REPORT ON MALAYA
THE RELEVANT FACTS
AND OPINIONS

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The Problem

The problem of Malaya arises from external circumstances compelling rapid political development in a country long governed on the assumption that existing institutions would continue essentially unchanged. In view of the serious character of the present emergency, in which what is still euphemistically termed banditry differs little from a state of war, no apology is necessary for a consideration of how best to obtain the co-operation of all racial elements in welding together a community in which democratic self-government can develop.

While there exists (see bibliography) a great mass of published work on various aspects of this problem, little attempt seems to have been made to bring together all the relevant factors and evolve a coherent policy on all departments of life touched by government; the nearest approaches to this are found in Phyllis Kaberry's contribution to the Ninth Conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations (81), in T. H. Silcock's shorter article (106) summarising the possible policies and the broad lines on which these may be pursued, and in a thesis by Maurice Freedman (74) which examines in detail the factors affecting relations between the races. The present study is an attempt to deduce from the published material what agreement exists as to the aims to be pursued in Malaya and what means are most likely to promote those aims.

The authorities consulted are listed at the end of this pamphlet and numbers in brackets refer to this list.

I gratefully acknowledge the helpful criticisms of many people with first-hand knowledge of Malaya, and the facilities afforded me by Malaya House and by the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Background

In announcing the departure of Sir Harold MacMichael for Malaya in October, 1945, the Secretary of State for the Colonies said (23) that the Government recognised "the need to promote the sense of unity and common citizenship which will develop the country's strength and capacity in due course for self-government within the British Commonwealth". This objective of a united Malaya, self-governing within the Commonwealth, has been reaffirmed many times; its pursuit must involve a reversal of pre-war
policy, which was directed neither towards preparing the country for self-government nor towards welding together its diverse racial elements.

This diversity is the central fact of the situation, Malaya being populated by several races which intermarry hardly at all (83), retain their own languages and customs, for the most part keep to their own characteristic occupations and therefore differ in economic status, and differ in their attitude to Malaya itself.

The *Malays* are regarded as the indigenous inhabitants, though many are comparatively recent immigrants from Indonesia. There are no figures for the really indigenous Malays; some authorities (86, p. 116; 123) put them as low as one-third to one-half of the total, but the 1947 census gives the number of Malays born outside Malaya as only 0.6 per cent, of the total of 2,427,834 and “other Malaysians” born outside Malaya as one-third of their much smaller total of 300,000. If the people of Malay race include many immigrants, this may well affect the attitude of the other races towards Malay claims, and the attitude of Malays towards a possible union with Indonesia, but it does not otherwise complicate the position, for these immigrants are accepted by the Malays as Malays and are assimilated, while immigrants of other races are not (81, p. 25). The Malay population amounted in 1947 (12) to 49 per cent. of the whole five million, varying from 92 per cent. in Trengganu to 7½ per cent. in Singapore.

The Malays have their own system of government in the nine States and are subjects of their Sultans; they are all Moslems. In occupation they are usually peasants or fishermen, showing little inclination to commercial pursuits or to working for wages; they are consequently much poorer than the rival races.

The *Chinese* population is 38 per cent., varying from 5 per cent. in Kelantan to 78 per cent. in Singapore. Some Chinese settled as early as the fourteenth century in what is now Singapore (71, p. 282) and others in the Malay State of Malacca, but by far the largest numbers were imported as labourers, especially after 1870. The bulk of these returned to China and were replaced by new immigrants, but there has been an increasing tendency for a proportion of them to settle permanently in Malaya. With return discouraged by the disturbed state of China and normal immigration stopped by the Japanese occupation, the proportion of Malaya’s Chinese inhabitants born in Malaya has risen from one-third in 1931 to two-thirds in 1947 (11; 12). These immigrants have tended to regard China as their home and Malaya merely as a place to make money (much of which they have remitted to their families in China); if a poll taken by the Nan-Chian newspaper is any guide,
only a very small proportion are willing to renounce Chinese for Malayan citizenship (66, p. 20). On the other hand, Chinese born in Malaya do tend to regard it as their one and only home, although otherwise remaining Chinese in sentiment, and Straits-born Chinese have shown great pride in their status as British subjects (82, p. 20). The allegiance of the Chinese in Malaya to an external power, which claims all of them as Chinese nationals, has obvious dangers, but it seems that these may have been exaggerated, for the Chinese population and its press do not blindly follow the lead of whatever government is in power in China. No great opposition appears to have been aroused by the ordinance forbidding membership of the Kuomintang party in Malaya (46, p. 1250), and the Chinese population in general has not supported the Chinese Communist Government in helping the Chinese Communist terrorists nor shown any great interest in it. The Chinese press is not unanimous on questions affecting China (51, nos. 1, 6, 7, and 11, of 1950), and part of it supported the Perak Council of State in its vote against the appointment of a Chinese Communist Consul (51, 1950, no. 6, p. 9).

