

The Alliance road to Merdeka

by Zainon Ahmad

AS IS generally known, Britain was reluctant to grant Malaya independence so quickly after it reoccupied the country following the Japanese surrender. One of its officials stated in 1951 that it would take another 25 years before the country would be ready for self-government.

The reason, as acknowledged by scholars and also evident from the recent releases of Colonial Office documents, is Britain's need for Malaya's dollar earnings from the rubber and tin industry to help in the recovery of the war-ravaged British economy. In a sense Malaya was the "jewel in the crown" in the Far East.

One of the excuses given by colonial officials against early general election and independence was security. Indeed the communists, who were once part of the British-equipped Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army, had just launched an armed insurgency against the colonial government.

But to appear committed to decolonisation Britain made appropriate noises about its intention of preparing the people of Malaya for self-rule and eventually independence once the security threat was less critical.

The editorials of the British-controlled *The Straits Times* and *The Malay Mail*, dutifully echoed the sentiments of the British colonial officials, things just have to wait.

Another excuse, and a constantly used one, was the absence of a country-wide mass-based nationalist movement clamouring for independence. British colonial officials were quite smug about this as to them it would be a long time before any kind of a mass independence movement involving all the races would emerge to demand freedom.

There were attempts including the one by the All-Malaya Council for Joint Action (AM-

CJA) formed to protest the 1948 Federation of Malaya Constitution drafted by the joint effort of Umno, the British and the Malay rulers. But it did not quite morph into a nationalist movement even after it was joined by a coalition of radical Malay parties.

Datuk Onn Jaafar, even when he was Umno president, did not quite believe Malaya was ready even for self-government. In fact, in 1950 when he announced that the country would be ready for independence in about 15 years, he was rebuked by colonial officials.

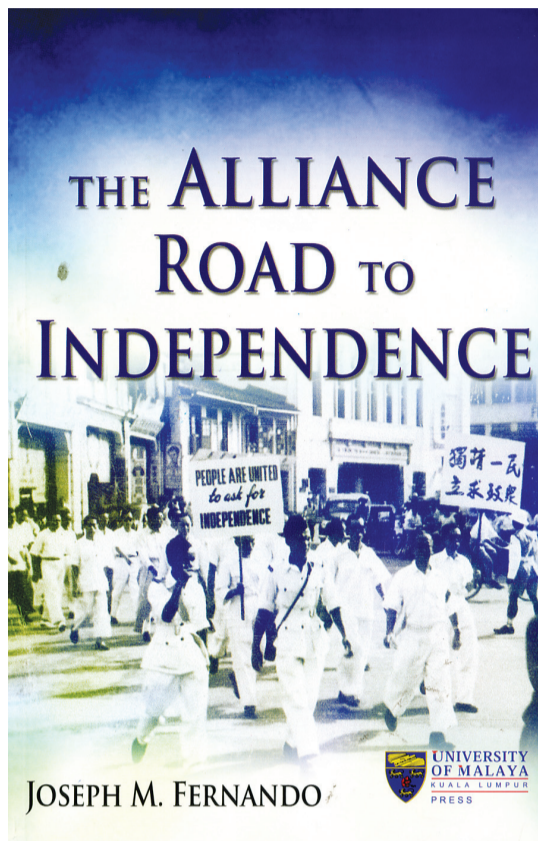
He, too, tried after he left Umno in 1951 and formed the mass-based multiracial Independent of Malaya Party (IMP) which was much favoured by the British colonial government.

None, however, foresaw Umno and the MCA, two communal parties, working together on one platform to win the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections in February 1952. The successful joint outing inspired both party leaders towards further cooperation which was later institutionalised in the formation of the Alliance Party.

In his latest book, *The Alliance Road to Independence*, Dr Joseph M. Fernando, whose earlier books *The Making of the Malayan Constitution* and *Federal Constitution* won wide acclaim, provides the first detailed historical account of the Alliance struggle for independence of the country.

Contrary to what earlier writings have suggested, and is widely believed to be the case, Fernando reveals that the independence of the country was not given on a silver platter by the British but rather "it was the result of a concerted and sustained political struggle pursued by the Alliance Party which represented all the main races in the country."

Two weeks after the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections, leaders of Umno, led by Tunku Abdul Rahman and the MCA,



led by Tan Cheng Lock, met to discuss extending the cooperation nationwide in preparation for other municipal and town council elections scheduled for later in the year.

Both parties agreed to cooperate as an "alliance of equals" where they will each preserve their separate identities, character and structure. H.S. Lee, leader of Selangor MCA told a forum

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that the country "will never be united unless the two communal organisations come together to give the lead to others".

Tunku told the March 1952 Umno general assembly that the party intended "to extend the alliance and promote friendly relationship with non-Malays in other states".

All these are well-known but what is less known and what is highlighted by *The Alliance Road to Independence* is that the Alliance had to fight every inch of the way but in the process it was gradually becoming the foremost independence movement.

It was no plain sailing as the two parties had to fight internal doubting Thomases while at the same time outside criticisms, especially those from IMP's Onn who had a powerful influence in the Federal Legislative Council where he was member for home affairs.

