

History Internal Assessment

Research Question: To what extent was the British decision to replace the Malayan Union in 1946 due to the threat of anti-colonial left-wing parties?

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Section 1: Identification and evaluation of sources

This investigation will explore the question 'To what extent was the British decision to replace the Malayan Union in 1946 due to the threat of anti-colonial left-wing parties?'. The book *Bangsa Melayu* by Ariffin Omar is relevant to the investigation as it discusses the Malay reaction to the Union proposal, which led to the British decision to replace it. A telegram from Malayan Union Governor Edward Gent to Secretary of State for the Colonies George Henry Hall is relevant to the investigation as it highlights Gent's reasons for replacing the Union.

Source 1: Bangsa Melayu by Ariffin Omar (1993)

The origin of the source is valuable because Omar is a think-tank researcher specializing in Malay history, and has written extensively on Malay nationalism, indicating that he is knowledgeable on the topic. The date of publication of the source further strengthens its origin as Omar, benefitting from hindsight, analyses a wide corpus of primary sources, with consideration of their literary and ideological biases. The content is valuable because Omar details the rise of radical nationalism in both Malaya and Indonesia, providing a wider regional context for the British fear of anti-colonial left-wing parties.

However, Omar's book focuses only on the Malay reaction to the Union proposal, limiting the content's scope by not considering other factors that led to the Union's replacement, such as the role of minority Chinese and Indian communities. The purpose of the source is limited, as Omar, an ethnic Malay, may be inclined to glorify

Malay nationalism and exaggerate its role in causing the Union, perceived as an anti-Malay policy, to be replaced.

Source 2: Inward Telegram no 268 from Sir Edward Gent to G. H. Hall¹

The origin of the source is valuable as it was written by the Malayan Union Governor, detailing the viewpoint of an authority figure in the British colonial administration who likely influenced the decision to replace the Union. The date of the telegram, 1946, adds to the origin's value as it enables an understanding of contemporary British opinions leading up to the Union's replacement. Gent's elaboration of multiple arguments for replacing the Union in the telegram's content is valuable, as it highlights the importance of various factors such as the threat of left-wing parties and political apathy among minority communities in the British decision to replace the Union. The purpose is valuable because Gent's confidential telegram to Hall is not intended for public consumption, allowing Gent to convey his private worries regarding the Union proposal and providing an honest, candid insight into British perceptions of the Union's failures which led to its replacement.

However, as the telegram focuses on Gent's personal views, the content is limited as it may not reflect the collective opinion of British colonial administrators towards replacing the Union. The source is limited in its purpose as Gent's telegram, written to persuade the Colonial Office to replace the Union, may exaggerate the threat of anti-colonial left-wing parties and thus may not reflect the actual importance of this threat in the British decision to replace the Union.

¹ A.J. Stockwell, *British Documents on the End of Empire. Series B Volume 3, Malaya. Part 1: The Malayan Union Experiment 1942-1948* (London: HMSO, 1995, 229-231.)

Section 2: Investigation

On 22 January 1946, the publication of a White Paper revealed the Malayan Union proposal to the Malayan public, involving centralization of British rule and the granting of equal citizenship rights to all Malayan residents, including Chinese and Indian minorities who were perceived by the native Malay majority as 'immigrants'.² Inaugurated on 1 March 1946, the Union was regarded as a threat to the position of the Malays and received widespread Malay backlash.³ This led to the formation of an Anglo-Malay Working Committee which drafted the Federation of Malaya Agreement 1948 as a replacement, with considerable concessions to the Malays.⁴ While other reasons such as the formation of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and political apathy of minority communities towards the Union proposal all contributed to a large extent, the threat of anti-colonial left-wing parties was the main reason for the British decision to replace the Union.

