Elite intercommunal bargaining and conflict resolution: The role of the Communities Liaison Committee in Malaya, 1949–51

Joseph M. Fernando

Between 1949 and 1951, the Communities Liaison Committee (CLC), an unofficial body comprising leaders from the main Malayan ethnic communities, served as a prototype for elite intercommunal conflict resolution during a very challenging period amid an ongoing communist insurgency. Drawing upon previously inaccessible primary sources, this article reassesses the CLC's work towards resolving divisive issues such as Malay economic backwardness, federal citizenship, national identity, education and language in Malaya. This article argues that the CLC played a significantly bigger role than previously recognised and influenced government policy considerably. Equally importantly, it entrenched the concept of consociationalism, which was to shape the Malayan political landscape long thereafter.

Introduction

Malaya's post-war political developments posed a considerable challenge to the returning British colonial administration. The Malayan Union — a system of unitary government imposed on the entire peninsula — announced by the Colonial Office in late 1945 and which came into effect on 1 April 1946, provoked the most serious opposition to British plans. The Malays opposed in particular the introduction of new citizenship criteria that enabled the large domiciled Chinese and Indian communities to acquire Malayan citizenship and the transfer of the Malay Rulers' sovereignty to the British Crown under the Malayan Union. Led by Dato' Onn Jaafar, a Malay leader from Johore, the Malays held nationwide protests against the Malayan Union scheme brought together in a central administration the Federated Malay States (FMS), Unfederated Malay States (UMS) and the Straits Settlements of Penang and Melaka, and was headed by the High Commissioner. Singapore, because of its special status as a free port and important naval base, remained a separate colony. See A.J. Stockwell, British policy and Malayan politics during the Malayan Union experiment (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1979), pp. 17–38.