

The Road to Independence

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by Zainon Ahmad
merdeka@thesundaily.com

THE Federation of Malaya gained independence from the British at the stroke of midnight on Aug 30, 1957.

In an unofficial ceremony organised by the Alliance, people had gathered at the Selangor Padang to witness the lowering of the Union Jack.

When the clock at the tower of the Selangor Secretariat building struck 12, the British flag was lowered and Tunku Abdul Rahman shouted "Merdeka!" several times. The crowd joined in enthusiastically.

It was a moment pregnant with significance, but Tunku could only make a short speech because his words were quickly drowned out as he was swarmed by people who rushed to the stage to shake his hands.

Malaysia would have been the country's name at the time of independence if Umno's suggestion to the Reid Constitutional Commission had been accepted, but the MCA's suggestion that the name of the newly-independent country be retained as Federation of Malaya, in English, and *Persekutuan Tanah Melayu*, in Malay, was instead accepted.

So the country's long name became known as Federation of Malaya, and its shortened name Malaya.

In fact, the idea of a wider federation of the states of the Malay peninsula with Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore had been bandied about even before World War II, and was finally and officially mooted in 1961 by Tunku.

In 1961, Tunku accepted the British plan for the formation of Malaysia to merge Malaya with the states of Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore, and consultations between the relevant parties finally reached agreement.

The states of Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore could have come together on Aug 31, 1963 - indeed, that was the agreed plan - had it not been for serious objections from the Philippines and

Indonesia.

Because of their allegations that Malaysia was "a neo-colonialist plot", the United Nations (UN) decided to conduct an enquiry to resolve the issue by verifying the wishes of Sabahans and Sarawakians. Hence, the new federation's proclamation had to be deferred.

Sabah and Singapore, however, decided to cast off their colonial yoke as scheduled on Aug 31. But Sarawak, due to its internal politics, couldn't and so had to wait for the UN report which officially declared that the people of Sabah and Sarawak opted to join Malaysia.

The new federation was proclaimed on Sept 16. It brought to a close more than 100 years of British dominance in the three states but Singapore left the federation in 1965.

Nationalistic fervour for Malaya's independence gained momentum after World War II.

After the war, tired of the charade of "indirect rule", the British imposed direct rule by making the whole peninsula a colony, calling it the Malayan Union. Sabah and Sarawak also became separate colonies.

The Malay Rulers, with whom the British signed treaties, quickly realised they had been dispossessed of their country and reduced to being religious heads.

Instead of being protected, they had been betrayed, screamed the Malay leaders. And coming on the heels of the three-week "reign of terror" under the communist guerillas during the interregnum that followed the Japanese surrender on Aug 15, 1945 and the arrival of the British re-occupation force in early September, the Malays rallied.

Mass demonstrations were held and the demonstrators were even able to prevent their rulers from attending the installation ceremony of the new colony's governor.

The formation of the Alliance

Many Malay parties and organisations participated in these demonstrations, and most of them later amalgamated into the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), led by its

first president, Datuk Onn Jaafar. However, several Malay nationalist groups had struggled for independence before the war. A few of these groups, which included the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM) banded together under the organisation *Kesatuan Rakyat Semenanjung* - or Keris for short - and worked to obtain Japan's support for Malaya's independence. Keris was led by Ibrahim Yaacob, Mustapha Hussein and Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy.

KMM had branches all over the country and with their help, Keris was able to establish units in all the states.

Their plan was for them, with Japanese connivance, to take over the country's administration from the Japanese and to prepare to resist the British when they returned. The Japanese played along for a while but eventually refused to hand over power.

Japan's surrender and news of the British's early return scuttled Keris' plans and some leaders went underground while Ibrahim escaped to Indonesia. Some were arrested by the British when they returned while others were able to continue their nationalistic activities until independence.