The British decision to replace the Union may have been primarily caused by the threat of violence by anti-colonial left-wing parties, such as the pro-Indonesian Malay Nationalist Party (PKMM) and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). This is evidenced by the dispatches of newly-appointed Malayan Union Governor Edward Gent and Governor-General of Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald to the Colonial Office, warning of violence if the Union was not replaced. Gent warned that Malay backlash would 'actively assist' the MCP and nationalist pro-Indonesian political organizations,⁵ while 'Malaya-based Indonesian elements' might capitalize on the

² Perlis Malay Association to Hall, 13 Feb 1946, CO 537/1551 no. 50823/34/3, cited in Albert Lau, "Malayan Union Citizenship: Constitutional Change and Controversy in Malaya, 1942-48," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Sep 1989), 229.

³ Ishak bin Tadin, "Dato Onn and Malay Nationalism," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (Mar 1960), 60-61.

⁴ Barbara W. Andaya, and Leonard Y. Andaya. *A History of Malaysia* (London: Red Globe Press, 2017, 272.)

⁵ CO 537/1528, no 95A. Stockwell, *British Documents*, 225-227.

tension to attack minority communities.⁶ MacDonald, having been dispatched to 'bring Gent back to his senses',⁷ instead reinforced Gent's opinions, by warning of 'Indonesian anti-European currents'.⁸ The PKMM, who had gained considerable support among the Malay peasantry for their anti-colonial stance⁹ and ideology centered on the Indonesian nationalist philosophy of Pancasila,¹⁰ threatened to emulate Indonesian revolutionaries who had violently overthrown the colonial-friendly Indonesian aristocracy.¹¹ Moreover, the rise of anti-British leftist militant groups, such as the Angkatan Pemuda Insaf, presented a direct security threat to the British.¹² If the British did not replace the Union while the moderate UMNO still held sway over the Malay masses, Malay support would shift to groups that advocated more radical and violent methods. The significance of this threat is evidenced by the haste in which negotiations with UMNO were conducted to draft the Union's replacement, with Gent urging the Colonial Office for 'a quick settlement' to prevent leadership of the Malays from passing to the PKMM.¹³ At the same time, Gent faced the threat of the MCP,¹⁴ who condemned the Union as a means of perpetuating British colonial rule.¹⁵ Intended as a political concession to appease the MCP following the end of World War II,¹⁶ the MCP's hostility towards the Union in favor of immediate independence¹⁷ likely convinced the British that the Union proposal was untenable, as it failed to assuage MCP demands while also radicalizing the Malay peasantry. Faced with the dual threat of the anti-colonial PKMM and MCP, the British may have decided that granting concessions to the Malays to consolidate their support for the

⁶ CO 537/1529, no 100. Stockwell, *British Documents*, 229.

⁷ Mohamed Noordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation: Political Unification in the Malaysia Region 1945-65* (Kuala Lumpur: UM, 1974, 33-34.)

⁸ CO 537/1529, nos 149-152. Stockwell, *British Documents*, 252-255.

⁹ Donna J. Amoroso, "Dangerous politics and the Malay nationalist movement," 1945-47, *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Nov 1998), 265.

¹⁰ Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2015, 51-53.)

¹¹ Omar, *Bangsa Melayu*, 95-96.

¹² CO 537/1581, no 32. Stockwell, *British Documents*, 197-199. See also Donna J. Amoroso, "Dangerous politics," 269-270.

¹³ Lau, "Malayan Union Citizenship," 237-239. See also Gent to Gater, CO 537/1530, no 303. Stockwell, *British Documents*, 271-274.

¹⁴ CO 537/1529, no 101. Stockwell, *British Documents*, 229-231.

¹⁵ Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star Over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict During and After the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941-46*. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012: 289-90.)

¹⁶ Cheah, *Red Star*, 154-155.

¹⁷ Cheah, *Red Star*, 247-248.

British-friendly UMNO was the only realistic option of preserving British rule. Therefore, by replacing the Union and placating the Malay peasantry, the British were able to alienate anti-colonial left-wing parties from popular support, consolidating British influence and defusing societal tensions that threatened to erupt in violence.

