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Legacies of the Cold War in Malaysia: Anything but Communism

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ABSTRACT

Malaya's anti-communist Emergency of 1948–1960 demonstrated the lengths to which elites – first British colonial, then local – were prepared to go to combat communism's advance domestically. But the threat of communism, then the spectre of an all-too-convenient communist bogey, resonated across the polity well beyond the Malayan Communist Party's defeat. The Cold War left a complex and enduring legacy for Malaysian formal politics and civil society. We can see these legacies in terms of political ideologies, settlement patterns, restrictive legislation and geo-political positioning. Overall, Malaysia did experience a genuine and aggressive communist movement, and its counterinsurgency measures, coupling a hearts-and-minds strategy with military suppression, remain a model for even present-day efforts against extremist mobilisation. But what has left a deeper stain is less the Malayan Communist Party *per se* than how these battles sculpted the ideological, demographic, legal and security landscape: a largely Chinese, internationally vilified, anti-capitalist movement at a formative period in Malaysian socio-political development helped to delegitimise ideological alternatives and bolster a strong, centralised, specifically communal and capitalist state, nested in a significantly depoliticised society.

KEYWORDS

Malaysia; Cold War; anti-communism; colonial legacies; ethnic politics

Malaysia occupies a unique niche in Asia's Cold War history. On the flanks of the larger conflagrations in Korea and Vietnam, what became contemporary Malaysia experienced its own dramatic and violent flare-up in the form of the prolonged campaign by and against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Events within Malaya pulled Britain firmly into the Cold War's Asian theatre, worried about the possibility of Soviet advances into this corner of the region (Deery 2007, 30–31). Yet the rest of the world arguably cared more about this front after the fact than at the time: British and Malayan government counterinsurgency measures, coupling a hearts-and-minds strategy with military suppression, became and remain a benchmark for countering violent extremism among Western security forces, from conflicts in Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan.

All told, the MCP's struggle fits better within a narrative of anti-colonialism and contestation over national identity and institutions than one of superpower rivalries, notwithstanding Chinese Communist Party influence and both British and US assumptions, almost immediately called into question, of Soviet direction of the MCP (Mason

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2009, 2–3; Comber 2009; Chin 2009, 14–15).¹ Indeed, suggests Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail (2009, 164–165), on the eve of the anti-communist Emergency of 1948–1960, few Malays were even aware of the Cold War or attentive to the East–West rivalry at its heart. Malay intellectuals and others were focused instead on their community’s economic and social position, and on maintaining their status as indigenous and ultimately sovereign – what eventually started to draw Malays towards the MCP was less communist ideology than anti-imperialist nationalism, including through the influence of Indonesian “communists/nationalists” in the 1940s.

Nevertheless, the Cold War and its legacies have shaped Malaysian politics and society. The Malayan Emergency – as the war against the MCP came to be known – entangled both British colonial and local elites in prosecuting a costly, enervating effort to halt the advance of communism and root out its proponents. But even with the marginalisation and defeat of the MCP, the threat of communism and then the spectre of a convenient communist bogey has resonated across the Malaysian polity. The Cold War, the counterinsurgency and the defeat of the MCP left a complex and enduring legacy for Malaysian formal politics and civil society. To be sure, Malaysia did experience a genuine and aggressive communist movement, but what left a deeper stain is how these battles sculpted the ideological, demographic, legal and security landscape: a largely Chinese, Western-vilified, anti-capitalist movement at a formative period in Malaysian socio-political development effectively delegitimised ideological alternatives and bolstered a strong, centralised, specifically communal and capitalist state, situated in a society that was significantly depoliticised or at least, confronted a constrained menu of political alternatives.

Malaysia offers a particularly interesting Cold War case to consider. On the one hand, its 2018 general election, in which a largely programmatic coalition ousted a more explicitly patronage-oriented one after 61 years in power, but an Islamist third party also made a strong showing, signals the still-significant pull of ideological rather than merely transactional or technocratic politics. On the other hand, that political mapping also reflects the long history of the suppression of left-wing movements: Malaysia has not had a strongly (or at least, overtly) class-based political alternative, beyond a small, beleaguered Socialist Party, in decades, notwithstanding its early history of active, popular left-wing politics. That the MCP, including its armed wing (the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army, MPAJA, then the post-war Malayan People’s Liberation Army, MPLA), sparked a traumatic anti-communist military campaign just as the now-Malaysian state was taking shape proved particularly pivotal to the shape and character of that state.

However large the Emergency looms, early efforts to suppress and sideline communism in Malaya involved a range of institutional and structural, geo-strategic, and ideological angles. On the institutional front, the British colonial government, then the Malayan (then Malaysian, as well as Singaporean²) government proscribed particular parties and organisations altogether, as well as restricting socio-political organisations more broadly, especially those on the left. Geo-strategic considerations lay behind the British backing of the MPAJA as a proxy force in the Second World War, then its subsequent declaration of emergency against the MPAJA’s post-war successor, as well as the wider effort to emplace anti-communist, pro-capitalist governments in newly sovereign Malaya and Singapore. Ideologically, the effort involved branding communists as both existential threats to the nation and specifically Chinese, and actively downplaying the Chinese role in Malaysia’s anti-Japanese and nationalist struggle.³ These efforts have had enduring effects for the array of organisations active and that the

Malaysian public largely deems legitimate, on Malaysia's international priorities and self-positioning and on the range of ideological perspectives that dominate politics: to be branded "communist" remains a slur, and invocation of long-ago ideological struggles, centred on class but inextricably interwoven with the notion of ethnic Chinese as threat to a Malay(sian) way of life, remain an ever-present trope.

The discussion to come traces the broad contours of Malaysia's Cold War experience, then delves into its still-apparent implications for Malaysian political ideologies, settlement patterns, restrictive legislation, and geo-political positioning. This effort brings what has been a literature dominated, unsurprisingly, by historians more firmly into the realm of contemporary politics; my aim here is not to embellish the historical record, but to carry it into the present day.

