

# The Malayan Union and its impact

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by Dr Cheah Boon Kheng

THE Malayan Union, which the British Labour Government inaugurated in post-war Malaya on April 1, 1945, lasted slightly more than two years. Although it was a shortlived constitutional experiment, it led to dramatic political developments.

In present-day Malaysian history textbooks, the Malayan Union is regarded as having awakened political activity, and heightened ethnic consciousness and nationalism among the peninsula's different ethnic groups. For the Malays, their opposition to the Malayan Union led to the birth of the United Malays National Organisation or Umno – which was inaugurated on May 11, 1946 in Johor Baru – and the emergence of Datuk Onn Jaafar as its first president.

Umno obtained support from all strata of Malay society in opposing the Malayan Union – the aristocrats, the radical Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (Malay Nationalist Party or MNP), Islamic groups, civil servants, rural leaders like the penghulus (village heads), and even the police and ex-service personnel.

Umno opposed the Malayan Union because it restricted the Malay rulers' powers and Malay special privileges, and granted citizenship and equal rights to non-Malays who qualified on birth, residential and other terms.

Umno demanded a return to the prewar political structures, set up in the Malay states according to treaties signed with the Malay rulers under which the British "protected" the Malay states and advised the rulers in all matters except Islam and Malay customs.

The protests and demonstrations against the Malayan Union saw Malay women breaking tradition by joining marches and carrying placards. Many Malays wrapped white cloth around their songkok (cap) as a symbol of mourning. Umno urged Malay civil servants to boycott the Malayan Union government by refusing to carry out any work. Also at Umno's urging, the Malay rulers boycotted Sir Edward Gent's inauguration as Malayan Union governor.

Non-Malays were also prompted to fight for their rights, and organised political parties such as the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) and the Malayan Democratic Union, which came under an umbrella organisation – the All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA) – headed by prominent Chinese leader Tan Cheng Lock.

Several trade unions and women's groups aligned with the then semi-legal Communist Party of Malaya also joined the AMCJA.

For the first time, politics during the Malayan Union led to the formation of a multi-racial alliance between the non-Malay AMCJA and the Malay-based Pusat Tenaga Raayat (Putera), a coalition under the MNP's leadership that comprised its youth and women wings, and Malay cultural bodies.

Dr Burhanuddin Al-Helmy became Putera-AMCJA president, with Tan as deputy president.

This followed the MNP's departure from Umno over differences regarding Umno's flag. The MNP decided to team up with the AMCJA to fight for an independent United Malaya with equal citizenship for all, and an elected Parliament in which the Malay rulers would become constitutional monarchs.

The coalition's parties also agreed that Malay would be the national language, and all citizens would be known as "Melayu" nationals.

The proposed "Melayu" nationality was controversial, but it was quite different from bangsa Melayu and was not a racial but a national identity. The Malays opposed the term "Malayan" because it was associated with the Malayan Union, so Putera's non-Malay partners agreed not to use it. At the same time, the term "Malaysian" did not yet exist.

The AMCJA-Putera "People's Constitution" which incorporated these points was a blueprint for Malaya's future.

Many observers were surprised that Chinese and pro-communist groups were willing to make such major concessions to accommodate the MNP's Malay nationalism, and equally surprised that the MNP was willing to accept

non-Malays as equal citizens if they demonstrated their loyalty to Malaya. However, the British government rejected the AMCJA-Putera proposals, and decided to concede instead to the demands of Umno and the Malay rulers. The British were not yet ready to grant self-government and independence and attempted to negotiate a deal that would not endanger its political, economic and military interests.

Umno and the Malay rulers had taken up their grievances with the Colonial Office in London by writing petitions to British members of Parliament and waging a public relations campaign.

They received support from prominent former British government officers like Sir Richard Winstedt and Sir Frank Swettenham.

The British finally agreed to the Malay demands for the return of sovereignty to the Malay rulers, and a tightening of citizenship laws for Chinese, Indians and others. In return, Umno and the Malay rulers agreed to the British proposal to set up the Federation of Malaya as a mutually acceptable frame of government to replace the Malayan Union.

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An Anti-Malayan Union demonstration. Malaysia in Penang.