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Remembering the Merdeka journey

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COMMENT

by Joseph M. Fernando

AS we celebrate 60 years of independence as a sovereign nation on Aug 31 it may be useful to recall some significant elements of that struggle for freedom in the 1950s. While there will be continued debates among scholars as to the prime movers of independence, it is, I think, as important to recognise the broader achievements in that period that greatly shaped the new nation.

One of the most significant achievements of the Merdeka journey was the coming together of all the communities to support the campaign for independence. Without this sense of unity and purpose at a critical juncture in the 1950s, Malaya would certainly not have been granted independence in 1957. The British colonial administration had frequently stated that independence would not be granted without evidence of unity among the races in Malaya.

The colonial records indicate that the British administrators in the immediate post-war period generally felt that Malaya would not be ready for even the grant of self-government for several decades. The security threat emanating from the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) revolt, which began in 1948, had to be resolved before self-government could be seriously considered, they argued. Malcolm MacDonald, the British commissioner-general in Southeast Asia, thought in 1950 that the country would not be ready for independence for another 25 years. Datuk Onn Jaafar, the preminent Malayan politician of the time, however, argued that 15 years was a more reasonable period for the attainment of self-governance.

The moderate constitutional parties arguably led the push for independence in the early 1950s, inspired by the successes of nationalist movements in several Asian countries and in Ghana. The security threat from the MCP had been well contained by the security forces by the early 1950s and the British administration felt confident enough to introduce local elections from 1951. The early successes of the Umno-MCA cooperation in the local elections, beginning with the big win in the 1952 Kuala Lumpur municipal elections, paved the way for the consolidation of the alliance, which was joined by the MIC in late 1954. The year 1953 was a landmark year as the Alliance's Party held its first national convention and raised the stakes and openly pushed the agenda for self-governance and federal elections a notch higher.

Several events were notable turning points in the journey towards independence. It is sometimes forgotten that the Alliance leaders' trip to London in 1954 led by Tunku Abdul Rahman to demand a larger majority

Tunku Abdul Rahman during the proclamation of Independence on Aug 31, 1957 at Stadium Merdeka.



of elected seats in the federal legislature and the subsequent boycott of the federal legislative council and the municipal and town councils by the Alliance helped to speed up the introduction of the first federal election. The British government made some concessions on the composition of the federal legislature following the Alliance boycott, which the party launched after the London trip.

The Alliance leaders risked life and limb in the pursuit of the goal of independence. They were willing to be imprisoned for their struggle. This is something that the younger generation is less aware of. History textbooks in schools do not provide adequate details of this important campaign for independence in the 1950s.

Equally significant, the cross-communal support for the Alliance Party during the first federal election of July 1955 was a critical factor that moved the campaign for independence forward considerably. The Alliance had to win big to obtain a workable majority as only 51 of the 98 seats in the Federal Legislative Council were elected directly. Even a loss of five seats would mean a minority government and a dampening of their independence hopes.

"Independence" was the main thrust of the Alliance manifesto for the 1955 election, which contained important inter-communal political compromises as it promised that the interests of all the races would be safeguarded in the emerging nation.

This was well received by all the races as reflected in the election results. The strong cross-communal support from across the country enabled the Alliance to win 51 of the 52 elected seats. This historic win sealed the Alliance's campaign for independence.

The colonial records show that the British colonial administration had not anticipated the massive Alliance win. The high commissioner did not even make the necessary housing arrangements for the new leader in government until after the election,

or had given serious thought to the position to be conferred on the majority party leader.

Following the landslide win, the Alliance raised the target – they demanded independence in two years. Their election manifesto had originally sought independence in four years but after the inspiring win they felt two years was reasonable. When Tunku and the Alliance leaders met the secretary of state for the Colonies in London in January 1956 to discuss the question of independence, Tunku had a specific date in mind. The Alliance wanted independence to be declared on Aug 31, 1957.

The British government, the records indicate, hesitated for a moment during the talks. The Alliance, however, remained firm on the target date. Eventually, the British government relented. The British government's initial plan was for the grant of full internal self-government, not independence. But the Alliance insisted that they were not returning to Malaya without a firm date for independence in hand; Aug 31, 1957 to be more precise. In the circumstances, the signs were clear and the British government agreed to transfer power to the Alliance government and withdrew from Malaya gracefully.

Malaya's independence was not given on a silver platter. It was hard earned from the sacrifices and risks taken by a generation of Malaysians from all communities who wanted freedom. This was enabled by the support from all the communities in the country. History has shown that when all the communities come together we can overcome any obstacles.

Selamat Merdeka!

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