

# Revisiting The origins of The Alliance

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by

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The Alliance assumed the reigns of power from the British colonial administration on 31 August 1957 when Malaya gained independence. In contrast to nationalist movements in other parts of Asia such as India and Indonesia which had been active since the early decades of the last century, the Alliance had barely five years of history behind them. Within this short period the Alliance transformed from an adhoc coalition for the 1952 Kuala Lumpur municipal elections into the main nationalist movement by 1954, and, after the first federal elections of July 1955, formed the government. Subsequently, the Alliance was able to secure independence from Britain within two years. While much has been written of the latter phases of the development of the Alliance, its origins has received scarce attention.

Karl von Vorys, for example,<sup>1</sup> in his analysis of the Malaysian political system, examines the workings of the Alliance as a political organisation but deals only briefly with its origins. K.J. Ratnam, in his study on communalism in Malaysia, and G.P. Means, in his general survey of Malaysian history, pay greater attention to the campaign for independence and the working of the Alliance government.<sup>2</sup> R.K. Vasil meanwhile, treats the subject summarily<sup>3</sup> while others have focused on the three communal components of the Alliance: UMNO, MCA and MIC.<sup>4</sup>

This essay aims to shed more light on the origins of the Alliance. The first part of this essay examines the political conditions and trends in the post-1948 Federation of Malaya period that influenced the emergence of the inter-communal Alliance<sup>5</sup>; the second traces the evolution of the idea of an alliance between UMNO and the MCA, about five weeks before the Kuala Lumpur Municipal in 1952, and analyses the motives behind the pact; and, the concluding section focuses on the formalisation of the UMNO-MCA alliance.

### THE POLITICAL SETTING

One of the most significant events in the post-war period in Malaya following the Malayan Union controversy in 1946 was the introduction of local elections as part of the British government's plans to prepare Malaya for self-government. The preamble to the Federation of Malaya Agreement which came into force on 1 February 1948, replacing the Malayan Union, provided for the introduction of elections, "as soon as circumstances and local conditions will permit."<sup>6</sup> This marked a new era in Malayan political evolution as local involvement in the political decision-making process until then was limited to representation on the State and Federal legislative councils through nominations by various interests groups such as labour, commerce, mining, agricultural, planting, Settlements and the States.<sup>7</sup> The realisation of this provision for elections in the Federation Agreement, however, was delayed with the declaration of a nationwide emergency on 18 June 1948, following a series of organised killings and economic sabotage by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).<sup>8</sup>

Tackling the insurgency, which threatened the economic and political stability of the Federation took priority over civil matters. Nevertheless, local political evolution did not remain static. Even from the early stages of the Emergency the government felt that the communist insurgency could not be resolved by purely military means. The new High Commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney,<sup>9</sup> stressed that the government was tackling the communist problem from the social, economic and political fronts in addition to the military campaign.<sup>10</sup> Barely a year after taking office, replacing Sir Edward Gent who was killed in an aircraft accident,<sup>11</sup> Gurney was already discussing with the Colonial Office the question of local elections as well as the devolution of greater political responsibility to Malayan political elites.<sup>12</sup>

Gurney planned to hold the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections in November 1951, local elections in Penang and Malacca in December 1951, Batu Pahat

and Muar in April 1952, Ipoh in second-half of 1952, and the Johore State Council elections in 1953. In addition, he planned to introduce a "Member System" to provide local elites experience in administration.<sup>13</sup>

Gurney's approach to political advancement for Malaya was two-pronged. Through local elections<sup>14</sup> he hoped to create greater political awareness and participation of the population at the lower levels, while on a higher plane, he hoped to create a nucleus of leaders, who, through the "Member System," would have acquired sufficient experience in government administration to enable a smooth transfer of power, eventually.

Political advance, argued Gurney, was required not only as part of progress towards eventual self-government but also to "satisfy public demands for democratic as opposed to communist methods."<sup>15</sup> In giving local politicians more political power and adding a touch of "democratic" politics, Gurney also saw a potential trump card against the MCP's claim to legitimacy for its violent campaign for self-government as his plan would indicate positive steps towards self-government.

A parallel development on the political front was the formation of the MCA in February 1949 in which Gurney played an important role. The Communist revolt being very much dependent on Chinese support, Gurney felt that there was a need for an association that could win the allegiance of the Chinese away from the Malayan Communist Party.<sup>16</sup> He hoped that the MCA would assist the government to obtain more support from the Chinese in the war against the communists.

Gurney's success in bringing together leading Chinese members of the Legislative Council and representatives from the rubber and mining sectors culminated in the formation of the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) on 27 February 1949<sup>17</sup>, Gurney in fact assisting in drafting the rules of the organisation.<sup>18</sup>

Getting the association off the ground was an important achievement for Gurney as there had been unsuccessful attempts previously to form such an organisation to represent Chinese interests as, for example, the Malayan Chinese League proposed by Tan Cheng Lock in April 1948.<sup>19</sup> Gurney was also cautious in his early assessment of the MCA, Gurney wrote that the association was "capable of going wrong and would have to be carefully handled."<sup>20</sup>

Gurney had an implicit politically objective beyond the Emergency when he shaped the formation of the MCA. He hoped for the emergence of a strong political organisation that could represent Chinese interests and acquire the

same status accorded to UMNO by the administration. As will be seen below, it is this second objective, that of pursuing an overt political role, that the MCA leadership concentrated on as plans for the introduction of elections were drawn up by the government. Gurney, in fact, was also to have a key role in the conversion of the MCA from a social and welfare organisation into a fully-fledged political party later.

Apart from the Emergency, the most serious problem that Malaya faced during this period was the deep-seated communal sentiments among the populace. The Japanese Occupation, the Malayan Union crisis, the 1948 Federation of Malaya Agreement and the Emergency had exacerbated the already strained relations between the communities before the Second World War by pitting the races against one another.<sup>21</sup> Among the government's main priorities was the promotion of closer relations between communities which was deemed a necessary pre-requisite before the question of self-government could be seriously considered.

