

Father of Malay nationalism

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DATUK Onn Jaafar (1898-1962) was the son of a former Johor *mentri besar* and became well known before World War II as a fearless newspaper editor with outspoken views. He clashed publicly with Sultan Ibrahim of Johor over several issues, and for this, he was exiled to Singapore.

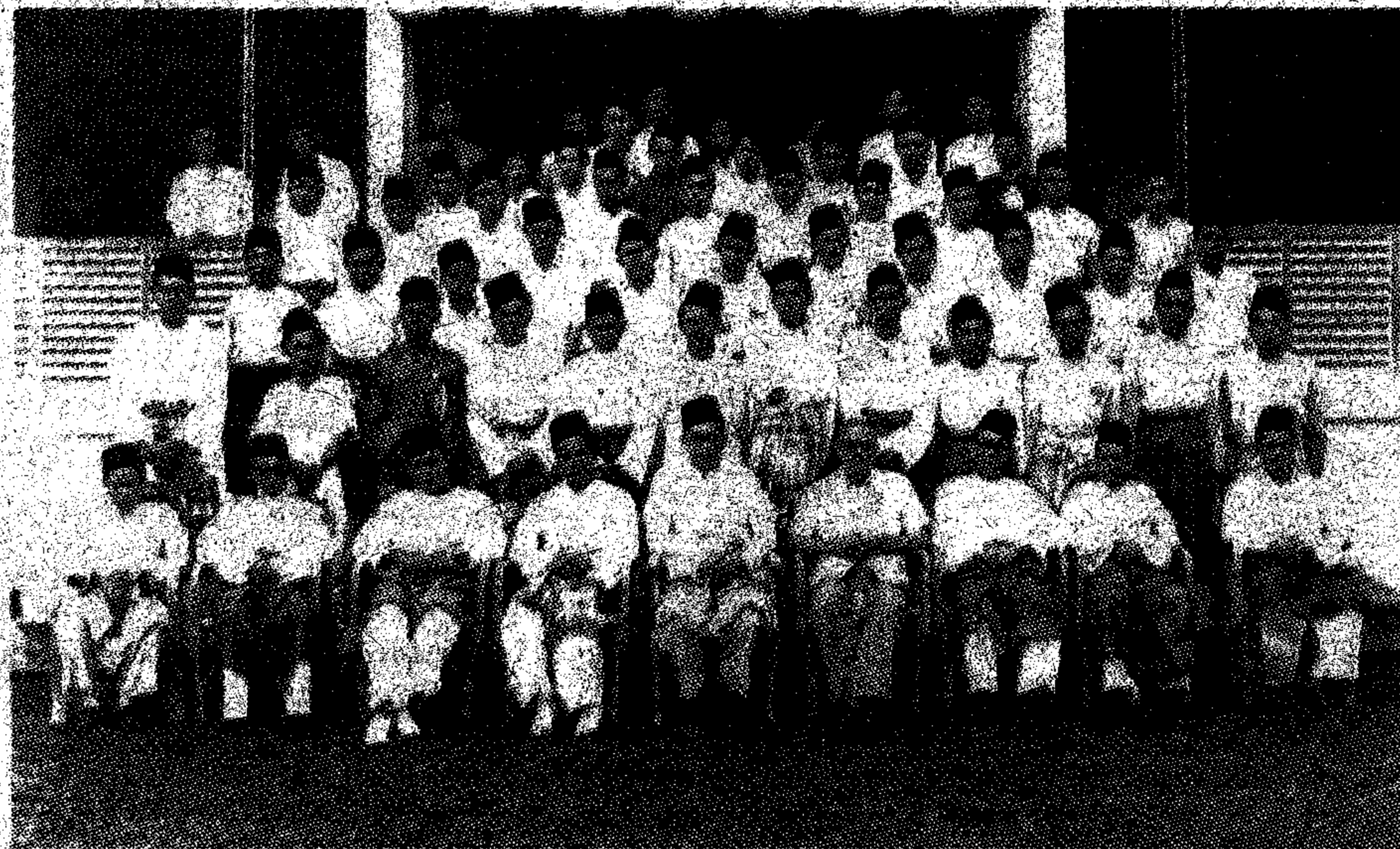
After a few years, he was pardoned and returned to Johor, where he spent most of his life in government service, rising to become *mentri besar* in 1946. While holding this post, which he relinquished in 1950, again over disagreements with Sultan Ibrahim, he initiated the formation of the United Malays National Organisation or Umno.

In 1946, when Britain announced the formation of the Malayan Union, which restricted the Malay rulers' sovereignty and Malay special privileges, Onn wrote a letter to the Malay newspapers inviting 41 Malay associations throughout the peninsula to attend the Pan-Malayan Congress on March 1, 1946 to coordinate protests against the Malayan Union.

