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British Colonial Policy and the Development of Political Parties in Malaya, 1945-1957: Taming the Shrew?

Joseph M. Fernando

Abstract

This article examines the policies of the British colonial administration in Malaya towards the formation and development of political parties between 1945 and 1957. The period 1945-1957 witnessed the emergence of political parties of various ideological dispositions and was an important formative period in the development of the modern party system in Malaysia. While there are numerous studies of political parties in Malaysia, no serious study has been undertaken to examine the policies and legislation governing the formation and activities of political parties in the post-war period concerned. This article examines the policies of the colonial administration towards political parties and legislation that were introduced during this period to regulate the establishment and functioning of political parties. In a broader sense, this study examines the extent to which the British colonial administration attempted to influence party politics and political activities in the period leading up to Malayan independence in 1957.

Introduction

British policy towards the development of political parties in the postwar period in colonial territories in general was quite ambivalent.1

In Malaya in the early postwar period there does not appear to be any clear plan to regulate or shape Malayan politics, although this is more discernible from 1948. Party politics and political activity in the post-war period in Malaya (1945-57) was quite vibrant. A broad range of parties of different ideologies emerged to champion various causes and often were stridently anti-colonial. Interestingly a kind of embryonic parliamentary