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# Trials and tribulations

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**T**HE peoples of Malaysia went through several trials and tribulations from World War II. Although Malaya achieved independence on Aug 31, 1957, North Borneo (now Sabah) and Sarawak did not obtain self-government and independence until their territories joined with independent Malaya and Singapore to form Malaysia in 1963. Singapore left in 1965.

» The first major challenge was the **Japanese Occupation** which lasted three-and-a-half years from December, 1941 to August, 1945.

The occupation was traumatic and brutal, and is remembered as a "dark blot" in the country's history.

For many Malaysians who lived through these terrible times, the occupation was very divisive. When the British returned to Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak after Japan's defeat in World War II, the colonial administration did not view locals' collaboration with the Japanese in a favourable light.

Many who collaborated were punished, including civil servants, whose wartime careers would result in them not being reinstated. Since those who collaborated were stigmatised, people did not dare to own up to it until after Independence when they were free to talk about why they had collaborated.

Officially, the Malaysian government has attempted to exorcise the ghosts of World War II, and has tended to look at the war's more positive rather than negative aspects.

National museums and Malaysian history textbooks tend to play down the wartime inter-racial clashes between the Chinese and the Malays, Japanese atrocities and massacres of the Chinese, the role of the Chinese-dominated guerilla resistance movement, and the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army or MPAJA, while highlighting how the occupation inspired anti-colonialism and awakened Malay nationalism.

» The **communist insurgency**, which began in 1948 in Malaya, marked another period of trial and

tribulation. The Malayan Emergency (1948-60) saw widespread violence, unrest and terrorism, although the communist guerillas claimed that their armed struggle was to free Malaya from British rule.

To combat the communist threat, the British administration introduced emergency laws, which infringed fundamental human rights, imposed restrictions on the media, and allowed for arrests and indefinite detention without trial.

However, the British realised that the battle against the communists could be won only by granting independence to Malaya and handing over power to non-communist nationalist elites. Consequently, it held general elections in 1955 in which the Umno-MCA-MIC Alliance won 51 of the 52 contested seats in the Federal Legislative Council.

The Alliance had campaigned on a platform of amnesty for the communists to persuade them to lay down their arms. To discuss the terms of amnesty, Alliance leader Tunku Abdul Rahman, who was then Malaya's Chief Minister, met with Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) leaders in Baling, Kedah, on Dec 28 and 29, 1955.

The Tunku was accompanied by Singapore Chief Minister David Marshall and MCA chief Tun Tan Cheng Lock, while the communists were led by CPM secretary-general Chin Peng, and his party colleagues, Chen Tien and Rashid Mydin.

The talks, however, broke down as the Tunku rejected the CPM's demand for recognition in exchange for ending its armed struggle. The Tunku also turned down its second demand that there be no police screening of CPM members who turned themselves in to the authorities.

However, Chin Peng made a startling concession at the talks by saying that the communists would lay down their arms if the Alliance government had self-determination in internal security and national defence. To which the Tunku replied: "Is that a promise? When I come back from England (from the independence talks with the British government) that is the thing that I



Way ahead of their time, these women made up the Women's Home Guard of Pahang during World War II. They were part of Datuk Onn Jaafar's drive to defend the nation from the communist *Bintang Tiga*, where his son, Captain Hussein Onn selected Home Guard groups made up of kampung folk for training.



Malaysian Forces Reconnaissance Regiment mans the forward observation posts Paradise and Honalula set up on the coast of Sabah, facing the Indonesian-held part of Sabatic Island.

am bringing back with me."

Great publicity was given to this "concession" by Chin Peng, and it strengthened the Tunku's hand in the negotiations he held with the British in January, 1956.

In his retirement, Tunku, in his memoirs *Lest We Forget* (1985), belatedly acknowledged the communists' role in securing Malaya's independence:

"Just as Indonesia was fighting a bloody battle, so were the communists of Malaya, who too fought for independence. With the difference

that the communists of Malaya were not the indigenous people of this country and they were fighting to set up a communist regime, which the believers in the faith of Islam could not support nor could those orthodox people, who believed in freedom and democracy. So the struggle for the independence of this country was carried out by the communists alone and they fought a subversive as well as a shooting war... and would have gone on had the British government not yielded to our demand for a general elec-

tion as a step towards independence."

However, the current administration has been reluctant to accord the communists any recognition because it fought an armed insurgency, for at least 35 years, that ended only in 1989.

» The period of *konfrontasi* launched by Indonesia under President Sukarno against the formation of Malaysia was another pivotal moment in our nation's history.

In 1961, independent Malaya, Singapore and the British formulated a merger of Singapore and Malaya, with the eventual incorporation of the Borneo territories of Sarawak and North Borneo (now Sabah) into a new Federation of Malaysia.

Jakarta, however, was not happy with this development, seeing the Malaysian federation as a "neo-colonial plot" since British bases would remain.

The strongest opposition came from Brunei. Although Brunei's monarch showed some interest in joining Malaysia, in December of 1962, the Brunei People's Party (*Partai Raayat*) launched a short-lived rebellion against Malaysia, in favour of an independent state of North Kalimantan comprising Brunei, Sarawak and North Borneo.

On Sept 25, 1965 - nine days after Malaysia was formed - Sukarno announced that he would *ganyang* Malaysia (crush Malaysia) after both countries had severed diplomatic ties.

A small-scale border war erupted in the jungles of Kalimantan, in which Malaysian and British forces engaged with the Indonesian Army. In August and September of 1964, small-scale Indonesian incursions into Peninsular Malaysia took place, but the infiltrators were all rounded up.

When Singapore announced its separation from Malaysia on Aug 9, 1965, Sukarno viewed this as confirmation of the confrontation's righteousness.

However, there was already a split within the Indonesian Army, with many top generals inclined to end the confrontation.

Indonesia's *konfrontasi* ended after only two years following an ill-planned coup attempt in Jakarta from Sept 30 to Oct 1 1965, in which the Indonesian Communist Party was implicated. Events soon led to the rise of General Suharto who toppled Sukarno, recognised Malaysia and restored diplomatic relations with Malaysia.

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