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First all-race political action and the People's Constitution

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ON Oct 20, 1947, the whole of Malaya and Singapore bore witness to the first political action that involved the united action of people of all races – the Malaya-wide hartal.

The hartal, a general strike and the halting of economic activity, was effectively used in the Indian struggle for independence. It was used for the first time in Malaya by the left-wing coalition, Putera-AMCJA as a weapon against British colonialism.

Putera-AMCJA was a united front comprising two major political forces in Malaya: the Pusat Tenaga Ra'ayat (Centre for People's Power) and the All-Malaya Council of Joint Action.

The AMCJA was a federation of political parties, labour unions, women's associations and youth organisations that was inaugurated on Dec 22, 1946 in Kuala Lumpur.

The main organisations in the AMCJA was the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU), Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU), 12-State Women's Federation in Malaya, Malayan New Democratic Youth League (MNDYL) and the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Ex-Service Comrades' Association.

Although dominated by left-leaning parties, the AMCJA was led by a prominent Straits-born capitalist, Tan Cheng Lock.

Putera was a coalition inaugurated on Feb 22, 1947, consisting of Malay left-wing

parties such as Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM), Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (Api), Angkatan Wanita Sedar (Awas), Barisan Tani Se-Malaya (Batas), Gerakan Angkatan Muda (Geram), Lembaga Persatuan Melayu Johor, and other smaller organisations.

Putera was led by Ishak Haji Muhammad, a journalist and nationalist who was also one of the founders of Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) in 1938.

Putera-AMCJA succeeded in bringing together all the political parties in Malaya except the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) and the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) in a popular people's front to protest the Federation Constitution that was formulated by the British to replace the Malayan Union.

The coalition argued that the Federation Constitution was undemocratic because it was formulated in secret consultations between the colonial government and the Malay aristocracy, and sidelined the opinions and wishes of the Malayan people who sought democracy and self-governance.

For Putera-AMCJA, the British action of consulting only one party was part of a divisive "divide and rule" tactic. It held mass demonstrations throughout Malaya to protest.

At each gathering, attended by thousands from all races, Putera-AMCJA leaders such as Tan Cheng Lock, Ishak Haji Muhammad, John Thivy, Philip Hoalim Sr, Dr Burhanuddin Helmy, Gerald de Cruz, Ahmad Boestamam, K. Ganapathy and Shamsiah Fakeh explained the

importance of people from all races uniting to fight the Federation Constitution and to back Putera-AMCJA's struggles.

The coalition also held mass meetings throughout Malaya to gain endorsements for resolutions opposing the Federation Constitution. Hundreds of telegrams and protest letters were sent to the British government. But the British did not pay heed to any of this.

The People's Constitution

Putera-AMCJA realised they needed a stronger and more progressive programme to win mass support. From May 1947, it began drafting an alternative constitution to challenge the Federation Constitution.

On Aug 10, 1947, the People's Constitution was completed, taking into consideration the opinions and aspirations of the different factions within the Putera-AMCJA pact. It was a comprehensive document that covered provisions for a democratic system of government, towards establishing a new nationality and an independent nation-state.

The *Straits Times* dubbed the People's Constitution as "the first political attempt to put Malayan party politics on a plane higher than that of rival racial interests, and also as the first attempt to build a political bridge between the domiciled non-Malay communities and the Malay race".

On Sept 21, 1947, the People's Constitution was presented for the first time to more than 20,000 people who had gathered at Farrer Park, Singapore. Subsequently, Putera-AMCJA began a

national campaign to explain the contents of the People's Constitution to Malaysians.

Meetings, mass gatherings, and demonstrations were held in various places to get the people's support.

The constitution was published in four languages and disseminated throughout the states. Copies were also sent to the Malayan Union Government, the British Prime Minister and the Colonial Office in London.

Yet once more, the British refused to pay attention to Putera-AMCJA or to hold discussions. The colonial government also rejected all proposals in the People's Constitution.

Malaya-wide Hartal

On Oct 6, 1947, Putera-AMCJA released a "Hartal Manifesto". It called upon all those who regarded Malaya as their home to observe Oct 20, 1947 as a Day of Protest against the Revised Constitutional Proposals, by staging a Malaya-wide hartal on that day.

"October 20 has been selected as the Day of Protest because it is on that day that the British Parliament is scheduled to begin its autumn session, during which it is reported that a debate on the constitutional issue in Malaya will take place.

"On October 20, therefore, between the hours of six a.m. and midnight, all those who regard Malaya as their real home and who support the People's Constitution issued by Putera-AMCJA, are asked not to carry out their usual occupations, but to remain indoors throughout

the day and night.

"You are asked for one day to cease work in order to demonstrate to government that you reject the Revised Constitutional Proposals, and in order to carry our struggle for acceptance of the People's Constitution one step further.

