

# The Change of Malaysian Standard Time: A Motion and Debate in the Malaysian Parliament

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts to identify the reasons why the (former) Prime Minister of Malaysia, (Tun) Mahathir Mohamed proposed to change the Malaysian Standard Time on the 8 hours ahead based on Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and coordinated with official times for (East Malaysia), namely Sabah and Sarawak effective January 1, 1982. Previously, Peninsular Malaysia was 7 ½ hours ahead while Sabah and Sarawak were 8 hours ahead of GMT. Using analytical textual method, this paper formulated the content of the House of Commons Hansard texts on 21 December 1981 and the House of Lords convened on 18 December 1981. The findings revealed that the ½ hour time difference between the Peninsular and Sabah and Sarawak affected working hours especially in early and ending of time. The approval of the Malaysian Standard Time Act successfully standardized the official communication time between the Peninsular with Sabah and Sarawak as well as establishing integration between the two regions. The time zone of Sabah and Sarawak was chosen as the Standard Malaysia time as it was found to be most appropriate in terms of daylight savings as well as minimal disruption to the everyday life of the people in the country.

**Keywords:** *Mahathir, Malaysian Standard Time, Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), Sabah, Sarawak, Peninsular Malaysia, House of Commons, House of Lords, integration*

## **Introduction**

Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia from 16 July 1981 to 31 October 2003, making him the longest-serving holder of that office. After five months of occupying the Prime Minister's office, Dr. Mahathir made a change in setting Malaysia's official time (Rashid, 1999: 115). Although Malaysia achieved independence from the British colonialism in 1957, as well as the formation of Malaysia in 1963, Malaysia had two different official times namely East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) which was 30 minutes ahead, and West Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia). For the purpose of coordination and legitimate, Dr. Mahathir submitted a motion at the House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat) on 21 December 1981. For immediate approval, the House of Lord (Dewan Negara) had earlier in consultation on 18th December 1981 with first, second, third readings and approved with a majority vote.

Under the procedure and normal practice in bicameral system, any Bill must obtain the approval of the House of Representatives, before approval of the House of Lords (Senate). Base on the debate by the members of House of Lords (Senate) or the House of Representatives, both councils strongly agreed on the motion stressed that by Dr. Mahathir to standardise Malaysian official time effective 1 January, 1982.

### **Background of the Malaysian Standard Time and the Malaysian Parliamentary System**

Malaysian Standard Time is a standard time used in Malaysia. It is 8 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and Coordinated Universal Time (UTC). The local mean time in Kuala Lumpur was originally GMT+06:46:48. Peninsular Malaysia used this local mean time until 1880, when they changed to Singapore mean time GMT+06:55:24. Between the end of the Second World War and the formation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963, it was known as British Malayan Standard Time, which was UTC+07:30 hours ahead of GMT. At 2330 hrs local time on 31 December 1981, people in Peninsular Malaysia adjusted their clocks ahead by 30 minutes to become 00:00 hour's local time on 1 January 1982, to match the time in use in East Malaysia, which is UTC+08:00. The Malaysian government declared that people in West Malaysia (Peninsular) would move their clocks ahead by 30 minutes to match the time in use in East Malaysia (UTC+08:00 hours an UTC+08:00:00 ahead of Greenwich Mean Time) on 31 December 1981. On 1 January 1990, the Malaysian Cabinet appointed the National Metrology Laboratory as the official timekeeper of Malaysia (Zakaria, 2017).The Malaysian Standard Time is derived from five atomic clocks maintained by Standards & Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM) (National Metrology Institute of Malaysia, 2017)

The Parliament is the national legislature of Malaysia, based on the Westminster system. The bicameral parliament system consist the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives) and the Dewan Negara (House of Lord or Senate). The Yang di-Pertuan Agong (King) as the Head of State is the third component of Malaysian Parliament. Members of the House of Representatives in Malaysia are elected directly through elections held every five years. In 1981, there were 154 members in the House of Representatives and the number increased to 222 since 2013. Meanwhile, the House of Lords had 64 members in 1981 and the number increased to 70 in 2013. The appointment of House of Lords members in Malaysia is based on the following formulation;

