

# **Conflict And Reconciliation: Looking Back Ito Malaysian History**

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## **Preamble**

Compared to internal or domestic conflicts that have taken place in many other countries, those that have occurred in Malaysia/Malaya have been relatively more confined, the violence and the bloodshed involved notwithstanding. Nevertheless the impact that those conflicts has had on the nation's history and body politics is by no means insignificant. That be the case, the manner in which those conflicts has been resolved, or the ways reconciliations were arrived at are equally significant, or, arguably, even more so.

The notable conflicts that have rocked the nation in the past took a largely ethnic bearing, though an ideological underpinning, especially in one, could also be clearly discerned. Of notable conflicts in Malaysia's recent past, that there are essentially two. One occurred between 1948 and 1960 when the country experienced what has been called The Emergency. The other one was what has been since termed as the May 13<sup>th</sup> Incident or Tragedy of 1969. The 1948-60 Emergency involved jungle warfare and military engagement whereas the May 13<sup>th</sup> 1969 Incident was a civil strife. The casualty was much higher in the former than the later.

There had also been inter-ethnic conflicts, essentially between the Malays and Chinese, immediately following the Japanese surrender in 1945. These too had their ramifications on the ensuing political development in Malaysia, even though the ramifications might not have been that visible.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Emergency, 1948-60**

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\* In the preparation of this paper I have benefited a great deal from discussions that I have had with Professor Ahmat Adam of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi.

<sup>1</sup> Ahmat Adam, 2007, 'The End of the Second World War: its historical meaning to Malaysians'<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the International Conference on Commemorating the end of World War II in the Asia Pacific Region, organized by the Northeast Asian History Foundation, Seoul, Korea, 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2007. See also Mohd. Reduan Haji Asli, 1993, *Pemberontakan Bersenjata Komunis Di Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, p.60.

For the purpose of the discussion in this paper, the focus will be only on one of the conflicts: the Emergency, 1948-60, first declared in June 1948.

In this conflict some 8,000 members of the Malayan National Liberation Army (MRLA), the armed wing of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) were pitted against about a quarter million of government forces. The MNLA was officially formed in February 1949, about eight months after the British authority declared the Emergency.

The government side consisted of 250,000 Malayan Home Guard troops, 40,000 regular Commonwealth personnel, 37,000 Special Constables and 24,000 Federation Police. The Commonwealth personnel and forces came, besides the United Kingdom, from Australia, New Zealand, Rhodesia and Fiji. The rest of the forces were basically made up of Malays, though there were also Chinese, Sikhs and others.

As members of the MNLA, simply the Communists or Communists terrorists (CTs) to the government, were predominantly Chinese, this warfare between the MCP and the government forces was largely perceived by the populace as a contest between the Malays on the one hand and Chinese on the other, the ideological bearing of the MCP notwithstanding. This perception of ethnic divide was compounded by the fact the sympathisers on whom the Communists relied for material, logistic and other support, the *Min Yuen*, were also by and large Chinese. The total strength of the *Min Yuen* ran into tens of thousands or more.

The brunt of the conflict was suffered by the anti-government forces with 6, 710 killed, 1,289 wounded, 1,287 captured and 2,702 surrendered. Casualties on the government side were by no means insignificant but they numbered less. There were 1,346 Malayan troops, and 519 British military personnel killed. Amongst the wounded were 2,406 Malayan and British troops. With regard to civilian casualties there were 2,478 killed and 810 missing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The figures quoted here are from the 'Malayan Emergency', *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* //en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malayan\_Emergency, accessed : 4<sup>th</sup>October, 2007. Chin Peng, the former Secretary-General of MCP, seems to have somewhat corroborated this estimate of the total strength of his forces. Again his own figure is based on a rough estimation. He says, ' My estimate was that at the height of the Emergency it is about 5,000. Another of my colleague's estimate, at the height of the Emergency in 1951 was about 8,000. So the number varied from five to eight.' C.C.Chin & Karl Hack (ed), 2004, *Dialogues With Chin Peng: New Light On The Malayan Communist Party*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, p.151.

