The institution of constitutional monarchy remains one of the core institutions in the system of parliamentary democracy practised in Malaysia. The hereditary Malay rulers in nine states continue to wield considerable influence on the political system through a range of powers conferred by the federal constitution. Few, however, may be aware that the Malay rulers fought a pitched battle during the drafting of the Malayan independence constitution between 1956 and 1957 to safeguard their constitutional status and powers. The primary constitutional documents reveal that the rulers challenged strongly the very limited provisions made in the Reid draft constitution in regard to their constitutional powers, the role and function of the Conference of Rulers, and the limited financial powers accorded to the state governments. The rulers redefined their role and position from that provided in the Reid draft constitution and emerged considerably stronger in the administration of the state, and on matters of national importance. While the rulers accepted the basic premise of their position as “constitutional sovereigns” in the 1957 Malayan federal constitution (and state constitutions) as agreed at the London conference in January 1956, they were able to enhance their constitutional status significantly from the limited powers provided in the Reid draft constitution.

This intense contestation between the Malay rulers and the ruling Alliance Party on the former’s constitutional position during the framing of the Malayan federal constitution between 1956 and 1957 has not received adequate attention. Only two studies have some historical discussion on the constitutional position of the rulers, albeit in a broader sense. The first, by Simon Smith, discusses the constitutional...