

# Radical reforms under the Malayan Union

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**THE** Malayan Union scheme, which the British drafted in London during World War II, comprised a set of radical reforms that attempted to inculcate a sense of nationhood while at the same time, alter the country's pre-war political structure.

The proposals, outlined in a government White Paper, were presented to the British Parliament in January 1946 following the return to London of the government's special representative, Sir Harold MacMichael, after he had successfully concluded with each Malay ruler an agreement which transferred full jurisdiction to the British Crown.

Firstly, the scheme consolidated into one single entity all the former nine Federated and Unfederated Malay States together with the British Straits Settlements of Malacca and Penang but excluded Singapore, which became a separate colony. The latter was detached because of its strategic importance and its mainly Chinese population, which would upset the population balance.

A British governor would head the Malayan Union who would in turn appoint his own legislative council, and an advisory council of Malay rulers which would decide on matters related to Islam.

Since the British Crown had jurisdiction over the Malay states, the British government or Parliament could legislate for all the states under

the Foreign Jurisdiction Act.  
The scheme would introduce a Malayan Union citizenship to anyone born in the country, who was over the age of 18 and had lived in Malaya for more than ten years.

Only Malayan Union citizens would be admitted to public office or membership of central and local councils. However, this citizenship would not connote "nationality" as the Malayan Union would not yet be an independent or even self-governing state.

To Umno and the Malay rulers, the scheme meant that Britain had abrogated the old treaties with the rulers, under which each ruler would accept British advice on all matters except on Islam and Malay customs. They argued that this meant that the Malay states were now being annexed by Britain. They also opposed equal rights for all races, seeing this as a threat to Malay special privileges.

For the non-Malays, especially the Chinese, *jus soli* citizenship, determined by place of birth, was an attractive offer, but they did not show enough enthusiasm and support for it. In contrast, the Malay opposition to the Malayan Union was stronger and more successful.

As a result, the British government finally withdrew the plan and replaced it with the Federation of Malaya scheme, which restored Malay sovereignty and privileges and, under pressure from the Malay rulers and Umno, withdrew the citizenship offer by *jus soli* and imposed more restrictive conditions for non-Malay citizenship.



**Demonstrations against the British-conceived Malayan Union in Johor Baru in 1946.**