### **The Reconciliation: The Multifaceted Elements**

The reconciliation of the above conflict was not a straightforward affair involving the two antagonistic and warring parties. It was not to be settled simply by what happened on the battle ground. The conflict brought about by the Emergency was to become intertwined with a host of other complex issues: the strive towards self-government in Malaya and the British desire to have a hand in shaping the process and determining its outcome, the Malay open agenda to preserve the exclusive nature and entity of their homeland and the fervent wish of the non-Malays to secure the granting of citizenship to them based on the liberal principle of *jus soli*.

Thus besides the jungle warfare and civil strife, the conflict also involved much political horse trading between the Malays and non-Malays. To overcome the multi-faceted problem the British was deft enough to work out their political machinations , sometimes openly at other times less so. In the end their persistence and care brought home the dividends: they were able to “introduce” or “ impose “ their own formula which the other parties had, in reality, little choice but to accept. That formula then became the cornerstone of the reconciliation that was eventually arrived at.

### **A Question of Power**

As with most reconciliations, certain measures of compromises were inevitable. And as in the very nature of compromises the contending parties involved could not hope to secure their objective in its entirety. In a bargaining exercise, as to which party gets what and how much, is not necessarily determined by the negotiating skills and smart strategies of the participants alone. More often than not the possession of power matters a great deal. In other words, the possession of power, and, of course, its adroit utilization, have a telling influence in determining the outcomes of negotiations.

Power, simply defined, is the possession of elements and the ability to utilize them in order to obtain one’s preferred goal as well the wherewithal to persuade, induce or force other relevant parties to agree to the same.

At the time when events discussed in this paper were unfolding the one party that had the ultimate power was obviously the British government. It not only possessed the raw elements of power in its control, for instance the government machinery and the armed forces, but also

another element that was of equal, if not more, important: the power to grant independence to colonial Malaya.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Malays were almost powerless. The armed personnel that they had were in the employment of the British. The Home Guards and policemen could not possibly have been expected to turn against the government of the day, for whatever reasons. For the mainstream Malay leaders then, an armed contest or an insurrection against the British was never really an option. In 1956 for instance, Dato' Onn Jaafar, the foremost Malay nationalist leader of his time, when finding his aspiration thwarted became very angry with the British and also with other Malay political leaders. To him the leaders of the United Malay Nationalist Organisation (UMNO) had backtracked in their fight for Malay rights. On this occasion he openly admitted that he felt helpless. There could not be a recourse to an armed struggle against the power that be as the ones who were going to suffer loss of lives and properties would be the poor and the villagers.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of the above incident, Dato' Onn was no longer a member of UMNO, the then leading Malay political party of which he was the founding President. The adverse feeling that he had against the then UMNO leadership could not perhaps be more awkward and frustrating.

Amongst the Chinese, their moderate leaders too had shunned violence or militancy in their political struggle. However, they did have what is now normally termed as the 'soft-power': power of the purse string. On one known occasion in the early 1950s they had resorted to using this 'soft power' in order to influence the Malays to see things their (the Chinese) way. The instrument used was the setting up of a Sino-Malay Friendship and Economic Fund to alleviate the economic position of the Malays. Initially the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), under the leadership of Tan Cheng Lock, had set aside \$100,000 for this undertaking. However, as one scholar has observed,

This generous contribution appeared more a political bribe to induce the president of UMNO [Tunku Abdul Rahman] and Dato Onn to participate in

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<sup>3</sup> Ramlah Adam, 1998, *Kemlut Politik Semenanjung Tanah Melayu*, Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, pp. 179-80.

the proposed committee than an altruistic move to help the Malays' economic lot.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the soft power of the Chinese was, objectively speaking, no match against the combined hard and soft power that the British then possessed.