The formation of the Communities Liaison Committee<sup>22</sup> on 10 January 1949, under the sponsorship of the Commissioner-General for South-East Asia, Malcolm MacDonald, was thus aimed at fostering inter-communal ties by offering the community leaders a forum to discuss communal issues. Despite the CLC being an unofficial body, the Colonial Office records reveal that the agreements reached at these "closed" meetings on contentious issues such as citizenship, Malay special rights and education influenced greatly the administration's policies and formed the basis of amendments to the 1948 Federation of Malaya Agreement.<sup>23</sup> The CLC thus offered the communities an opportunity to discuss sensitive communal issues and reach a compromise away from public scrutiny, with the blessings of the colonial administration.

This approach to resolving political problems had a strong impact on Malayan politics as it brought about a closer working relationship between the local elites and sowed the seeds of inter-communal accommodation that was to become an important feature in Malayan politics in the period leading to independence. The developments in UMNO which had the biggest influence on the direction of Malayan politics will be considered first.

The UMNO leaders participation in the CLC discussions had an important influence on their political thinking. While UMNO had been formed to protect Malay interests during the Malayan Union crisis of 1946, following the signing of the Federation Agreement in 1948 the leaders now tentatively began to em-

brace a broader political outlook encompassing the interests of the non-Malays, realising that it was the only hope of achieving the party's goal of independence. This shift, for example, is evident in Onn's speech at the UMNO Annual General Meeting on 29 May 1949:

It is absolutely important for the Malays to obtain closer ties with the other people in this country. It is time for us to take the view wider than the *kampung* view. I ask of you, which will you choose, peace or chaos, friendship or enmity?<sup>24</sup>

The UMNO president's new approach was influenced largely by the realisation that the British government had made it clear that racial co-operation was prerequisite before the question of self-government could be seriously considered. In a speech on 27 April 1948, for instance, MacDonald stressed that all the races featured in plans for Malaya's self-government.<sup>25</sup> Onn realised that if UMNO was to achieve the party's long term goal of gaining self-governing status the party would have to reach an accommodation with the domiciled non-Malay population. Further, Onn was aware that the threat from the MCP also meant that it would be dangerous to alienate the Chinese population. MacDonald, personally, was also influential in bringing about a change in Onn's political thinking. Thus in his meetings with Gurney, Onn was soon speaking of a "united party of all communities."<sup>26</sup> As Onn was to explain later when he envisioned the formation of the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP): "It would be the proper course to prove to the Malays as well as for others who declare this country to be theirs."<sup>27</sup> To give form to his non-communal political approach, Onn, in the first instance, proposed that UMNO should open its door to non-Malays<sup>28</sup> and also be renamed the "United Malayan National Organisation."<sup>29</sup>

While the top executives of UMNO were supportive<sup>30</sup> of the idea, the second echelon leaders and the UMNO members in general were not in favour of the proposal which they felt was too radical. The bitterness of the war years and the immediate post-war years that had manifested itself in communal violence in several parts of the country were too close for them to contemplate such a proposition.<sup>31</sup> In June 1951, Onn offered UMNO an ultimatum to open its doors to non-Malays and when this was not forthcoming he left the party in August 1951 to set up the non-communal IMP<sup>32</sup>, despite being discouraged by Gurney and MacDonald from embarking on such a course. Gurney urged Onn to stay in

UMNO and form a new non-communal party but Onn felt that such an attempt would be obstructed by some of his critics in UMNO.<sup>33</sup>

Onn's actions had an important impact on Malayan politics. Firstly, the formation of the IMP introduced the relatively new phenomenon of non-communal politics to the Malayan political system which was soon to get its first taste of electoral politics and, secondly, it created a serious split within the UMNO leadership, with the up-and-coming second echelon leaders becoming more committed to ensuring that UMNO's communal organisational structure was retained. UMNO quickly closed ranks behind the new leader. Tunku Abdul Rahman, who declared that any UMNO member who joined the IMP would be expelled.<sup>34</sup> This triggered a struggle for Malay support between Onn's IMP and Tunku's UMNO which had an important bearing on the "alliance" between the MCA and UMNO. But before we consider that an examination of developments in the MCA is essential.

The MCA was also undergoing a process of self-examination during this period. While the party initially focused on assisting the government in the resettlement of the squatters from the fringes of the jungle and in gaining the allegiance of the Chinese "neutrals" as well as the "hardcore" MCP sympathisers, its leaders were now considering an expanded role for the organisation beyond the emergency. On 1 June 1950, for example, the MCA secretary-general, Leong Yew Koh, writing to Tan Cheng Lock, the party president, remarked that although the Perak MCA membership was 40,000-strong, the branch was a "mere basin of loose sand."<sup>35</sup> He felt that there was an urgent need to transform the MCA into a well-organised political force. Cheng Lock readily agreed, describing the MCA as a "loosely-knit association of persons, most of whom did not even know the basic aims of the organisation."<sup>36</sup> He was soon to rectify this weakness.

In September 1951, Cheng Lock, in an address to the MCA members, spoke of the need to re-examine the role of the MCA, arguing that the party should assume a more political role to better represent Chinese interests<sup>37</sup>

The MCA should not exist only for the limited, though vital, purpose of meeting the Emergency, It is a living institution which should consolidate itself on strong and broad democratic foundations, in order that it may be ready to play a part in Malaya of the future as well as the present.<sup>37</sup>

This was a turning point for the MCA and its transformation into a political party along the lines of UMNO. In this effort, Cheng Lock had the ear of Gurney who wanted the MCA to obtain "real and effective co-operation of the Chinese," having become a little impatient that an end to the Emergency was not yet in sight.<sup>38</sup> Gurney felt that the MCA since its formation in 1949 had not been effective in gaining the full co-operation of the Chinese and was eager to hear what plans the MCA had to improve the situation. Cheng Lock had several private meetings with Gurney in 1951 on the re-organisation of the MCA into a fully-fledged political party and was scheduled to meet Gurney on 28 October 1951 with the party's standing committee.<sup>39</sup> The High Commissioner hoped that the reorganisation of the MCA would assist counter-insurgency and hence paid special attention to Cheng Lock's ideas. Gurney, however, was killed in an ambush by the communists on 6 October 1951.