The Formative Nationalist Period

While the full history of the Malaysian left, communist or otherwise, is beyond the scope of this article, a brief sketch of key patterns, episodes and turning points will help to set the stage. As British enterprise stepped up in colonial Malaya, particularly tin mining and rubber tapping, and especially by the late nineteenth century, the colonial power brought in increasing numbers of labourers from China and India to supplement the local labour supply. By the time of independence in the 1950s, about half the Malayan population was ethnic Chinese. The local Malay community never fully accepted this flood of newcomers. As Tilman (1966, 408) sums up the ethnic crux of Malaya's bout between communism and anti-communism, "however much Marx, Lenin, and Mao must be implicated in this struggle, to no small degree the conflict also represented the logical culmination of almost a century of failure to encourage a meaningful dialogue across communal lines."

The Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 made matters worse. In December 1941, the British had cracked down on the Malay-nationalist Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Union), which was collaborating with the Japanese even as the Malay Regiment and the sultans allied with the British. The British also established ties and alliances with Chinese organisations, including the MCP and Kuomintang (KMT) (Cheah 1987, 19–20). These early measures set the stage: the British came to mistrust Malays (a sentiment that carried over into post-war negotiations for independence); the Japanese occupiers massacred, detained and extorted funds from Chinese; and Japanese rule favoured Malay administrative staff and civil servants, albeit under direct Japanese supervision (Cheah 1987, 20–29). The Japanese administration also mobilised and trained mostly young Malay men for a new military elite, both as police with wide-ranging authority and as volunteer military and specifically anti-communist forces (Cheah 1987, 33–36). The combination of active Chinese discrimination (beyond brutal suppression of suspected communists) and strong pro-Malay policies soured what had been a largely placid pre-war inter-racial balance, even if the Japanese seem not to have specifically sought the heightened racial animosity, resentment, and polarisation their policies wrought (Cheah 1987, 40–41, 55).

Malaya's Chinese community was also internally diverse, spanning from *Peranakan* (or Straits Chinese) resident for generations and more often conversant in English or Malay than a Chinese language, to recent arrivals, speaking only their vernacular and usually working class (see, for instance, Tan, C.-B. 1988). Among the mass of Malayan

Chinese, though, two institutions were especially important by the early decades of the twentieth century, and particularly for the spread of communist or non-communist left-wing ideologies: community-supported Chinese schools and trade unions – though the latter were not limited to one ethnic community, even if some unions had a predominantly Chinese base. The MCP, when it formed, layered atop, but also infiltrated, these pre-existing institutions.

The spread and penetration of Chinese schools was critical to, as well as emblematic of, community self-organisation even beyond the end of colonialism. Mandarin-language instruction helped to forge a “Chinese” identity and nationalism out of a hodgepodge of dialect groups and distinguished that community from those educated in government-supported Malay schools or even less well-funded Tamil schools. That some Chinese students enrolled in government-supported English-medium schools, instead, made language an imperfect marker of ethnic community, though; indeed, the divide between English-educated and Chinese-educated Chinese became politically important (and a proxy for class) by the late 1940s and 1950s.

Chinese schools were important for political socialisation, as well. Both the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the KMT were active in pre-MCP Malaya and Singapore, particularly in the Chinese schools. Curricular materials and teachers came from China and included political themes that British officials found problematic. Once the MCP had taken shape in the early 1930s, colonial security forces closely monitored Chinese schools for signs of radicalism, including pro-KMT radicalism.⁴ Even instrumental music could be deemed redolent of insurgent communism. Beyond communism, though, Chinese schools proved politically important as a focal point for organising and empowering the Chinese community. Mass civil society organisations that remain important today evolved among Chinese school headmasters and teachers in the early 1950s, collectively referred to now as *Dong Jiao Zong*, and fundraising in the 1950s for a Chinese-medium university in Singapore, for instance, encouraged cross-class organisation and showcased the capacity of the community.

Meanwhile, trade unions also developed, starting around the turn of the twentieth century. The first local unions were Malay-based, for seamen in 1894 and pineapple-cutters in 1908, then more substantial and effective unions by the 1920s. However, particularly given a pre-existing (and persisting) network of Chinese guilds and associations, Chinese-based unions also developed, even if many or most eschewed an exclusive ethnic premise. Unions started to ally for greater effect in the 1920s. Setting the stage was the Nanyang (South Seas) General Labour Union (NGLU), established in Malaya in 1927. Colonial police cracked down quickly on the NGLU in 1928–1931, though by then it already included over 40 unions. The MCP then established a Chinese-dominated General Labour Union (GLU) out of the remnants, for purposes of both collective labour action to protect workers’ rights and improve the terms of employment, and solidarity; it was renamed the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU) in 1947. Following Malaya’s first strike in 1926, industrial actions increased, some of them quite disruptive of the colonial economy. The period from 1934 to 1942 saw a wave of strikes, most Chinese-led, among everyone from dockworkers, to rubber tappers, to miners, to colliers; the economic hardship of the Japanese occupation and its aftermath then led these industrial actions to resume after a lull during the war. At its height, shortly after the war, the PMFTU controlled nearly three-quarters of organised labour, from across ethnic communities, though Chinese predominated. The British then effectively banned general labour

federations with amendments in 1948 to the Trade Unions Ordinance.⁵ Although far from all trade unionists had MCP ties themselves, those links, plus the simple fact of productivity lost to strikes, coloured policy, especially once the MCP moved in the mid-1950s from “indiscriminate terrorism towards what may be a more dangerous policy of political subversion,” as by penetrating secretly open, legal mass organisations such as parties and trade unions (National Archives of the UK 1954).⁶

