

The campaign for Merdeka
The Star Online
11 June 2007
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As we mark 50 years of Merdeka, *The Star* looks back at those who played major roles in the road to independence and to building a new nation in a series of articles entitled **Founding Fathers**.

TO THIS day, the historical documentation of the independence movement and the process of gaining Merdeka remains a contentious area of debate among scholars. The role of political parties, individuals, organisations and developments in Britain that impacted the decolonisation process are still being critically evaluated.

Datuk Onn Jaafar, for example, is often referred to as *Pengasas Kemerdekaan*, or the “Initiator of Independence”. First Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, on the other hand, is fondly referred to as *Bapa Kemerdekaan* or “Father of Independence” for his prominent role in the independence struggle.

Invariably, even the origins of the independence movement are a point of debate. It would be difficult to identify a precise date (or place) and there are varying interpretations on the origins of the independence movement.

Some contend that the seeds of the movement can be traced to the Second World War when after the defeat of the colonial power, nationalist groups were given a greater role in the Japanese administration.

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Historic pact: (From left) Tunku Abdul Rahman, first Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Rahman and MacGillivray standing outside King’s House in Kuala Lumpur aftersigning the Merdeka

Agreement on Aug 5, 1957.

This, it is sometimes argued, allowed for the growth of strong anti-colonial tendencies and sowed the seeds of the nationalist movement.

Others point to the Malayan Union protests in 1946 as an important turning point in the rise of nationalism. Yet others argue that the process is more discernible in the post-1948 period, particularly after the introduction of local elections in 1951.

Amid these interesting debates, a closer examination of recently available historical evidence indicates that the independence movement is more “visible” following the introduction of local elections in 1951.

The contest for political power resulted in a transformation in the thinking of the competing political parties and an organised mass nationalist movement began to emerge.

More precisely, it can be argued that 1953 was an important turning point in the emergence of a more organised and coherent mass independence movement in Malaya.

While the earlier stirrings of nationalism were clearly anti-imperial in nature, they did not focus on independence.

The Malayan Union protests in 1946, for example, were centred on two specific issues: the Malay Rulers’ loss of sovereignty and the new citizenship regulations.

The rallying cry of the newly formed United Malays National Organisation (Umno) was *Hidup Melayu* (Long Live the Malays), and not Merdeka.

Following the agreement reached between the British colonial administration and Umno, and the implementation of the Federation of Malaya Agreement on Feb 1, 1948, the political crisis was neutralised and a sense of normality returned.

By late 1951, the communist revolt that broke out in June 1948 – and posed a serious threat to the colonial administration – was very much contained.

The Communist Party of Malaya, recent research indicates, had shifted its strategy following its October Resolution adopted in 1951, and the armed struggle was relegated to second priority. Its direct impact on the independence movement was arguably marginal.

In these circumstances, the parties which chose the path of constitutional struggle to achieve independence largely determined the pace and pattern of the movement towards self-government.

Constitutional reforms took priority in the agenda of the nationalist movements. The 1948 constitution was a colonial constitution where political power was largely concentrated in the hands of the High Commissioner who was the chief executive of the Federation.

While the British government had promised in the 1948 agreement that elections would be held “as soon as circumstances and local conditions permit,” they were not really keen to move on this issue and even underestimated the strength of the nationalist movement.

Malcolm MacDonald, the Commissioner-General for South-East Asia, for example, had estimated in 1950 that it would take another 25 years before Malaya would be ready for self-government.

British plans clearly envisaged a long period of mandated rule. The colonial administration justified their position by arguing that the Emergency had to be ended before the idea of independence could be seriously considered.

Umno-MCA alliance

Following the introduction of local elections in December 1951, a transformation began to take place among the political parties. In this sense, the Kuala Lumpur Municipal elections in February 1952 were a watershed compared to the George Town elections of 1951.

Two important political movements emerged during the Kuala Lumpur elections to champion the nationalist movement, following the banning of leftist parties after the communist revolt. The first was the “alliance” reached between Umno and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) in January 1952 to jointly contest the Kuala Lumpur elections.

The second was the non-communal Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) headed by Datuk Onn Jaafar. The founding leader of Umno had left the party in 1951 to set up the IMP following Umno’s refusal to open its membership to non-Malays. This keen political rivalry continued in the local elections in 1952 and 1953 as elections were introduced in several major towns.

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Early stirrings of nationalism: Plenary Conference of The Constitutional Proposals for Malaya meeting being held in the dining room of King's House, Kuala Lumpur, on Nov 20, 1946 between the Governor-General, the Governor of the Malayan Union, the Rulers of the Malay States, and Umno. On Nov 22, MacDonald flew to London to present and discuss the constitutional proposals with the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

By early 1953, it was clear that the Umno-MCA Alliance had swept all the local elections inflicting heavy defeats on the IMP. The electoral success of the Alliance, however, did not see a corresponding increase in its political powers. The fully nominated Federal Legislative Council was still dominated by IMP leaders and supporters.

In early 1953, the Alliance leaders, being disillusioned with their political status quo, decided to raise the stakes and pushed more aggressively for self-government. Alliance leader Tunku Abdul Rahman, for example, told the Federal Legislative Council in March 1953: "People in the country, I feel, would like to see a thorough overhaul in the system of representation to the councils and, in particular, the Legislative Council." The first step was to demand that the colonial administration introduce elections to the wholly nominated Federal Legislative Council.

On March 17, 1953, the Alliance announced that Umno and MCA had reached agreement on the question of federal elections following a series of meetings. The Alliance also announced that they would be holding a national convention of all parties to discuss steps to speed up the process towards independence.

In the blueprint issued by the Alliance, the coalition demanded that 44 of the 75 seats in the Federal Legislative Council be chosen through direct elections and the remaining 31 seats be filled by nominations.

