The Old and New Malaya of Colonial Days and Its Continuity Into Modern Day Malaysia

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Abstract

The term “Old Malaya” refers to the Malay states of the eastern coast of the Peninsular (Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu) and the “New Malaya” to the states on the west coast (Perak, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Pahang). The British concentrated their economic growth on the west coast, thereby giving rise to a dual economy. On the west coast, the British were profit driven with special focus on mining and plantation sectors which reaped great economic growth. Similar policy was carried out by the post-independence government which focused more on the west coast states. This had serious implications and caused the east coast states to be underdeveloped. It is only very recently (2007) that the government planned to create the East Coast Economic Region (ECER) and Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER) with major projects to improve the economic condition of the east coast states. The unequal development extended beyond regional inequalities, again as in the case of colonial rule. For instance, the Indians were marginalised both during the colonial era as well as in post-independent Malaya/Malaysia. The marginalisation of the Indians when plantations were bought over by government owned companies led to uneven development in post independent Malaya. This article intends to explore the uneven development of Malaya in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a situation which continued to exist in post-independent Malaya.

Keywords: Old Malaya, New Malaya, Malaysia, British colonialism, colonial economy

1. Introduction

This article examines the factors behind the uneven development of Malaya in the 19th and early 20th centuries and the impact of such an uneven development on post-independent Malaya/Malaysia. The uneven development of Malaya had led to the emergence of Old Malaya and New Malaya. It is pertinent to first understand the term Malaya as used in colonial times in both its geographical and political context before attempting to understand Old and New Malaya. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the term Malaya was used to denote the Malay Peninsula and the adjacent islands of Penang and Singapore. Until 1945 there were three political entities in Malaya:

1. The British colony of the Straits Settlements (known for short as the “S. S.”) which included Penang (including the mainland territory of Province Wellesley) Malacca and Singapore. These territories were united in 1826 and Singapore became the capital in 1832.
2. The Federated Malay States (the “F. M. S.”) of central Malaya comprising the states of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang. The federation was formed in 1896 with Kuala Lumpur as its capital.
3. The Unfederated Malay States (the “U. M. S.”) of Johor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu. The nine Malay states of the F. M. S. and U. M. S. became British Protectorates at various times between 1874 and 1914. Malaya as a political entity came into being with the inauguration of the Federation of Malaya in 1948.