Since it was independence that was the one common goal shared by all the contending parties then, the British government found itself to be in a uniquely powerful position. They could dictate terms and that could be done either tacitly or in a more forward manner. The other parties, with the prospect of self-rule dangled in front of their eyes, would understandably not be too predisposed towards rejecting compromises that might be laid down for them. Indeed over time they, the Malay and Chinese political leaders, did find themselves prepared, willingly or otherwise, to abide by offer and conditions presented to them. Anyone that refused to accept the formula that was eventually worked out, or offered, would have to stay out of the loop and this was exactly what happened to the Communists.

#### **The Communists: An Illusion of Power?**

The MCP missed its chance of striking at a compromise when they participated in the historic Baling Talks in 1955. At that meeting its leaders had a lengthy exchanges with Tunku Abdul Rahman and his co-negotiators. The Tunku and his party, the Alliance, had just won a landslide victory at the July 1955 Federal Elections. The Alliance was a coalition made up of UMNO, MCA and MIC (the Malayan Indian Congress).

After a successful performance at the polls, the Tunku was very confident of inheriting power from the British. He had asked the MCP leaders to arrange for their party members to lay down their arms. The leaders of the MCP present refused this request. They also turned down the suggestion that the MCP be disbanded and the its members be left free to join any political party operating legally in Malaya then.

Their ideological commitment, no doubt, played a part in the rejection. As Chin Peng, the Secretary General of MCP, told the meeting,

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<sup>4</sup> Oong Hak Ching, 2000, *Chinese Politics in Malaya: The Dynamics of British Policy*, Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, p.166.

We will never allow ourselves to be forced by others to give up our ideology, but wish to put our ideology to the people to decide, if that is possible.<sup>5</sup>

Another reason for the MCP leaders' recalcitrant stand could also be the knowledge that they had armed groups still active in the jungle. Thus when Chin Peng promised stoppage of hostilities, that was if the MCP was recognized, he actually talked in terms of 'setting aside of weapons' rather than 'surrendering arms'.<sup>6</sup>

As it turned out their arms could not turn the tide in their favour. With the government's various counter-insurgency measures, including the relocations of rural residents to new areas away from the orbit of the guerillas, the MCP was not, in the end, able to put to good use Mao's dictum of 'surrounding the cities from the countryside'. Later Chin Peng was to admit that power did not grow out of the barrels of their guns. He said,

I don't think there was any opportunity of our success. Without foreign aid, we could not defeat the British Army, even if we expanded our forces to 10,000 at the most.<sup>7</sup>

Possibly earlier on, in earlier days of their struggle, the communists were trapped by their illusion of power and too buoyed up by their ideological sentiments.

### **The Immediate Post-War Period**

At the end of the Second World War and following the surrender of the Japanese in Malaya, the country returned to the British fold. It was ruled by the British Military Administration (BMA). The MCP which had fought the Japanese during the War and for which its Secretary General, Chin Peng, was bestowed with an award by the British Government, had officially laid down arms. In reality, however, it had stored away some arms and ammunitions presumably to be on the ready should a situation warranting them to take up arms again arise.

The MCP had reservations about the goodwill of the BMA even though the British had cooperated with them against the Japanese. After the War the MCP was a leading political force

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<sup>5</sup> Chin Peng (as told to Ian Ward and Norma Miraflor), 2003, *My Side of History*, Singapore: Media Masters, p.380.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p.385.

<sup>7</sup> C.C.Chin & Karl Hack (ed), *op.cit.* pp.150-1.

and to add to that it had 'a reasonably big military force of 10,000'.<sup>8</sup> It therefore agitated for independence and the 'granting of right to vote to people regardless of race, class, political party, sex or belief'.<sup>9</sup>

If the MCP doubted the good faith of the British, the feeling was mutual. As one writer has forcibly put it:

The British returned to re-impose their rule. They had no intention of handing power to the communists, sharing power with them or even allowing them to play a supplementary role.<sup>10</sup>

The BMA was not in doubt that the MCP's agenda was the expulsion of the British and the eventual establishment of communist republic. In the meantime it found the MCP's demands for democratic rights 'embarrassing'.<sup>11</sup>

The British co-operation with the military arm of the MCP, the Malayan People's Anti Japanese Army (MPAJA), was not unlike the wartime military alliance that the Western Allies had forged with the Union of Socialist Soviet Russia to confront Nazi Germany in Europe: it was simply a temporary marriage of convenience.<sup>12</sup>

The parting of the ways between the British and the MCP at the end of the War had therefore set the stage for the former to undertake efforts and strategic planning to cut the ground from under the feet of the later.

