The tough negotiator

V.T. Sambanthan stepped in to lead the Malayan Indian Congress at a crucial period in the party's development as the independence movement began to gather pace.

JOSEPH M. FERNANDO

V.EERASAMY Thirunayana Sambanthan, better known as Tun V.T. Sambanthan, was one of the leading Indian leaders to play a prominent role in the independence movement in Malaya. As president of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) during this portentous period of transition, he worked closely with Alliance Party leader Tunku Abdul Rahman and they developed a close personal relationship.

The entry of the MIC into the multi-communal Alliance in 1955 contributed greatly to enhancing the coalition's image as the main representative of the three main communities in Malaya.

The MIC's Alliance membership provided additional electoral strength to the coalition, cementing the British of increasing evidence of inter-communal co-operation and, more importantly, allowed for more representative solutions that led to the formulation of a new Constitution.

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Earlier, in 1956, Sambanthan led the MIC delegation in the negotiations between the Alliance parties in drawing up a memorandum to be presented to the Reid Commission.

Sambanthan was a pragmatic negotiator who worked hard to secure the interests of the Indian community, while at the same time being sensitive to the broader interests of the Alliance party's diverse membership. He was at times criticised by his party members for conceding on certain issues, but Sambanthan was faced with the need to find a suitable balance to the various sectoral demands and sought to take a middle path in the negotiations. For taking such a position, he was praised by the Tunku.

The final constitutional negotiations in London in May 1957 also saw a personal transformation.

Mutual respect: Sambanthan putting a garland on the Tunku on his arrival from Malacca where he had proclaimed the date of Independence in February 1956. Independence was in fact first proclaimed at Bandar Hilir, Malacca, on Feb 20, 1956. However, for logistical and administrative reasons as agreed to by Malaya and the British, it was decided that the official proclamation would only be made the following year.

— Courtesy of National Archives