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Tracing the origins of Malaysia

The idea of Malaysia came to fruition in 1963 as a culmination of the combined forces of decolonisation and expanding South-East Asian nationalisms.

By Prof Dr D.S. RANJIT SINGH

THE famous announcement on May 27, 1961 by Tunku Abdul Rahman, then the Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, calling for forging closer political and economic cooperation between Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak, is generally taken as the starting point for the formation of Malaysia on Sept 16, 1963. The roots of the Malaysia scheme, however, go further back in time and were embedded in British plans hatched in 1942 for the decolonisation of South-East Asia in the post-Second World War period.

In fact, such an idea was first suggested in 1893 by Lord Brassey, director of the British North Borneo Company, who proposed the amalgamation of all British possessions in South-East Asia into "one large colony". Brassey's proposal, however, did not find favour with the British Government.

The outbreak of the Second World War and the subsequent capture of all British colonial possessions in South-East Asia by the Japanese changed everything. The British felt humiliated and partly laid the blame for their defeat on the disunited nature of their territorial possessions in South-East Asia which made it difficult to organise a coordinated defence.

In 1942, the Colonial Office led by its Eastern Department headed by G. Edward Gent began to lay plans for a more coordinated post-war policy in South-East Asia. This policy was founded on two principles: preparing dependent territories for the goal of self-rule, and integrating smaller units into larger political blocs.

The justification given for the second objective was administrative efficiency, economic development, political stability and defence viability. Anchoring their policy on these two principles, the Colonial Office laid plans for a "Grand Design" in South-East Asia after the Second World War. This called for the creation of a "union", a "federation"; a "confederation" or a "dominion" of all British territories in the

Malayan-Borneo region.

This large union or federation was to include the Malay states, Straits Settlements, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei. This "Grand Design", which may be appropriately named the "Colonial Malaysia Scheme", was to be achieved gradually and in stages beginning with political integration in two separate blocs, that is, between Malaya and Singapore on the one hand, and between the Borneo territories on the other.

Confirming this line of action, J. D. Higham of the Colonial Office minuted on Jan 20, 1953 as follows: "Our original idea was that Malaya and Singapore would form one bloc and Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei, another, and that the two blocs might then merge into some sort of confederation."

From 1946 to 1949, and even later, the British Government wished to push ahead with the process of integration within the two blocs, but political, strategic and economic exigencies and contingencies on the ground, such as the importance of maintaining Singapore as a naval base, the desire to push the Malayan Union proposals in Malaya, managing the

Anti-Cession movement in Sarawak, and the wide gap in the political, economic and social development between the Malayan and Borneo territories, hindered all attempts to bring about any union within these blocs.

Seeing that integration in two separate blocs was not working, the British Government revived the "Grand Design" or the "Colonial Malaysia Scheme" idea in 1949.

Towards this end, the British Government created the post of the British Commissioner-General for South-East Asia to act as a coordinating body in the region. The man chosen for the job was Malcolm MacDonald.

Although he tried very hard, MacDonald achieved little success from 1949 to 1951, however. In 1951, he began to introduce new

innovations, the most important being the setting up of branches of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) in the British territories in the Malayan-Borneo region.

By this move, MacDonald was able to foster much regional solidarity and goodwill among the local leaders through the mechanism of CPA meetings. In light of strong support especially from non-officials for a wider regional integration, MacDonald began to push vigorously for the realisation of the "Grand Design" or a British Dominion of South-East Asia in 1952.

Independence and expansion

But the Commissioner-General's exuberance was short-lived. By the early months of 1953, support for the Grand Design or Colonial Malaysia began to dissipate mainly as a result of uncompromising attitudes of British colonial officials in Malaya and Singapore. Ongoing animosity between top British administrators of these two states forced the Colonial Office to abandon the idea of forming an overall

British Dominion of South-East Asia in favour of the pre-1951 formula of encouraging the formation of separate political blocs.

While the Colonial Office concentrated its efforts in improving relations between Malaya and Singapore, a strong initiative commenced in the Borneo region in 1953 to promote greater administrative coordination between North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei with a view of their "ultimate federation".

Political developments in Malaya also began to take fundamental decision-making out of the hands of the colonial masters. The formation of the Alliance Party comprising Umno, MCA and MIC in 1954 and its resounding victory in the 1955 elections to the Federal Council effectively placed Malayan leaders in charge of their destiny.

Under the dynamic leadership

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of Tunku, Umno and the Alliance, Malaya thus began to move towards independence at a pace far ahead of the British "time-table". In this context, the views of Tunku and Umno concerning the Malaya-Singapore merger and the wider Colonial Malaysia Scheme became decisive.

