The rebel in Onn Jaafar

Datuk Onn Jaafar remains an interesting subject for the study of the politics and leadership of this country during its formative years.

By JOSEPH M. FERNANDO

He is perhaps best known for organising nation-wide protests against the colonial Malayan Union scheme in 1946 that culminated in the formation of Umno in May that year. Nevertheless, Datuk Onn Jaafar (1895-1962) remains an enigma.

Scholars of history are still scrutinising the life of this pre-eminent political leader of the post-war period to decipher his thoughts and actions. His political ideas varied considerably from the time he led the Malayan Union protests to the formation of the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) in 1951 and, later, the Party Negara.

One may well ask: was he a Malay nationalist or a Malayan nationalist, or a blend of both? The answer could well depend on the period being examined.

There is some consensus that Onn contributed significantly to the growth and development of the independence movement. Some scholars refer to him as Peruger, a Malay nationalist; while others refer to him as Pengasas, a Malay nationalist.

Agreement in 1948.

Following the signing of the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948, there appears to be a shift in Onn's political position from a narrow communal stance to a more inclusive approach.

Inclusive politics

This approach remained the basis of Onn's political struggles. He was...