Then the Lights Went Out
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At the formal opening of the Manila meeting last week, Philippines President Diosdado Macapagal heaped praise upon his two guests. He hailed Indonesia's fun-loving President Sukarno as a "great leader" and paid tribute to the "stabilizing influence in Asia" of Malaya's Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, who hopes, on Aug. 31, to preside over the birth of Malaysia, a merger of Malaya with Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo. Macapagal went on: "The question in the minds of many is, 'Will this conference succeed—?' " At that moment the power failed, out went the lights, off went the microphones and air conditioning. It looked like a sign.

Referendum Demand. At first the three leaders seemed to ignore ill omens. Next morning at Malacanang Palace, Sukarno said he had gone to bed early. Then he winked, "But that doesn't mean I went to sleep early." Macapagal and the Tunku roared with laughter. Getting down to business, the three leaders swiftly approved the principle of a loose association of the future Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, to be known, by syllabic fusion, as Maphilindo. But then came the blow from Sukarno, who has long opposed Malaysia, has only lately and reluctantly accepted the idea. Sukarno insisted on a full-scale referendum in Sarawak and North Borneo before Malaysia comes into existence, to "ascertain" whether these territories really want the federation. They plainly do, but Sukarno just wanted to throw his weight around. He was supported, halfheartedly, by Macapagal, since the Philippines has a shadowy legal claim to certain parts of North Borneo and a referendum would offer a face-saving way of abandoning the claim.

The man who was supposed to do the ascertaining, the U.N.'s already overburdened Secretary-General U Thant, was also thinking in terms of a referendum, which would take at least four weeks and might require a mandate from the General Assembly. All this could push the Malaysia timetable from late August until November. The British government applied some needed stiffening to Tunku's back by telling him bluntly that they were pulling their troops out of Sarawak and North Borneo on schedule, thereby opening both territories to possible Indonesian infiltration and terrorism.

Blithe Unconcern. By week's end tempers were rising in Manila. The Tunku pointedly reminded Sukarno that he had taken over West Irian without a plebiscite and that the legislatures of North Borneo and Sarawak had passed resolutions in favor of the new federation. No man to be troubled by inconsistencies, Sukarno nevertheless demanded his referendum. Only the soothing presence of Macapagal prevented a walkout by the Tunku.

Failing to reach a decision, the meeting went on into this week, with indications that a compromise might emerge. U Thant was reported ready to visit the Borneo territories, without waiting for General Assembly approval, and prepared to make his "ascertainment" without a formal referendum. Sukarno, switching from intransigence to blithe unconcern, took time off to collect an honorary degree (his 21st) from the University of the Philippines, to pursue a pretty Malayan correspondent, and to demonstrate for photographers the intricacies of the lenso, a sort of static Indonesian twist.

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