



*Malaysiaku Gemilang*

## Founding Fathers

A weekly series

By JOSEPH M. FERNANDO

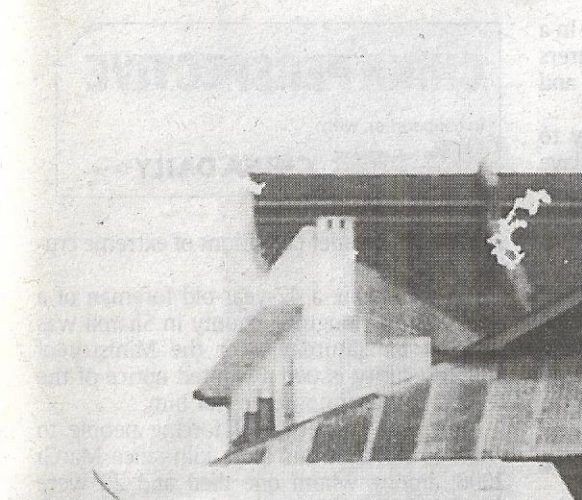
**H**E IS perhaps best known for organising nation-wide protests against the colonial Malayan Union scheme in 1946 that culminated in the formation of Umno in May that year. Nevertheless, Datuk Onn Jaafar (1895-1962) remains an enigma.

Scholars of history are still scrutinising the life of this pre-eminent political leader of the post-war period to decipher his thoughts and actions. His political ideas varied considerably from the time he led the Malayan Union protests to the

# The rebel in Onn Jaafar

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Datuk Onn Jaafar remains an interesting subject for the study of the politics and leadership of this country during its formative years.



»It is time for us to take the view wider than the kampung view. I ask of you, which will you choose? Peace or chaos, friendship or enmity?«

DATUK ONN JAAFAR

formation of the independence of Malaya Party (IMP) in 1951 and, later, the Party Negara.

One may well ask: was he a Malay nationalist or a Malayan nationalist, or a blend of both? The answer could well depend on the period being examined.

There is some consensus that Onn contributed significantly to the growth and development of the independence movement. Some scholars refer to him as *Pengasas Kemerdekaan* (The Initiator of Independence).

While he was not alone in the mass "revolt" orchestrated by several leaders against the Malayan Union constitution, his role in the movement was clearly dominant.

Onn was in a sense a rebel of his age and some of his ideas were perhaps a little ahead of time. He stood up to what he felt was an exploitative colonial regime that was holding on to its control over Malaya.

He also spoke out against what he perceived as inconsiderate palace politics in his home state of Johor – an action that would be deemed unusual in traditional Malay society. In the second instance, he was forced into exile for a period of time (1927-1936) in Singapore.

Onn's political ideas were influenced by his early experiences and liberal education he received in Britain and at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK).

His induction to politics can be said to have started in the pre-war period in the 1920s and particularly in the 1930s when he edited several Malay newspapers.

In his writings, he sought to instil a sense of national consciousness



**Pre-eminent leader:** Datuk Onn speaking at the ceremony to raise the Umno flag for the first time in Kluang, Johor, in 1946. — Picture courtesy of National Archives

among the Malays, moving away from the traditional state-centred identities. His writings reflected a sense of disillusionment with the colonial administration, particularly over the plight of the Malays, and at times with the Johor state authorities.

It was in the immediate post-war period that Onn became pre-eminent in national politics. When the contents of the Malayan Union

became clear, he urged the Malay organisations to resist the scheme. The Malay rulers' loss of sovereignty and the perceived liberal citizenship requirements were the objects of this protest movement.

This resulted in the meeting of the Malay Congress held between March 1 and 4, 1946, at the Sultan Sulaiman Club in Kuala Lumpur. The congress was attended by 39 Malay

organisations.

A new party, Umno, was formed on May 11 in Johor Baru and Onn Jaafar was elected its leader. Taken aback by the strong Malay protests, the British begun negotiations with Umno leaders in June 1946 to find an acceptable solution to the objections to the Malayan Union. The outcome of these negotiations was the signing of the Federation of Malaya

Agreement in 1948.

Following the signing of the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948, there appears to be a shift in Onn's political position from a narrow communal stance to a more inclusive approach.

### **Inclusive politics**

This approach remained the basis of Onn's political struggles. He constantly urged the Malays to adopt a wider political outlook. For example, in a speech on May 29, 1949, he urged the Malays to be less parochial: "It is absolutely important for the Malays to obtain closer ties with the other people in this country. It is time for us to take the view wider than the kampung view. I ask of you, which will you choose? Peace or chaos, friendship or enmity?"

Onn realigned Umno's objectives towards the issues of self-governance and independence and a greater accommodation with the domiciled non-Malays. He persuaded the party to change its slogan of *Hidup Melayu* (Long Live the Malays) to *Merdeka* (Independence) in June 1951.

He told the Umno General Assembly in June 1951: "Umno's objective is independence ... independence of the whole country. This cannot be achieved unless there is unity with the other races who are prepared to owe full allegiance to Malaya."

His change of attitude and approach from his Malayan Union days was influenced by the political realities of the period and to an

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