zoo as a transformative place where he could convert his privacy as a Sultan into a form of privacy that could be shared with the people, thereby allowing him a measure of autonomy and freedom. By looking at the question of privacy, we may gain an insight into the dilemma faced by the Sultan throughout his lifetime and in his relationship with the non-human that shared a significant part of his life. Notwithstanding, his creativity in leveraging the mini zoo as a flexible space for him to deconstruct the dilemma and maintain his influence over the people is noteworthy. This article reveals the complex human and non-human interactions as they leverage their relationship by compromising their respective privacies between one another within complex political and cultural settings, such as in the Sultan's mini zoo.

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