For its part, the MCP had formed in 1930, building on the increasing transfer of loyalties and focus from China to Malaya. The war and occupation marked a key transition: the MPAJA’s having served as ally to the British against the Japanese, the MCP had reason to expect better treatment than it had garnered previously, even if some members saw continued acquiescence to colonialism as “tactical” at best and remained chary of the British (Cheah 1987, 150). When the Japanese suddenly surrendered in 1945, the British were physically unable to return immediately to Malaya. In the interim, the MPAJA served for several weeks as the de facto government, including punishing those who had collaborated with Japan. At least some within the MPAJA aimed not for restoration of British rule, but “an independent republic for all Malayan peoples based on the MCP’s programme,” though the extent to which MPAJA headquarters shared that objective is unclear. MCP leaders’ official policy was to co-operate with the returning British and pursue constitutional struggle (Cheah 1987, 148–149). Regardless, the MPAJA did not then disband and embark upon peaceful civilian life upon the arrival of the British Military Administration. They retreated from their administrative role, but remained “a well disciplined military organization” (Tilman 1966, 409). In 1947, under the leadership of Chin Peng – the *nom de guerre* of Ong Boon Hua, then in his early 20s – the MCA and its MPLA launched an armed rebellion in 1948, using guerrilla tactics, amid post-war labour unrest and economic and political uncertainty. Harper (1990) details the dire economic straits in which the returning British found post-war Malaya, referring to the heightened tensions induced by “dehabilitation and disease” and associated shortages and dislocation, requiring reorientation of social policy, regulation and other state functions, as well as spurring charitable, but politically charged, social mobilisation. The British countered the MCP by declaring a state of emergency in June 1947.

Colonial authorities banned the MCP in 1948, just as installation of the Federation of Malaya disqualified most resident ethnic Chinese from citizenship in the soon-to-be-independent state. Malays had vociferously rejected the more accommodating Malayan Union Plan, proposed in 1946. The British resettled over half a million ethnic Chinese into “New Villages” (more on that process below), jailed 30,000 as communists and deported 15,000, including large numbers of Chinese school principals and teachers, to China. At the same time, taking a radically different tack, Chinese community elites, largely of English-educated, *Peranakan* background, established the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) as a proto-political party to provide a more mainstream, Malaya-centric channel for loyalties and engagement (Ang 2014, 41).⁷

Importantly – and often obscured in contemporary discourse – it was not just ethnic-Chinese organisations that had a left-wing tinge; pre-independence Malay counterparts, influenced by Indonesian nationalism, also mobilised a class-based challenge to colonialism. The immediate post-war years saw a rise in Malay as well as non-Malay radicalism, as new leaders “from below,” mobilised during the war and occupation, took on the established aristocratic and English-educated bureaucratic elite (Abdul Rahman 2009, 157). Among

these groups were the short-lived Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM, Malay Nationalist Party, 1945–1950) and its women’s section, Angkatan Wanita Sedar (Conscious Women’s Front, AWAS), Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Union, KMM) and Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (Movement of Aware Youth, API). After independence, Parti Rakyat Malaysia (the Malaysian People’s Party, PRM, or for a time, Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia, PSRM) carried the mantle, but with a socialist or social democratic frame rather than communist ideology (see, for example, Khoo 1981; Firdaus 1985; Abdul Rahman 2009, 156–163; Syed Husin 2015). Within the MCP, too, was an all-Malay unit, the 10th Regiment. Chin Peng (2003, 263) explains that “it had always been a critical requirement” that the party “attract substantial numbers of Malays.” In 1948, he had the party push in earnest to find recruits, starting in villages around Temerloh, Pahang, site of a nineteenth-century anti-British rebellion and still-simmering anti-colonial sentiment. By early 1950, over 500 Malays had joined – though an early ambush of around 300 of these still inexperienced guerrillas led nearly all to scatter; 200 then surrendered to British authorities who admonished and briefly detained them (Chin Peng 2003, 263–266).

Colonial and post-colonial officials were chary of the Malay left more broadly, banning the PKMM and other organisations. Before long, though, much of the Malay left, including PKMM members, had been absorbed into the mainstream United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), established in 1946; the MCA, as UMNO’s counterpart, never achieved such wide acceptance among the class- and language-divided Chinese community. But importantly, presenting society as stratified more saliently along lines of class than race, even the all-Malay PKMM reflected a multi-ethnic outlook and inclusive, egalitarian nationalist vision, in contrast to the firmly communal, near-consociational order the British preferred and the new Malayan government embodied (Syed Husin 2015, 37).

Both British colonial officials and incoming, then in-office, early Malay(si)an political leaders were anxious to root out communists from across socio-political organisations – not just Chinese schools and trade unions (though those sites featured heavily as targets of surveillance and regulation), but also nationalist groups, (non-communist) left-wing parties, and elsewhere. Regardless, many or most of the activists and groups the British labelled as or suspected of being “communist” were almost certainly merely anti-capitalist and/or nationalist – on the left writ large, but not communist. The war against communism – highly violent, financially costly and deeply unsettling – spanned the transition to independence in 1957 and entailed not only mass, coerced population movements, but also the introduction of controlling legislation as an integral part of the governing apparatus of the new “democratic” state.

Context of the Cold War

The Cold War proper, including the larger battles to the north in China, then also in Korea, then Vietnam, made these internal political struggles, first over a left-wing (including radical-left) nationalist challenge to the colonial order, then for control of the post-colonial state, all the more trenchant. Malaysia was farther removed from these core conflicts, aside from the People’s Republic of China’s obvious influence, than were frontline Southeast Asian states such as Thailand, but these globalised conflagrations remained important. In particular, the farther-distant Korean War caused a boom in rubber and tin, allowing the Malaysian state to step-up spending on pacifying social services and

sapping increasingly prosperous villagers' will to revolt. Even if the conflict offered limited inspiration for local leftists, windfall export-revenues also sparked a surge in sympathetic smallholders' contributions to the MCP, though colonial counter-insurgent food-control measures left the party little to buy (Chin Peng 2003, 278). Soon after, the Vietnam War honed both Cold War divisions within Southeast Asia and non-communist states' mutually non-judgmental solidarity, as reified in the new Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN (Hagiwara 1973, 443–445). At least as importantly, the period crystallised Western states' tolerance of increasingly authoritarian governments overseas, provided they remained assiduously anti-communist (see Glassman 2020; Hewison 2020). That logic offered impetus and cover for aggressive action against political rivals, so long as plausibly on the left, and diminished any significant external spur towards more liberal praxis in a decreasingly democratic Malaysia.

