

Extended Abstract

Elite Coalitions and Nation-Building in Post-War Malaya: Colonial Legacies, and Political Realignments during the Malayan Emergency

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In the complex history of the Malay Peninsula after World War II, political coalitions were frequently formed, yet most of them gradually disintegrated, often transforming erstwhile allies into enemies. The history of these shifting alliances and rivalries cannot be simply reduced to an explanation rooted in communalism or colonial legacies, such as the racial segregation under British colonial rule. While these structural factors contributed to the social and political fabric of Malaya, they do not fully explain the rise and fall of cross-ethnic coalitions in the post-World War II era. Therefore, rather than assuming a direct causal link between colonial policies, contentious politics and later political outcomes, we should ask: what alternatives existed, and why were they rejected or dismantled? What factors led to the eventual rise of certain forms of cooperation while others were sidelined?

This article explores why racial collaborationism, often regarded as the only viable political path, emerged as a dominant strategy during the Malayan Emergency, a period marked by intense struggles over identity, ethnicity, and nation-building. Collaboration was not an inevitable response to threats, such as communist insurgency; rather, it was a contingent outcome shaped by elite rivalry, ethnic competition, and strategic recalibration. Through a relational lens, I analyze how collaboration between the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) became a "locked-in" strategy while other alternatives, such as integrationism and opposition, ultimately failed.

The first significant attempt at political integration in post-war Malaya came in the form of the Malayan Union Scheme, introduced by the British colonial authorities in 1945 following Japan's surrender. The Union sought to centralize control over the Malay states and provide full citizenship to non-Malay residents, including the large Chinese and Indian communities. This plan was seen as a radical departure from the traditional system, where local Malay rulers held considerable symbolic and political power, and the Chinese community was largely excluded from political participation. The Malayan Union Scheme, however, faced immediate opposition from both the Malay and Chinese communities. For the Malays, the scheme represented a direct challenge to their political supremacy and the authority of their local rulers. The reduction of the Malay sultans to mere ceremonial figures struck at the heart of Malay identity and sovereignty. Meanwhile, the Chinese community, though initially supportive of the idea of citizenship, was wary of the potential dilution of their political autonomy in the face of strong Malay resistance.

The failure of the Malayan Union led to its abandonment in favor of the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948. This new agreement disqualified a majority of the Chinese population from gaining citizenship, leaving many Chinese elites in a

precarious position, especially as the threat of communist insurgency and the establishment of the People's Republic of China loomed large. Thus, the scheme intended to integrate the diverse ethnic communities of Malaya instead deepened divisions, reinforcing the idea that ethnic competition would dominate political discourse.

Due to divisions caused by ethnonationalist ideals, differences in group interests, masses' aversion towards The Malayan Union Plan, and strained interpersonal relationships, Dato' Onn bin Jaafar's efforts ended in failure, but it also unexpectedly facilitated the alliance between UMNO and MCA. After the tentative and slow-paced alliance between UMNO and MCA proved to be successful in 1952 Kuala Lumpur City Council Election, Onn Jaafar shifted from being a multiculturalist to being perceived as a Malay extremist. He publicly criticized MCA for its covert relation with Taiwan Kuomintang government, and reaffirmed Chinese' intention in incorporate Malay into China. His extremist speech irritated Chinese elites, who then turned to UMNO for nationwide cooperation. This shift resulted in sequential effect, as the initially instable alliance gradually gained its solidarity when competing with other political camps, namely, Party Negara hosted by Onn Jaafar, and Persatuan Islam Sa-Malaya (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party). In other words, the historical process was finally "locked-in" not only because of the counter-revolutionary actions towards massive revolts, but also because of the inter-competition between different factions of elites.

In the wake of the Malayan Union debacle, elites from various ethnic communities sought new avenues for political engagement. One of the most significant developments in this period was the establishment of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) in 1949. The MCA filled an institutional void within the Chinese community that had been created by the ongoing communist insurgency. The creation of the MCA was, in part, a response to the British colonial authorities' realization that a Chinese political party was necessary to mobilize the Chinese population in support of the anti-insurgency campaign.

The MCA's formation, however, was not a simple matter of uniting the Chinese community; it required overcoming deep divisions among Chinese elites, who had previously failed to create lasting coalitions. The party brought together diverse factions of Chinese elites, including both English-educated leaders and those with traditional ties to the Chinese clan associations (*huay kuan*) and the Kuomintang (KMT). By uniting these previously fragmented groups, the MCA strengthened its negotiating power with the Malay elites, particularly UMNO.

The eventual UMNO-MCA alliance was not a foregone conclusion. It emerged from a process of strategic recalibration in which both parties adjusted to the changing political landscape. The partnership gained traction during the 1952 Kuala Lumpur City Council Elections, where the MCA's alliance with UMNO proved successful in countering both the leftist threat and the political challenges posed by rival factions, including the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Persatuan Islam Sa-Malaya) and the Party Negara, founded by Onn Jaafar. Despite early tension and differences, the party alliance became solidified as both sides realized that their shared interests—primarily

the need to maintain political stability and combat the communist insurgency—outweighed their ethnic and ideological differences.

The entrenched cooperation between MCA and UMNO was sealed by the increasingly hostile rhetoric of Onn Jaafar. His criticism of the MCA and his later turn towards Malay extremism unintentionally helped consolidate the UMNO-MCA alliance. His critiques, including accusations of covert ties between the MCA and the Taiwanese Kuomintang, reinforced Chinese elites' concerns about the safety of their political position within a Malay-majority political system, leading them to increasingly favor cooperation with UMNO.

The formation of the MCA was not without opposition, particularly from leftist factions within the Chinese community. In 1946, the Council Joint Action, later renamed the All-Malaya Council of Action, was formed as an umbrella organization representing left-wing groups, including labor unions, anti-colonial activists, and pro-communist factions. The council vehemently opposed the new constitution and the formation of the Malayan Union. This united front led to the Hartal (massive strike) in 1947, which sought to pressure the colonial government to abandon its reforms.

However, leftist mobilization ultimately failed to achieve its political objectives. The failure of the Hartal strike, along with the deepening divisions between the communist insurgency and moderate Chinese elites, exposed the limits of opposition strategies. Chinese elites, seeking to preserve their political influence and avoid being sidelined by either the Malay elites or the communists, eventually turned towards cooperation with UMNO.

In conclusion, this article argues that elite collaboration during the Malayan Emergency was not a foregone conclusion, but rather the contingent outcome. By analyzing the historical alternatives of integrationism, collaborationism, and opposition, I demonstrate how the political landscape of Malaya was "locked-in" through a process of elite cooperation and division. The subsequent consolidation of the UMNO-MCA alliance became the cornerstone of nation-state building in post-independence Malaysia, shaping the political order for decades to come.