

# Malaya's early freedom fighters

7. Sun pg. 12  
12.7.07

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**W**HEN the Union Jack was lowered for the last time on the various territories of Malaya, it marked the end of just over a hundred years of British dominance in the country's affairs even though its influence had been felt much longer than that.

Britain took Penang by conquest in 1786. It then obtained Malacca and Singapore by treaties. In 1867, these three territories became the crown colony of the Straits Settlements. To its imperial crown was later added Labuan.

Sarawak and Sabah became British colonies after World War II in 1946. They were previously under the loose suzerainty of the Sultan of Brunei who gave trader James Brooke and a British trading company administrative rights.

The British Chartered Company's attempt to bring the different territorial and tribal chiefs of North Borneo, the area that is now Sabah, under one central administration was resisted every step of the way. One serious challenge was the uprising led by Mat Salleh.

Beginning in 1874, Britain imposed what it called its indirect rule in Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang, collectively called the Federated Malay States (FMS) in 1896. If anything, the rule through the various state British Residents, who were ostensibly

advisers to the sultans, was more direct than indirect.

In Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Johor, collectively referred to as the Unfederated Malay States (UMS), the various sultans exercised slightly more independence even though they each had a British adviser.

Exercising control over the various entities was the Singapore-based governor of the Straits Settlements. In the FMS, he was high commissioner.

After the war, the British grouped together the Straits Settlements, the FMS and the UMS as one colony which they called Malayan Union. It was shortlived.

Following mass opposition throughout the country, the entity, sans Singapore, became the Federation of Malaya instead.

Generally, British imperial power was hardly challenged. Through the clever use of threat, persuasion and advice, Britain was able to dominate the whole country with just

a small military and police presence.

Still, it was occasionally challenged. From time to time, its small police force, spread thinly throughout the country, was called together to deal with uprisings to overthrow foreign rule in the fight for independence and freedom.

## Dol Said of Naning

**T**hough not much is heard about him or mentioned in history books, the first man who really fought to be free from British rule and to



James Brooke's house in Kuching.

be left alone to administer his own little territory was Penghulu Dol Said of Naning.

He refused to submit his collection of *mukims* (provinces) in Malacca to British rule and in 1832, war broke out. Never was such a force ever assembled by the British to bring just one recalcitrant *penghulu* (chief) to heel.

Thousands of men from various parts of the country, Singapore and India were assembled with all kinds of equipment and armoury to arrest Dol Said. Hundreds of bullock carts were used to transport equipment. Progress through the narrow village footpaths was slow and along the way to Tabuh, the main settlement of Naning, Dol Said had his men set all kinds of booby traps and ambush to discourage the expedition.

In the end, Dol Said was captured, but only after being betrayed by a lieutenant. It was the costliest war ever fought by the colonial power to maintain its prestige and dominance in Malaya.

## Datuk Maharaja Lela

**I**n 1875, another huge British force, including soldiers from India and Hongkong, was assembled because the "natives" had actually dared to lay hands on an official of the British monarch: Resident J.W.W. Birch.

Maharaja Lela of Pasir Salak, seen as the uprising's principle leader, and a few other chiefs, decided that one year of British involvement in Perak's affairs, especially one year of Birch - a Victorian disciplinarian - was more

Ishak  
Muhammad.



Ibrahim  
Haji Yaacob.



Datuk Ahmad Boestaman.



than they could tolerate. The British, especially Birch, who was seen as increasingly interfering in local traditions and customs, had to go.

The presence of the British force after Birch's killing was to demonstrate the imperial power's might to deter future challenges to colonial rule. It was a reminder of the immense power behind each British official.

When the force from India and Hongkong arrived, the 150 or so local sepoys had already completed their task of putting down the uprising and capturing the principle leaders, among them Maharaja Lela and his neighbour from across the Perak river, Datuk Sagor.

The huge force remained on standby in Perak until after a commission determined what happened, tried those arrested, and hanged the ones found to be directly involved in Birch's killing.

### Datuk Bahaman, Tok Gajah and Mat Kilau

In Pahang, the British were not actually welcomed with open arms when they moved in and installed a resident there in 1888. A year later, a full-scale rebellion led by the territorial chief of Semantan, Datuk Bahaman, or Orang Kaya Semantan, broke out.