The Malaysian state would appear no longer to have faced an appreciable threat of communism *per se* after the Emergency wound down in 1960, even though the MCP's official full surrender came only in 1989, with peace agreements in Hat Yai with Malaysia and Thailand.⁸ But especially with the Cold War (and within Southeast Asia specifically, the Vietnam War) still raging, the communal, pro-capitalist state still felt validated, and faced minimal external pushback, in assailing its key challenger – a cross-racial Socialist Front, quashed by the early 1970s – as both leftist and overly Chinese-dominated, with “Chinese” read as “communist.” Indeed, communism as a (semi-plausible) spectre provided, and still provides, a useful foil to legitimate a strong state and a society concertedly depoliticised (not “naturally” apolitical, as high levels of engagement in informal politics, plus surges in formal political activity suggest) and organised communally, and which has never really rejected its former colonial powers.

The Cold War's legacy thus lives on in Malaysia, offering a model of what scholars of South Korean political history have termed “internalization of the Cold War,” or adapting an external conflict within a particular social context, in a way that lays bare internal rifts and crystallises domestic rivalries (Park 2001, 344–345). That durable residue is particularly clear in terms of political ideologies, settlement patterns, restrictive legislation, and Malaysia's geo-political positioning. The discussion that follows intends to be not conclusive, but mainly suggestive, highlighting the extent to which the Cold War maintains its grip on Malaysian socio-political reality in terms of each of these complex dimensions, without purporting to offer the last word on any of them.

Political Ideologies

Anti-communist ideology contributed to British and Malayan efforts to suppress radical trade unions and class-based alignments, helping to entrench instead ethnic pillarisation and communal politics. That outcome specifically reflected the interests of elites in UMNO and its Alliance partners, the MCA and Malay(si)an Indian Congress: their model of political affiliation and administration depended on that voters' primary axis of identification be along lines of ethnicity, not class. But it also entailed an unequal racial order. The interests of Malays, the numerically and politically dominant part of the population segment framed as indigenous (*Bumiputera*), were to have primacy over other communities. Anti-communism aligned neatly with both these readings of the polity: it suggested class-based mobilisation to be more dangerous than ethnicity-based

allegiance and it painted Malays as loyalists (or at least, as non-communist and loyal to firmly pro-establishment sultans) and Chinese as suspect.

Although it was not only ethnic Chinese who participated in the MCP, British accounts tended to frame the party as though intrinsically mono-ethnic.⁹ This framing may reflect considerations of indirect rule, under which British colonial authorities collaborated with and substantially worked through Malay communal elites. For them to brand the largest “other” as suspect not only justified surveillance and subjugation, but also delegitimated a major channel for nationalist agitation – particularly once the MPAJA became an avowedly anti-British force. Juxtaposition affirmed, in contrast, the stature of “better” Malay sultans and organisations, who were themselves substantially propped up and glorified by British intervention and who, unlike a more radical Malay segment, had indeed sided with the British rather than the Japanese in the war.

Key to what defined “good behaviour,” in British eyes, was an embrace, or at least, not a rejection, of capitalism. Cold War logic allowed British and Malayan elites to press such ideological compliance not as in their own interest, but as warranted by existential threat. Yet here, the ethnically-segmented economy that colonial rule fostered and favoured complicated those same elites’ classification of community risk-levels (Abraham 1997). Especially as a “modern” economy developed, ethnic Chinese were more likely than Malay counterparts to be in cities, in the capitalist economy. (As will be discussed below, a substantial share of the Chinese population was *not* urban, though, but rural or peri-urban; most of those Chinese Malaysians were uprooted and resettled.) In those early days, the mass of Malays were small-scale rice farmers, sustained in that role by British policy and presumably fairly agnostic about capitalism. Scott’s (1976) account of the lives of the mass of Malay *padi* farmers in this transitional period suggests antagonism towards creeping economic “modernisation.” But the dominant elites within the Malay community were now securely invested in the order the British wrought (see Amoroso 2014). British policies sought to establish a Malay agricultural middle and capitalist class – for instance, through the Rural Investment Development Authority, the progenitor of what is now the Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA, Council for the People’s Trust) behemoth – while creation of a Malay administrative service and other ethnically-targeted efforts expanded that integration into the colonial polity.

Most Chinese economic elites were equally embroiled in capitalist pursuits, even if some still backed leftist movements, or had ties with the People’s Republic of China.¹⁰ But rather than small-scale farmers, more of the Chinese (and Indian) working class constituted an emerging industrial proletariat, in factories as well as rubber plantations, tin mines and paid labour such as dock-work. It was from among this base in Malaya and Singapore that left-leaning trade unions emerged, presenting critical perspectives on Western-dominated capitalism. As noted above, British authorities suppressed the larger general labour unions well before independence and remained suspicious of others; labour’s preferences contravened a mercantilist mission of maximal profit to the owners of capital. More pressing still, unions served as potential or actual launching pads for partisan political engagement, against the status quo: they facilitated not only class – rather than ethnic – identification, but also collective action. Ideologically denigrated or simply repressed early on, labour remains largely quiet today, limited by investment-wooling rules on unions’ structure and rights, representation primarily of already marginalised ethnic-minority (as well as working-class) communities, and lack of empowering links with political parties (see Rasiah, Crinis, and Lee 2015).