**Table 1:**

Selection of Members for the Malaysian House of Lords 2013

Proposed by	Numbers	
	1978	2013
State	24	30
His Royal Highness the Yang di-Pertuan Agong	40	40
Total	64	70

Source: <http://www.parlimen.gov.my/hansard-dewan-negara.html?uweb=dn&arkib=yes>, Retrieved on August 22th 2017

The House of Representatives has 222 elected members, as shown in Table 2 below;

**Table 2:**

Election of Members for the House of Representatives, 2013

States	Numbers	
	1981	2013
Perlis	2	3
Kedah	13	15
Kelantan	12	14
Terengganu	7	8
Pulau Pinang	9	13
Perak	21	24
Pahang	8	14
Selangor	11	22
Federal Territories (Wilayah Persekutuan-Kuala Lumpur, Labuan & Putrajaya)	5	12
Negeri Sembilan	6	8
Melaka	4	6
Johor	16	26
Sabah	16	25
Sarawak	24	31
Total	154	222

Source: Report of General Election of the House of Representatives and State Legislative Assemblies Excluding State Assemblies of Kelantan, Sabah and Sarawak 1978, p. 40; <http://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DR-21121981.pdf>, Retrieved on August 22th 2017.

Based on the normal procedure in the lawmaker rules in Malaysia, it is initiated in the House of Representatives ahead from the House of Lords for the first, second and third readings. Subsequently, the motion was brought to the House of Lords to be debated and approved. The Bill is only declare as an Act upon the consent of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (King). In the case of formulation of the Malaysian Standard Time, the Dewan Negara held discussion three days ahead, i.e. on 18 December, 1981, while the Dewan Rakyat convened only on 21 December 1981. Dato' Mohamad Nasir, who was the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, commented regarding this matter as valid and legitimate, there was no contravention of the constitution under the Clause 47, Rules of House of Senate Public Order and Clause 66 (2) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution.

### **Motion and Debate in the Dewan Negara (Malaysia Senate) on Malaysian Standard Time**

On 18 December, 1981, Dato' Mohamed Nasir delivered a motion with the title "The Malaysian Standard Time Bill" in the House of Lords for the second and third readings. This motion was aimed to standardise the official Malaysian time effective from 12.01 a.m., 1 January 1982. Before that, Malaysia had two different official times, i.e. East Malaysian time (Sabah and Sarawak), which was 8 hours ahead and West Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia) 7½ hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) which was 30 minutes apart from each other. Dr. Mahathir has decided to change the official Malaysian time for Peninsular Malaysia ½ hours ahead effective at 11.30 p.m., on 31 December 1981, making the exact time of 12.00 midnight as Sabah and Sarawak time. The official time of Sabah and Sarawak was chosen based on daylight savings and minimal disruption of people's lives. The proposal received unanimous support by the House of Lords members including Parliamentary Secretary of Science, Technology and Environment, Law Hieng Ding. Abdul Hamid Tahir, who was a Senate member said that, since the colonial period, the official time for Peninsular Malaysia was based on 1 to 7 degree latitude to the north of the equator and between 100 degrees and 119 degrees eastward in longitude. Meanwhile, during interregnum into Malaya at World War II, the Japanese Army changed the local official time to Tokyo time. After World War II, British reoccupation in Malaya resulted in the Malaysian official time to be referred to Greenwich Means Times (GMT) or London. Abdul Hamid stressed that it was awkward phenomenon when the Bill was read earlier in the Dewan Negara rather than in the House of Representatives. Abdul Hamid added, the change of Malaysian time had been too vulnerable in official programmes, such as its implications to invitation letters, cinema shows, flights, train schedules, schools and government printer. Furthermore, the Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) needed to provide sufficient explanation to the people (Parliament of Malaysia, 22/8/2017).

Mohamed Din Jaafar and Mahimon Harun asserted that the standardisation of Malaysian Airlines System (MAS) aircraft schedule which involved landings in Kota Kinabalu or Kuching, it was not necessary to announce two different times, since these two cities were located in Sabah and Sarawak respectively. Abdul Razak Abu Samah who also supported the motion insisted that it was unreasonable for Malaysian people to look at television screen with two different times, namely West Malaysian time and East Malaysian time. According to Abdul

Razak, the Senate members were no longer synonymous with rubber stamp members' because proceedings in Dewan Negara were held earlier than the House of Representatives. Mahmoud Salim Mohamed, added if this scenario was referred to the United States of America, Russia, China or Indonesia, it was a possibility because these countries were too large compare to Malaysia.