His complaint was that he was losing independence and losing revenue as he could no longer collect taxes, and hence, had diminished dignity and respect. He complained to the sultan that the British had no right to impose their will on Pahang

and its people.

A number of other chiefs, among them Tok Gajah and his son Mat Kilau, concurred with him. Fighting broke out after the British decided to send officers and the police to arrest them.

The rebels attacked police stations and seized guns and ammunition. The success of these attacks encouraged thousands of people to join Orang Kaya Semantan. At the rebellion's height in 1892, the British could not be sure whether the sultan was also encouraging the rebels.

The British sent in more people after the rebel leaders and by the year end, most of them fled the state with soldiers and the police in hot pursuit. Many, like Mat Kilau, fled to Kelantan. Mat Kilau surfaced in 1970, but nothing more was heard of the others.

### Tok Janggut

In Kelantan, nearly all the chiefs resented the imposition of a British adviser in the state's administration. In particular, the opening of district offices in their territories meant the end of their independence.

Because it was done in the sultan's name, most of the chiefs accepted the move without demur.

But not the Pasir Putih chief, a popular and much-respected man. When he



Mat Kilau.



Tok Janggut was killed in a fight with the British on June 25, 1915 in Pasir Putih, Kelantan.

raised the flag of rebellion in 1915, his people rallied behind him.

Another rebellion leader who was always at the forefront of the fighting was Mat Hassan. He had just returned from Mecca and was deemed a religious person.

He was reverently called Tok Janggut, not just because of his white beard, but because of his age - about 60 - and his quiet demeanour. It was said that he was nearly 1.8m tall.

When he and his followers refused to pay taxes, the district office sent a sergeant to arrest him. There is some confusion over what actually happened but the sergeant was stabbed in the chest by Tok Janggut.

Full-scale fighting broke out after Tok Janggut and his followers sacked Pasir Putih and burnt down the district office. Many others joined him, heeding his call that they were fighting in the cause of Islam against the infidel British, but not against the sultan.

As fighting spread and threatened the safety of the Europeans who were opening up plantations in the state, more and more police officers were sent out to arrest him and some of the other rebellion leaders.

Tok Janggut was finally shot and killed, and his body taken to Kota Baru where it was put on public display and later ordered by the sultan to be strung up, upside down, for four hours.

### Teachers and writers

The end of violent anti-British uprisings did not mean the end of anti-colonial sentiments among Malaysians. They were kept alive by debates and discussions by teachers especially from the Sultan Idris Training College

(SITC), established in the 1920s and considered the crucible of political consciousness.

There were also the writers and journalists who wrote in magazines and newspapers such as *Neraca*, *Al-Ikwan*, *Majlis* and *Saudara* who reminded readers they were still colonised.

Among these were Ibrahim Haji Yaacob (an SITC graduate), Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy, Ishak Muhammad and Datuk Ahmad Boestaman. Through their writings, the nationalistic spirit was kept alive.

In 1937, a group of graduates from SITC and the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar formed a socio-political organisation called *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM). It was patterned on the reformist Young Turks movement led by Turkey's Kemal Ataturk and followed in the footsteps of similar movements in Indonesia.

Its latent goals were freedom and independence from British rule, but outwardly it appeared reformist and radical.

Following the Japanese invasion, most of the KMM leaders were arrested by the British in Singapore for allegedly receiving funds from the Japanese Consulate in exchange for acting as guides and interpreters during the offensive.

After Singapore fell, these leaders were freed by the Japanese and cooperated with their military administration. The Japanese, however, refused to entertain demands for independence and disbanded the KMM.

Upon Japan's defeat, the British yet again detained some KMM leaders for collaborating with the Japanese, but KMM chief Ibrahim Yaacob escaped to Indonesia where he lived in exile.

INFORMATION MINISTRY



# The Malayan Union and its Impact

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.

## Umno founder Onn Jaafar



DATUK Onn Jaafar (1898-1962) was the son of a former Johor Mentri Besar and became well known before World War II as a fearless newspaper editor with outspoken views. He clashed publicly with Sultan Ibrahim of Johor over several issues, and for this, he was exiled to Singapore for a few years.

## Radical reforms under the Malayan Union

THE Malayan Union scheme, which the British drafted in London during World War II, comprised a set of radical reforms that attempted to inculcate a sense of nationhood while at the same time, alter the country's pre-war political structure.