### **Weaning Away The Chinese**

Thus to wean away the Chinese from the MCP, the British methodically embarked on its programme of re-emphasizing 'the Malayization of its Chinese policy'. What this entailed, in fact, amounted to the formulating of a policy to liberalize the terms for the granting of Malayan citizenship, the encouragement of the formation of another Chinese political party, a

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<sup>8</sup> Khoong Kim Hoong, 1984, *Merdeka! British Rule and The Struggle for Independence in Malaya 1945-1957*, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information Research Development, p.68.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73.

<sup>12</sup> But see also C.C. Chin & Krl Hack (ed), *op.cit.* pp.4-5.

more moderate one, as an alternative to the MCP and finally the push towards facilitating a kind of political alliance between the Malays and Chinese.<sup>13</sup>

The formulation of a policy to liberalize the citizenship procedure and requirements was manifested in the British proposal for Malayan Union, a policy mooted by the British as early as October 1945. In 1946 a British administrator and the ex-High Commissioner for Palestine, Sir Harold MacMichael, was given the task of obtaining consent from the Malay Sultans for the said proposal. Consent he did obtain but it was not done in the most circumspect manner. Nevertheless, the Union was duly proclaimed on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1946 and Sir Edward Gent became its first Governor.

### **The Malay Awakening**

The Union, however, was short-lived. Its *jus soli* principle of granting citizenship to non – Malays, principally Chinese and Indians, and a provision that allowed for the demotion of the power of the Malay Sultans had ran into a storm of protests from Malays.

The stern opposition was spearheaded by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a political party founded on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1946 and led by the charismatic Dato' Onn Jaafar. The country-wide demonstrations saw protesters displaying posters with slogans like “Malayan Union not wanted”, and ‘Malaya for the Malays’. In the circumstances, the Union was dissolved and subsequently replaced by the Federation of Malaya that came into being on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1948.

### **The Emergency: The Need For A Continuous British Overtures**

The failure of the Malayan Union, and with it the plan to liberalize the granting of citizenship to win over the Chinese, did little to deter the British in their effort to push for their brand of political solution for Malaya. They refused to abandon their original objective. In fact, with the declaration of the Emergency in June 1948, the need to show understanding overtures to the Chinese became even more important. As has been noted,

It was the Emergency, nonetheless, that facilitated the British to find an excuse to widen the opportunities for Chinese and other immigrant races to obtain Malayan citizenship. Six months after the State of Emergency was declared in June 1948,

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<sup>13</sup> Oong Hak Ching, *op.cit.* p.139.

British officials began to show a growing sympathy towards Chinese who wished to become loyal citizens of Malaya.<sup>14</sup>

The belief and/or the need to marshal support from amongst the general Chinese populace in the fight against the Communists in Malaya continued to be expressed by British officials, including at the highest level. The British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Oliver Lyttelton, who toured Malaya in late 1951, was convinced that the British '...could not win the war without the help of the population, and of the Chinese population in particular'.<sup>15</sup> Later the Lyttelton chosen High Commissioner, General Gerald Templer, also emphasized this sentiment when he said that the main problem facing him was to make both the Malays and Chinese in Malaya feel that 'This is our country'.<sup>16</sup>

### **An Alternative Chinese Political Party**

In the case of the proposed formation of a moderate Chinese political party, it turned out that the party that eventually came into being was the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA). It was inaugurated on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1949. The Party in fact came to fill in a vacuum that had been created by the British administration when in July 1948 it had declared the MCP to be an illegal entity. Later, just prior to the launching of the MCA, it had also banned the China Democratic League and China Democracy Promotion Society, both parties were seen as foreign oriented if not controlled. Thus 'there was no doubt that the local government played an important role in the formation of the MCA'.<sup>17</sup>

The leadership of the MCA, like the British, clearly believed that the way to dissuade the Chinese from joining or sympathizing with the communist movement was to give them a stake in the country to which they had in the first place come primarily to earn a living. In fact, even before the Second World War has yet to come to a close, Tan Cheng Lock, the leader of the MCA had already dabbled with this idea.<sup>18</sup> After the war he again stressed this point. The objective was 'to wean away the China-born Chinese from China and Chinese politics'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ahmat Adam, *op.cit.* p.13.