In essence, the Alliance was asking that at least 60% of seats in the council be elected through popular vote. This shocked the IMP leaders and brought a swift response.

Barely two days later, the IMP leaders announced their own plans to hold a national conference to discuss the creation of “a united, free and self-governing Malayan nation.” This contest saw the intervention of the colonial administration, which announced on July 15, 1953, its plans to set up a committee to discuss the question of federal elections.

This committee, which included representatives from the IMP and the Alliance (the majority being pro-IMP supporters), announced its findings on Feb 1, 1954, recommending that less than half the members of the Federal Legislative Council be elected; that is, 44 out of the 92 members.

High Commissioner Sir Gerald Templer himself was a little surprised by the committee’s recommendations and persuaded the Malay Rulers that a small majority of elected seats (eventually fixed at 52 out of 98 seats) would be more appropriate.

The Alliance leaders later wrote to Templer urging him to provide for at least a 60% majority, which they argued was needed by any party that hopes to govern the country smoothly. Templer refused to entertain the request.

The Alliance then decided to send a delegation to London to raise the issue directly with the Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs Oliver Lyttelton. Some of the money for this historic trip to London came from public donations.

Initially, Lyttelton was reluctant to meet the Alliance delegation because of “constitutional impropriety”. He only agreed to the meeting following the intervention of Lord Ogmores (the British MP formerly known as David Rees-Williams who visited Malaya during the height of the Malayan Union protests).

Lyttelton, however, was not convinced by the arguments for a 60% majority in the legislature and to hold the elections in 1954. He wrote to Templer on May 15: “My impression of the delegation is that they are three worried little men (referring to Tunku, Datuk Abdul Razak and T.H. Tan) and on evidence of their attitude I should doubt whether they will in fact press their opposition to their present proposals by the extreme measures they have threatened ? I am quite determined not to budge from our present position.”

Lyttelton had given Tunku a letter detailing his reply and told Tunku not to open it until he was in the plane.

Tunku's challenge

On their return to Malaya, the Alliance held an emergency meeting on May 24 to discuss their next course of action. Tunku wrote to Lyttelton expressing his disappointment

over the refusal to meet the demands of the Alliance: "His Majesty's Government insists that 52 elected to 46 appointed will give the victorious party at the election sufficient majority to run the government? we consider that this majority of six is insufficient to enable the victorious party to have a working majority to run the government. No responsible party will willingly form a government in these circumstances."

The Alliance meeting agreed to withdraw their demands if Lyttelton was willing to set up an independent commission to examine the Federation of Malaya Agreement to consider reforms. If this failed, the Alliance decided it would carry out a boycott of the government and withdraw all its representatives from the legislature and municipal and town councils.

At a special meeting of Alliance leaders, Tunku posed a challenge to his colleagues. As related by Harry Miller, he told the meeting: "Our withdrawal (from official posts) may mean serious trouble for some of us. I am prepared to go to gaol if necessary to achieve our aims. How many of you are prepared to do the same?" All the Alliance leaders responded unequivocally in the affirmative.

Secretary of State Lyttelton refused the Alliance's request to set up an independent commission. On June 13, 1954, the Alliance decided to go ahead with their boycott after the government published its White Paper outlining its plans to introduce federal elections with the bare majority. The Alliance withdrew its officials from the legislatures, municipal and town councils and organised nationwide demonstrations. They also obtained the support of the Malay Rulers.

With several demonstrations taking place and several more planned, the situation in Malaya became tense and the British administration was very worried. Initially, British High Commissioner Sir Donald MacGillivray advised the Colonial Office to hold their position. But when the atmosphere became more tense, decided to negotiate with Alliance.

At a meeting held on warship *HMS Alert* off the coast of Johor Baru, MacGillivray agreed to the Alliance's proposal that the five nominated seats, usually appointed by the High Commissioner, be decided by the majority party. This would mean that if the Alliance secured a majority it would have five extra seats. More importantly, this meant that the Alliance was able to extract from the British its demand of a 60% majority.

In the first federal elections held in July 1955, the Alliance, which was now joined by the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), won 51 of the 52 seats and formed the first locally-elected government. But their battles were far from over.

A month after the elections when the Tunku, as the newly-elected Chief Minister, met the Secretary of State Alan Lennox-Boyd in Kuala Lumpur, he urged the latter to

discontinue the veto powers of the High Commissioner and to set up an independent commission to draw up a new constitution for the country to prepare for independence. Tunku told Lennox-Boyd that the Alliance had promised the people independence in the 1955 election campaign and it was appropriate to discuss the issue.

Lennox-Boyd was a little hesitant and invited the Alliance leaders to London to discuss the issues together with others he had in mind. He ticked off the Alliance for its preoccupation over independence. But the alliance was not deterred.

The London Conference in January 1956 discussed a range of issues including internal security, defence, the civil service and finance as part of the eventual transfer of power. The official documents relating to the negotiations reveal that the Colonial Office was only planning to offer “full internal self-government” rather than independence.

But the Alliance remained firm. Two days after the conference began, the position of the British government shifted and they agreed to grant Malaya independence on Aug 31, 1957.

Malaya’s independence was not given on a silver platter. It was a hard-earned victory secured by the Alliance through a mixture of persuasion and coercion. Tunku’s able leadership was a significant factor in the turn of events. He planned, strategised and orchestrated the Alliance’s campaign for independence.

The independence negotiations were conducted directly between the Alliance and the British government. The British recognised after the July 1955 federal elections that the tide had turned somewhat and decided to withdraw gracefully.

The Alliance’s push for independence that began earnestly in 1953 was rewarded barely four years later. On Aug 31, 1957, Malaya took its place alongside other independent and sovereign nations in the world.

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