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From **Malayan Union**  
to **Singapore Separation**

Political Unification in the Malaysia Region 1945–1965

SECOND EDITION



S E R I E S   I N   M A L A Y S I A N   H I S T O R Y

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## A CONFLICT APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF POLITICAL UNIFICATION

It has been said that those who yearn for the quiet life had no right to born on the twentieth century. Even in a world which has been hurled from change to change, the political transformation which have altered the face of Southeast Asia, especially after the end of the second war world, can only be described as extraordinary. In far as post-war territorial integration is concerned, two areas in Southeast Asia have experienced the greatest changes. One is Indochina. The other is the Malaysia region, that part of what was once the British realm made up of the territories of Brunei, Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Penang, Perlis, Sabah, Sarawak, Selangor, Singapore and Terengganu.

Before the Second World War, there had been ten separate governmental systems in this region; by mid-1946, there were five. In 1963 there were two; two years later, there were three. In the twenty-year period after the war, their new politically unified system was formed; two were destroyed. Numerous unsuccessful attempts were made to unify further: and numerous unsuccessful attempts were made to destroy what had already been established.

The post-war trend towards bigger and fewer separate polities was, of course, part of the century-old movement towards greater political unity in the region. For most of that period, it was the imperial power which was the most fervent advocate of unification.

In relation to the territories of the region, Britain did not attempt to divided and rule, but rather to unite and administer. The extension of British rule or "protection" to the various territories of the region was invariably followed, not necessarily immediately, but sooner or later, by attempts to amalgamate them into a larger whole. Thus in 1824, Britain unified the territories already under her rule (Penang, Singapore and Malacca) into the Straits Settlements. In 1896, she set up the Federated Malay States consisting of Perak, Pahang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, states which had come under her control between 1874 and 1895. Having brought all the political entities

in the Malaysia region under British rule or protection by the time of the First World War, the British High Commissioner in the Malaysia region attempted in the inter-war years to bring all these territories, particularly those in the Malay Peninsular, into one centralized political entity. The movement failed in the face of state parochialism, the intransigent opposition of Malay Rulers, and the rivalry between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore bureaucrats.

It was only after the Second World War that the British made progress in the direction of greater political unification. In October 1945, barely one month after the British re-occupation of the Malay Peninsula, a plan to form a "Malayan Union" encompassing the whole of Malaya but excluding Singapore was announced in London. On 1 April 1946, the unitary state was inaugurated – despite public opposition unprecedented in the historical experience of the region. Almost immediately after its legal implementation, however, the British authorities had to negotiate with the Malay Rulers (who had so recently signed away their sovereign status) and the United Malay National Organization (which had been born out of the Malays' struggle against the Malayan Union) on a Federal alternative to the union. The Malayan Union was subsequently dismantled; and a looser federal system called the Federation of Malaya was inaugurated in its place on 1 February 1948.

The Federation of Malaya lived on for a decade and a half despite a major insurrection. Its composition remained unaltered in spite of separatist movement emanating from Penang, Johor and Kelantan, and despite numerous attempts to nullify the "unnatural" separation of Singapore and to bring the island into the Federation.

The Federation of Malaya was only superseded and the "inevitable" merger of Singapore with Malaya brought about (within a broader framework) in 1963, when "Malaysia", (a concept which had existed for a hundred years), was transformed into reality.<sup>1</sup> And less than two years later, on 9 August 1965, the "natural" relationship with Singapore broke when the island was separated from the rest of Malaysia.

### **Aims**

This book seeks to present specific case studies of the major attempts at forming, maintaining and destroying politically-unified systems in the Malaysia region in the twenty year after the second world war. Within a disciplined framework of explanation, an attempt will be made to examine, in each case, the determinants of the resultant success or failure. More specifically, we will examine three cases of successful formation (the successful formation of the Malayan Union, the Federation of Malaya, and Malaysia); three cases of the failure to form a unified system (the non-formation of a United Malaya encompassing the Malayan mainland and Singapore in the period 1946-48, 1948-54, and 1954-61); four cases of successful maintenance