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British duplicity and collusion of the Malay elite contributed to keeping the various communities apart and made the struggle for a united nation state post-Malayan Union a distant dream.

In our study of Malaysian history we are always told that the best approach for achieving unity in this plural society is the *Barisan Nasional* way. In other words only by having race-based parties that are able to come to some degree of understanding and cooperation can we achieve a fragile unity and some measure of peace in this country. However such a view is indeed erroneous because there were attempts to achieve a meaningful unity among the various ethnic communities based on shared common values and willingness to give and take. These attempts were not successful because of political and social factors that were not conducive towards establishing a genuine unity in Malaya

In order to understand why we are trapped in the maze of ethnic and racial politics today, we must examine the past to see what went wrong

To begin our discussion we will start with the Malayan Union. The Malayan Union was introduced by the British immediately after the end of the Second World War. In order to implement their plan, the British had to obtain the agreement of the traditional rulers in the Malay states. The aim of the Malayan Union was to integrate the large Chinese community and the smaller Indian one into a Malayan polity with a sense of 'Malayaness'.

The British also wanted to do away with the cumbersome pre-war administrative structures comprising 10 government units consisting of the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang and the Unfederated Malay States of Johor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu and the Straits Settlements comprising of Penang, Singapore and Malacca. The British wanted to integrate them into a single, centrally controlled state with Singapore as a separate entity. Finally, the long-term goal of the British was to lead Malaya to independence.

To carry out their plan it was necessary to reorganize citizenship qualifications whereby 83 per cent of the Chinese and 75 per cent of the Indians would qualify for citizenship under very liberal laws. The British also intended up open up the Civil Service – hitherto a British and Malay preserve – to all communities.[1]

The Malay sultans would forfeit their positions as heads of their respective states but retain authority only in Islam. In other words, the British wanted to create a new 'nation state' from scratch and Tanah Melayu and other symbols cherished by the Malays as well as the bangsa Melayu would cease to exist. The bangsa Melayu would be subsumed into a bangsa Malayan that would encompass the Malays, Chinese and Indians.

2.25 million Malays, 3 million Malayans

The British were well aware that the Malays refused to be categorized as Malayans since they saw that term as a British creation that served the interests of the colonial regime. It was even recorded that, "a Malay is a member of the Malay race; a Malayan is a person of any other origin who happens to live in Malaya. There are 2,250,000 Malays; and 3,050,000 Malayans."[(2)]

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