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UK-MALAYSIA TIES: THEN, NOW AND THE FUTURE



Tunku Abdul Rahman proclaiming independence for Malaya on Aug 31, 1957, at the Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur. FILE PIC

Bilateral relations between countries have stood the test of time

THE month of August bears witness to the commemoration of two diametrically contrasting independence movements, culminating in freedom from British colonial rule.

As the hour of midnight struck on Aug 14, 1947, the partition of British from India became reality when Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of the Congress Party declared India an independent nation free from British colonial rule. A few hours previously, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League had claimed the birth of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan as a homeland of the majority of India's Muslim population.

A sordid and hasty retreat from the British Empire saw a forced two-way migration of populations – Muslims and Hindus – one of the largest in history, culminating in unspeakable acts of brutality and violence on both sides and resulting in over a million deaths.

If it had happened today, the British government would have been hauled in front of the International Court of Justice, charged with genocide and crimes against humanity.

Contrast this with a decade later on the Aug 31, 1957, when at the stroke of midnight, a proud Tunku Abdul Rahman uttered the words “Merdeka” (Independence) seven times at the packed Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur, thus proclaiming Malaya (later to become Malaysia) independent from Britain.

The difference to the chaotic partition of India could not be

more stark – a peaceful transition of power following relatively amiable talks between Malayan leaders and their erstwhile colonial masters.

“Today, a new page is turned,” declared Tunku in his historic address. “And Malaya steps forward to take her rightful place as a free and independent partner in the great comity of nations – a new nation is born and though we fully realise that difficulties and problems lie ahead, we are confident that, with the blessing of God, these difficulties will be overcome and that today's events, down the avenues of history, will be our inspiration and our guide.”

Talking about *Midnight's Children*, it just happens that my wife, Leila, is a “Merdeka baby”, not born on the stroke of midnight but a couple of weeks before independence at the main hospital in Singapore, then part of the Federation of Malaya, but who had grown up in Petaling Jaya and schooled at Alice Smith School in Kuala Lumpur, where her English-born mother was a teacher.

Her father, Shaykh Sir Dr Mohamed Zaki Badawi KBE, OBE, was a prominent Egyptian Azharite scholar, who was despatched to Malaya with fellow Azharite Shaykh Abdul Rauf, to establish a Muslim College that later became Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

In 1956, he moved to Universiti Malaya, then in Singapore, transferring to the Kuala Lumpur campus in Peninsular Malaya, teaching Arabic and Islamic Studies.

His students included scions of Malaya, who later went on to achieve high office in politics, the civil service, academia and business. They include the young Tun Musa Hitam, who went on to become deputy prime minister of Malaysia in the government of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

My wife's earliest post-Merde-

ka recollection, I am afraid, was more mundane albeit befitting a toddler of 28 months – her close affinity to her Aya, who was effectively her surrogate mother who taught her the Malay language, and her usurper newborn sibling Faris, who had suddenly dominated the attention of her parents and visitors alike.

Dr Badawi was endeared to Malaya/Malaysia and contributed inter alia with others to the development of Islamic studies and Islamic finance in the decade after independence.

He, for instance, had cooperated with Royal Professor Ungku Aziz, the prominent Malaysian economist, founder of Angkasa cooperative movement and father of Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz, when she was governor of Bank Negara Malaysia, to establish Lembaga Tabung Haji in 1963.

Ungku Aziz wrote the concept paper for Tabung Haji, while Dr Badawi gave the *fatwa* (legal opinion) endorsing the establishment of the institution. Dr Badawi also cooperated with the Islamic Affairs Department at the Prime Minister's Office, Islamic Development Department and had a close relationship with several Malaysian prime ministers advising them on Muslim affairs especially abroad, and also served on the Syariah Advisory Boards of Bank Negara and Labuan Offshore Financial Services Authority.

Years later, he gave a landmark *fatwa* to Malaysian Islamic bankers endorsing their use of *Bay Al-Dayn* (sale of debt) in transactions. He defended the differences in syariah opinions relating to Islamic financial law, stressing that if Muslims can tolerate variations in the rules governing their relationship to God, then surely they can accept variations in the rules governing financial contracts.

Indeed, one of the countries

that Malaysia has been forging close relations in Islamic finance over the last 35 years is Britain. The two countries have shared a common bond and relationship that first started in the 17th century. But this year's 60th anniversary of Merdeka also marks the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Putrajaya and London.

These relations have had their ups and downs. But, there have been more about spats between friends rather than adversaries.

Malaysia is the United Kingdom's second largest trading partner within Asean, while the UK is Malaysia's fourth largest trading partner within the European Union. UK-Malaysia trade totalled to £2.76 billion (RM15.2 billion) in 2015.

Malaysian investments in the UK amounted to £3.7 billion, while British investments in Malaysia amounted to £3.4 billion. Although the numbers appear positive, they are not reflective of the true potential. Putrajaya aims for bilateral trade to touch £8 billion by 2020.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak poignantly reminded during the visit of then British counterpart David Cameron to Malaysia in 2015: “Economically, culturally and politically, our bilateral relationship has stood the test of time.

“It has done so precisely because our history and our values are so intricately intertwined. Both our countries believe in the power of moderation, the strength of civil liberties, as well as the need to increase prosperity by building open, outward-facing economies.”

There is no reason why Malaysian-UK relations should not stand the test of time for the next 60 years!

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