Ariffin Haji Salleh, affirmed that the change should have been done since the early days of the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Latip Dris, stressed that the uniformity of time provided convenience to government officers in two-way working days. The exactly times of telephone calls and banking also made easier.

V.V. Aboo, insisted that the government should be considering transportation problems faced by rural children when going-back to school. At the same time, Salmah Sheikh Hussain hoped the government to consider the view of the Syariah fellowship regarding the performance of the Zohor prayer originally set at 12.45 p.m. as had to be changed to 1.15 p.m. instead.

Mohamed Nasir, thanked all the members who supported the Malaysian Standard Time. This standardisation was one of the government's efforts to unite the people in Malaysia. Mohamed Nasir referred to the Regulation of the Meeting of the 47 Senate and Clause 66 (2) of the Constitution of the Federation of Malaya, the Bill could be submitted in any house either in the House of Representatives or in the House of Lord, except the Money Bill which is presented in the House of Representative respectively. Upon reading the second and third times of the Bill, the Speaker referred to Clauses No. 1 to 3, and ordered to legitimise the Bill (Parliament of Malaysia, 22/8/2017).

### **Motion and Debate in the House of Representatives**

On 21 December, 1981, the Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed submitted a motion that the Malaysian Standard Time Bill to be read for the second and third times in the House of Representatives based on Article 72 of the Rules of Meeting. This motion was supported by Ong Kee Hui, the Malaysian Minister of Science, Technology and the Environment (Parliament of Malaysia, 2017). Dr. Mahathir further, proposed that the Bill (Malaysian Standard Time, Act 1981) to be read for the second time;

"The Bill Act seeks to streamline the official times of the state of Malaysia effective from 1 January, 1982 because Malaysia has two official times. At that's time, an official time for the Peninsular was set at 7½ hours earlier than Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) which had been practiced since 1941, and East Malaysia (Sabah & Sarawak) time set at 8 hours ahead of GMT. The difference of time for ½ hours had led disputes of the working hours between the Peninsular and Sabah and Sarawak for about two hours a day. The official time of Sabah and Sarawak, was chosen as the standard time for Malaysia instead of West Malaysia time. On 31 December, 1981, the Peninsular's time would changed to ½ hours ahead making it to 12.00 a.m.

the same time as Sabah and Sarawak. The Sabah and Sarawak times had been chosen because it was an appropriate in terms of daylight savings and convenience to all Malaysians. According to international practice, the time in one zone to the next zone is one hour. Sabah and Sarawak time has been convenient to the principle of difference. If the Peninsular time had been chosen, it would have been excluded from the international time zone system, which was only a half hour difference between the previous and later zones."

Shamsuri Md. Salleh (Balik Pulau) suggested that the time format be changed to the 24-hours clock system such as 14.00 (to refer to 2.00pm) and 24.00 (to refer to 12.00 midnight) which was also practised in flight schedules. For Abdul Ghani Misbah (Kinabatangan) the idea by Dr. Mahathir actually points out to Malaysians to be more forward-looking, disciplined and to stand together as a single nation. The Bill would be able to strengthen national integration and promote the nation's prosperity and stability. Negotiations with ASEAN countries should be urgently held to enable the country to use the Malaysian Standard Time as soon as possible.

Lim Kit Siang (Petaling), from the opposition (Democratic Action Party) supported the Bill and suggested that all Malaysian should have a standard time throughout the states of Malaysia. The motion of Malaysian Standard Time was just a gesture if it was not accompanied by more substantive changes, taking the initiative to resolve the barriers to national consciousness, especially between the states of Sabah and Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia although this matter may not contribute significantly to bringing Malaysia closer to the national consciousness.