Cheng Lock's discussions with Gurney on the re-organisation of the MCA into a political party also reveals the ambivalence of the MCA leadership since it was in this period<sup>40</sup> that the IMP was formed with Cheng Lock chairing the inaugural meeting. The MCA at this stage, while in favour of inter-communal co-operation, did not have a clear policy on the political direction of the party.<sup>41</sup>

From the above account it is clear that during the period under discussion, 1948-52, there was a shift in the pattern of Malayan politics from a narrow communal focus towards an inter-communal accommodation. This is reflected in the formation of the Communities Liaison Committee (CLC) as a platform to discuss inter-communal issues; in Onn's attempt to open the UMNO membership to non-Malays; and, most significantly, in the formation of the non-communal IMP in September 1951. These measures were a reflection of the realisation among the communal leaders of the plurality of the Malayan political community and the necessity for closer inter-communal co-operation if Malaya was to advance towards self-governing status.

Despite these developments, communal sentiments remained strong, both in UMNO and the MCA, particularly among the second echelon leaders and the members in general. Hence the reluctance, for example, by UMNO's second echelon leaders to support Onn's proposals to open the party to non-Malays and to rename itself as the "United Malayan National Organisation." In the MCA, which had reorganised itself into a fully-fledged political party in the second-half of 1951, there was also a reluctance among the second echelon leaders to abandon the MCA's communal structure and to merge with Onn's IMP. Bearing

these political developments in mind we examine now the events that led to the UMNO-MCA pact for the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections in 1952 to discern the reasons behind the pact which was the forerunner to the formation of the Alliance.

### THE BIRTH OF THE UMNO-MCA PACT

The first local election to be held in the Federation was the George Town municipal elections in Penang on 1 December 1951. Gurney had originally planned to introduce the first local election in Kuala Lumpur in November 1951<sup>42</sup> but his death in October 1951 delayed the election till February 1952. The George Town election did not have much national significance because it was largely contested by regional parties such as the Penang Labour Party, the Penang Radical Party and the Muslim League. UMNO did, however, field a few candidates jointly with the Muslim League.<sup>43</sup> The Kuala Lumpur municipal election, however, took on an added significance when the IMP, UMNO and the MCA declared that they would participate in the election.<sup>44</sup>

In the months leading to the election UMNO, MCA and the IMP sought to strengthen their positions. UMNO and the MCA, for example, indicated that they would field non-Malay and non-Chinese candidates, respectively, to improve their chances in the Kuala Lumpur election. At that stage, the IMP was expected to win the election comfortably. Being led by a political heavyweight such as Onn, they were expected to be supported by all the three main communities whose leaders had expressed support for the party. Developments in the MCA and UMNO, however, altered the political demography of the Kuala Lumpur elections. The first significant development was the Selangor MCA's announcement of its election manifesto on 3 January 1952. The manifesto stated:

In view of the large Chinese population resident in the municipality, who will contribute the major portion of the rates and taxes, the Chinese community should be adequately represented. But, the MCA Selangor branch are also of the opinion that the interests of the members of other communities should also be represented.<sup>45</sup>

The second significant development was the positive response of the Kuala Lumpur UMNO branch to this announcement which was viewed as an invitation from MCA. A day after the MCA announcement, the chairman of the elections com-



mittee of the Kuala Lumpur UMNO, Datuk Yahya Abdul Razak, approached the Selangor MCA leaders to discuss the possibility of co-operation between the two parties. Following a roundtable conference on 7 January 1952 between UMNO and MCA officials, the Kuala Lumpur UMNO and the Selangor MCA branch made an official announcement on 8 January 1952 declaring that they would jointly contest the Kuala Lumpur elections. This statement signed by the Selangor MCA chairman, H.S. Lee, and Yahya surprised political observers, largely because the objectives of both these communal parties were diametrically opposite and they were rivals to political power. Further, it had been clear for some time that the top MCA leadership had publicly expressed their support for Onn's IMP. What brought about this change in the attitudes of UMNO and the MCA?

R.K.Vasil has suggested that the UMNO-MCA electoral pact resulted primarily because of personal differences between Lee and Onn.<sup>46</sup> Lee, according to Vasil, felt ignored at the inauguration of the IMP on 16 September 1951 as he was not invited to sit with the senior officials nor asked to address the meeting. Consequently, he purportedly decided to work against the IMP. Heng Pek Khoo, on the other hand, has attributed the pact to the "racial arithmetic,"<sup>47</sup> of the Kuala Lumpur electorate where the registered Chinese and Malay voters were of almost equal proportions. Neither of these interpretations, however, is wholly convincing.

Firstly, Vasil's suggestion that "personal differences" between Onn and Lee resulted in the pact is debatable. That Onn had differences with the MCA leadership on various issues was quite well known, but this alone could not have resulted in the pact because despite their differences there was a working relationship, as can be seen, for instance, from Cheng Lock chairing the IMP's inaugural meeting (and Lee being present for the event as well). In fact, there was an initiative by the Selangor MCA leadership to reach a similar arrangement with the IMP before the pact with UMNO was announced. Shortly before the statement by UMNO and MCA on 8 January 1952, Lee held talks with an IMP leader, Datuk E.E. Thuraisingham, who had been given the task by Onn, on possible co-operation between the MCA and the IMP for the Kuala Lumpur elections.<sup>48</sup> These talks, however, failed because the Selangor MCA wanted to contest the Kuala Lumpur election under the MCA banner. The IMP's refusal to accommodate the Selangor MCA's request was partly based on their confidence that they would win the elections comfortably. Subsequently, on 3 January 1952, Onn informed the Kuala Lumpur IMP branch meeting that "the Selangor MCA

branch was not prepared to come in with the IMP for the elections."<sup>49</sup> In other words, MCA's pact with UMNO was a second choice and one which may have not materialised had an agreement been reached between the IMP and the Selangor branch.

Secondly, Heng Pek Khoo's contention that the "racial arithmetic" of the Kuala Lumpur electorate was the "foremost consideration," does not appear to be borne out by the results of the elections. The UMNO-MCA alliance obtained 10,340 votes in winning nine seats, while the IMP obtained 6,641 votes in winning two seats.<sup>50</sup> The remaining seat was won by an independent. The votes obtained by the IMP indicate that there was a substantial Chinese vote for the IMP, in addition to significant Malay and Indian votes.<sup>51</sup> The top IMP candidates in the Sentul ward, Abdul Aziz Ishak, for example, obtained 1151 votes, only 93 votes less than the successful UMNO-MCA alliance candidate. In the Imbi ward, the IMP candidate, T.R. Marks, obtained a substantial 530-votes compared to 778 votes for the successful UMNO-MCA alliance candidate. Had the MCA thrown its support behind the IMP, they could have tipped the result in IMP's favour with the additional Chinese votes. In other words, the "racial arithmetic" could have worked to IMP's favour had the MCA teamed up with the IMP. UMNO on its own would have been able to draw only the Malay votes which, as the Penang elections in December 1951 showed, when UMNO in combination with the Muslim League won only one of the nine seats contested, would have meant defeat.

