Malaysia, the collective leadership of the Alliance Party and esprit de corps were crucial in the quest for independence, writes SEPH M. FERNANDO.

NATIONALIST movements of various shades emerged in Asia and Africa over the last century to challenge the colonial powers. Often, these movements took different paths in pursuing their goal of achieving self-rule. In some cases, as in Indonesia and Vietnam, the anti-colonial struggle took on a violent form. In others, a mixture of constitutional struggle,usive resistance and threat of a violent campaign enabled nationalist movements to gain control of their nations.

These nationalist movements differed in their styles of leadership and decision-making. They ranged from the saintly, as in Mahatma Gandhi's leadership of the Indian nationalist movement and the collective leadership of the Indian Congress Party, to more autocratic leadership of Sukarno in Indonesia and many other Asian and African nations. The nature and style of leadership were often shaped by the prevailing social, economic and political conditions.

Malaysia's experience in this sense is distinctive. There was no violence in the struggle, but the road to independence was less challenging. The approach of the Alliance Party, the leading nationalist movement of the time, was a mixture of political persuasion and aggressive posturing. While the independence campaign was largely a constitutional struggle, the threat of a more repressive campaign remained an option.

A consensual style of decision making developed where a coalition of communal parties formed a partnership ably headed by Tunku Abdul Rahman. This coalition was characterised by the presence of a strong spirit de corps and collective decision-making. Cooperation and trust were evident during the campaign for the first national elections in 1955. The Alliance election manifesto was an embodiment of inter-communal compromises. On the contentious issues such as citizenship, language and education, the coalition was able to convince parties to explain the coalition's decisions. Tunku Abdul Rahman has noted that the constitutional compromises were made possible because of the "spirit of give-and-take" within the Alliance. The constitutional commission took note of these inter-communal compromises, stating that the Alliance's approach was "a better way of doing justice between the races than any other that has been suggested or occurred to us."

The Tunku, in particular, was a trusted leader among the coalition partners. He was...