

Winning over Sabah and Sarawak

by Zainon Ahmad

INITIALLY the leaders of Sabah (then British North Borneo) and Sarawak were opposed to Malaysia or at best gave it a lukewarm welcome after it was proposed by Tunku Abdul Rahman on May 27, 1961 at the Foreign Correspondents Association in Singapore.

"Let us become independent first and then we will decide whether to join Malaysia or not," said Tan Sri Ong Kee Hui, the Kuching mayor and leader of the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), formed in 1959.

Other prominent Sarawak leaders like Datu Abang Haji Openg - later the first local governor - and Abang Mustapha Abang Haji Abdul Gapor who are also members of the Council Negeri, considered the oldest legislature in the country, were unanimous in their opposition to the Tunku's plan.

In Sabah, Tun Fuad Stephens (then Donald Stephens), a newspaper publisher, a member of the State Council and *Huguan Siou* (paramount leader) of the Kadazan/Dusun people, shared the same view as Ong.

"We must not be seen as changing colonial masters," was the response of the United National Kadazan Organisation (Unko), a party Fuad formed with Keningau community leader GS Sundang. They contacted leaders from the other territories to see whether they should revive the idea of a federation of Borneo states of Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei instead.

Many of the leaders believed that Malaysia's formation was not really meant to benefit the people of the two territories but more to provide a solution to solve the problems of Britain, Malaya and Singapore.

Britain needed to withdraw from the East but it could not just up and



Sabah Chief Minister Tun Fuad Stephens takes his oath of office as part of the first state cabinet on Sept 16, 1963.

go without ensuring its former colonies' survival. Malaya wanted to increase the number of bumiputras to ensure that their numbers were bigger than the others. Singapore, threatened by communists, wanted security.

The leaders opposed the plan because they feared their people would be at the mercy of the commercially superior Chinese whose numbers would increase with Malaysia, and they also feared that they would eventually be sidelined by the more politically sophisticated Malays.

They also worried that their culture and polity would be gradually eroded. Thus, discussions were held on such issues as religion, education and finance where early assurances on these matters were made. Most of the discussions centred on the Sabah All-party 20-point memorandum and the Sarawak 18-point memorandum containing matters the two territories wanted to safeguard. But mostly the focus was on religion, constitutional safeguards, immigration, special position of the indigenous people, language, educa-

tion and fiscal arrangements.

But even while discussions were still at the early stages, more and more leaders and their people gradually began to voice support for the plan.

The Malays were easily persuaded by Malayan Foreign Ministry permanent secretary Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie - the driving force behind the plan.

And the resolve of those Malays who still

resisted the plan finally caved in shortly before the Cobbold Commission arrived in the two territories to determine the peoples' response to Tunku's proposal.

Tun Mustapha Datu Harun, a Sabah State Council member and considered a leader of Sabah Malays, agreed wholeheartedly. Someone even described him as being the most "gung-ho" about Malaysia. A few months after the announcement, he formed Usno (United Sabah National Organisation).

In Sarawak, two lawyers, Tun Abdul Rahman Yakub and his nephew Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, not only favoured the idea but also promoted it. They quickly formed a party called Barjasa (Barisan Anak Jati Sarawak) which later merged with Panas (Parti Negara Sarawak) to form Parti Bumiputra.

Many Dayaks, led by their paramount chief, Temenggong Jugah anak Barieng, also came out in support of the idea. The chief was among the founders of Pesaka (Parti Pesaka Anak Sarawak) which later merged with Parti Bumiputra to form Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu

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or PBB, the current dominant party of the Sarawak Barisan Nasional.

Datuk James Wong Kim Ming, who later led the Dayak-based Sarawak National Party (SNAP) and was deputy chief minister several times, agreed "subject to favourable terms for Sabah and Sarawak." In his book *The Price of Loyalty*, he said he had been told of the proposed federation in 1960 by British officials while he was in London.

Indeed, most leaders of the Borneo territories had heard of similar proposals for an association of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei being bandied about by officials in Britain and in Asia long before the Tunku's announcement.

But Fuad Stephens and members of his delegation abandoned the idea of a federation of Borneo territories after meeting Tunku in Kuala Lumpur where they were royally entertained. Fuad Stephens was also talked out of it by Ghazali and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, a strong campaigner for Malaysia.

A member of Fuad's delegation, Datuk Seri Ghani Gilong, told reporters on arrival at the airport in Kota Kinabalu (then Jesselton) "... bisuk pun boleh masuk Malaysia" ("... we can join Malaysia as early as tomorrow").

Fuad Stephens, who with his friends had tried to popularise the term Kadazan in the 1950s, to refer to his people who were "unglamorously" known as Dusun, now threw himself into campaigning for Malaysia.

He hoped the founding day of the new federation would fall on Sept 14, 1963, his 43rd birthday. It was not to be. It fell instead on the 40th birthday of Lee Kuan Yew, the man who convinced the Unko leader of the benefits of joining Malaysia.

Sundang, who was against Malaysia and who was also not

enamoured by the term Kadazan, left Unko and formed United National Pasok Momogun Party or Pasok Momogun for short.

But all these parties later came together as the Sabah Alliance led by Mustapha and Fuad. On Merdeka Day, Mustapha took office as governor and Fuad as chief minister. And, as Fuad wanted, it was an independent Sabah that officially became part of Malaysia on Sept 16, 1963.

In Sarawak, SNAP, led by Tan Sri Stephen Kalong Ningkan, finally agreed to join Malaysia but SUPP refused to be persuaded till the end.

Said Ong: "We felt that any decision on North Borneo and Sarawak becoming part of a larger confederation should not be made until both these states were independent and directly responsible for their own destiny."

The party held demonstrations when the Cobbold Commission arrived in Sarawak and told the commission why Sarawak should not be part of Malaysia. It said the same thing to the United Nations team that was sent to verify the peoples' response to the new federation.

Such was its opposition to Malaysia that it even voted against the bill when the Sarawak Alliance government, led by SNAP's Ningkan as chief minister, presented it in the inaugural meeting of the newly elected Council Negeri. The vote was 31 ayes to five SUPP nays.

Having succeeded in forming Malaysia, Tunku, now prime minister of a larger federation was magnanimous to SUPP. Since then, the Chinese-based party with Dayak and Malay members has played an important role in the country as well as the state.

It is interesting to note that as Malaysia celebrates 50 years of nationhood, fewer and fewer people seem to be asking about the safeguards that