After more local council election victories in 1952 and 1953 and after the MIC abandoned the IMP and joined the Alliance in 1954 it was clear that the Alliance had won the leadership of the nationalist movement.

The book argues that the influence of the communists on the process of independence was marginal after 1951. Onn, whose IMP collapsed after the Chinese and Indians abandoned it, formed another multiracial party, Parti Negara, but clearly he was a spent force.

The introduction of federal elections in July 1955 was an important milestone in the country's political evolution and the devolution of power from Britain to the local political elite paving the way towards self-government and independence.

To get there the Alliance had not only to fight British High Commissioner Sir Gerald Templar and his successor, Sir

Donald MacGillivray, but also officials in London, Onn, other pro-Onn elites including the mentris besar, all of whom were generally against early Federal Legislative Council elections and the Alliance proposal for elected members to be in a slight majority over those nominated.

To back their demands for early general election for a new Federal Legislative Council and constitutional reforms, the Alliance leaders boycotted the government and organised demonstrations throughout the country. So overwhelmingly large was the mass support that the government was nearly paralysed and law and order was threatened.

The colonial government was concerned with the massive support the Alliance was getting but to avoid a breakdown of law and order gave in and announced that elections would be held on July 27.

The British supported Onn's party hoping that it would win sufficient number of seats to deny power to the Alliance. But the Alliance won 51 or the 52 elected seats, with PAS winning one, in the new Federal Legislative Council of 98 members. The Tunku as leader of the Alliance became Chief Minister.

Even at this stage things were not clear about when full independence would be granted. The Alliance had campaigned on "Independence in Four Years". But its leaders in several meetings with the British government leaders in London were able to make them agree to many of their demands, including Aug 31, 1957.

The book concludes that independence was the realisation of the dream Umno and MCA leaders had in 1952. It was a reflection of the degree of consensus reached among the Alliance leaders to end British rule early.

Clearly independence was a joint effort in which all communities and their various organisations contributed significantly.

There was no doubt as the Union Jack was lowered for the last time and the *Jalur Gemilang* raised that the emotions felt and the hopes that were entertained were truly those of 1Malaysia.

A rose by any other name

"I'M not a dictionary!" I used to be told pre-Google times. So I learnt to use the lexicon and I'm still a fan of the physical book though I'm a devotee of the online version.

Definitions are a peculiar thing. Though very useful, it can be confining, inhibiting and determining at times. Sometimes I find that the definition

might not be sufficient and that's when I wonder how well some definitions encapsulate meaning. I think Shakespeare said it best when the warring families in *Romeo and Juliet* set the scene where these famous words were uttered, "What's in a name, that which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." I used to wonder what this meant. Would an orange still taste and smell like an orange if it were called an apple? Those were my juvenile thoughts.

Today perhaps I acknowledge the power of definition – how it can change or frame our thoughts, actions and opinions. It can be easy to



OnPointe
by Natalie Shobana Ambrose

understand how some words too can be easily mistaken in definition or interchange meaning. This though causes much confusion, because the definition itself determines the action or thought pattern of the situation and has the potential to cause grave consequences.

A ceremonial procession which includes people marching could be easily misunderstood as a protest when in fact this definition is clearly the definition of a parade. There are many similarities of a parade and protest. In many cases uniforms are involved to identify those involved. Some uniforms may be a little more ornate than an average orange, yellow, black or white T-shirt.

The danger in misunderstanding these definitions is that the consequences vary. Sometimes when parading, people might carry an object while parading. This varies from group to group. Though to some the object might be sacred, the majority might not define it as such making it a parade instead.

Therefore, it's important to note that in cases like these where it's really a thin line, it matters not what the march is about but rather how it's defined. Another important note to remember when defining a parade or protest is the availability of a permit, though most times, if the cause is defined as a parade, arrests are not necessary. So to avoid arrests and tear gas, request to have a parade and not a protest.

When Juliet mentioned the rose in 1594, what she was really saying is what matters is what something is, not what it is called. If the essence of the parade is hatred, disapproval or an ostentatious display of ignorance, then motive defines the act. That is why sometimes definitions might need to be re-evaluated.

Another word that can cause great confusion is tolerance. Some other words that are synonymous to tolerance such as patience, impartiality, open-mindedness don't always attach its meaning to tolerance. Tolerance is more a sufferance and putting up with something wrong. Though this may seem like a very altruistic quality, it does come with limits and judgment. A classic example would be my tolerance of noise.

Though it is endured, my tolerance of noise may be limited to a decibel that most teenagers might not agree with and if my patience is tested, I might lose my cool and be driven to do something not very good. Though my excuse might be that I've tolerated enough and am justified in my outburst, somehow this makes tolerance not a very positive word if my victims have to accept my bad behaviour.

This is when I prefer the word acceptance to tolerance. If one party has to continuously tolerate and the other accepting the consequences of the toleration, things go a little awry and become a little scary.

Definitions are a funny thing. In order to be taken seriously, we define things, measure outcomes and provide statistics. Yet, the important things in life such as love, harmony, friendship, decency and integrity cannot be precisely defined. And sometimes in order for peace and justice to be upheld, a spade should be called a spade.

Natalie is not much of a gardener and rarely can be seen with a spade in her hands. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com

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