Indeed, Malaysia did have a Labour Party, the LPM, for a time, a partner in the Socialist Front that challenged the pre-1969 Alliance. The LPM developed out of state-level parties – themselves rooted in unions – established in the early days of electoral politics. However, arrests, coercion, and eventually the party's banning after the 1969 elections accelerated an internal process first of radicalisation and ethnicisation, then of decline (Weiss 2006, 93–98). The early years after independence saw left-wing parties' making headway, especially at the local government level. But *Konfrontasi*, Indonesia's attack on the formation of Malaysian federation in 1963 as the product of a neo-colonial pact, provided justification for suspending local elections in the mid-1960s; such polls were abrogated by the early 1970s. Some of the areas where the Malay-based PRM and Chinese-based LPM were strong, though, distinctly reflect left-wing (and anti-left-wing) legacies: those villages in Pahang in which the MCP's Malay 10th Regiment took shape, for instance, or the New Villages into which so many ethnic Chinese were coercively resettled in the 1950s. Although other parties have forged links with organised workers or the urban or rural proletariat broadly since then – including the contemporary, ideologically committed Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) – there is no party that serves as *the* acknowledged workers' party, a reality all the less likely to change now that so few Malaysian trade unions are independent or particularly progressive.

More broadly, post-colonial restructuring reduced foreign ownership (see below), but not the class divide colonial mercantilism and postcolonial foreign ownership embodied or its more pervasive legacy. Most important in that process of restructuring was the New Economic Policy (NEP), developed in the wake of the Alliance's loss of support in the 1969 general elections and subsequent racial clashes in Kuala Lumpur, and launched officially in 1971. Although Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and his government tried to pin the communal violence on a communist plot to destabilise and seize the state, even his explanation also faulted declining prosperity, rising economic inequality, and endemic frustration among both Malays and Chinese on the economic margins (Abdul Rahman 1969, 18–20; Enloe 1970). The NEP aimed to reduce the coincidence of race and occupation, eradicate hard-core poverty, and redistribute wealth towards Malays and other Bumiputera – not so much by taking from other Malaysians, as by reducing the share of foreign ownership and putting in place an elaborate affirmative-action framework.

The NEP's methods were hazily conceptualised, however, especially in as much as the policies were not intended to impose upon Chinese. Technically, the premise was that the policies would transfer wealth from foreign, especially British, owners to Bumiputera (especially Malays), yet the more common understanding was that the policy would be negative, not neutral, for Chinese Malaysians. And, indeed, the Chinese community felt the pinch. Subsequent Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad later retooled the policy framework, both to relax those rules that constrained policy flexibility to manage an economic downturn (that is, softening rigid rules for preference) and instituting cultural and other safeguards to appease and safeguard core interests of Chinese voters. There is, of course, a certain irony to the fact that the government's response to a supposed “communist” challenge, but premised also on the assumption that Malays could not compete on equal terms and win, was a set of policies so antithetical to free markets and accepting of the pro-Malay state's proverbial thumb on the scales!

Importantly, throughout all these developments, formal politics – dominated since independence by a capitalist and initially largely aristocratic elite, but today overwhelmingly

neo-liberal in ideological orientation – retains limited tolerance for critical engagement. Even so long beyond the MCP's demise, one may still be branded as “communist,” as a catch-all de-legitimation and justification for suppression, nor is the state's ethno-centric spin on neo-liberalism presented as “ideological”; rather, dominant political discourse frames Malay supremacy as demographically and sociologically inevitable and rarely considers seriously alternative economic frameworks, beyond fiddling at the policy margins (see Felker 2015).

Among those the racialist state does not favour, we might say the chief legacy of the Cold War is a deep-rooted scepticism and cynicism towards the state – a state manifestly not equally in the interests of all. Among those favoured, in contrast, as campaign-time promises and warnings make clear, the more prevalent reading is of the state as ethnic champion, however starkly imbalanced the benefits accruing to different class strata within that community. All told, though, the patterns the Cold War successfully entrenched, of communal rather than class alignments, of eschewing consideration of socialist or social-democratic models (except in as much as the state *does* deliver enhanced benefits to members of specified ethnic communities), and of deeming Chinese citizens intrinsically suspect, have deeply and enduringly coloured post-Cold War ideological possibilities and praxis.

Settlement Patterns

The second key legacy of the Cold War in Malaysia, which has also contributed to entrenched communalism, concerns the human landscape itself. Emergency-era anti-communist efforts in late-colonial Malaya extended to the forcible resettlement of over half a million ethnic Chinese, about one-tenth the population at the time, into what were euphemistically called “New Villages,” under a plan Sir Harold Briggs finalised in 1950 (building upon plans hatched earlier), upon his appointment as Director of Emergency Operations, and his successor, Sir Gerald Templer, largely carried out (Tilman 1966, 410).¹¹

Meanwhile, in the interest of intensifying agriculture and creating a rural middle class, substantial numbers of Malays were likewise resettled in villages a decade later, under the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), established in 1965. Movement of Chinese settlers was punitive – a prophylactic effort intended to disrupt supply chains supporting the MCP – while movement of Malays was voluntary and proactive, to cultivate Malay smallholders and tackle rural poverty by providing land, agricultural inputs, capital and infrastructure. FELDA was (and remains) as much a political project as the Briggs Plan, intending to foster gratitude to, and a sense of dependency on, UMNO and its coalition (Varkkey 2015, 193–194). Indeed, until 2018, after a botched initial public offering for FELDA Global Ventures, FELDA settlers comprised a seemingly unshakeable vote-bank for UMNO's Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition. The study in contrasts these efforts present exemplifies the extent to which anti-communist initiatives foreshadowed later racialised, and simply deeply interventionist, policymaking, in the name of not just economic restructuring, but also of changing political incentives.

