

When tempers flared

With Racial Harmony Day around the corner on July 21, SHARON SEOW revisits the times when the racial situation was explosive

It is hard to imagine these days that the different races did not always mingle as easily as they do today. That there were racial riots as recently as 1969. Those were one of four the country experienced in the last 60 years.

Maria Hertogh riots, 1950

The Maria Hertogh riots, also known as the Nadra riots, started on Dec 11, 1950. They centred round the 13-year-old, who had been raised as a Muslim by Aminah Mohamed for eight years.

Aminah had adopted Maria (whom she named Nadra) in 1942, but Maria's Dutch mother, Adeline, insisted that she only allowed Maria to stay with Aminah for three days.

Unable to find Maria after World War II, during which she was interned and her husband a prisoner of war, the Hertoghs returned to Holland.



1950: Tensions were high and little provocation resulted in fights like this one.

Aminah raised Nadra in a small kampung in Terengganu, where a British officer came across the girl. He convinced Aminah to bring Maria to Singapore, saying she could arrange for legal adoption papers here. But the girl was taken into custody by the Social Welfare Department.

The Chief Justice took 15 minutes to decide that custody be given to the Hertoghs. His decision raised anti-Christian and anti-European sentiments in the Muslim community.

It took two months for Aminah to re-obtain custody of Maria. Three days

after that, the girl, now 13, was married to a 22-year-old Malay man, an event which alarmed the European community.

On Dec 2, the court awarded custody of Maria to the Hertoghs again and temporarily placed her in a Catholic home, which further upset the Muslims.

On Dec 11, a frustrated 3,000-strong crowd, convinced of discrimination after the appeal hearing was over, abused the police, attacked cars and threw stones.

For three days, mobs of Malay and Indian Muslims wielding parangs



A lot of property was damaged during the riots, both in 1950 (this picture) and in the 1960s unrest (right)



attacked any Europeans or Eurasians on sight. People were dragged off motorcycles and from taxis and cars, and beaten, some even to death.

Order was restored only after two weeks of a 24-hour curfew. In total, 18 people were killed, 173 injured and 19 vehicles damaged.

The insensitivity of the colonial government towards the racial and religious feelings of the locals was deemed as one of the main reasons for the tragedy.

July race riots, 1964

These were also known as the Prophet Muhammad Birthday Riots, 1964 Racial Riots and 1964 Sino-Malay Riots. They involved groups of Chinese and Malays. At the time, Singapore was part of Malaysia.

The riots broke out on July 21. More than 25,000 Muslims gathered at the Padang that day to celebrate the Prophet's birthday, then set off to Lorong 12, Geylang, where a feast awaited.

Eye-witnesses said that some Chinese men threw water and bottles at the procession while it was at the Kallang area. Hostile words were exchanged. The rioting started between that point and Geylang Serai, when a Chinese policeman asked a group of Malays who peeled off from the crowd to rejoin the main procession.

Buildings, stalls and vehicles were set on fire. Groups of Chinese and Malays were seen fighting with parangs and

choppers. Some Chinese families sought refuge in the homes of their Malay friends and vice versa.

At 9.30pm, a dawn-to-dusk, island-wide curfew was imposed and armed troops were deployed.

The curfew was lifted only on Aug 2, by which time 23 had died, 454 were injured and damage had been done to a lot of property.

The riots led to the formation of goodwill committees made up of community leaders from the various racial groups. Their task was to help restore peace and harmony between the Malays and the Chinese.

The riots worsened the already strained relations between Singapore's PAP and Malaysia's UMNO.

September race riots, 1964

Feelings were obviously still simmering, as a second race riot broke out on Sept 3, when the body of a Malay trishaw rider was found at Geylang. He had allegedly been killed by a group of Chinese.

A curfew was imposed and lifted only on Sept 11. Incidents of stoned buses and cars were reported; 13 people died. More than 1,200 were arrested for rioting and curfew-breaking.

Politicians from both Malaysia and Singapore blamed the September riots on Indonesian provocateurs spreading anger and distrust.

Race riots, 1969

The 1969 race riots of Singapore were a result of the spillover of the May 13 riots in Malaysia. That day, angry Malay protestors killed two passing Chinese motorcyclists over reports of attacks by Chinese.

It had been four years then since both countries had ended their union, still, rumours about Malay atrocities against the Chinese in Malaysia, among other things, increased racial tensions in Singapore.

The clashes here started on May 31, when Chinese groups, apparently spurred by triads in Malaysia, organised attacks on Malays. In one reported story, they killed a Malay woman walking along Jalan Ubi with her daughter.

In revenge, on June 1, members of the Black Hawk Malay Secret Society set fire to a Chinese-owned sundry shop in Geylang. That day, 50 to 60 parang-wielding Chinese attacked houses in the Jalan Ubi area.

On June 4, two Malays threw a flaming torch at a taxi driven by a Chinese along Bedok Road.

The Internal Security Department, the police and the military managed to bring the situation under control on June 6. The seven days of rioting saw four people dead and 80 injured.

Today, the ISD still works to counter potential threats of communalism, and racial and religious violence.



1969: Reserve Unit policemen who were called in to help, at Bras Basah Road.