The occupation of the Chinese varies with their province of origin (66, p. 12; 71, p. 271) but they mainly engage in tin mining or commerce; they are very enterprising and control far more economic power than the rest of the Asiatic population.

The Indians, 11 per cent. of the population, are mainly Tamils from the southern provinces. Like the Chinese, they have been mainly temporary immigrants attached to their country of origin; unlike the Chinese, however, they have had a lead from their home Government (Pandit Nehru) advising them to choose between Indian and Malayan citizenship (66, p. 20; 153, p. 150). The Indians appear to be much more politically minded than the Malays or the Chinese, joining trade unions more readily and taking a larger part in elections (67, p. 9; 167). They are employed mainly as estate workers or government servants.

The Aborigines consist of primitive pygmies and somewhat more advanced Sakai (Senoi) living in the jungle with little interference or protection by government; they are less than 1 per cent. of the population. The Sakai do produce a little rubber (36, p. 80) and carry on some trade with the villages; they have also shown unexpected political consciousness by joining in demonstrations against the Union proposals (95; 175).

Europeans are very few in numbers (9,607 in 1947, excluding the garrison) but they have been the effective rulers of the country since the 1870’s. They consist of British Government officials and owners or managers of mines and estates; they nearly always retire to Britain.
A small community of some commercial significance are the Eurasians, descended mainly from the Portuguese invaders of 1510; they are Roman Catholics.

Other races include small numbers of Japanese, Javanese, Arabs, and Jews.

Though the races show so little inclination to mix, the absence of strife between them, up to the Japanese invasion, has struck every observer. It is, however, unsafe to assume that this will continue if no positive steps are taken to secure it; "inter-communal relations have been excellent socially, but that harmony was founded on the temporary basis of complementary function" (83). Unlike most Asiatic countries, Malaya is still, for all its phenomenal development during the last hundred years, under-populated (82), with room for all races. In the Malay States, there is still plenty of potentially useful land under jungle. Some Malay holders of land already cultivated are protected from losing it (for instance through getting into debt) by laws which prohibit its sale or lease to non-Malays (146). The division of occupation, and consequently of income, between Malays and Chinese causes no trouble so long as the general prosperity is sufficient for all to live on a level with which they are content; danger of bad feeling between the richer and the poorer races arises if (a) there is pressure on the means of subsistence, or (b) penetration of Western ideas makes the poor desire a standard of life to which they have hitherto been indifferent. Political factors add to the possibilities of conflict: (a) the conditions of the Japanese occupation, and particularly the activities of the mainly Chinese terrorists which have tended to set Malays and Chinese against one another, and (b) the growth of self-government. Under a reasonably impartial British rule, none of the Asian races need fear domination by another; when British rule ceases there will be fear of either domination by the energetic and potentially more numerous Chinese, or, to prevent this, limitation of citizen rights to favour the Malays at the expense of more recent immigrants.