Alternatively, the British decision to replace the Union may have been caused by the formation of UMNO, which united the Malays in openly confronting the British. As historian William Roff notes, pre-war Malay nationalism was beset with a lack of Pan-Malayan unity stemming from regionalism and traditionalism.¹⁸ Indeed, the initial Malay reaction to the Union was uncoordinated and subject to internal Malay politicking, evidenced by local rivalries between anti-Union organizations and Malay state associations.¹⁹ Thus, Onn Jaafar's founding of UMNO in May 1946, convening 41 Malay associations under an umbrella organization,²⁰ presented a united Malay front against the British and was crucial in ensuring the success of the anti-Union campaign. UMNO's mass mobilization of Malays for confrontational protests²¹ and coercion of the Malay Rulers to boycott Gent's installation ceremony²² demonstrated the strength of Malay unity, convincing British officials that 'Malaya had become politically conscious overnight'²³ and persuading the British to replace the Union in the face of overwhelming UMNO-led Malay opposition. However, UMNO's role in proactively leading Malay nationalist discourse has been questioned by Amoroso, who states that UMNO was in fact 'swimming in a great tide of popular expression that threatened to engulf it'.²⁴ From this perspective, the allure of anti-colonial

¹⁸ William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Canberra: ANU, 1965, 383-385.)

¹⁹ A.J. Stockwell, *British Policy and Malay Politics During the Malayan Union Experiment 1942-48* (Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, 1979, 64-65.)

²⁰ A.J. Stockwell, "The Formation and First Years of the United Malays National Organization (U.M.N.O.) 1946—1948," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1977), 491.

²¹ Amoroso, "Dangerous politics," 254.

²² Stockwell, "Formation and First Years," 494.

²³ Gammans's press statement in Kuala Lumpur. 25 May 1946, cited in Stockwell, *British Policy and Malay Politics*, 89.

²⁴ Amoroso, "Dangerous politics," 258.

left-wing parties to the Malay peasantry may have forced the aristocrat-led UMNO²⁵ to conform with anti-British sentiments to maintain its political relevance. This viewpoint is supported by Ariffin Omar, who states that a 'revolutionary shift' in hitherto feudalistic Malay social relations caused the position of the Malay ruling class to become dependent on upholding the interests of the Malay masses,²⁶ evidenced by the Malay press's unprecedented criticism of the Malay Rulers for initially agreeing to the Union proposal.²⁷ Therefore, rather than proactively uniting the Malays to replace the Union, it could be argued that UMNO's anti-Union campaign was a reaction to the rise of anti-colonial left-wing parties such as the PKMM which threatened to usurp traditional aristocratic dominance over Malay society. Thus, the formation of UMNO caused the British replacement of the Union only insofar as UMNO provided a viable moderate alternative to left-wing parties which demanded immediate independence from colonial rule.

Political apathy among the minority Chinese and Indian communities is another factor in the British replacement of the Union. The initial apathetic attitude of minority communities towards the Union, as compared to the ferocious Malay resistance, was decisive in the British decision to replace it. Minority communities did not defend the Union proposal, despite benefitting the most from its equal citizenship provision, as they were still politically orientated towards their 'homelands' and felt that acceptance of Malayan citizenship would annul their ethnic identities.²⁸ Thus, the Union was received with general apathy by minorities' vernacular press.²⁹ Gent, initially worried of minority backlash if the Union were to be replaced,³⁰ became

²⁵ Stockwell, "Formation and First Years," 494.

²⁶ Omar, *Bangsa Melayu*, 62-67.

²⁷ Straits Times, 14 January 1946 and Seruan Rakyat, 23 November 1946. Cited in Amoroso, "Dangerous politics," 259. See also Omar, *Bangsa Melayu*, 66.

²⁸ Paul Kratoska, *South East Asia, Colonial History: Peaceful transitions to independence (1945-1963)* (London: Routledge, 2001): 157-158.

²⁹ Victor Purcell, "A Malayan Union: The Proposed New Constitution", *Pacific Affairs* Vol. 19, No. 1 (Mar 1946), 37-38. See also Cheah, *Red Star*, 287-288.

