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## TUNKU'S MERGER PROPOSAL AND SARAWAK'S RESPONSES, 1961 TO 1962

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to describe some of the responses and agitations of the newly established political parties and their representatives in Sarawak that stemmed from Tunku Abdul Rahman's speech on merger in May 1961 till the arrival of the Cobbold Commission in February 1962. The rationale for Tunku's speech will be briefly touched on and the underlying reasons for the initial unwillingness of the participants to be receptive to this new idea will be discussed.

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"Sooner or later Malaya should have an understanding with Borneo and the peoples of Singapore, North Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak. It is premature for me to say now how this close understanding can be brought about but it is inevitable that we should look ahead to this objective and think of a plan whereby these territories can be brought together in political and economic cooperation."

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On 26th May 1961 Tunku cut short plans for a vacation to South Vietnam. Instead he flew south to Singapore and on 27th May 1961 at a luncheon held in his honour at the Adelphi Hotel, he described his plans<sup>1</sup> to merge the three British territories in Borneo with the Malayan Federation and Singapore, to the Foreign Correspondents' Association of South East Asia. Among other things, Tunku mentions that,

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Tunku was not a stranger to the idea of merger with Singapore. Tunku had wrestled with Lee Kuan Yew over the idea of merger with Singapore even before his pronouncement of 'Merdeka' in 1957. The novelty was Tunku's suggestion of a merger of his Persekutuan Tanah Melayu with Singapore and the British Borneo territories. Tunku had been very persistent and adamant in his policy over Lee Kuan Yew's suggestion of "independence through merger" and had always insisted that there could be no merger citing, 'where there are Chinese, there are communists'. Foremost and fresh in Tunku's mind was the recently successful conclusion of a costly civil war against the communist terrorists during the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960. In large part, the battle against communism was won due to the Malay leaders insistence on responsible government and finally independence from her colonial masters. Thus unlike other communist eruptions in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand at the time, the Malayan communist insurgency

could not be considered as a nationalist uprising against the colonial regime. However the looming specter of a socialist Cuba-like satellite Singapore, the 'third China'<sup>2</sup>, troubled Tunku greatly. When Tunku made his announcement of merger with Singapore and the Borneo territories, Tunku had decided what constituted the lesser evil, a Communist Singapore or a Chinese dominated Malaysia. The inclusion of Sarawak into his merger plan was part of his answer.

Tunku's proposal represented a volte-face in Tunku's foreign policy. Prior to May 1961, Tunku had vigorously opposed merger with Singapore. Tunku now not only suggested the idea of merger with Singapore but attempted to merge with the Borneo territories as a single political entity. While impetus may have come from Tunku's speech, a political analyst's conversations with unnamed senior British officials, "suggests that it is more probable that the British government persuaded the Tunku to promote the idea of Malaysia, first because of the possibility of a takeover in Singapore by the alleged pro-Communists Barisan Sosialis, and second because of British desires to withdraw, gracefully as ever, from direct colonial rule in Southeast Asia."<sup>3</sup>

Arnold Brackman mentioned ethnic, racial and religious differences between Malaya and Singapore as working against any possibility of merger. Brackman stated that Tunku, "noted that the Malay was the national language of the people of Malaya, while the overwhelming majority of the people in Singapore spoke Chinese; that Malaya had a constitutional monarch and that the Chinese were unlikely to pay homage to a King as a head of state, much less a Malay monarch; and that, finally, Islam was the state religion of Malaya and the Singapore Chinese were hardly to accept that."<sup>4</sup>

Lee Kuan Yew, in trying to assuage Tunku's fears of Chinese domination, had attempted to influence Tunku that his people were sincere in accepting Malay rule. Lee admitted that Singapore chose Yusof bin Ishak as the first Yang Di Pertuan Negara because Singapore "wanted a distinguished Malay in order to show the Federation that Singaporeans were willing to accept Malays as their leaders."<sup>5</sup>

Why was the Singapore Prime Minister so keen on a merger with Malaya in the first instance? By July 1961, Lee Kuan Yew was holding a majority of one after a split in the left wing PAP. In April 1961 the PAP was soundly trounced in the important Hong Lim by-election by expelled PAP maverick Ong Eng Guan, ex-Singapore Mayor and a sacked PAP National Development Minister, who had stood on a platform of anti-colonialism,



Chinese chauvinism and wanted an immediate and unconditional independence from Britain. By July 1961, the PAP were tested again in the Anson by-election. The PAP faced opposition from former Singapore's Chief Minister, the impetuous Jewish lawyer David Marshall, who was also an avowed Communist and trade unionist. Lee was hoping that a merger would consolidate his hold on the Singapore government. At the same time, British opinion was that Lee was the only person able to provide stable government. The British feared the left wing, anti-military base faction of the PAP would be infiltrated and backed by the Communists. Lord Selkirk told Ian MacLeod, Colonial Office Secretary that, "Lee Kuan Yew has not been successful in riding the communist tiger and is in danger of being gobbled up."<sup>6</sup>

Prior to 1961, Tunku had extensive discussions with Lee Kuan Yew, over the possibility of merger, which had all come to nought. While Tunku had golfing sessions with Lee Kuan Yew and had numerous discussions in attempting to iron out Singapore's problem, Tunku did not see fit to first discuss his idea with the Borneo leaders before springing it on them. It has been suggested that initial opposition to Tunku's proposal from the Borneo territories stemmed from Tunku not consulting them beforehand. Tunku had not thought it was necessary to consult, in the first instance, with the Borneo leaders when he came out with his proposal pronouncement. The Borneo leaders had every right to feel rankled, indignant and resentful, that their opinions on such an important issue affecting their independence was neither valued nor sought. The initial reactions of PANAS, SUPP and SNAP, three newly formed political parties, which has as yet to contest in any direct elections, were hostile to say the least. However PANAS was soon to retract its early stand on the Malaysia proposal.

