

The rebel in Onn Jaafar

LETTERS

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Datuk Onn Jaafar remains an interesting subject for the study of the politics and leadership of this country during its formative years.

HE IS perhaps best known for organising nation-wide protests against the colonial Malayan Union scheme in 1946 that culminated in the formation of Umno in May that year. Nevertheless, Datuk Onn Jaafar (1895-1962) remains an enigma.

Scholars of history are still scrutinising the life of this pre-eminent political leader of the post-war period to decipher his thoughts and actions. His political ideas varied considerably from the time he led the Malayan Union protests to the formation of the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) in 1951 and, later, the Party Negara.



Pre-eminent leader: Datuk Onn speaking at the ceremony to raise the Umno flag for the first time in Kluang, Johor, in 1946. — Picture courtesy of National Archives

One may well ask: was he a Malay nationalist or a Malayan nationalist, or a blend of both? The



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independence movement. Some scholars refer to him as *Pengasas Kemerdekaan* (The Initiator of Independence).

While he was not alone in the mass “revolt” orchestrated by several leaders against the Malayan Union constitution, his role in the movement was clearly dominant.

Onn was in a sense a rebel of his age and some of his ideas were perhaps a little ahead of time. He stood up to what he felt was an exploitative colonial regime that was holding on to its control over Malaya.

He also spoke out against what he perceived as inconsiderate palace politics in his home state of Johor – an action that would be deemed unusual in traditional Malay society. In the second instance, he was forced into exile for a period of time (1927-1936) in Singapore.

Onn's political ideas were influenced by his early experiences and liberal education he received in Britain and at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK).

His induction to politics can be said to have started in the pre-war period in the 1920s and particularly in the 1930s when he edited several Malay newspapers.

In his writings, he sought to instil a sense of national consciousness among the Malays, moving away from the traditional state-centred identities. His writings reflected a sense of disillusionment with the colonial administration, particularly over the plight of the Malays, and at times with the Johor state authorities.

It was in the immediate post-war period that Onn became pre-eminent in national politics. When the contents of the Malayan Union became clear, he urged the Malay organisations to resist the scheme. The Malay rulers’ loss of sovereignty and the perceived liberal citizenship requirements were the objects of this protest movement.



Support from all levels: Sultan Badlishah of Kedah (third from left with hands at back) posing for press cameraman after hoisting the Umno flag in front of the Balai Besar in Alor Star where he opened the party's 4th General Assembly on Jan 10,



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Sulaiman Club in Kuala Lumpur. The congress was attended by 39 Malay organisations.

A new party, Umno, was formed on May 11 in Johor Baru and Onn Jaafar was elected its leader. Taken aback by the strong Malay protests, the British began negotiations with Umno leaders in June 1946 to find an acceptable solution to the objections to the Malayan Union. The outcome of these negotiations was the signing of the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948.

Following the signing of the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948, there appears to be a shift in Onn's political position from a narrow communal stance to a more inclusive approach.

This approach remained the basis of Onn's political struggles. He constantly urged the Malays to adopt a wider political outlook. For example, in a speech on May 29, 1949, he urged the Malays to be less parochial: "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?"

Onn realigned Umno's objectives towards the issues of self-governance and independence and a greater accommodation with the domiciled non-Malays. He persuaded the party to change its slogan of *Hidup Melayu* (Long Live the Malays) to *Merdeka* (Independence) in June 1951.

He told the Umno General Assembly in June 1951: "Umno's objective is independence ... independence of the whole country. This cannot be achieved unless there is unity with the other races who are prepared to owe full allegiance to Malaya."

His change of attitude and approach from his Malayan Union days was influenced by the political realities of the period and to an extent the British High Commissioner for South-East Asia Malcolm MacDonald, with whom he had close relations.

At the Umno general assembly in June 1951, Onn proposed that the membership be open to non-Malays and the party be renamed "United Malayan National Organisation" to reflect the change. Umno's senior executives were willing to accede to Onn's request but the second-echelon leaders and the wider membership were not quite ready. They viewed the proposal as being too radical.

As a result, Onn left Umno and set up the non-communal Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) on Sept 16, 1951.

Onn had been constantly pricking the conscience of the British on the issues of self-governance and independence. In 1950, he suggested that Malaya would be able to achieve independence in 15 years and was reprimanded by the High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney.

A lesser-known fact about Onn was his attempt in 1952 to get High Commissioner General Sir Gerald Templer to set up a committee of Asian leaders to discuss the issue of self-government.



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Onn's experiment with the IMP, however, failed to materialise. He did not receive the support he anticipated when he enthusiastically launched the party. Rather, a new partnership between Umno and MCA emerged at the Kuala Lumpur Municipal election in February 1952 and won nine of the 12 seats at stake.

Thereafter the IMP lost heavily in the local elections to the Umno-MCA alliance. Onn then founded Party Negara in early 1954, receiving unofficial support secretly from the British colonial administration.

The period 1953 to 1954 saw a major political battle between the IMP (and later Party Negara) to attempt to lead the nationalist movement. Onn felt that a more gradual timetable was needed to achieve independence. The Alliance under the leadership of Tunku argued that 1954 was the right time to hold federal elections as the term of the Federal Legislative Council came to an end.

In the first federal elections in July 1955, Onn campaigned on a more communal platform under the banner of the IMP's successor, Party Negara, almost appearing to return to the pre-1948 narrow ethnic-based nationalism.

The large Malay electorate invariably dictated this communal stance. Party Negara did not win any seat and it signalled the beginning of his political demise. The British hereafter dealt largely with the Alliance on the question of constitutional reform and independence.

Onn was a Malayan nationalist at heart. While he started off as a champion of a more exclusive form of ethnic nationalism, he later embraced a more inclusive Malayan nationalism. He continued to champion Malay interests but at the same time sought a cooperative engagement with the non-Malay political organisations.

He was as much influenced by the emerging age of democracy as he was by the realpolitik of the period. Cooperation with the non-Malay constituents was a political necessity if he hoped to successfully champion the interests of the Malay community.

While Onn may have failed to turn his ideas into reality following the defeat of Party Negara to the Alliance Party, his ideas were not entirely lost. Indeed, they helped to shape the emerging pattern of Malayan politics.

The Alliance, in fact, adopted the spirit of the inter-communal approach to politics that Onn had espoused. He himself once admitted that the Alliance had achieved what he had set out to accomplish when he formed the IMP. His constant challenge to the Alliance in this sense had an indirect impact on the politics of the party.

It can be said that Onn had an enormous impact on the independence movement and helped to shape the emerging pattern of Malayan politics in more ways than he is often credited with.



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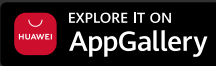
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