<sup>15</sup> Oong Hak Ching, *op.cit.* p177.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*p143.

<sup>18</sup> Ahmat Adam, *op.cit.* p.10.

<sup>19</sup> Oong Hak Ching, *op.cit.* p.151.

With the British administration and the leading Chinese political party in agreement over the status to be given to the Chinese residents of Malaya, it only remained for them to solicit the agreement of the Malays to ensure that the idea would bear fruit. This in essence must have been what was meant by the strategy to encourage Malay-Chinese alliance or understanding as envisioned in the so called agenda of Malayizing the British Chinese policy.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Communities Liaison Committee**

On the surface of it, the task it would seem, could only be onerous. After all there had only recently been a widespread Malay protests against the very same idea as was incorporated in the aborted Malayan Union plan. With hindsight, it could now perhaps be argued that the failure of the Malayan Union had forced the hand of the British to resurrect the very same idea in a slightly different form. The vehicle, to which the British gave tacit encouragement and effective assistance, to propel this idea forward was the Communities Liaison Committee (CLC). It was established in 1949.

The formation of the CLC was engineered by the British Commissioner General for Southeast Asia, Malcolm MacDonald. It was to be a committee the members of which were to be made up of some leading personalities of the Malay, Chinese and Indian/Ceylonese and other communities. Dato Onn Jaafar was in it.<sup>21</sup> It was from his position in the CLC that Dato' Onn Jaafar tried to persuade his party, UMNO, to accept an arrangement whereby the non-Malays would be allowed to become citizens of Malaya on more liberal terms. The British had made up their mind that Malaya's independence would only be bequeathed to a multi-racial party and they were banking on the ability and influence of Dato Onn Jaafar to make that possible.

### **Parting of the Ways: *A Cul de Sac***

Dato' Onn Jaafar, the one who had in 1946 galvanized the Malay masses to reject the British idea of opening wide the door of Malayan citizenship, had in 1949 set himself the task of soft-peddling the issue and persuading his UMNO party members to come around to his way

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<sup>20</sup> See above.

<sup>21</sup> In his study Cheah Boon Kheng describes Dato' Onn's position in the CLC as very much a result of the political machination of the British. In fact, to him it is Dato' Onn rather than Tunku Abdul Rahman who ought to be described as ' Britain's "man" between the years 1951-55. Cheah Boon Kheng, 2002, *Malaysia: The Making of A Nation*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, p.26. For a different and opposite view of Dato' Onn in the CLC see Ramlah Adam, *op.cit.* .pp.257- 62.

of thinking. This transformation of Dato' Onn ,<sup>22</sup> was, however, unequivocally criticized by his fellow party members in a number of meetings that he had had with them in the 1950s. He was accused, among others, of “selling out” Malay rights.<sup>23</sup> The failure of Dato' Onn to make any headway with the new proposal led subsequently to his leaving UMNO and the formation of another party under his leadership. This was the Independent Malaya Party (IMP).

