The campaign for Merdeka

As we mark 50 years of Merdeka, The Star looks back at those who played major roles in the road to independence and to building a new nation in a series of articles entitled Founding Fathers.

Do this day, the historical documentation of the independence movement and the process of gaining Merdeka remains contentious area of debate among scholars. The role of political parties, individuals, organisations and developments in Britain that impacted the colonisation process are still critically evaluated.

For example, is referred to as Pengasas Merdekaan, or the “Initiator of Independence”. First Prime Minister Tuanku Abdul Rahman, on the other hand, is fondly referred to as Bapa Merdekaan or “Father of Independence” for his prominent role in the independence struggle.

Variously, even the origins of the independence movement are a point of debate. It would be difficult to identify a precise date (or place) and there are varying interpretations on the origins of the independence movement.

Some contend that the seeds of the movement can be traced to the early stirrings of nationalism: Plenary Conference of The Constitutional Proposals for Malaya meeting being held in the dining room of King's House, Kuala Lumpur, on Nov 20, 1946 between the Governor-General, the Governor of the Malayan Union, the Rulers of the Malay States, and Umno. On Nov 22, MacDonald flew to London to present and discuss the constitutional proposals with the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

In the blueprint issued by the Alliance, the coalition demanded that 44 of the 75 seats in the Federal Legislative Council be chosen through direct elections and the remaining 31 seats be filled by nominations.

In essence, the Alliance was asking that at least 60% of seats in the council be elected through popular vote. This shocked the IMP leaders and brought a swift response.

Barely two days later, the IMP leaders announced their own plans to hold a national conference to discuss the creation of “a united, free and self-governing Malayan nation.”

This contest saw the intervention of the colonial administration, which announced on July 15, 1953, its plans to set up a committee to discuss the question of federal elections.

This committee, which included representatives from the IMP and the Alliance (the majority being pro-IMP supporters), announced its findings on Feb 1, 1954, recommending that less than half the members of the Federal Legislative Council be elected; that is, 44 out of the 92 members.

High Commissioner Sir Gerald Templer himself was a little surprised by the committee's recommendations and persuaded the Malay Rulers that a small majority of elected seats (eventually fixed at 52 out of 98 seats) would be more appropriate.

The Alliance leaders later wrote to Templer urging him to provide for at least a 60% majority, which they argued was needed by any party that hopes to govern the country smoothly. Templer refused to entertain the request.

The Alliance then decided to send a delegation to London to raise the issue directly with the Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs Oliver