Why then did the Selangor MCA act in the way it did? Here one has to examine the relationship between the IMP and the MCA, in order to understand the latter's apprehension. The most important feature of the IMP was its non-communal stand. Onn believed that the IMP should be consistent in its non-communal policy. He had risked his political career and mass support among the Malays to pursue his non-communal ideals by severing his links with UMNO when his party did not want to open its membership to non-Malays, and hence he expected the rank and file of the IMP, particularly the MCA leaders who had pledged their support for the IMP to do the same. (The MCA as a body had not officially affiliated itself to the IMP.) Had the MCA leadership, decided to toe the IMP line, it would have meant that they would have to sever their ties with the MCA as a communal-based political organisation. The MCA leaders were not prepared to do so. This dilemma is revealed in a speech made by H.S. Lee on 12 February 1952, four days before the Kuala Lumpur elections. "The IMP," Lee

said, "tried to stop the MCA from participating in the Municipal election. They tried to make MCA members run on IMP tickets. Is this freedom?"<sup>52</sup> To the MCA, which had reorganised itself as a fully fledged political party only a few months earlier, abandoning their communal identity would have meant a return to their secondary role as a social and welfare organisation set up to assist the Chinese new villagers as part of the government campaign against the communist. Here the equivocal behaviour of the MCA president Tan Cheng Lock also deserves some examination.

At the outset it would have been within the means of the MCA national leadership to rescind the Selangor MCA-Kuala Lumpur UMNO pact, but it did not do so. The Perak MCA, for instance, wrote to the MCA president shortly after the inauguration of the IMP asking for directions on whether its members should join the IMP. No reply was received.<sup>53</sup> The position adopted by Cheng Lock, despite protests by some MCA leaders such as vice-president Khoo Teik Ee and Yong Shook Lin on the move by the Selangor MCA, was to remain silent. In private, however, Tan Cheng Lock had in fact given Lee his blessings for the Selangor MCA to contest the Kuala Lumpur elections with one condition attached: that Lee should get a Malay partner in his venture so that the contest with the IMP would be ideological rather than racial.<sup>54</sup>

Cheng Lock's first official response to the UMNO-MCA pact on 16 January 1952 stating that "UMNO-MCA co-operation is very admirable thing and I naturally support it," further confirms that he gave the pact his blessing, despite his close involvement in the IMP.<sup>55</sup> His decision was influenced by the fact that at least five presidents of the MCA's state and Settlement branches had given written support for H.S. Lee's pact with the Kuala Lumpur UMNO.<sup>56</sup> Cheng Lock's message congratulating the Alliance in the *Straits Times*, of February 1952, which at the same time stated that he was leaving it entirely to the MCA branches to decide as to with whom to co-operate, was an attempt to disclaim responsibility for the UMNO-MCA pact. His rather ambiguous statement added: "Principles are more important than people, I support the principles of the IMP, UMNO-MCA co-operation and Sino-Malay co-operation." Cheng Lock's cautious cultivation of the IMP was not dissimilar from that of H.S. Lee<sup>57</sup> as appears clear from Cheng Lock's private response, later, to Onn's poser to the Chinese "to work either for the IMP or the MCA," when he is reported to have asked how the IMP could expect Chinese support except through the MCA.<sup>58</sup>

The most important factor that influenced the actions of the Selangor MCA branch was their desire to ensure the continuation of the MCA as a communal political organisation. Thus the demand by H.S. Lee to the IMP that the Selangor MCA should be allowed to contest under their own banner. The MCA, having reorganised itself as a fully-fledged political party in the modern sense of the word, did not want to lose their newly-gained status nor their bargaining power as an organisation representing a significant portion of the population. This was particularly important to the MCA in view of the inter-communal problems that remained unresolved. In their capacity as representatives of the Chinese community, the MCA felt that they would have greater bargaining power on matters that concerned Chinese interests. The pact with UMNO allowed the MCA to contest under the party's own banner and, more important, meant the MCA leaders did not have to break their link with their party. Further, the arrangement did not affect the status of the MCA as a political organisation.

The actions of the Selangor MCA officials were in part influenced by the poor response from the Malays to the IMP since its formation in September 1951. The IMP, being a party built from the top, did not have an important ingredient – a mass support base, particularly among the Malays.<sup>59</sup> Since its inauguration on 16 September 1951 only the Kuala Lumpur branch of the IMP functioned actively. The Malacca IMP branch, for example, had not even been set up by February 1952, despite Tan Cheng Lock being given the chairmanship of the organising committee responsible for establishing the branch.<sup>60</sup> UMNO, on the other hand, despite Onn's departure did not disintegrate as he had expected.<sup>61</sup> Under the new leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman, UMNO recovered quickly from the initial turmoil caused by the departure of Onn and regained their former strength. In UMNO, the Malays saw an organisation that was committed to uphold their collective interests. The IMP, in contrast, was seen by the Malays as a threat to their position because of its liberal objectives which espoused equal political, social and economic rights for all the communities.<sup>62</sup> Hence the reluctance of the Malays to embrace the new party, despite Onn's leadership. Onn's following among the Malays had dropped considerably since leaving UMNO, so much so that the IMP had to look to the non-Malay voters for their support in the Kuala Lumpur elections.