### **A Last-Ditch Defence?**

The departure of Dato' Onn from UMNO and his eventual political eclipse has been seen by some as a profound phenomenon of the time. To Cheah Boon Kheng it is rather perplexing. As he puts it,

His [Dato' Onn's] departure from UMNO marked his eventual decline in politics, and is one of the strangest ironies of recent Malay political history. Yet who could have predicted his fate in 1946-47 when he was at the height of political success and popularity? Onn was a hero of the Malays, courted by the Malay Rulers and British officials.<sup>24</sup>

However, viewed from another perspective, Dato' Onn's departure from UMNO, or his rejection by the Malays, could not be 'one of the strangest ironies of recent Malay political history' after all. It surely was a clear manifestation of the steadfastness of the Malays to hold on to and to strive for the preservation of the concept of 'Malaya for the Malays'. It was this very concept that Dato' Onn's erstwhile successor as the President of UMNO, Tunku Abdul Rahman, articulated and emphasized to members of the Party upon assuming his new portfolio. The Tunku said,

With regard to the proposal of some of our men that independence should be handed over to the “Malayans”, who are these “Malayans”? This country was received from the Malays and to the Malays it ought to be returned. What is called “Malayans”, it is not yet certain who they are; therefore let the Malays alone settle who they are.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> To Cheah Boon Kheng Dato' Onn had 'transformed himself from an exclusive Malay nationalist to an inclusive “Malayan” nationalist'. Cheah Boon Kheng, *op.cit.*, p.25.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

To Cheah Boon Kheng these words of the Tunku were tantamount to an 'advocacy of extreme Malay nationalism'.<sup>26</sup> Not all would agree to this labeling, more so perhaps if viewed in the context of the time. The expression articulated by the Tunku was simply, to the Malays, certainly UMNO Malays, a legitimate voicing of what they considered to be their pristine and inalienable right. To uphold that, as the Tunku had, in the continuation to the same passage referred to above, but not quoted by Cheah Boon Kheng, also said,

Let not our desire for independence be such that because of that very consideration for independence our honour be compromised. Do take due cognizance of what will befall unto our race in time to come. Thus we have to hold on fast to the Malay sentiments first and foremost so that with that spirit we would be in a position to demand independence.<sup>27</sup>

### **An Irony?**

The irony perhaps lies not in the rejection of Dato' Onn by the UMNO members, but in the inability of the Tunku to steer completely clear of the "treacherous" policy that Dato' Onn was accused of. Tunku Abdul Rahman, despite his declaration, was not able to sustain the 'Malaya for the Malays' policy for much longer.

Dato' Onn's programme for enlisting Chinese support and placing them in the political agenda might be different from the way the Tunku eventually enlisted and placed them. Dato' Onn would have worked with the Chinese in UMNO, had he managed to convince the Malays to accept the Chinese as UMNO members. Tunku, on the other hand, entertained no such idea but nevertheless later worked with the Chinese who had their own political party, the MCA, in a coalition that came to be known as the Alliance Party or in Malay *Parti Perikatan*. The Malayan Indian Congress was the other component of the triumvirate.

### **Similar Goal, Different Paths?**

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>27</sup> *UMNO 10 Tahun*, p.144 as quoted in Ramlah Adam, *op.cit.*p.174.. The original Malay text reads: *Janganlah kita gemarkan kemerdekaan itu sehingga dengan kerana kemerdekaan itu kehormatan kita terjual. Ambillah tahu apa yang akan terjadi kelak atas bangsa kita. Oleh sebab itu saya katakan mahulah kita berprgang teguh kepada semangat Melayu terlebih dahulu supaya dapatlah kita dengan semangat itu menuntut kemerdekaan. Ibid.*

Was it just a matter of timing and personal style that divided the fate of Dato' Onn and that of the the Tunku, ensuring that the later succeeded where the former failed? Could it be that perhaps the issue had been blurred over time, the Malay anger that had erupted over the Malayan Union episode had somewhat subsided? Or could it be that the Tunku's emphatic insistence that 'our desire for independence' should not end with 'our honour be[ing] compromised' was proving too difficult to manage and uphold in the politically volatile post-war Malaya?

It has also been explained that the Tunku had managed to triumph where Dato' Onn stumbled because the former had utilized and benefited from the mandate system whereas the later had not. After assuming the leadership of UMNO the Tunku was mandated by members of his own party to negotiate with the other relevant parties and work out for the Malays their political future. That the Tunku did, presumably in ways that were then thought to be the best possible. As what must inevitably happen in a mandated arrangement, what the Tunku later brought back to his colleagues and party rank-and-file could only be a *fait accompli*.