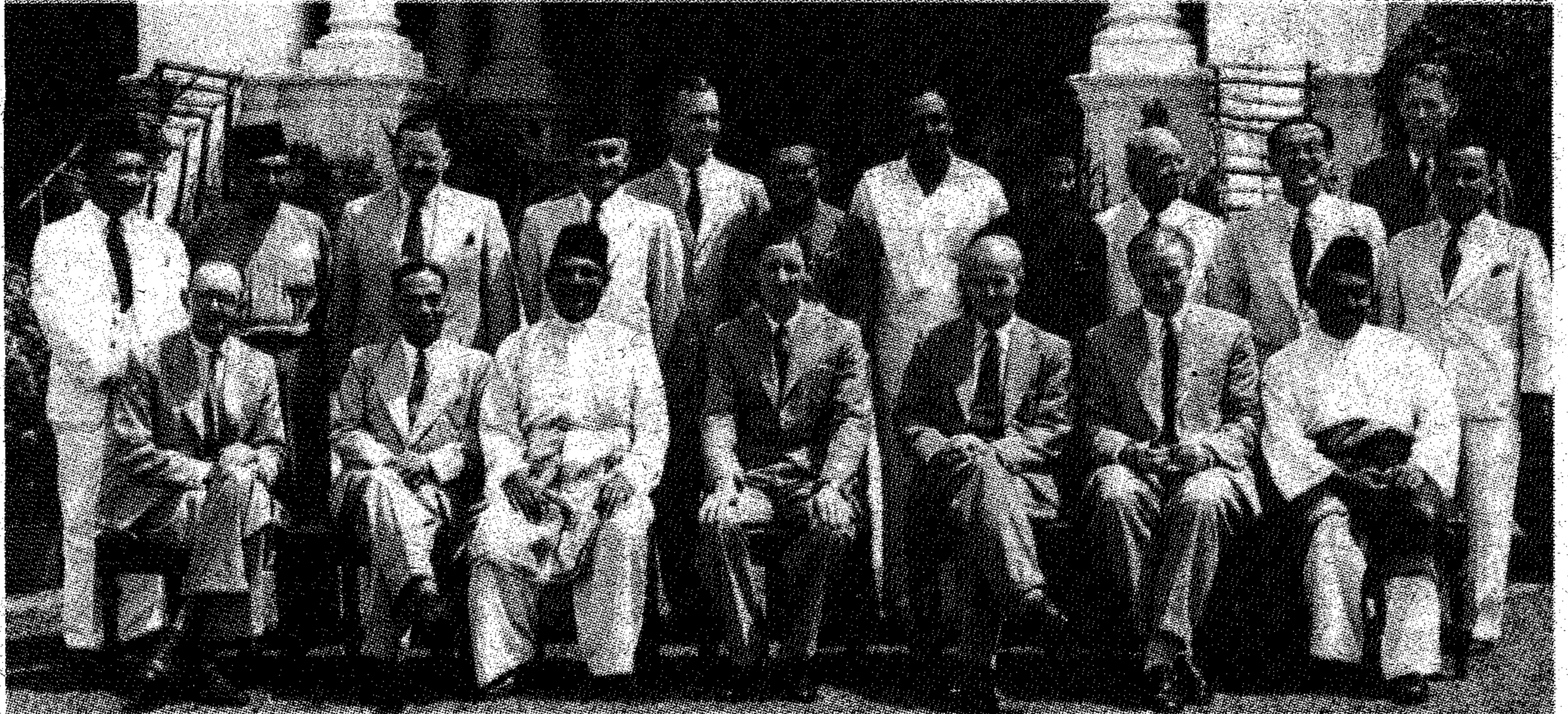
But like in Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the three-and-a-half-years of painful Japanese Occupation fostered in the people a different attitude towards their colonial masters when they returned.

Britain was no longer the invincible white imperial power they once held in awe; not only were its forces defeated by an Asian power, they were also humiliated.

Immediately after they returned, the British put in place a military administration to restore order.

On April Fool's day, 1946, the Malayan Union, with its offer of generous citizenship rights to non-Malays, was established.

But contrary to general British expectation, it was shortlived. Faced with Malay opposition, the British compromised by establishing a more acceptable system called the Federation of Malaya which came



The first Malayan cabinet in 1955 led by Tunku Abdul Rahman prior to independence in 1957.

into force on Feb 1, 1948.

Singapore was excluded from this federation because of its large Chinese population. Even in the federation, the Chinese – two thirds of them local-born – formed 45.2% of the six million population. The Malays made up 43.8%, the Indians 10.5%, and others about 0.5%.

Some Chinese who decided to make Malaya their home were unhappy with the less generous citizenship terms offered under the new federal constitution, seeing it as a setback. Under these circumstances, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) – which launched its armed rebellion following a spate of violence during which three European planters were killed in one day in Sungai Siput, Perak, leading to an emergency being declared – saw an opportunity to win disenchanted Chinese to its side in an attempt to gain control of the country. It was immediately outlawed by the British.

While the emergency was at its height, there was little chance of political development towards achieving self-governance for which the 1948 Federation of Malaya Agreement was a stepping stone.

But in an effort to win the people's "hearts and mind", the colonial government introduced the "member system" under which nine locals were made members of the government's executive council. The British also promised local elections to allow people to play a more active role in government.

As a result, a number of political parties were formed. The Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) was formed in 1946 following the dissolution of a number of political organisations including the Central Indian Association of Malaya. In 1949, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) was formed, led by Tan Cheng Lock, Leong Yew Koh and T.H. Tan.

In 1951, Onn left Umno to form the Independent of Malaya Party (IMP) after his proposal to admit non-Malays as Umno members was rejected. His new party received the MIC's support.

On Jan 8, 1952, reacting to the formation of the IMP, Umno and MCA announced that they would be working together in the Kuala Lumpur municipal council elections. Of the 12 seats, the Umno-MCA alliance won nine, IMP two and an independent one.

Disillusioned with the lukewarm support from the non-Malays he was courting, Onn formed a more nationalistic Malay party, Parti Negara. This drove the MIC, then led by its fourth president K.L. Devaser, into the Alliance in 1954.

Confident that the Alliance formula of three-racial parties working together was acceptable to the people, the leaders decided to contest the first federal election in 1955 as one party. The Alliance won 51 of the 52 seats. The Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PAS) won the remaining seat.

Following the elections, the colonial

government asked Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Umno president who succeeded Onn and who was also the Alliance leader, to become Chief Minister and to nominate elected Alliance members as ministers under the new system of self-government.

Soon, preparations were under way for independence. A delegation of government members, party leaders and representatives of the Malay Rulers went to London to work out steps towards achieving Merdeka in 1957. A date was soon decided.

In the meantime, the Alliance government worked hard to end the emergency by Aug 31. But, an amnesty offer to the communists received poor response. So a direct meeting was arranged in Baling between Tunku, Singapore Chief Minister David Marshall and Tan Cheng Lock with CPM secretary-general Chin Peng and his trusted lieutenants.

The talks collapsed after the communists rejected the terms of surrender. However, the failed talks proved to be a propaganda victory of sorts for Tunku and the Alliance leaders.

Meanwhile, a commission of distinguished jurists was set up under the chairmanship of Lord Reid with members from Britain, India, Pakistan and Australia for the all important task of drafting a constitution for an independent Malaya.

On midnight on Aug 30, 1957, the Union Jack was lowered for the last time.