"October 20 is the day on which the people of Malaya will be called upon to stage the greatest political demonstration that this country has ever seen."

The campaign to promote the hartal began on Oct 7. Its aim was to ensure the hartal's success and to prove to the British that the masses were behind the hartal.

Full hartal instructions were issued on how it should be observed, and "12 Hartal Slogans" that pinpointed the reasons for the hartal were sent to the media, all the parties within Putera-AMCJA, and to the 30 Putera-AMCJA centres throughout Malaya to be translated and disseminated to the people so that they fully understood the hartal's aim as a political act.

committees were set up in each state to align and plan activities for the hartal. Propaganda corps were established to tour the towns, districts and kampung to put up posters and banners, as well as give out leaflets explaining the hartal and the People's Constitution.

Thus, on Oct 20, 1947, beginning from 6am, the whole of Malaya underwent the hartal. Merchants shut their shops, labourers stopped going to the mines, factories, shipyards, and rubber plantations, farmers did not work their lands, fishing folk stayed ashore, housewives did

it with the government as required by the Emergency regulations, agreeing that it would be tantamount to recognising the colonial regime as a legal government.

However, its members continued to be active in other social and semi-political organisations. Many of its members played an active role in the formation of Asas 50 or the 1950 Literary Generation.

It declared its aim as the struggle of Malay language and literature fans and enthusiasts who were politically conscious that national unity was important to achieve national freedom, and that national freedom was a bridge towards social justice, peace and prosperity.

Former members of the Malayan National Party, including its second president Dr Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, were also involved in the Nadrah or Maria Hertogh riots which broke out in December 1950 in Singapore and in which 18 people were killed.

Later, Dr Burhanuddin joined PAS and as its third president, he used his organisational skills to reorganise the party. In the 1959 general elections, PAS won 13 seats after winning only one in 1955.

Opposition giants

Among all those involved in the country's opposition politics, two giants that stand out are Ahmad Boestamam and Tan Sri Tan Chee Koon. Ahmad for his persistence and tenacity and Tan for his integrity.

Ahmad was born in Nov 30, 1920 to parents who were poor peasants. After attending the Malay school in Behrang Ulu near Tanjung Malim, he continued his education at Ipoh's Anderson School.

He became a journalist and counted among his friends such fellow journalists as Ibrahim Haji Yaakub and Ishak Muhammad. The three friends founded the KMM in 1937. Ahmad and Ishak were arrested by the colonial authorities and imprisoned for anti-British activities.

During the Japanese occupation, Ahmad was active in KMM and Kris. After the war, he was actively involved in the Malay

Nationalist Party and also in Api. He was arrested for the second time for pro-communist activities in 1948 and imprisoned for seven years.

Upon his release, he formed Parti Rakyat which worked closely with the Labour Party. Later with some members of the Labour Party, he formed the Socialist Front. In 1959, he contested in the Setapak parliamentary constituency and became an MP.

In 1963, after Indonesia launched its *konfrontasi* against Malaysia, Ahmad was arrested "by my own compatriots" for pro-Indonesia activities and was imprisoned for four years. After his release, he tried to be active in politics again but realised his time was over.

He continued writing, and for some time was employed by Sarawak Yang di-Pertua Negri Tun Abdul Rahman Yaacob as a speech writer. It was Sarawak which gave him his datukship. He died on Jan 19, 1983.

Tan was born on March 4, 1919. He graduated from Singapore's King Edward VII Medical College in 1949.

In 1952, he joined the Labour Party and contested in the 1955 general election. He also helped his party prepare a memorandum that was submitted to the Reid Commission.

He was Batu MP for a long time. Tan left the Labour Party to become one of Gerakan's founder members. He was against communal parties and when Gerakan joined the Barisan Nasional, Tan left it and helped formed the multiracial Pekemas or the Social Justice Party of Malaysia.

He, however, supported the New Economic Policy when it was debated after Parliament was reconvened following the May 13 incident which saw the national legislature suspended for 21 months.

In the 1974 general election, all Pekemas candidates were defeated except for Tan. Health reasons constrained his effectiveness and in 1977, he announced his retirement from politics.

A deeply religious Christian, Tan was involved in a number of social activities before his death on Oct 14, 1996.

not go to the markets, and the youth stayed away from amusement parks. Only colonial government offices, European stores and several other shops operated as usual.