A secondary factor that contributed to the MCA leadership's apprehension was the dominance of the IMP by the more politically-conscious Indians. The IMP's organisational structure being built on a non-communal platform would

not necessarily have ensured that top MCA leaders would be able to command positions in the IMP in proportion to their influence in the Chinese community. Remarks made in private by Cheng Lock that any non-communal party at that stage of Malaya's political development would be "pirated by the politically-minded Indians,"<sup>63</sup> confirms this fear among the MCA leadership. H.S. Lee was more blunt on this point when he told a gathering: "In the Kuala Lumpur Municipality the Chinese and the Malays form by far the largest proportion of the population and yet of all the 12 candidates nominated by the IMP, only four are Chinese and two are Malays. What sort of equality is this?"<sup>64</sup>

In comparison, in the pact reached between UMNO and MCA, six of the candidates were Chinese, five Malays and an Indian associate member. To the MCA elites who held positions of influence within the Chinese community as well as in the Malayan political arena by virtue of their position in the party, severing their ties with the MCA in favour of the IMP would have meant the loss of their influential positions in Malayan politics, possibly to the more politically-conscious Indians. As MCA's flag-bearers they were assured of more political clout as representatives of Chinese interests but in embracing the IMP they faced the likelihood of a diminished political position. Thus their reluctance to shed their ties with the MCA.

UMNO, on the other hand, also had good reasons for entering into the pact with the MCA for the Kuala Lumpur Municipal elections. The partnership with the MCA gave UMNO a glimmer of hope of gaining at least a few seats in the face of an electorate that was predominantly non-Malay and a formidable IMP. After the disastrous performance at the Georgetown Municipal elections in December 1951 where they won only one out of the nine seats, the pact with the MCA offered the best opportunity to put up a strong challenge to the IMP. Yahya took the decision to enter into a pact with the Selangor MCA on his own, possibly after consulting a few close associates. In fact, the head of the Kuala Lumpur branch, Datin Puteh Maria, on hearing the announcement on 9 January 1952, called an emergency meeting of the branch executive to voice her displeasure.<sup>65</sup> Wiser counsel prevailed on realising the mutual benefit of the pact with the MCA.

At the national level, the UMNO president Tunku Abdul Rahman was also surprised. Recalling the incident later, he said that on reading the announcement in the newspaper he was uncertain about the line he should take, but subsequently decided to support the arrangement.<sup>66</sup> with a little over a month

before the Kuala Lumpur election itself, the Tunku was quick to capitalise on the pact. Addressing a Sino-Malay rally, the Tunku said he hoped that the new arrangement would "prove to be the forerunner of co-operation on much more important issues."<sup>67</sup> The Tunku's actions indicated an awareness, despite his earlier rhetoric, of the political necessity for the Malays to reach an accommodation with the Chinese to achieve the long term objective of self-government for Malaya.

Heng Pek Khoo has suggested that UMNO's poor finances was also an important reason for the Kuala Lumpur UMNO branch entering into the pact with the Selangor MCA.<sup>68</sup> A closer examination reveals that this does not appear to be so although UMNO did gain from MCA's healthy finances. Firstly, UMNO's decision to contest the elections was already made before the pact with the MCA was reached. UMNO would have contested the municipal election even if there had been no pact and, as noted earlier, they had intended to field some non-Malay candidates. Secondly, UMNO's finances were not, as has been suggested, in a poor state. Although Heng Pek Khoo cites an intelligence report indicating that UMNO had a bank balance of \$35 in July 1950,<sup>69</sup> UMNO's annual accounts for 1951 show that it had an income of \$138,570 and an expenditure of \$106,375. Leaving a healthy balance of \$32,195.<sup>70</sup> Further, UMNO's income for 1952 was \$137,610 and its expenditure \$102,940, leaving a balance of \$34,670. Considering that the cost of election campaigns at the municipal at this period in history was small,<sup>71</sup> UMNO, clearly, would have been able to finance their campaign even if there had been no pact with the MCA. UMNO's main reason for the pact was that it enabled them to put up a stronger contest against the IMP in the face of a predominantly non-Malay electorate.

Beyond the immediate political manoeuvres in the period leading to the Kuala Lumpur Municipal elections, the deep-seated communal sentiments was the most fundamental and biggest barrier to the growth of non-communal politics at that stage of Malaya's political development. The trend towards inter-communal accommodation in this period, as noted earlier, did not amount to a willingness to completely submerge the communal identities of UMNO and the MCA. While the leadership of UMNO and the MCA aspired non-communal politics, the second echelon leaders and the members in general were not fully attracted to the idea. To the younger leaders non-communal politics was utopian while inter-communal co-operation was seen as a more pragmatic alternative. These leaders were not prepared to see UMNO and the MCA eclipsed by an

untested non-communal IMP. The Japanese Occupation, the crisis of the Malayan Union and the on-going Emergency had a profound impact on inter-communal relations in Malaya and communal sentiments remained strong. H.S. Lee, for example, reflecting later on the UMNO-MCA pact depicted the frame of mind:

I went to listen to Datuk Onn at the inaugural meeting of the IMP but found him [Onn] to be totally unrealistic when it came to the business of politics and electioneering. He wanted a monolithic party, but its prospective members were unable to agree even among themselves as to what its policies ought to be.<sup>72</sup>

As both the main political organisations, UMNO and the MCA, arose from communal foundations and continued to depend on a narrow base of support within their respective communities, shedding this time-honoured approach to politics appeared to them a step in the dark. The UMNO-MCA pact, on the other hand, offered an alternative which, while allowing the organisations to retain their communal structure, enabled them to co-operate at a higher level and at the same time to retain their support among their respective communities. While this move inadvertently institutionalised communalism in the Malayan political system, it was nevertheless a compromise between extreme communalism and the ideal of non-communalism.

#### THE FORMALISATION OF THE ALLIANCE

The UMNO-MCA alliance won nine of the twelve seats in the Kuala Lumpur Municipal elections on 16 February 1952 and in the process overwhelmed the IMP which was able to win only two seats.<sup>73</sup> The risky venture entered into by UMNO and the MCA had proved fruitful, drawing votes from the Malay and Chinese voters and securing comfortable victories for their candidates. Their success put the alliance on course for closer co-operation although it was a year, and after much discussion, before the pact was formalised as the "Alliance." The leaders in both parties were quick to take advantage of the momentum created by the win at the Kuala Lumpur elections, the margin of victory surprising UMNO and MCA leaders.