British opinion up to this point in time was that fragmentation of the three Borneo states would weaken each of them, even if the three Borneo territories were to form a single entity.<sup>7</sup> In a conversation between Dr. Hatta, Indonesian vice-president and Malcolm MacDonald, British High Commissioner for South East Asia, Hatta tells us in his own words that, "MacDonald replied that it was indeed Britain's intention to grant independence to these territories, but not as three separate states. Fragmentation into three separate states, he stated, would be apt to weaken each one of them, hence it would be more suitable if the three areas were united together into one state."<sup>8</sup>

### Closer Association of Borneo States

Lord Brassey, who had spent some time in Borneo waters in his yacht *Sunbeam*<sup>9</sup> in 1887, proposed a scheme by which the British Government



should amalgamate its Protectorates in Borneo and Malaya with the Straits Settlements into one large colony.<sup>10</sup> The question of closer association was taken up more than half a century later by Sarawak Governor Sir Anthony Abell (when he was in Brunei wearing his other hat as British High Commissioner to Brunei), when in an interview over Radio Brunei on July 1957, he commented, "I like to see the territories of Borneo draw closer together. I believe it is vital to them if they wish to retain their individuality. I want to see them solving together their common difficulties. Sharing services and resources where it is economical to do so, presenting to the world of South-East Asia a picture of a strong healthy partnership of people determined to pursue their own chosen way of life and destiny. I believe an increase in political stability, economic strength and international prestige would result from such a partnership."<sup>11</sup> This statement of Abell came less than two months before Tunku was to pronounce independence for Malaya. Another half year went by before Abell sold his idea to the Sarawak people. In another radio interview in February 1958, this time over Radio Sarawak<sup>12</sup> in which he had described his talk as "a matter of the greatest importance", Abell told the Sarawak people, "if we entered into some kind of partnership we would form one much larger, more power and more influential unit".<sup>13</sup> Abell spoke of a central authority which would provide a check and balance on each other while at the same time being responsible for communications, internal security, civil aviation, defence and external relations. Abell believed that Brunei was vital to the alliance he envisaged, as the three territories were small and vulnerable. A closer association would strengthen the security of the Borneo territories.

Local community leaders were contacted for their opinions on Abell's speech. In the main the reaction was favorable. Edward Jerah, President of the Sarawak Dayak National Union, felt that there needed to be an understanding among the people. Robert Jitam, President of the Sarawak Dayak Association felt that he would wait for events to unfold before commenting. Tan Kui Choon, Kuching Chinese General Chamber of Commerce and President of the Chao Ann Association felt that while Abell's speech was important, one should not be hasty and there needed to be a thorough discussion. Mohamed bin Haji Bakri and Ikhwan Zainie, President and General Secretary of the Sarawak Malay National Union respectively, felt that there was a need for the Union to discuss the matter before coming to any decision. Ling Beng Siew, a Council Negeri member, felt that it was a good idea as the three territories would bring economic benefits to its members.

In the Kuching Municipal Council on 25th February 1958, its President William Tan and Ong Kee Hui favored the closer association in principle.

However their views were not shared by Dawi bin Abdul Rahman who did not see any benefit. Dawi Abdul Rahman put forward the argument that Sarawak was recognised by the United States of America as a sovereign nation in 1851, a full twelve years before Britain accorded such recognition to Sarawak. The federation idea was an anathema to the Sarawak Malays. Speaking on behalf of the Malays, Dawi Abdul Rahman, a member of the Kuching Municipal Council stated that the welfare of the indigenous people of Sarawak was more urgent than the formation of a federation.<sup>14</sup> Another reason given was the fear that the federation would bring about the immigration of Chinese into Sarawak which would pose two threats to the Malay community: population explosion and the communism threat.<sup>15</sup> However as we shall discuss further below, by 1961, after a slight initial objections, the Kuching Malays under the Datu Bandar accepted the idea of a even greater federation.

The Malays living in the Sarawak border in Limbang division near to Brunei had a slightly different view of federation. The Resident of the Fifth Division, H.P.K. Jacks in the second half of the annual report for the Division in 1958 stated, "(c)loser Association of the Borneo Territories was given wide publicity throughout the Division. Local opinion was generally in favor, and the hope was expressed that the immigration regulations in and out of the Brunei State would be lifted or considerably ameliorated".<sup>16</sup> The Limbang Malays accepted Abell's federation idea as it allowed greater ease of travel from the state to Brunei and because it allowed greater economic benefits in the exchange of trade.

At the end of his Governorship in Sarawak in December 1959, Sir Anthony Abell believed that if Brunei were to join Malaya it would become a "focus for Malay discontent or Malay irrendentism throughout Borneo".<sup>17</sup> He felt that a closer association of Brunei, North Borneo and Sarawak was in the best interest of those territories.<sup>18</sup>

### Early Reactions to Tunku's Proposal

On 30th May 1961, Stephen Yong pronounced that merger or federation presupposed independence, and therefore merger or federation with Malaya should come about when "we have attained a large measure of self-government and independence". Stephen Yong felt that the political disparity of Malaya being independent, Singapore semi independent and Sarawak still a colony, any conference to discuss merger would not work out satisfactorily. Stephen Yong was of the opinion due to that the disparity between the political parties in Malaya and Singapore holding the reigns of power and the