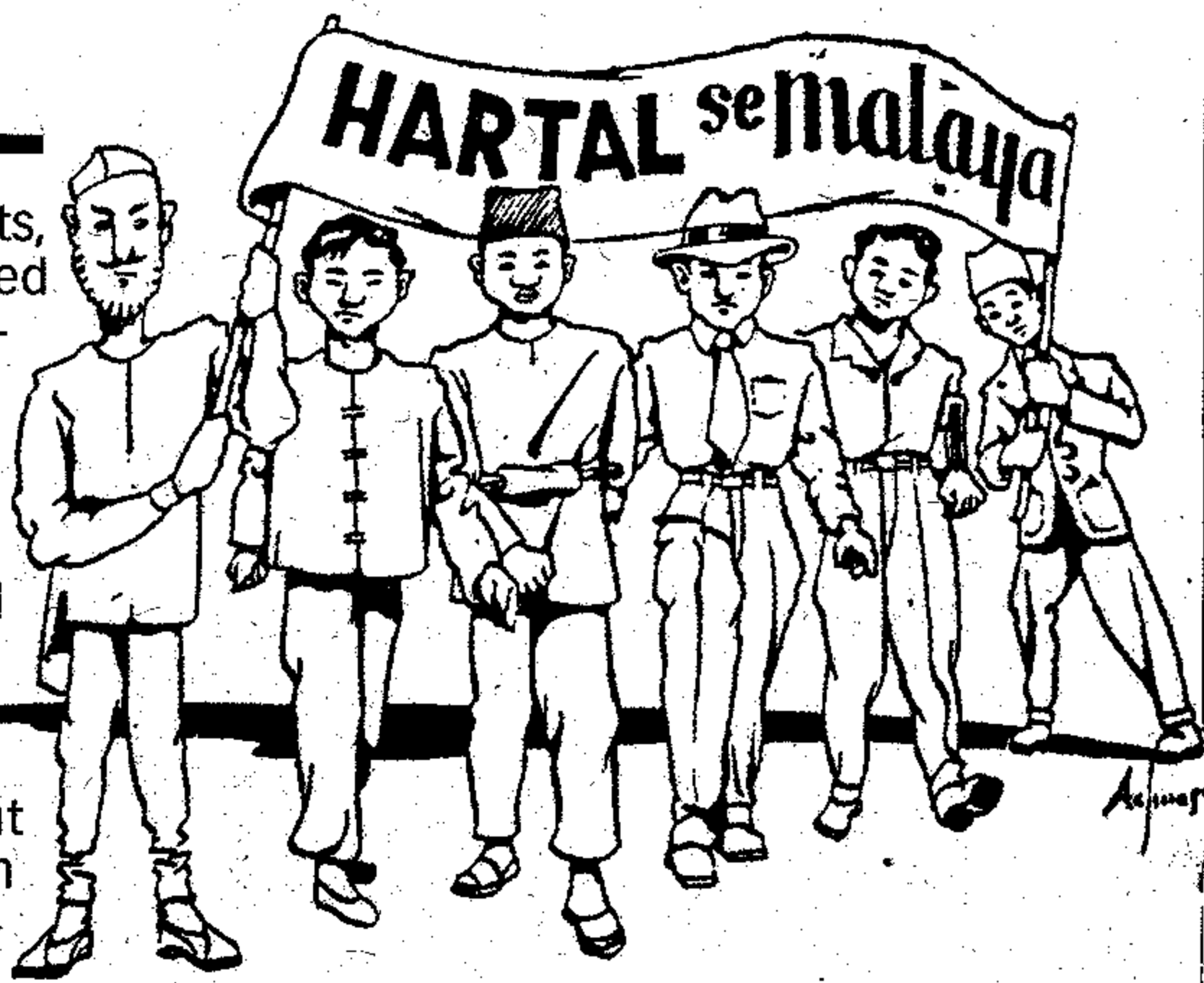
It was estimated that the British colonial government suffered £4 million in losses from the nationwide strike that day.

According to the Putera-AMCJA, the hartal was also "a unique method of political education. It brought the constitutional issue into every home in the country, and confronted every man, woman and child with this issue. Even in the Government English schools, children in the fourth and fifth standards questioned their teachers about the hartal, asked about its nature and why the government was opposed to it".

Even though the hartal was a complete success in its execution, it failed to change British constitutional policy in Malaya. The British rejected the People's Constitution and stayed committed to their agreement with the Malay aristocracy and defended their Federation Constitution.

On Feb 1, 1948, the Federation of Malaya was inaugurated to replace the Malayan Union.

Then, to crush Putera-AMCJA's



continued protests against the new Federation of Malaya, the British declared a state of Emergency throughout Malaya in June 1948.

Thousands of Putera-AMCJA leaders and members were arrested. Most were locked up in detention camps for several years while others were banished.

Most of the organisations affiliated to Putera-AMCJA were banned or dissolved. This was the turning point and marked the beginning of the end of the constitutional independence struggle of the left in Malaya.

Fahmi Reza is the director of Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka, a short documentary film that chronicles the events that culminated in the Malaya-wide hartal day of protest against British colonial rule on Oct 20, 1947.