Although there grew a strong body of opinion in Singapore in 1954 and 1955 advocating merger with the Federation of Malaya, Tunku and Umno strongly opposed such a union. They feared being outnumbered by the addition of over a million Chinese; that the Malays would lose political dominance; and that Malaya's security would be seriously threatened. The British, taking stock of the situation, could not countenance merger in the face of Umno's rejection.

As far as the Colonial Malaysia Scheme was concerned, Tunku in fact lent support to the idea in 1955 and 1956, but the format was to be "Greater Malaya", which was to be established in the future after Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo had achieved independence.

In 1956, Tunku was more concerned in winning independence for Malaya in a hurry and did not want any scheme of merger or territorial expansion to derail this supreme objective.

"At this stage," he declared in 1956, "it is wise to be prudent like Kamal Ataturk who resolutely opposed territorial expansion in favour of improving Turkey itself first. Thus, when Malaya achieved independence in 1957 ahead of the colonial "time-table" and ahead of Singapore, the British Grand Design was rendered untenable and therefore remained unfulfilled.

But the idea of Malaysia remained alive both in the minds of the British and Tunku, and finally came to fruition in 1963 as a culmination of the combined forces of decolonisation and expanding South-East Asian nationalisms.

Tunku's Malaysia

After achieving independence for Malaya in 1957, Tunku Abdul Rahman again broached the subject

of forming Malaysia on May 27, 1961. His motivation were, however, slightly different than those of the British. One was to help complete the unfinished British Grand Design of decolonisation, which had been derailed as a result of Malaya's unexpected independence. When this Grand Design had to be aborted in 1957, Britain began to face an intractable dilemma of finding a workable solution for decolonising the rest of her colonial possessions in the region.

The British found it unfeasible to grant independence separately to Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei as they were too small or too weak politically, economically and in security terms to survive alone. They were also extremely vulnerable to the forces of expanding communism, a situation the British colonial masters wished to avoid for the preservation of their own interests in the region.

In Borneo, the British tried to find a workable solution by fostering the formation of a North Borneo Federation from 1957 to 1960. This attempt failed miserably due to the opposition of the Sultan of Brunei, the rise of Party Rakyat Brunei which wanted to establish Negara Kalimantan Utara linked to Indonesia, and the rising tide of communism in Sarawak spear-headed by the Sarawak Communist Clandestine Organisation.

The Singapore problem became even more alarming with the stark possibility of a communist takeover of the government in 1961.

In these dire circumstances, the British began to look to Malaya and Tunku Abdul Rahman, who was quite ready to do the job for them but had another motive as well for the creation of Malaysia. This second orientation was the desire for territorial expansion, an impulse very much consistent with the phenomenon of expanding nationalisms at the time especially in insular South-East Asia.

Paradoxically, the rise of nationalism in the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei and the Federation of Malaya also produced a desire among the leaders of these countries for ter-

ritorial expansion in the region for various reasons.

In the Philippines, the main architect of this nationalist expansion was Diosdado Macapagal who, since the country's independence in 1946, began to advocate the extension of Philippine jurisdiction on all former Spanish possessions including the Turtle Islands and North Borneo.

Sukarno in Indonesia, wanting to resurrect the Majapahit Empire, laid claim to all former Dutch colonies in the region, including West New Guinea (West Irian) which was not handed over by the Dutch to the Indonesian Republic in 1949. Indonesia also had designs over British Borneo, over which it was casting "covetous eyes" as early as 1953.

Tunku's Malaysia Scheme also smacked of expansionist aims. He basically wanted North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei as part of Greater Malaya and was willing to bring in Singapore only if the British Borneo territories were brought in first. In Brunei, Party Rakyat Brunei led by A. M. Azahari was seriously advocating the revival of the former Brunei Empire in the form of Negara Kalimantan Utara from 1956 to 1962.

These expanding nationalisms overlapped in the territorial milieu and produced a period of intense conflict. The concepts of Greater Malaya, Greater Brunei, Greater Indonesia and Greater Philippines were totally irreconcilable and were bound to produce political turmoil in the region.

There was in fact also strong opposition initially from the peoples of British Borneo against Tunku's Greater Malaya. A great deal of diplomacy and safeguards were necessary to gain their support, and even then Brunei stayed out.

Sabah and Sarawak indeed claim they did not join Malaysia, but formed Malaysia as equal partners with Malaya and Singapore.

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Historic moment: Sabah's first Governor Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun taking his oath of office on Sept 16, 1963.