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The Malaysian idea

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WHEN we come together to celebrate Malaysia Day on Sept 16 each year, what is it that we really celebrate?

Are we celebrating a united nation that has brought all races, regions and religions together to live in apparent harmony? Or are we celebrating the political ingenuity of the then Malayan leaders who successfully executed the idea of what essentially was greater Malaya?

Throughout our relatively short history, there has always existed the tension between administrative control from the central government and the autonomy exercised by individual states.

In fact, up to the 1940s, there was no strong nationalist sentiment towards Malaya, and Malays thought of themselves as belonging to their own states like Selangor, Pahang, Kelantan, and so on, rather than to Malaya.

It was therefore no surprise when the Kelantan state government opposed the formation of Malaysia in 1963; they even filed a case against the Government of the Federation of Malaya and Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman to call for the Malaysia Act to be declared as null and void, or, alternatively that it was not binding on

Kelantan. However, they lost the case as the court ruled that Parliament acted within its constitutional power.

Sabah and Sarawak were even more cautious in their agreement to form Malaysia. The Cobbold Commission of Inquiry was set up to determine whether the people of North Borneo (Sabah today) and Sarawak supported the proposal to create the Federation of Malaysia, where only one-third of the population was reported to be strongly in favour of Malaysia.

The remaining two-thirds were either concerned with safeguards and conditions, and either wanted to achieve independence first or remain under British rule for the time being.

In short, the reaction from Sabah and Sarawak was rather mixed. The two states submitted proposals for inclusion into the Malaysia Agreement, which are known today as the 18-point and 20-point agreements respectively for Sarawak and Sabah.

While some points were incorporated eventually into the amended Federal Constitution (such as the point on the special position of indigenous races), others were not.

Another source of unhappiness was that a new constitution was not in fact drafted for Malaysia as a new country; instead, the existing Constitution of the Federation of Malaya 1957 was merely amended. It was felt that if a new country was being born in 1963, why was there not a new constitution being

introduced alongside its birth?

Suffice to say that Malaysia was formed under rather tense conditions, possibly under less hopeful circumstances than during Malaya's independence celebrations just six years earlier.

Even the inclusion of Singapore (which, as we now know, left the Federation in 1965, two short years after Malaysia was formed) was partly due to the Tunku's fear that the communists had a growing stronghold on Singapore - bringing it into the Malaysian fold would partly contain any insurgency that would otherwise spill over into Malaya.

The common concern felt and expressed by individual states in Peninsular Malaysia, East Malaysia and even Singapore was that there would emerge excessive control from the central government, which would erode their own autonomy.

Nevertheless, this was an experiment that was considerably bold. Malaysia was - and is - certainly well placed within the region to establish itself as an economic and trading powerhouse, flush with natural resources, and inheriting infrastructure like roads and schools that the British had left behind. It was a formula that had all the right ingredients.

As we celebrate Malaysia's 54th year of being, one wonders about this idea of Malaysia: was it the best solution, and have there been sufficient safeguards to protect the interests of all states that formed the nation?

Tunku Abdul Rahman's speech on Sept 16,

1963 admits that "The road to nationhood has not been an easy journey. Surprises and disappointments, tensions and crises, have marred the way". That Malaysia was born in a time of uncertainty seems to be evident.

But then he goes on to say that "Now finally the peoples of Malaysia are celebrating the establishment of Malaysia. This is the time to think earnestly and hopefully on the future of Malaysia as the whole country resounds with joy".

States have always been wary of central government powers from the very beginning of Malayan history.

In an age where our neighbouring countries are promoting greater decentralisation for improved governance, the federal government could consider devolving additional powers to states. To see the Malaysian idea truly flourish and not fail, this would be a wise path to take.

The views expressed are the writer's and the Sun does not necessarily agree with or endorse them. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com

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