History of Government

Malaya has never been a single political unit. At the time of the Japanese invasion, it consisted of (a) the Colony of the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, and Malacca, with certain territories outside Malaya) under a government of the usual colonial pattern; (b) the Federated Malay States, and (c) the Unfederated Malay States. The Malay States were protectorates (and their inhabitants not British subjects); their Sultans had at various dates from 1873 onwards each accepted a British Resident or Advisor and had
bound themselves to take his advice on all matters except those of Malay religion or custom. For the sake of more efficient administration, four of the nine States federated in 1895; it was hoped that the others would follow suit, but they regarded the Federation as much too centralised and destructive of the States’ individuality (63, p. 154; 53, pp. 74, 92 ff.; 96). The Unfederated States varied from “Trengeganu at one extreme, a traditional Malay monarchy only slightly modified in its form by the presence of British control and technical advice, to Johore at the other, a State with a constitution and a cabinet and legislature and pronounced inter-racial elements modifying the original pattern” (82); they were a real example of indirect rule, and Ormsby-Gore was of the opinion that “the spirit and intention of British policy in Malaya is carried out more completely and simply in the Unfederated Malay States” (14). Abortive attempts at decentralisation of administration in the Federated Malay States were made in 1909 and 1923 (14; 15; 97); in 1932, Sir Samuel Wilson (15) reported that “until the knot now tied so tightly in the F.M.S. can be loosened it would appear hopeless to suggest that the Rulers of the U.M.S. should come into any form of Malayan League”, and another attempt was made. Certain powers were returned to the States (that is, in effect to the residents), but an intention to combine this with advisory functions centralised at Kuala Lumpur or Singapore came to nothing. Hence, at the outbreak of war, this country the size of England still had ten separate governments, four of them linked in a federation and all under some form of British control, and “none of the three races owed any allegiance to Malaya as a political unit” (82).

An important factor is the difference between Singapore and the peninsula. Not only have their governments been separate (and still are), but social and economic conditions are very different. Singapore is a commercial community dependent on free trade (while the States tend to be protectionist), overwhelmingly Chinese, and not a plural society in the same sense as the rest of Malaya.

If there was no geographical unity of government, there was none either as regards the various races. The British had intervened in Malay affairs to remedy disorder and general misgovernment; similarly they intervened in Chinese and Indian affairs to protect the immigrants against shocking conditions and to check fights between rival Chinese secret societies. Although certain special posts created for these purposes disappeared (70, p. 151), the functions remained largely separate and civil servants continued to specialise in Malay, Chinese, or Indian affairs—thereby being hindered from identifying themselves with Malaya as a whole (60, p. 25). The Malays were considered to be the rightful owners of
the country and the other races (exceeding the Malays in total numbers) to be foreigners (63, p. 174; 71, p. 382); no attempt was made to integrate the Chinese into a Malayan nation (71, p. 399). It has been a complaint of the Chinese (82, p. 9) that little Government help was given to their education, although grants in aid were given in the Straits Settlements and in the Federated (not the Unfederated) Malay States. The Chinese ran their own schools, with staff and books supplied mainly from China, and the Government paid little attention until the dangers of subversion from that source became too evident (70, p. 230); it was then "more anxious to close undesirable schools than to open others" (82, p. 9).

Within these various units of government there was very little that could be regarded as a foundation for democratic self-government and little attempt was made to develop any. The general opinion was an acceptance of "the utter inapplicability of any form of democratic or popular government to the circumstances of these States" (107, p. 112) and even by 1941 there seemed little reason to revise the opinion of Governor Sir Frederick Weld in 1880 that "nothing we have done so far has taught them to govern themselves; we are merely teaching them to co-operate with us and to govern under our guidance. To teach men to govern themselves you must throw them on their own resources; we are necessarily doing the very reverse" (63, p. 132).

The native Malay institutions were despotic, with a wide gap between the ruling classes and the mass of the people (57, p. 48); the immigrants brought with them no institutions of government except the Chinese secret societies which had to be suppressed because they protected their members against the law (70, p. 160). The Malay villages, however, did choose their own headmen and it has already been mentioned that their States were not all devoid of constitutional checks on their rulers; Johore adopted a written constitution in 1895 (63, p. 203).