Dato' Onn tried to sell his idea of a Malayan Malaya, whatever the version, directly to his party supporters. He never got over even the first hurdle.<sup>28</sup> In fact, it has also been argued that Dato' Onn's idea of bringing in the non-Malays into UMNO was, to him, a way of getting the non-Malays to better understand the political ideals and culture of UMNO not to dilute its very struggle. The party leadership would still be in the hands of the Malays. In this kind of arrangement resolutions and decisions passed by UMNO would automatically be endorsed by the non-Malays by virtue of their being party members of UMNO. But this idea came to no avail. To Ramlah Adam, the UMNO Malays could not appreciate 'this sophisticated idea' of Dato' Onn because their strong anti-non-Malay sentiments had clouded their judgment.<sup>29</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

Whatever the reason, what remains undeniable was that the Malays had compromised on their original desire to have their land given back to them: taken from the Sultans and returned to the Sultans. It is hard to see how, in the eyes of the Malays, this could not be categorized as a major sacrifice. To G.P. Means, 'It was a major concession by the Malays to agree to such

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<sup>28</sup> See Ramlah Adam, *op.cit.* p.179.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*p.260

liberal citizenship requirement'.<sup>30</sup> Expressing the same point Chandra Muzaffar has noted that, in fact, the Malays have been relegated from being a 'nation' to a 'community'.<sup>31</sup>

The Malays had not necessarily wanted to exclude the non-Malays completely from their effort and endeavour of nation-building in their country which was then on the verge of being decolonized. The various Malay political factions had not subscribed to any idea of totally shunning out the non-Malays. However, the Malays surely would have liked to have the non-Malays on board on their (Malays') own terms.

Similarly, the Malays would have liked their position as the legitimate sons and daughters of the country to be recognized and appreciated. Nevertheless, in return for the compromise, or sacrifice, that they have consented to, the Malays were assured of their 'special positions' within the new emerging political entity, a right guaranteed in the Constitution and referred to at times as a part of the 'social contract'.

The non-Malays, namely the Chinese, compromised too. However in their case, it can be said that they did not compromise by forsaking what they had possessed but rather by curtailing the wider wish that they had cherished for their own community. As for the British colonial power, the handing over of the country to a coalition of political parties made up of the three main ethnic groups had met their long held political planning. Their agreeing to hasten the process of transferring power could be called a compromise if one wishes to call it so, as was the case with their earlier readiness to drop the Malayan Union idea in favour of the Federation of Malaya arrangement.

The compromises worked in the past have survived to this day as Malaysia celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. There had been, undeniably, some notable hiccups experienced along the way with regard to the implementation of some of the tenets of the social contract. The shortfall in the carrying out of some of these tenets should be addressed. However, the defect or defects should not be allowed to be turned into a basis for undermining, or worse, the dismantling of the assiduously formulated social contract. The compromises etched out in the

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<sup>30</sup> G.P. Means, 1976, *Malayan Politics*, London, p.177 as quoted in Ramlah Adam, *op.cit.*, p.224.

<sup>31</sup> Chandra Muzaffar, 1994, 'Tolerance In The Malaysian Political Scene' in Syed Othman Alhabshi & Nik Mustapha Nik Hassan (eds) *Islam and Tolerance*, Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, p.123. See also Qasim Ahmad, 2001, 'Conflicting Premises in Race Relations: Beyond Resolution?', Paper presented at The First Southeast Asian Conflict Studies Network (SEACSN) Malaysian National Workshop, Penang, 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2001.

political deal were instrumental in bringing about reconciliation. A reconciliation denied then could have possibly led to conflicts; but conflicts were avoided. Taken out of its historical context the arrangement could easily be misunderstood or perceived with certain reservations. Not appreciating it can lead to efforts at questioning or even deriding it --- acts that can run into the danger of resurrecting conflicts that have been once reconciled: such is the importance of historical knowledge and sense. It also underlines the wisdom that lies behind the principal of compromise and reconciliation.

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