

The separation of Singapore

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SINGAPORE's separation from the Federation of Malaysia can be traced back to the long drawn out and acrimonious proceedings leading to the 1963 formation of Malaysia.

The seeds of discontent from the disagreements between the two governments sprouted into major crises during the short-lived merger between Singapore and the Federation.

One of the toughest items was related to citizenship provisions that maintained a differentiated citizenship for the people of Singapore and of the Federation.

Political opponents were critical of Singapore leader Lee Kuan Yew because the Tunku was determined not to grant equal Malaysian citizenship rights to Singapore. Singaporeans who were Malaysian citizens could only vote in Singapore and not in Peninsular Malaysia and only for Singapore's 15 seats to the Malaysian Parliament. And only those born in the peninsula could stand for elections in Peninsular Malaysian elections.

Tunku was fearful of the political repercussions in the mainland if he granted the vote to an additional one million Singapore Chinese.

Disputes over tax collection, the sharing of revenues and the common market, on a number of occasions, also threatened to derail the progress towards Malaysia.

Throughout the negotiations, which Lee described as a process of "attrition", both sides bargained hard and gave in little. In the end, a hastily arrived compromise was reached under pressure to have an agreement hammered out before the declaration of Malaysia.

Parallel to these arrangements, negotiations between the British and the Malaysians went on more smoothly and marked the hasty process of decolonisation for Sarawak and North Borneo (now Sabah). They would lead the Borneo colonies to be handed over to the Malaysians so that the Tunku would secure what the British were most interested in achieving: Singapore's merger with the Federation.

On his part, the Tunku, however, made sure he would secure the Borneo territories, which he was most anxious to have before Singapore was reluctantly thrust upon Malaya.

Malaysia was inaugurated on Sept 16, 1963, without Brunei joining, amidst a number of major challenges, most notably hostilities from Indonesia, from

various communist organisations, and from Moscow and Peking.

Already, at that particular moment of Singapore's entry into Malaysia, indications of future trouble between Singaporean and Malaysian leaders were evident. The Malaysia they had all worked hard to bring about was eventually rent with Singapore leaving Malaysia within two years in rather unhappy circumstances.

On Aug 31, 1963, Lee had defiantly declared Singapore's independence. He refused to wait and comply with the Malayan Parliament's decision to proclaim Malaysia on Sept 16 in conjunction with the release of a UN-commission of inquiry's findings on the wishes of the people of Sarawak and North Borneo. In concert with Lee, the two Borneo states followed suit.

These actions infuriated the Tunku's government, as they violated the terms of the Malaysia



First Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra makes the first call over the Malayan Microwave Trunk System to Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, on Sept 26, 1959. On the right is Minister of Works, Posts and Telecommunications Sardon Jubir.

Agreement. Then, on Sept 21, five days after Malaysia's formation, Lee called for general elections in Singapore.

Lee's People's Action Party (PAP) won 37 seats, while 13 seats went to the left-wing Barisan Sosialis, and one seat to another opposition party. The Tunku's Alliance Party, however, failed to win any seats despite personally campaigning in the elections - a bitter blow to him.

The Tunku's participation upset Lee, but the Alliance's defeat was a greater blow to the Tunku who attacked Singapore Malays as "traitors" for not voting the Alliance and Umno. The Tunku did not even congratulate Lee on his electoral victory.

A reversal of fortunes for both parties, however, occurred



Tunku Abdul Rahman and Lee Kuan Yew celebrate the formation of Malaysia in 1963. The Tunku, wears a songkok bearing the words "Hidup Malaysia", is smiling next to a garlanded Lee.

in the April, 1964 elections in Peninsular Malaysia.

For Lee, the election results were "a shock". The PAP fielded 11 candidates and won only one parliamentary seat, while the Alliance won 89 of the 104 seats contested, a landslide victory showing the Malaysian public was solidly behind the Tunku despite Indonesia's "confrontation" of Malaysia.

As the war of words ensued between the Federal and Singapore leaders, inter-ethnic tensions reared in Singapore, with Malays led by Umno leaders demanding special rights, job quotas and special occupancy in government-built housing projects, as in the peninsula.

In July 1964, racial riots broke out in Singapore. Initial media

reports on the number of people killed varied between 22 and 93, while the number of injured was said to be more than 200 and the number of arrested more than 1,100.

The statistical discrepancies arose as the government imposed censorship shortly after the riots.

It was reported that on the day of a PAP-sponsored Malay convention to discuss Malay issues, two people were killed, but the worst rioting began two days later. An incident during a procession of Malays celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday triggered pitched battles between Malays and Chinese.

The Alliance government blamed pro-Indonesian Malay extremist gangs and pro-communist Chinese extremists for starting the riots, while the PAP blamed Malay "ultras" or extremists in Umno for the riots.

Although peace and calm returned, there was a second minor outbreak of racial violence in Singapore within two months, in the same areas in which eight people were reportedly killed and about 60 injured.

On May 8, 1965 Lee organised a big opposition get-together, comprising peninsula and Bornean parties to press for what he called a "Malaysian Malaysia" that sought equality for all races. "The special and legitimate interests of different communities must be secured and promoted within the framework of the collective rights, interests and responsibilities of all races," he declared.

It was a speech Lee made earlier before May 8 that alarmed Federal leaders, making them conclude that he was challenging the "special position" of the Malays. Umno leaders called for Lee's arrest and detention while his effigies were burnt at rallies.

It was largely at that moment that the Tunku felt Malaysia's security was deteriorating daily, and it was that which made him decide on Singapore's separation from Malaysia.

On Aug 7, 1965, both parties signed the separation agreement. It was ratified at an emergency sitting of the Malaysian Parliament, which was hurriedly convened on Aug 9.

In Singapore, at a televised press conference on the same day, Lee said the separation was for him "a moment of anguish". He was so "emotionally affected" he broke down in tears, and the conference was terminated.

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