The British developed State Councils and instituted a Legislative Council for the Federated Malay States; also, in the Straits Settlements, Legislative and Executive Councils, on the usual colonial pattern; three Municipal Commissions, and some Sanitary Boards. These bodies, however, were entirely nominated (except for two members elected to the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements by the British Chambers of Commerce of Singapore and Penang) and the Councils had official majorities. More truly democratic, so far as they went, were the use of village headmen as assistants to District Officers (52, p. 22) and the institution of district conferences of headmen and elders; the latter were most
successful when no officials were present (81, p. 77). Modest changes were from time to time proposed and unofficial representation was in fact increased; a Select Committee of the Singapore Legislative Council in 1921 (13), recommended an unofficial majority but this was not acted upon. That committee turned down elections as impracticable, and in that was clearly in line with the bulk of articulate opinion at that time; there was no considerable demand for the franchise, no nationalist movement at all comparable with that in, for example, India, and there was very little interest in politics outside a tiny minority.

The Japanese Occupation

The Japanese occupation upset the apparently established order and wrought great changes both in the British Government’s attitude and in that of the Malayan population. In the first place, our defeat in 1941 undermined British prestige and turned the thoughts of the population to rule by Asians. Anti-European feeling was deliberately stirred up by the Japanese, and some Malay junior civil servants who were raised by them to positions of temporary authority got the impression that government was a simple matter to which they were fully equal (82, p. 17). The different treatment accorded to Malays and Chinese tended to embitter relations between them, and the prosperity on which inter-racial concord was founded broke down.

The Chinese, whose homeland had already been fighting Japan for a number of years, were naturally more inclined to resist than were the other elements in the population, and they formed anti-Japanese guerilla bands, mainly under Communist leadership. These were recognised by the British but did little effective fighting and, in the circumstances of Japan’s surrender, had no opportunity to co-operate with British troops. They took control in the interval before the British arrived, and afterwards tried to turn the machinery of government to Communist purposes; failing in this, they became, in 1948, the terrorists who still gravely threaten law and order. These terrorists are not exclusively Chinese, nor are their victims confined to the other races; nevertheless, their activities can hardly fail to worsen race relations.

It is considered by some (82) that the conduct of some of the liberation troops (who were prepared for fighting and not for helping in peaceful administration) contributed to a further decline in European prestige, but on the whole the military government appears to have functioned as well as could reasonably be expected.
Post-War Changes

It was clear from the first that a mere return to the pre-war position was out of the question, and while the war was still in progress consideration was given to what should be done at its end; the inevitability of change was made an opportunity for moving towards a more unified administration.

The British Government, perhaps influenced by the consideration that people who docilely accept a paternal British rule are liable to be equally docile in accepting other masters, has moved towards the view that "it does not seem as certain that the absence of political life between the world wars was in the true interests of the people of the country, however convenient it may have been to their rulers" (64, p. 3), and that active preparation of Malaya for self-government is both desirable and practicable (23, etc.). The first steps, however, were concerned more with unification than with self-government; a stable Malaya was desired as a base from which to attack Japan (92) and plans for a unified administration were drawn up during the war on the assumption that Malaya would be reoccupied against Japanese resistance, with the Chinese guerillas helping our troops but the Malays probably obstructing (82). It was these plans for a Malayan Union which were applied in the different circumstances of a peaceful reoccupation after the surrender of Japan.

They provided for a Union of the whole peninsula (Singapore becoming a separate Colony), with a Governor, an Executive and a Legislative Council, a Council of Sultans, Malay Advisory Councils, and State or Settlement Councils, these latter to include elected members and all intended to be "broad-based and representative" (32); there was to be a common citizenship including all persons born in the Union or in Singapore or resident there for ten out of the last fifteen years. As a preliminary, the Sultans were asked to hand over the necessary powers to His Majesty (i.e. not to agree to these Union proposals but to agree to conditions that would make possible the putting into effect of those proposals or of others); Sir Harold MacMichael arrived in Malaya on the 11th October, 1945, to put before the Sultans in turn nine similar treaties, the last of which was signed on the 21st December (30). Some criticism of this procedure was voiced in England at a very early stage (154), and with the publication the following January of the White Paper containing the proposed constitution a storm of protest broke out in Malaya. The Union was attacked for the same centralisation that had been disliked in the old Federation, the Sultans were attacked for allowing States' rights to be infringed, and themselves