

# The Malayan Union and its impact

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**T**HE 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 short-lived 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 pre-war 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



An anti-Malayan Union caricature



Umno founder Datuk Onn Jaafar was a keen writer.

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



Tun Tan Cheng Lock, eventually founded MCA.

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.

# Father of **Malay** nationalism

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**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.

After a few years, he was pardoned and returned to Johor, where he spent most of his life in government service, rising to become mentri besar in 1946. While holding this post, which he relinquished in 1950, again over disagreements with Sultan Ibrahim, he initiated the formation of the United Malays National Organisation or Umno.

In 1946, when Britain announced the formation of the Malayan Union, which restricted the Malay rulers' sovereignty and Malay special privileges, Onn wrote a letter to the Malay newspapers inviting 41 Malay associations throughout the peninsula to attend the Pan-Malayan Congress on March 1, 1946 to coordinate protests against the Malayan Union.

The congress decided to form a national organisation to protect Malay interests, and elected Onn as its first president.

Onn decided to call the organisation the United Malays National Organisation because he thought the name spelt unity, similar to that of the United Nations Organisation (UNO) which had just been formed in 1945. Umno has remained the organisation's popular name instead of its Malay name, *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu*.

Onn's achievement in Umno's formation can be understood only when it is realised that no single unified pan-Malayan nationalist movement



Umno Youth delegates in this picture taken in February, 1951.

nationalism”.

It was during Umno's campaign against the Malayan Union that he led its rallies and demonstrations throughout the peninsula and emerged as a skilled orator. He articulated the Malays' sense of nationalism so well that most Malays found at least some of their ideals in his thinking.

Although a volatile personality, given to temper tantrums, he was nevertheless charismatic, brimming with ideas and confidence, and initiated a Malay boycott of the British administration and invented the popular slogan, "*Hidup Melayu!*" or "Long Live the Malays!".

He persuaded the Malay rulers to turn their backs on the "unjust treaties" surrendering their sovereignty and Malay special privileges, which they had signed with Sir Harold MacMichael, the British

After Umno and the Malay rulers succeeded in persuading the British administration to rescind the Malayan Union, Onn emerged as the Malays' undisputed leader until he resigned in 1951 as Umno president over the party's refusal to accept his suggestion to open its doors to non-Malays.

He had come to believe that the only route to independence would be through the creation of a multi-ethnic party.

He would have led Malaya to independence and become Malaya's first prime minister if he had





Onn addresses an Umno general assembly for the last time as its president. Next to him is Tunku Abdul Rahman, who succeeded Onn.



Umno founder Onn Jaafar was unrelenting in opposing the Malayan Union.

An advertisement found in a booklet published by Grenier touting British Malaya as 'The Land of Opportunity'. For many, that promise came true.



an Union

# Radical reforms under the Malayan Union

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**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.

The proposals, outlined in a government White Paper, were presented to the British Parliament in January 1946 following the return to London of the government's special representative, Sir Harold MacMichael, after he had successfully concluded with each Malay ruler an agreement which transferred full jurisdiction to the British Crown.

Firstly, the scheme consolidated into one single entity all the former nine Federated and Unfederated Malay States together with the British Straits Settlements of Malacca and Penang but excluded Singapore, which became a separate colony. The latter was detached because of its strategic importance and its mainly Chinese population, which would upset the population balance.

A British governor would head the Malayan Union who would in turn appoint his own legislative council, and an advisory council of Malay rulers which would decide on matters related to Islam.

Since the British Crown had jurisdiction over the Malay states, the British government or Parliament could legislate for all the states under

the Foreign Jurisdiction Act.

The scheme would introduce a Malayan Union citizenship to anyone born in the country, who was over the age of 18 and had lived in Malaya for more than ten years.

Only Malayan Union citizens would be admitted to public office or membership of central and local councils. However, this citizenship would not connote "nationality" as the Malayan Union would not yet be an independent or even self-governing state.

To Umno and the Malay rulers, the scheme meant that Britain had abrogated the old treaties with the rulers, under which each ruler would accept British advice on all matters except on Islam and Malay customs. They argued that this meant that the Malay states were now being annexed by Britain. They also opposed equal rights for all races, seeing this as a threat to Malay special privileges.

For the non-Malays, especially the Chinese, *jus soli* citizenship, determined by place of birth, was an attractive offer, but they did not show enough enthusiasm and support for it. In contrast, the Malay opposition to the Malayan Union was stronger and more successful.

As a result, the British government finally withdrew the plan and replaced it with the Federation of Malaya scheme, which restored Malay sovereignty and privileges and, under pressure from the Malay rulers and Umno, withdrew the citizenship offer by *jus soli* and imposed more restrictive conditions for non-Malay citizenship.



**Demonstrations against the British-conceived Malayan Union in Johor Baru in 1946.**