Chieng Tiong Kai (Sarikei) stressed that Malaysia was situated between the longitude of 100°-120° east. According to International Standard Time rules, every 15° longitude time was designated one hour difference. Malaysia had already been placed in a standard time area, which was the first 8 hours of GMT time. The half-hour difference between Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak was not supposed to be sustained as it created many problems such as government administration, business activities, relationships, and so on. Chieng's idea was also supported by Azharul Abidin Abdul Rahim (Batang Padang) and Shaari Jusoh (Kangar).

Mohd. Nakhaie Haji Ahmad (Baling) from Pan Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), agreed on the uniformity of time. Mohamed Khir Johari (Kuala Muda) also agreed and welcomed Mahathir's proposal to make a uniform time nationwide by recommending 15 minutes of Peninsular Malaysia time to accelerate while delaying 15 minutes for Sabah and Sarawak. This would have work out the equivalent 30 minutes difference required in this proposal.

Ampung Puyon (Labuk Sugut) asserted that it was a positive turning point to ensure national unity among Malaysians of diverse races, religions and cultures. All residents need to think as Malaysians and there was no difference between the Peninsular, Sabah or Sarawak. This action wiped out incredulous voices that Kuala Lumpur colonised Sabah or Sarawak. All MPs from

Sabah welcome the Prime Minister's motion. Ikhwan Nasir (Pontian) agreed to the motion because it sparked a sense of belonging to Malaysians.

Meanwhile Wan Mohd. Najib Wan Mohamed (Pasir Puteh) stressed that the major impact when the Bill was passed would be disturbing to the working hours especially in the Peninsular. He suggested that the idea of transition would happen within one year. At that point of time it was towards the end of year, the calendars had already been printed. Therefore, he stressed that no parties would be victimised. He also suggested that the working hours of government servants be change to five days a week and a two-day break either Friday and Saturday or Saturday and Sunday instead of only one day per weekend during the period.

Au How Cheong (Telok Anson) believed that the time zone was based on Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) 30 minutes ahead of the sun (correct solar time). The Earth rotates within 24 hours at a rate of 15 degrees within an hour and the time zones are divided according to a specific longitude. Malaysia is located in the seventh time zone and Peninsular Malaysia time should be 7 hours ahead of GMT but set 7½ hours ahead of GMT. By virtue of this Bill, Malaysia's official time became eight hours earlier than GMT, an hour earlier than the real time. So it was more appropriate that Sabah and Sarawak follow the Peninsular's time.

Alias Md. Ali (Ulu Trengganu) supports this Bill and hopes that the government would pay special attention to school time so as not to affect students' learning tasks. Since schooling time was more like the time the government staff going the offices it created the hassle for parents especially in the morning. Timing changes should also be taken into account for those involved in sports activities. Thus the government has to organize sports activities as a national programme involving government employees. The government also needs to provide appropriate sports programmes for employees of the private sector.

Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir (Kulim-Bandar Bahru) described the benefits of uniformity could be strengthen relationships between the inhabitants of the Peninsular and Sabah and Sarawak. Mohamad Tajol Rosli Mohamed Ghazali (Gerik) supported the provision of the Bill to state RTM's timing of radio and television broadcasts needed to be adjusted.

Lee Lam Thye (Kuala Lumpur) agreed that the Bill way an away to unite Malaysians. Edwin anak Tangkun (Batang Lupar) stressed that the majority of Sarawakians welcomed the Bill presented by the Prime Minister. Many residents had asked him why most Malaysians were not surprised of this time adjustment. Every year when the New Year celebrated on 1 January at the 12.00 midnight in Sarawak, residents were surprised when the TV broadcasts from Peninsular Malaysia hampered their activities. With the passing of the Bill, it was hoped that all Malaysians would be able to view TV broadcasts at the same time. The same question was often asked by foreign tourists why Malaysian was not uniform in official time. For example, a Malaysian Airline System (MAS) flight departing from Subang Airport to Kuching at 10.00 am and took 1 hour and 50 minutes. When the passenger arrived at Kuching Airport, they saw the clock

showing 12.20 p.m. which supposedly 30 minutes longer than in the peninsular. This matter caused the passenger to change the time on their watch in line with Sarawak's official time. Obviously, when returning to the peninsular, they had to change the watch to local time again.