The congress decided to form a national organisation to protect Malay interests, and elected Onn as its first president.

Onn decided to call the organisation the United Malays National Organisation because he thought the name spelt unity, similar to that of the United Nations Organisation (UNO) which had just been formed in 1945. Umno has remained the organisation's popular name instead of its Malay name, *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu*.

Onn's achievement in Umno's formation can be understood only when it is realised that no single unified pan-Malayan nationalist movement had ever existed before the war since previous efforts had repeatedly failed. This is why Onn is today justifiably regarded as "the father of Malay



Umno Youth delegates in this picture taken in February, 1951.

nationalism".

It was during Umno's campaign against the Malayan Union that he led its rallies and demonstrations throughout the peninsula and emerged as a skilled orator. He articulated the Malays' sense of nationalism so well that most Malays found at least some of their ideals in his thinking.

Although a volatile personality, given to temper tantrums, he was nevertheless charismatic, brimming with ideas and confidence, and initiated a Malay boycott of the British administration and invented the popular slogan, "*Hidup Melayu!*" or "Long Live the Malays!".

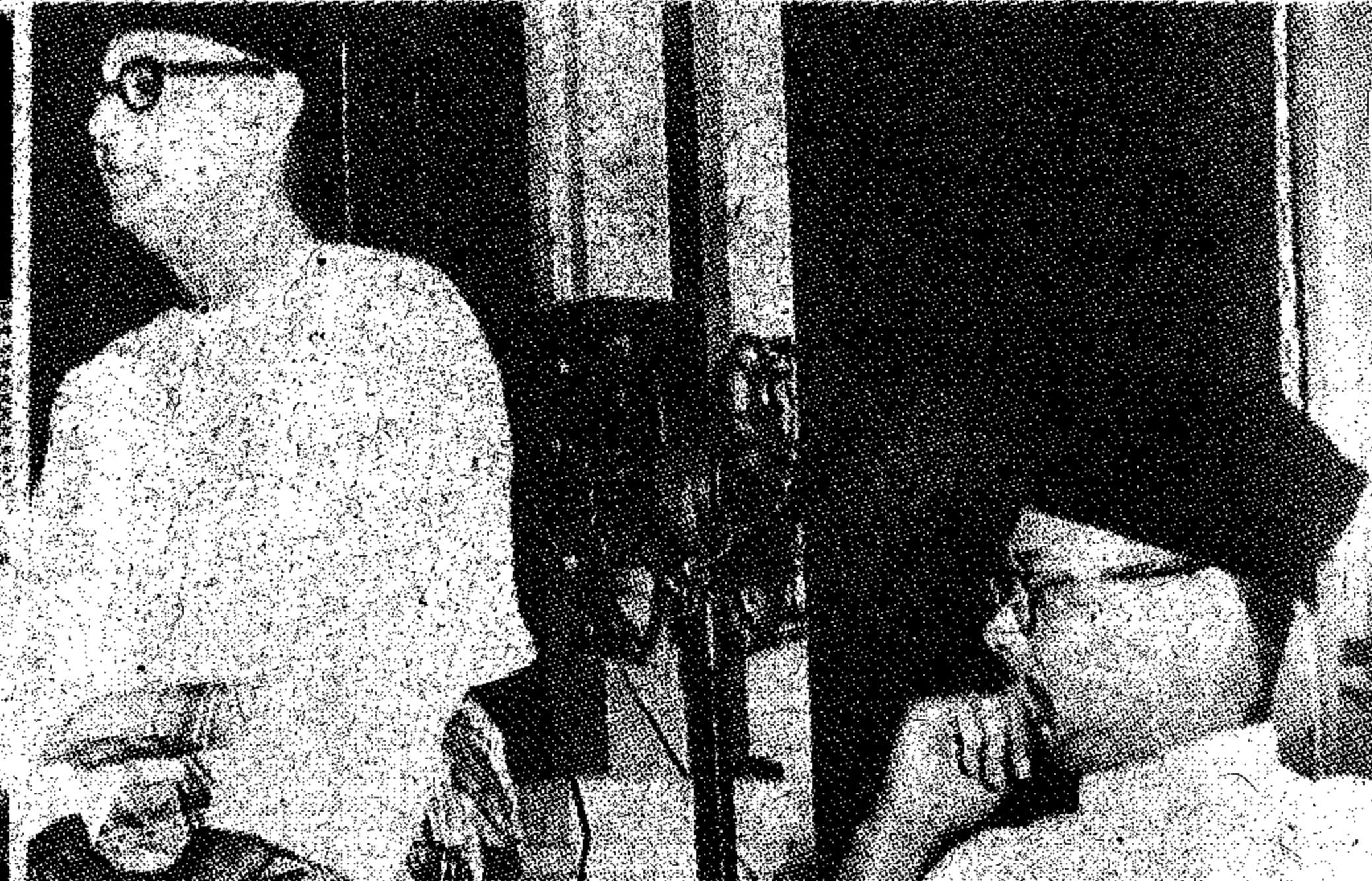
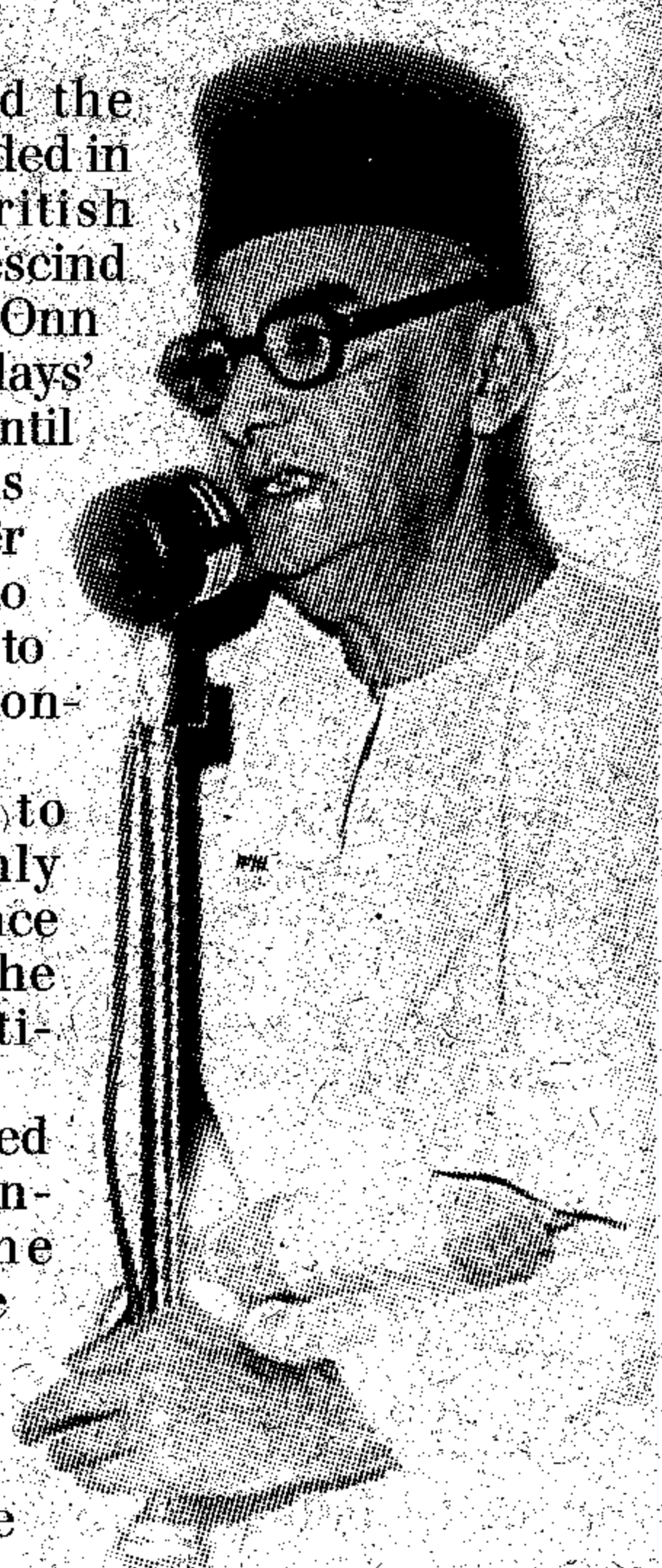
He persuaded the Malay rulers to turn their backs on the "unjust treaties" surrendering their sovereignty and Malay special privileges, which they had signed with Sir Harold MacMichael, the British government's plenipotentiary.

It was these treaties which had allowed the British government to form the Malayan Union.

After Umno and the Malay rulers succeeded in persuading the British administration to rescind the Malayan Union, Onn emerged as the Malays' undisputed leader until he resigned in 1951 as Umno president over the party's refusal to accept his suggestion to open its doors to non-Malays.

He had come to believe that the only route to independence would be through the creation of a multi-ethnic party.

He would have led Malaya to independence and become Malaya's first prime minister if he had not been impatient with Umno and resigned from the party.



Onn addresses an Umno general assembly for the last time as its president. Next to him is Tunku Abdul Rahman, who succeeded Onn.



Umno founder Onn Jaafar was unrelenting in opposing the Malayan Union.



An advertisement found in a booklet published by Grenier touting British Malaya as 'The Land of Opportunity'. For many, that promise came true.

PICTURES: ARKIB NEGARA-MPS/ INFORMATION MINISTRY