However largely concentrated in cities and around mining sites, some share of ethnic Chinese had long occupied subsistence farms; the Japanese occupation in the 1940s increased that rural dispersion. By 1945, as many as 500,000 Chinese squatters occupied such settlements, along the fringes of the jungle – the jungle from which the MPAJA

waged guerrilla war. These squatter communities, vulnerable, regardless, given the insecurity of their land tenure, supplied the MPAJA with food and other supplies, conduits for information, and even recruits, willingly or not (Tilman 1966, 410; Yao 2016). A group of 30 guerrillas, Chin Peng (2003, 267) estimated later, could not last more than about two weeks on just “natural nutrients” sourced from the jungle, before they required food from elsewhere. The Briggs Plan took this vulnerability as its premise, assuming that communist guerrillas could not endure in the jungle without food cultivated in jungle gardens. Government troops would seek out and destroy those gardens, working systematically from south to north, and targeting both local *Orang Asli* (indigenous peoples), whom the British coaxed to settle near their own “jungle forts” to facilitate observation, and Chinese squatter communities. That last piece, the most complex, Briggs tackled by moving those communities wholesale into “fenced, floodlit, and guarded villages,” which may have offered land titles and social amenities, but entailed a coercive beginning and ongoing strict surveillance and control (Tilman 1966, 411).¹² The MCP felt the pinch in food supplies within a matter of months, made worse as the British tightened the screws by carefully controlling not just movement of food supplies into and out of villages, but even organising central cooking systems in each village, to regulate provisions to the point of consumption. Food shortages soon became debilitating for the MCP, as the British intended (Chin Peng 2003, 268–273).

Integration of restive Chinese into the political mainstream was also among Briggs’s objectives. The MCA formed in 1949 to address the parlous conditions in which the Chinese community found itself, given war, rebuilding, and the externalities of British anti-communist actions (razed villages, destroyed crops, and more). The party took active part in Briggs Plan resettlements. It raised M\$4 million through a welfare lottery to fund infrastructure and temporary subsistence allowances, while MCA-built schools and community halls, plus services such as adult education courses, both were meant to help New Villagers adapt to their new environment and established the (securely non-communist, mainstream) party as benefactor (see Teh 2007).

These population movements left both MCP sympathisers and others geographically isolated in mono-ethnic towns and, in many cases, deeply dissatisfied with so intrusive a state. This mass displacement heightened ethnic identification, though that effect also carved out a niche for the MCA as communal protector. The party still in 2018 advertised its plans to develop New Villages on campaign billboards in those areas (for example, in Perak, home to nearly one-third of those resettled). The initiative also sparked new forms of local governance, including colonial officials’ introduction of representative structures designed to increase residents’ sense of investment in their new communities (Strauch 1981, 40–41). It also fostered new techniques and justifications for surveillance – for instance, new Community Development and Security Committees (JKKK) later introduced more widely, and increasingly for partisan purpose.

New Villages remain scattered across especially western peninsular Malaysia. They may be less ethnically mixed than more organically formed cities and towns. And they have had inconsistent access to public services. Although managed under a new federal ministry from 1971, and though most had potable water, health facilities, electricity, and schools by the mid-1980s, the settlements have faced persistent overcrowding and scarce agricultural land; limited employment opportunities and, hence, outmigration; poor or limited schools and other amenities; and inadequate administration and fiscal resources

(Rumley and Yiftachel 1993, 61–62). There are relatively few studies of the implications of this massive population movement for Malaysian political development (for exceptions, see Loh 1988; Strauch 1981). However, the extent of population reconfiguration Cold War anti-communism inspired, soon echoed by the similarly politically salient, if differently motivated and pitched, movement of Malays under the FELDA scheme, represents an enduring and consequential legacy of the period.

Restrictive Legislation

A third arena of reverberations from the Cold War is the legal landscape. “Respect for civil liberties,” notes Phillip Deery (2007, 29), was an “immediate casualty” of the declaration of emergency in 1948. The British did not just ban the MCP, but also curbed “seditious” publications; increased their powers to detain, investigate, and deport or imprison; made carrying unauthorised weapons a capital offense; and required official registration, with a photo and fingerprint, of every individual over the age of 12. Unlike in other states in the region, anti-communist efforts did not elevate the armed forces *per se*, notwithstanding protracted military engagement (on Thailand, see Hewison 2020). In retrospect, that restraint is remarkable. It may reflect the initial British – that is, non-local – leadership of the Emergency, but also surely the ethnicisation of the police and armed forces: overwhelmingly Malay, they benefited from an overtly communal polity.

However, the Emergency saw new curbs on civil liberties and socio-political reorganisation that persisted well beyond the Cold War. Not just labour-related, but also other civil society organisations have remained subject to rules on registration and official scrutiny dating back to Emergency regulations. Most recently, the Registrar of Societies refused to register the (ultimately victorious) former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad’s new political party or coalition ahead of the 2018 elections (*Straits Times*, April 6, 2018). Likewise, it took years for the left-wing, but non-communist Parti Sosialis Malaysia to secure registration, with the party deemed a threat to national security (Ramakrishnan 2008). Moreover, while Malaysia’s post-Cold War administrations have rolled back part of that legal apparatus – most significantly, in repealing the Emergency-era Internal Security Act (ISA) of 1960, which allowed preventive detention without trial of communists or others politically suspect – that entrenched logic of security through extraordinary powers has persisted. Assessments of the law that replaced the ISA, the Security Offices (Special Measures) Act, or SOSMA, as well as attendant amendments to the Penal Code, find the new provisions to be about as bad. For example, they remove the possibility of indefinite detention without trial, though still permit it through protracted appeals (after an initial 28 days’ detention during which the attorney-general can decide whether to press charges), expand and shift investigative powers, widen the scope of activities proscribed and restrict the presumption of defendants’ innocence (Spiegel 2012). In short, the norm of requiring special police powers to interdict loosely defined, including specifically political, threats persists, as a holdover from Cold War-era efforts. The new government elected in 2018 has promised to review and repeal these laws, but has shown limited political will to follow through (*Malaysiakini*, July 21, 2019).

