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Unravelling the history behind 'Malaysia'

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KUALA LUMPUR: The formation of Malaysia had a lot to do with Britain and communism, says Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim.

After World War II, he said, the rivalry between Russia and the United States began.

The United States then put pressure on Britain, resulting in the independence of India in 1947, and Burma (Myanmar) in 1948.

To set an example, the US granted the Philippines independence in 1946.

At the end of World War II in 1945, the British decided that Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak, Singapore and Brunei should form a British dominion.

"This was the original plan until they were pressured by the United States to free their colonies.

"They also found it wiser not to push the Malay kingdoms into a state of being colonised."

There were no British colonies before World War II, said Khoo, as the British had signed agreements

As Malaysia Day approaches tomorrow, eminent historian Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim and former chief secretary to the government Tan Sri Abdullah Ayub talk to SONIA RAMACHANDRAN about the events leading up to the formation of Malaysia. And the belly dancer who delayed the signing

with the Malay rulers to run the country on their behalf.

"They signed treaties to protect the Malays. This is very important as this contributed to the shape and direction of the Federation of Malaya," he said.

The Straits Settlements comprising Penang, Malacca, Singapore and Dinding in Perak were the only states under the control of the British, said Khoo.

"Dinding was returned to Perak in 1936. The British representative to the Straits Settlements was called a governor, whereas the British representative to the Malay states was called a High Commissioner," he said.

The formula for making what

was called "Malaya" into a nation state was very complicated, said Khoo.

"The Malays strongly felt that this must remain a Malay country and that they, as subjects of the rulers, should be a privileged people.

"This was a problem, but the three leaders of the major race-based parties in the country agreed to compromise and become a nation state first and then solve these problems.

"The agreement between the leaders is now known as a social contract."

In the original plan, Singapore was not included as the population balance would have been

"disturbed", said Khoo.

"But in 1960, Lee Kuan Yew (the first Singapore prime minister) had trouble dealing with the leftist parties in the country, so he needed the support of the Federation of Malaya. This idea of Malaysia, with Singapore and Malaya, then began.

"But the Malays would not have been happy with just this merger, so Sabah and Sarawak had to come in to even out the numbers.

"That was how the term 'Bumiputera' was coined," said Khoo.

"Strictly speaking, the term Bumiputera refers to the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak who are not Muslims.

"According to the law then,

there would be no Bumiputeras in the peninsula," he said.

"Britain then came in and we had the Cobbold Commission to investigate and prove that Sabah and Sarawak wanted to join Malaya.

"Recent findings, however, show that Sabah and Sarawak were told by the British to accept the Malaysia proposal," he said.

How did the name Malaysia come about? According to Khoo, the name "Malaysia" was used long before 1963.

One example of this was a book in the 1930s, written by a western author about the country called *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule* which referred to

this country as "Malaysia".

"The Malays never accepted the word 'Malaya'. They associated that name with the non-Malays before World War II.

"They wanted the word 'Melayu', so 'Malaysia' was a compromise," said Khoo.

Former chief secretary to the government Tan Sri Abdullah Ayub said the government started developing the economy after Merdeka.

This was when the Red Book System was introduced, said Abdullah, who was then with the Treasury as the deputy director of the Budget.

"This system planned the development of each district. It dealt with roads, water supply, electricity and irrigation.

"The government spent a lot of money to develop the rural areas," he said.

Then came the First Malaya Plan — for a period of five years.

In July 1963, Abdullah was part of the delegation that went to discuss the Malaysia Agreement with the British.

"When it came to Singapore, the discussions took a long time. There were problems with taxation and there were also concerns about all the industries moving to Singapore which was practising free trade then," he said.

When the problems were ironed out, the agreement was supposed to be signed on July 9, 1963 at night, said Abdullah but the Malaysian delegation, including the representatives from Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore went to a restaurant called Omar Khayyam.

"It dragged on because there was a belly dancer there. We were supposed to meet the British at 9pm but we got delayed by one hour and didn't turn up till past 10pm.

"The British were worried and thought we had had another disagreement. They were quite relieved when we turned up.

"The report came in September and Malaysia Day had to be declared on Sept 16, 1963," Abdullah said.