³⁰ Lau, "Malayan Union Citizenship," 230.

aware of the Union's lack of support from the groups it was intended to benefit and advocated for its replacement.³¹ Likewise, the Colonial Office granted permission for concessions to the Malays,³² subsequently stonewalling minority representatives from negotiations.³³ Therefore, the initial apathy among minorities towards the Union, contrasted with mass Malay civil disobedience, convinced the British to replace the Union with the Federation of Malaya in July 1946, offering large concessions to the Malays. Had minority communities campaigned to support the Union in early 1946 instead of remaining apathetic, the British would likely have had second thoughts about replacing the Union. Despite the subsequent political awakening of minority communities to oppose the Federation in December 1946,³⁴ the British, humiliated by the failure of their Union proposal, could not risk another volte-face that would destroy confidence in British rule.

To conclude, the British decision to replace the Union was primarily due to the threat of anti-colonial left-wing parties. The political apathy of minority communities was decisive in convincing the British that Anglo-Malay negotiations to replace the Union were politically viable, but was not the primary cause of its replacement. The Union had failed in its aim to appease the MCP, which instead asserted its uncompromising stance by demanding immediate independence. Moreover, by radicalizing the Malay masses against the British, the Union proposal attracted popular support for the anti-colonial PKMM, which threatened to emulate their Indonesian nationalist counterparts in using violence to achieve independence. Combined, this dual threat by anti-colonial left-wing parties to British rule and societal stability in Malaya

³¹ CO 537/1529 no 101. See also CO 537/1528, no 95A. Stockwell, *British Documents*, 225-227, 229-231.

³² Lau, "Constitutional Change," 230-232.

³³ M.R. Stenson, "The Malayan Union and the Historians," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Sep 1969), 351. See also Syed Husin Ali, Ariffin Omar, Jeyakumar Devaraj, Fahmi Reza, *People's Constitutional Proposals* (Petaling Jaya, SIRD, 2017: 46-49.).

³⁴ Andaya and Andaya. *A History of Malaysia*, 272-73.

necessitated a British reaction. The formation of UMNO as a moderate alternative, led by the historically British-friendly aristocratic class, presented a means to control the rebellious Malay peasantry. Thus, the formation of UMNO only contributed to the Union's replacement insofar as concessions to UMNO provided the British with an opportunity to establish a bulwark of Malay support against the threat of anti-colonial left-wing parties.

Section 3: Reflection

My investigation raised some issues regarding the historical method. A challenge faced by historians is the impact of cultural bias on the production of secondary sources, potentially predisposing historians to favour or oppose a particular viewpoint. Historians of a particular ethnicity may interpret historical events according to their own cultural perspectives when producing secondary sources, leading to biased misrepresentations of history. It was difficult for me to determine which secondary sources were most reliable, as the Malay-majority government-approved history textbooks often exaggerated UMNO's role in 'defeating' the Malayan Union. A method used by historians to overcome this challenge is to utilize a wide range of sources to account for differing cultural perspectives. In my investigation, I considered primary sources from different ethnicities, written in their original languages.

Another challenge faced by historians is the differentiation between causality and consequence when considering different historical perspectives. Referring to sources that highlighted UMNO-led mass protests, it seemed convenient for me to acknowledge the paramount importance of UMNO's strength in causing the British to replace the Union. However, upon investigating different perspectives, it became evident that UMNO's protests were actually a consequence to the threat of ascendant anti-colonial left-wing parties, the actual underlying factor that caused the Union's replacement. Thus, historians are prone to confirmation bias which may lead to flawed generalisations. A method used by historians to overcome this issue is to

investigate the historical context of each source and critically assess the sufficiency of evidence before making inferences from sources.

Historians also face the difficulty of overcoming the pro-Western bias of primary sources written in English. While official sources such as the Colonial Office records were easily accessible, they provided an Anglo-centric perspective, excluding the contemporary views of local Malaysians. A method used by historians to overcome this bias is to consider primary sources written from a local perspective by those actively involved in the events. Historians may perform fieldwork, interviewing local witnesses to a historical event or searching for material and written evidence, such as artefacts and documents. In my investigation, I referred to secondary sources produced by Malaysian historians, who drew upon local vernacular publications and oral histories of local community leaders.

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