More insidiously, this socio-legal apparatus – both the fear that “draconian” legislation inspires and the belief that it is unequivocally necessary – helped to entrench

a devaluation of critical political engagement by framing it as daring, reckless or inappropriate. Such judgements started ostensibly not as partisan or as restricting criticism of the governing Alliance, then Barisan Nasional coalition, but as to stave off discourse and action that might potentially compromise Malaysian sovereignty or cede too much influence to Chinese Malaysians presumed *really* loyal to China.¹³ The key developments that served to entrench this view were urban racial riots in the late 1960s, especially in 1967 in Penang and in Kuala Lumpur after the May 1969 elections (“May 13th”) These clashes are best understood as between Malay and Chinese “have-nots,” in a system of persistent interethnic inequality. Organisationally, the camps reflected the order established in the late-colonial period, especially when, in 1969, the communal UMNO purportedly instigated Malay youths to respond aggressively to triggers including an overly boastful Socialist Front (Snider 1968; Abdul Rahman 1969, 18–20; Enloe 1970). Over time, though, the dominant reading of “May 13th” shifted, erasing the ideological cast in favour of a purely racialised depiction: new enactments after a period of emergency rule from 1969–1971, complementing the NEP, rendered verboten any attack on, or even critical discussion of, Malay special rights, lest too-entitled Chinese bring on another conflagration – or so the narrative reads.

Still today, notwithstanding the recent change of government – the BN’s first loss since independence – Malaysia has a set of legal constraints clearly out of proportion with any actual threat. That the Cold War is over is irrelevant and really rather inconvenient. Especially while it lasted, that existential ideological contest offered a handy spectre, conveniently aligned with local power struggles and prejudice, to justify measures otherwise objectively unduly coercive.

Geo-Political Positioning

Lastly, as socio-political patterns crystallised in Malaysia in the run-up to independence and after, including through clearly anti-democratic provisions, heated pursuit of the Cold War elsewhere in Asia (see, for example, Tadem 2020 and Williams 2020) buffered the polity from external intervention or even sharp critique. Throughout this period, prosecution of the Emergency enshrined capitalism as sacrosanct – and as Britain’s domain. Britain’s investment in the effort is startling. Tilman (1966, 408) offers stark data: over 11,000 killed (most of them guerrillas), thousands more wounded or missing, and additional material and human costs, both calculable and “inestimable.” The conflict involved nearly 50,000 British troops committed by October 1950, a Malayan (predominantly Malay) police force swollen from 10,000 in 1948 to 160,000 in 1951, and costs to the UK of 250,000–300,000 Malayan dollars per day by late 1948; the official overall tally exceeded £700 million, at a time when the British economy was already in a precarious state (Deery 2007, 31–32; Stockwell 2009, 28). However much the British *were* in it to protect their economic stake, especially in rubber and tin – menaced by newly armed and politically ambitious “bandits” – an estimated 7% of European planters in Malaya had lost their lives by 1954 (while deep anxiety drove others out) and British business shouldered much of the cost of fortifications and operations (White 1998, 150–152, 173–174).

It was only with introduction of the NEP in the 1970s that the Malaysian government moved seriously to start whittling back foreign control of the economy. At that point, three-quarters of the agricultural sector, nearly the same share of mining, nearly two-

thirds of commerce, 60% of manufacturing, and slightly over half of banking and insurance remained in foreign (mostly British) hands. The NEP aimed to halve foreign ownership to 30% within 20 years, albeit still increasing foreign investment in absolute terms and still aiming to concentrate ownership among a Malay capitalist elite (Hirschman 1998, 77, 80–81).

Meanwhile, driven by intertwined political as well as economic logic, the UK, USA, and other anti-communist powers tolerated illiberal leadership in Malaysia and other regional states, so long as those partners opposed communism themselves, and through the 1970s, especially if they facilitated military access to Vietnam. In fact, Stockwell (2009, 292) suggests that the core British objective in battling the MCP was to ensure a “way of escape from the burdens of empire” but while staving off a possible communist takeover; their goal was a “reliable Malayan regime” able to take the reins and prepared to safeguard Britain’s stake (see also Jones 2002, 2–3). Indeed, the most serious external threat Malaysia has experienced since independence, Indonesian *Konfrontasi* (1963–1966), specifically confirmed the new Malaysian state’s stronger allegiance to Britain and a capitalist, sovereign future than to the multi-racial, decidedly leftist, and anti-imperialist alternative Indonesia and much of the domestic left preferred.¹⁴ As such, Malaysia’s regime, along with those of its partners in the nascent ASEAN, an alliance developed in large part for collective resistance to the further penetration of communism through the region, enjoyed protection from uncomfortable conditionality or external pressure (Lau 1976).

What is not clear is the extent to which, and why, these allowances became habit: beyond Vietnam, beyond even the fall of the Soviet Union, the USA and other “Western” powers continued to accept an increasingly repressive Malaysian state, so long as it remained a willing and productive trading partner. Distinguishing tolerance of Malaysia from the blind eye the USA turned towards, say, Indonesia’s authoritarian President Suharto was that the alternative to the left in Malaysia was communal, and also increasingly Islamist, politics. While American policymakers grumbled at the extent of affirmative action – Bumiputera preference became a stumbling block in efforts towards a USA–Malaysia free-trade agreement that collapsed in January 2009 after several years of negotiations, for instance (Martin 2009) – Malaysia still seems to have benefited from an early *laissez-faire* approach, with rapprochement premised overwhelmingly on shared *economic* interests and approaches. Unlike Indonesia or Burma, for instance, Malaysia never really pushed back against Europe in anti-colonial anger, apart from, for instance, a largely snarkily symbolic “Buy British Last” campaign in the 1980s; it had no need to do so, being part of the old-boys’ club of hoary Cold War warriors. Malaysia’s ideological innovation has all along aligned neatly enough with anti-communism to be non-threatening to, and hence largely uncontested by, its external partners.