Racha Umong (Bukit Mas) and Patrick's Anak Uren (Mas Gading) expressed focus endeavour to find ways to strengthen the unity of multiracial groups, especially that of the peninsular and Sabah and Sarawak, which was separated by the South China Sea. Sometimes it becomes difficult for government servants in Sabah and Sarawak whose wanted to contact a staff in Peninsular because of different times. The unevenness of time led to the disruptions of many funded government programmes.

Dr. Mahathir (Kubang Pasu) congratulated all members of the house who participated in the debate (Parliament of Malaysia, 2017). He affirmed that nobody rejected the proposal of Malaysian Standard Time, not even opposition members that. Therefore;

This motion is based on the uniformity of time between Peninsular and Sabah and Sarawak. The practice of time zone accepted worldwide into account Greenwich longitude as a practical measure. If a place is in the east, Greenwich's longitude gets earlier, on the other hand the west of the Greenwich longitude becomes late. The system is based on the sunrise from the east and sunset to the west. Now the time difference was divided into the sole zones as far as 15° longitude and between zones with other zones which take 1 hour. Worldwide there are 24 zones based on 360° on the globe. A modern-day the journey from Malaysia to the United Kingdom takes only 14 hours or so by air, instead of three months by ship in ancient time. In Malaysia, between East Malaysia and West Malaysia we have two different time zones. The different of time between the Peninsular and East Malaysia would continue to trigger various problems if the current official time are still being maintained. If the government chooses the Peninsular time, which is 7½ hours ahead of GMT, then the difference between Malaysia and other countries would be half an hour and this is not usually practiced by most countries in the world where the difference is one hour. If the time for Sabah and Sarawak is used, then the difference between the time for Sabah and Sarawak with the previous and subsequent zones is about one hour. This means that the Sabah and Sarawak zone is more suitable to be chosen as the Malaysian Standard Time. Generally the honorable members' views are in line with the proposals and I thank the members who supported the government's proposal to determine the new Malaysian Standard Time.

The Bill was read for a second time and submitted to the House for approval. The Bill was approved with no amendment made according to Clauses No. 1 to 3, hence it was ordered to be part of the Act. The Bill was endorsed by Yang di-Pertuan Agong (Royal) on 28 December 1981 and subsequently published in the government Gazette on 29 December 1981. This Act



became effective on 1 January 1982 and ordered to be part of Malaysian Law with the title the Malaysian Standard Time, Act 261.

### **Results and Discussion**

The debate on Malaysian Standard Time which began in the House of Lords rather than the House of Representative was not against the Malaysian Constitution though does it did not follow the normal procedure. The time for Sabah & Sarawak was chosen rather than the time for Peninsular, taking into account several factors such as daylight savings. Accepted worldwide practice take into account Greenwich's longitude as a measure, where if somewhere to the east to the Greenwich longitude gets earlier, instead of the West of Greenwich longitude becomes later than the GMT. The consideration proposed by Dr. Mahathir was in line with international practice. If Peninsular time (7½ hours ahead of GMT) had been chosen, the difference in time between Malaysia and other countries would have been half and hour. If Sabah and Sarawak time was chosen, then the difference between Sabah and Sarawak time with other time zones was one hour. This meant that the Sabah and Sarawak time zones was more suitable to be chosen as the Malaysian Standard Time. Obviously, the standardisation of time between East Malaysia and West Malaysia was timely to strengthen the socio-economic cooperation and the integration of all the state in Malaysia.

### **Conclusion**

Dr. Mahathir as the Prime Minister of Malaysia had made numerous changes which affected the nation since he was appointed as the Prime Minister of Malaysia effective 16 July 1981. Among the changes made was to standardize Malaysia's official time, specifically between East Malaysia and West Malaysia. The main purpose was to create a link between territories in Malaysia and to make the government more efficient throughout the nation although many found this to be awkward, as most of the population (roughly 80%) live in Peninsular Malaysia rather than in East Malaysia (on Borneo). Nevertheless, with the support of the people, the change was legitimately enforced on 1 January, 1982, when both the Senate and the House of Representatives gave their seal approval to go ahead with the Malaysian Standard Time Act.

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