Two days after the elections, H.S. Lee urged the MCA president Tan Cheng Lock, to extend the co-operation nationwide. "If the UMNO-MCA could be es-

established in other parts of the country," he said "it would go a long way to achieve a united Malaya."<sup>74</sup> Two weeks after the Kuala Lumpur elections Tunku Abdul Rahman held talks with Cheng Lock on extending the UMNO-MCA cooperation to the other municipal and town council elections that were scheduled for later that year and in 1953.

The post-election period ushered in a new phase of consolidating a temporary arrangement which had been originally reached for the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections. UMNO and the MCA realised that the results of the Kuala Lumpur elections meant that they had in the pact a workable formula which offered hope of overcoming the communal barrier to political unity and, consequently, movement towards self-government, in addition to defeating the IMP. It was at this stage an "alliance of equals" yet distinctly separate political entities. As the Tunku stressed a week after the elections: "We will co-operate with other organisations, but we certainly want to preserve our identity."<sup>75</sup> The new political relationship was based on the understanding that their respective communal organisational structures would remain intact. More significant, both parties realised the importance of continuing their relationship if they hoped to emulate their success at the Kuala Lumpur elections and strengthen the hard-earned political advantage.<sup>76</sup>

The institutionalisation of the UMNO-MCA alliance involved a vertical and horizontal expansion of the partnership.<sup>77</sup> Vertically, UMNO-MCA liaison committees were formed at the national, state, town and district levels, while horizontally, new "Alliance" branches were set up at the town and district levels to mobilise grassroots support. Thus shortly after the Kuala Lumpur elections UMNO-MCA liaison committees were formed all over the country – at the town, district, state and national levels – to prepare for elections that were scheduled to be held in other towns and municipalities.

At every level of the Alliance network a committee consisting of UMNO and MCA representatives were formed to co-ordinate the activities of the alliance within their respective spheres. The vast network of UMNO and MCA branches that already existed made it easier for the Alliance to mobilise support for their candidates in the following town and municipal elections. This multi-tiered structure of the UMNO-MCA alliance was effective in reaching out to virtually all parts of the country.

The appeal to communal loyalties through the individual branches of UMNO and the MCA gave the coalition a solid base of support at the grassroots levels



and was an important in the subsequent success of the coalition. In comparison the IMP was essentially a Kuala Lumpur-based party which was still in the process of spreading its influence outside the city. In the municipal and town council elections that followed in December 1952 and in 1953, the Alliance again scored overwhelming victories. This was an indication of the effectiveness of the Alliance organisation in mobilising support at the grassroots levels.

In all, the UMNO-MCA alliance won 94 out of the 119 seats contested in the municipal and town council elections in 1952 and 1953, the IMP capturing only three seats.<sup>78</sup> The results of these local elections established the Alliance as the leading political power and set a trend that the other parties, including the IMP (and later its successor, Party Negara), were unable to reverse.

The process of formalising and expanding the UMNO-MCA alliance was not altogether smooth. The Alliance faced several obstacles during the phase of extending and consolidating their influence throughout the country. Firstly, UMNO and the MCA had to overcome resistance from within their organisations and, secondly, they had to guard against the challenge from the IMP which was still influential in the Federal and State legislative councils. Within UMNO, the group led by Perak Mentri Besar, Datuk Panglima Bukit Gantang, was the most vocal critic of UMNO's co-operation with the MCA. Being a close ally of Onn, Bukit Gantang did not approve of the UMNO-MCA alliance although he continued to be a member of UMNO's central executive committee. He continually questioned the wisdom of such an inter-communal relationship. In April 1953, following criticism of the Alliance in the *Straits Times*, Bukit Gantang was expelled from UMNO<sup>79</sup>. He then formed the non-communal National Association of Perak (NAP) on 4 October 1953 and continued to remain a thorn in the Alliance side. His new party also threw its support behind Onn and the IMP in the run up to the Federal elections.

One incident which greatly strained UMNO-MCA ties was the visit of Dr Victor Purcell to Malaya in August 1952 to prepare a report on the Chinese community at the invitation of the MCA. This angered UMNO as Purcell, a former Adviser on Chinese Affairs to the Government, was well known as a spokesman for the Chinese on political issues. UMNO forbade its officials from co-operating with Purcell. The MCA, in response, withdrew its offer of \$500,000 to set up a Malay welfare Fund to provide economic assistance to the Malays. The setting up of the Fund in July 1952 in itself aroused the ire of some Malays;

one UMNO leader in Selangor said that it amounted to an attempt to "buy over Malays at 20 cents a head."<sup>80</sup>

In the MCA, on the other hand, there was also mixed feelings about the venture. Senior MCA officials such as Khoo Teik Ee, Yong Shook Lin, Tan Siew Sin and several others were apprehensive of the party's electoral co-operation with UMNO. These MCA officials were active IMP members and saw the coalition as a threat to the IMP. But most of these MCA officials, with the exception of Shook Lin, who resigned from the MCA, subsequently cut their links with the IMP when Onn took on a more communal stance and it became clear that the party did not generate much Malay support.

The UMNO-MCA alliance also faced pressure from outside the coalition. One example was the motion seeking a ban on the MCA lottery introduced by Onn, as Member for Home Affairs, in the Federal Legislative Council in September 1952. Onn claimed that the MCA lottery gave the Alliance an unfair political advantage as the proceeds were used to finance the coalition's election campaign. A ban on lotteries run by political parties subsequently came into force in June 1953. This motion led to the resignation of Tan Siew Sin from the IMP as he felt that the IMP's action was hostile to the MCA.<sup>81</sup> Another example of an attempt to split the UMNO-MCA Alliance was the accusation by Onn in March 1953 that the Chinese organisations in the country were trying to make Malaya the "20<sup>th</sup> province of China" and that the MCA had assumed the role formerly played by Chinese consular representatives.<sup>82</sup> The deliberate attack by Onn was intended to arouse Malay sentiments over UMNO's co-operation with the MCA. A motion to censure Onn was defeated by the IMP majority in the Federal Legislative Council. This time, Cheng Lock severed his links with the IMP.

Despite the problems UMNO and the MCA leaders decided to continue their co-operation as they realised their alliance offered the best chance of defeating the IMP in future elections. The UMNO-MCA alliance, being built on communal foundations, represented a volatile relationship in this initial phase of their co-operation. Nevertheless, the mutual benefit of their co-operation and the close camaraderie between the top leaders of UMNO and the MCA ensured the continuance of the organisation. The setting up of the Alliance roundtable by Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tan Cheng Lock on 3 February 1953<sup>83</sup> cemented firmly what started out as a temporary arrangement. The objectives hereafter were geared to the broader goal of self-government and independence.

