

Brunei spumed Tunku's overtures

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CONTRARY to most accounts about his enthusiasm for joining Malaysia, Brunei's Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III had actually been consistently wary about the Malaysia proposal.

An earlier British proposal for a federation of North Borneo territories including Brunei had not appealed to him either as it would require Brunei's surplus oil revenue for its development.

Brunei's oil revenue was the main issue that kept the monarch guarded about joining any federation. Brunei sought to retain its oil revenues in perpetuity, including its rights over all future discoveries of oil within its territory.

The Tunku, however, was willing to allow only 10 years after which the Malaysian government would exercise the right of levy and collect taxes on oil.

Brunei had been a protectorate since 1888, and with a new treaty in September 1959, it attained internal self-government while its defence, internal security and external relations remained in British hands.

However, in the repeated overtures made to the Sultan, who ascended to the throne in 1950, to woo him to join Malaysia, negotiations became very protracted. Speculation was rife that he had an affinity with the royal houses of Malaya and that he might be interested in the prospect of being the next Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

At one stage of the negotiations, the Tunku complained that the Sultan had unfortunately been "evasive ... very evasive".

But other pressures worked against the Sultan joining Malaysia.

The powerful Brunei People's Party (BRP) led by A.M. Azahari opposed the Tunku's idea of Malaysia. In 1962, BRP won overwhelming public endorsement when it swept all the four district council elections, indicating that Malaysia was not well-received in Brunei.

In December, 1962, Azahari's BRP launched an anti-Malaysia armed rebellion in Brunei, which spread through North Bornean towns and Sarawak's border districts. The Sultan denounced the rebellion, and the British rushed in military reinforcements to crush the revolt.

However, the revolt strengthened the Sultan's resolve not to join Malaysia.

Although he went through the motion of conferring with the Tunku on constitutional and financial matters related to Brunei's entry into Malaysia, he decided to consolidate his hold over his kingdom, and did not give in to the Tunku's overtures to join Malaysia.