Towards the Birth of a Nation: The Alliance and The First Federal Elections in Malaya

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The introduction of federal elections in July 1955 marked an important milestone in the Federation of Malaya’s political evolution and the decolonisation process. It signified a more substantive role in the decision-making process for the local political elite and, more importantly, paved a clearer path towards self-government and independence. But getting the British to introduce federal elections, however, was a difficult and hazardous task. Britain was in no hurry to grant self-government to the Federation, let alone independence. Malaya, the British felt, was not yet ready for devolution of political power. The outbreak of the communist insurgency in June 1948 was also a setback to electoral reform.

This paper discusses the Alliance’s role in the introduction of federal elections. The first part examines the tussle with the pro-IMP “Moderates” led by Dato’ Onn Jaafar for leadership of the nationalist movement and to set the pace for movement towards self-government. The second part looks at the Alliance “confrontation” with the British colonial government on the question of federal elections. This challenge against the British authorities resulted in important concessions being made by the British administration on the question of composition of the Federal Legislative Council and, more importantly, hastened movement towards self-government. In the process, the Alliance established itself as the leading nationalist movement in the Federation.

Although the 1948 Federation of Malaya Agreement provided for the introduction of elections “as soon as circumstances and local conditions will permit”, by 1952 there was movement only towards elections at the municipal and town levels. General elections remained a distant goal as far as the British colonial administration was concerned. When the Secretary of State Oliver Lyttelton visited Malaya during the Emergency in December 1951, he
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