## NOTE

- 1 Karl von Vorys, *Democracy Without Consensus*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, United States, 1975.
- 2 K.J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaysia*, University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1970, pp. 159-161; G.P. Means, *Malaysian Politics*, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, pp.132-134.
- 3 R.K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1971.
- 4 J. Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1980; R. Amplavanar, *The Indian Minority and Political Change in Malaya, 1945-57*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1981; Heng Pek Khoo, *Chinese Politics in Malaysia*, Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1988.
- 5 The Alliance in the initial stages comprised only UMNO and the MCA. The MIC joined the coalition in 1954.
- 6 J. de V. Allen, L.R. Wright, A.J. Stockwell (eds), *A Collection of Treaties and Other Documents Affecting the States of Malaysia*, London, 1981, Vol. 1, p. 101.
- 7 See S.M. Middlebrook and A.W. Pinnick, *How Malaya is Governed*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1949, pp. 24-26. See also J.M. Gullick, *Malaysia*, Ernest Benn Ltd., London, 1969, pp. 124-126. The Legislative Council comprised 14 official members, 11 representatives from the States and Settlements and 50 other unofficial members from the various interest groups.
- 8 See Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1948-1960*, Frederick Muller Ltd., London, 1975, pp. 34-94 and J.H. Brimmell, *Communism in South-East Asia*, Oxford University Press, London, 1959, pp. 194-212 and pp. 320-325 for a discussion of the origins of the Emergency.
- 9 CO537/3686 (37), Gurney served his apprenticeship in the Colonial Service in Kenya as an Assistant District Commissioner in 1921 and became District Commissioner in 1923. He was appointed Assistant Colonial Secretary in Jamaica in 1935 and returned to Kenya in 1936 as Assistant Secretary. Between 1944-46 he served as the Colonial Secretary to the Palestine government, a post he held until May 1948.
- 10 See, for example, CO537/6026 (36), Notes of discussion between Gurney and Malayan community leaders, 5 July 1950 and CO537/5969 (6), Note on the Emergency by D.C. Watherston, 7 December 1950.
- 11 CO537/3686 (17), A. Creech-Jones (Secretary of State) to Clement Attlee (Prime Minister), 30 June 1948. Gent was killed in an aircraft accident in London while returning home for "consultations." The Colonial Office had decided to relieve Gent of his post in Malaya.
- 12 CO537/4741 (74), Gurney to Paskin, 25 August 1949. See also Robert Heussler, *Completing a Stewardship*, Greenwood Press London, 1983, p. 195. Heussler remarks of Gurney: "Given his knowledge of Carribean, West African and Middle-Eastern nationalism and his undoubted convictions about the rights of colonial peoples, the High Commissioner's sincerity was not open to question among the knowledgeable..."
- 13 CO537/4741 (83), Gurney to Paskin, 31 December 1949.

- 14 CO537/7254 (1), Minutes of Commissioner-General's Conference, 22-23 August 1951.
- 15 CO537/6026 (2), Gurney to Secretary of State, 1 March 1950.
- 16 CO537,773 (1) Memorandum by Gurney, 28 January 1949.
- 17 CO537/4242 (1), Gurney to Secretary of State, 19 December 1948. See also CO537/773 (1), Minute by Gurney, 28 January 1949.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 *Straits Times*, 4 April 1948, cited by Soh Eng Lim in "Tan Cheng Lock," *Journal of South-East Asian History*, Vol. 1, 1 March 1960, pp. 41-42.
- 20 CO537/2424 (5), Gurney to Secretary of State, 1 March 1951.
- 21 S.H. Silcock and Ungku Aziz, "Nationalism in Malaya," in W.L. Holland (ed), *Asian Nationalism and the West*, MacMillan and Co., New York, 1953, p. 286. There was already Malay discontent in the pre-war period over their poor economic position vis-à-vis the Chinese and Indians. Malay peasants and fishermen, note Silcock and Aziz, were dependent on Chinese middlemen while Malays worked as messengers in offices where Chinese and Indians were clerks. See also Ratnam, op. cit., pp. 17-18.
- 22 CO1022/174, Minute by A.S. Melville, June 3, 1952.
- 23 See CO537/6026 (10), Gurney to Griffiths, 9 April 1950. For instance, one of the agreements reached at the CLC meetings was a plan to set up a Rural Development Authority to assist the economic development of the Malays. Thus RIDA was subsequently formed under the chairmanship of Onn to assist the economic development of the Malays. See also CO537/5983 (3), Gurney to Higham, 19 May 1949, on the CLC's citizenship proposals.
- 24 *Straits Times*, 29 May 1949, cited by Ishak Tadin, *Journal of South-East Asian History*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1960, pp. 81-82.
- 25 Malcolm MacDonald, "Political Developments in Malaya," Address at meeting of Empire Parliamentary Association, London, 27 April 1948, p.9.
- 26 CO537/6036 (36), Minutes of meeting between Gurney and community leaders at King's House, Kuala Lumpur, 5 July 1950.
- 27 *Straits Times*, 13 July 1951.
- 28 CO537/4790 (42), PMR, May 1949. The UMNO general meeting in Arau at the end of May 1949 had agreed to accept non-Malays as associate members.
- 29 *Straits Times*, 6 June, 1951.
- 30 *Straits Times*, 14 June 1951.
- 31 See Gullick, op. cit., *Malaysia*, p. 82.
- 32 *Straits Times*, June 6 and 7, 1951.
- 33 CO537/7303 (10), Gurney to Secretary of State, 13 June 1951.
- 34 *Straits Times*, 18 September 1951.
- 35 *Tan Cheng Lock Papers*, ISEAS, Folio XI, Leong Yew Koh to Tan Cheng Lock, 1 June 1950. Yew Koh was the Perak MCA chairman.
- 36 op. cit., Folio XI, Tan Cheng Lock to Leong Yew Koh, 24 June 1950.
- 37 CO1022/176, Address by Tan Cheng Lock, c. September 1951.

- 38 CO1022/176, File on the activities of the MCA. See also CO967/145, Gurney to T. Lloyd, 19 March 1951. Gurney, anxious over the slow progress in bringing the emergency to an end, in fact offered to resign when informed by Mac Donald that some Ministers were unhappy with the anti-insurgency campaign.
- 39 CO1022/176, File on MCA activities. The MCA's central working committee had a meeting on 16 September 1951 given Cheng Lock the responsibility to form a standing committee and to plan the reorganisation of the MCA.
- 40 *Straits Times*, 7 June 1951. A day after Onn had stated his intention to form the Independence of Malaya Party, Cheng Lock was quoted as saying: "Malaya can form one national brotherhood, therefore, I naturally welcome the lead Datuk Onn has taken to implement that basic idea."
- 41 See, for example, Onn to Cheng Lock, 30 November 1951, in *Tan Cheng Lock Papers*, ISEAS, Folio XIII. Onn urged Cheng Lock to "infuse enthusiasm" among the people of Malacca to form an IMP branch in Malacca, noting that it would be most undesirable if there was no branch in Cheng Lock's home town.
- 42 CO537/7254(1), Minutes of Commissioner-General's Conference, 22-23 August 1951.
- 43 Means, op. cit., p. 132. The UMNO-Muslim League coalition won only one of the nine seats it contested.
- 44 *Straits Times*, 5 July 1951, cited by Vasil, op. cit., p.11
- 45 Von Vorys, op. cit., p. 107.
- 46 Vasil, op. cit., pp. 10-11.
- 47 Heng Pek Khoo, op. cit., p. 160. Franchise was based on a minimum of three-year residential qualification and not on federal citizenship.
- 48 Vasil, op. cit., pp. 55-57.
- 49 Vasil, op. cit., p.57.
- 50 Means, op.cit., p. 134
- 51 Means, op. cit., p.59. The IMP obtained 28.2 per cent of the Chinese votes, 38.4 per cent of the Malay votes and 93 per cent of Indian votes. See also *Straits Budget*, 21 February 1952.
- 52 SP13/H/47, *Tan Cheng Lock Papers*, Arkib Negara, Kuala Lumpur. Speech by H.S. Lee, 12 February 1952, Chinese Assembly Hall, Kuala Lumpur. The Tunku was also present at this gathering.
- 53 CO537/5969 (31) extract from *Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs*, September 1951. This report also notes that Yap Mau Tatt, the head of the Negri Sembilan MCA branch, was criticised by the Central Working Committee for pledging the Negri Sembilan MCA branch's support for the IMP "without prior reference to the central office."
- 54 See J. Victor Morais, *Tun Tan, Portrait of a Statesman*, Quins Pte., Ltd., Singapore, 1981, p. 32.
- 55 *Straits Times*, 17 January 1952.
- 56 SO13/H/47, *Tan Cheng Lock Papers*, Kuala Lumpur. Speech by H.S. Lee, 12 February 1952.

- 57 Margaret Roff, "The MCA: 1948-1965," *JSEAH*, Vol. 6, 1964, pp. 43-44. H.S. Lee, recalling the events that led to the pact in 1963, said that "the Alliance was the only possible formula for co-operation between the communities while they are still linguistically as well as socially distinct."
- 58 CO1022/176, Pan-Malayan Intelligence Report.
- 59 Vasil, op.cit., pp. 54-57.
- 60 CO1022/176 (18), Extract from Review of Chinese Affairs, July 1952. The report notes that the Malacca IMP branch for a second time failed to produce a quorum at its General Meeting. Cheng Lock and his son, Tan Siew Sin, were not present. "It is believed that this was deliberate to scuttle branch," the report adds.
- 61 CO537/7303 (10), Gurney to Secretary of State, 13 June 1951.
- 62 *Straits Times*, 6 June 1951.
- 63 CO1022/192, Pan-Malayan Intelligence Report. See also R. Ampalavanar, op.cit., p.118.
- 64 SP13/H/47, *Tan Cheng Lock Papers*, Kuala Lumpur. Speech by H.S. Lee, 12 February 1952. See also Morais, op. cit, pp. 32-33.
- 65 Vasil, op.cit., p. 11.
- 66 Harry Miller, op. cit., p. 114.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Heng Pek Khoon, op. cit., p. 164.
- 69 Heng Pek Khoon, op. cit., p.164 and p. 177. The intelligence report is contained in CO537/4790(13)
- 70 UMNO/SEL No. 3/52, UMNO Files, Arkib Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 71 T.E. Smith, *Report of the First election of Members to the Legislative Council of the Federation of Malaya*, government Printers, Kuala Lumpur, 1955. In the first federal election of July 1955, for example, each candidate was limited to a maximum of \$5,000 (Malayan dollars) for his election campaign. See also Tunku Abdul Rahman, *As a Matter of Interest*, op.cit., p.9. The Tunku has noted that the total cost of the 1955 elections to UMNO was \$150,000 (Malayan dollars).
- 72 Margaret Roff, *The Malayan Alliance and its Accommodation of Communal Pressures. 1952-62*, MA Thesis, University of Malaya, 1962, p. 39.
- 73 One seat was won by an independent.
- 74 H.S. Lee to Tan Cheng Lock, 18 February 1952, cited by Heng Pek Khoon, op. cit., p. 167.
- 75 *Malay Mail*, 22 February 1952, cited in Vasil, op. cit., p. 135
- 76 CO1022/183, File on UMNO. At the UMNO half-yearly General Assembly, 29-30 March 1952, Tunku Abdul Rahman, for example, told members to "extend the alliance and promote friendly relationship with non-Malays in the other States."
- 77 See SP/45, *Tan Siew Sin Papers*, Memorandum on the Alliance by the Secretary, 31 August 1956, for an illustration of the Alliance organisational structure.
- 78 Karl von Vorys, op. cit., p. 109.
- 79 Means, op. cit., pp. 139-140.

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- 80 SP13/C/47, *Tan Cheng Lock Papers*, Arkib Negara, Tan Cheng Lock to Tunku Abdul Rahman, 25 August 1952.
- 81 Heng Pek Khoo, op. cit., p. 170-171.
- 82 Means, op. cit., p. 139
- 83 Heng Pek Khoo, op. cit., p. 166.