In short, however unsettled, contested, curbed, and initially quite bloody and disruptive the domestic context, Malaysia has had a quite peaceful time vis-à-vis external powers since its Cold War-era birth, especially once ASEAN had taken shape and offered an additional buffer against a “creeping” and militant communism. That experience would seem to offer a way of understanding the artificiality of or limit to the Cold War as an international conflict, or at least, Malaysia’s really peripheral role within the transnational, clash-of-titans face of the conflict. Prosecuting the Cold War in Malaysia – itself a multinational effort, as not just British, but also other Commonwealth troops, remained for *Konfrontasi* and

beyond (on Australia's contribution, Dennis and Grey 1996) – entailed less taking sides in the larger fray than shutting off, co-opting or containing challenges internally before they could cross borders to find ideological allies abroad or otherwise graduate from domestic to transnational threats.

Conclusion

The end result of these processes has been long-term fortification of an electoral-authoritarian regime that is only now in the early, uncertain stages of formal transition. That regime privileges communal identities, reinforced by geographic concentration that is only now diminishing with increasing urbanisation. It also privileges capitalist development, with welfare support couched as gifts from a benevolent regime rather than entitlements due citizens, and a widespread, deeply internalised, only intermittently sidestepped antipathy to or discouragement of critical engagement with politics. Parts of this legacy are no doubt to be found across the region, but Malaysia's substantially bloodless, phased decolonisation from Britain (but more violent pushback against Japanese rule in the Second World War, led by different protagonists), its communal framework, and its developmentalist ambitions and efforts spin these legacies in particular, and consequential, directions.

It remains open to debate how much threat the MCP actually posed in Malaya: whether the polity could really have gone communist. Clearly, the MPAJA, then MPLA, was a well-structured and a potent armed force, but the organised political left was largely non-communist and itself significantly communally stratified. What is clearer is the extent to which the communists did not need to win to leave an irrevocable, deep mark on the polity, shaping its institutional, ideological, social and strategic paths in key ways in the years and decades ahead.

Notes

1. Stockwell (2009, 282) does see, though, effects of both the 1960 collapse of the Russo-Chinese alliance and the onset of China's Cultural Revolution in devastating rifts and purges that wracked the MCP. Hack (2009, 479) goes further with this "post-revisionist" reading, tracing the extent to which shifts in the "communist international line" *did* help to structure and spark local revolts across Asia, including "the shift to more violent tactics" in Malaya (Hack 2009, 482).
2. Today's Malaysia and Singapore include what were a cluster of colonial entities – the Federated Malay States (FMS) and Unfederated Malay States (UMS) on the peninsula; the insular Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang, and Malacca; and British North Borneo (now Sabah) and the "White Raja" Brooke family-ruled Sarawak on the island of Borneo. The FMS, UMS, Malacca, and Penang initially formed independent Malaya in 1957; Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak joined in 1963, forming Malaysia; then Singapore left in 1965.
3. See Blackburn and Hack (2012) on the elevation of a Malay-centric narrative as the state's master narrative, and the segregation of other communities' memories and commemorations.
4. On the salience, structure and implications of Chinese education, see, among others, Enloe (1970); Tan, L. (1988, 1997); Heng (1996); and Ang (2014).
5. On the development of trade unions, see especially Dass (1991) and Stenson (1970, 1980). Information here is drawn from these sources.

6. In Singapore alone, in 1961 – that is, the *end* of the Malayan Emergency – strikes still accounted for 400,000 worker-days lost (Bellows 1970, 112).
7. English-educated Chinese were not above suspicion, though: a post-war Chinese-school-based Anti-British League (ABL), for instance, was found in 1951 to have a cell at the University of Malaya. Colonial officials detained 14 university students and employees, among others. The ABL’s English-speaking segment fed into a small English-speaking branch of the MCP (Weiss 2011, 66–67).
8. The MCP had sat earlier for negotiations with the incoming Malayan and Singaporean governments – the MCP’s Chin Peng and Abdul Rashid Maidin on the one side; Singapore’s David Marshall and Malaya’s Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tan Cheng Lock on the other, at Baling, Perak in 1955 – but the talks came to nothing.
9. Monthly Federation of Malaya political and intelligence reports throughout the 1950s, as well as other colonial-era documents, indicate that British intelligence homed in closely on Chinese schools across Singapore and Malaya – which may be moderately multi-ethnic today, but were not then – as presumed hives of communists, for instance. See also (Ngoei, 2019).
10. Prominent and persecuted left-wing activist Poh Soo Kai, for instance, begins his memoir (Poh 2016) with the story of his *towkay* grandfather’s far-reaching philanthropy in China, where he was born, and the latter’s eventual support for the Chinese communist regime.
11. It is widely acknowledged that the Strategic Hamlet Program used in Vietnam built on ideas from this programme in the Malayan Emergency. In 1961, Sir Robert Thompson, a member of the staff of the British director of operations during the Emergency and later Permanent Secretary of Defence in Malaya, was the head of the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam when he proposed a plan for pacification of the Mekong Delta to South Vietnam’s President Diem. The programme was soon accepted by US advisors and administration (see Department of Defense n.d., 10–16).
12. Yao (2016) offers an especially cogent description and assessment of the extent and nature of coercion (for instance, the use of collective punishment) and resistance in New Villages. For a fictionalised account by an Emergency-era police officer of British Special Branch subjugation of Chinese villagers in the course of pursuing communists, see Lilley (1970).
13. In a perverse twist, the MCA and the BN campaigned in 2018’s general elections in part specifically on their proximity to China, to the point of featuring Chinese President Xi Jinping together with MCA President Liow Tiong Lai on billboards (*Straits Times*, April 29, 2018).
14. Following General Suharto’s seizure of power and anti-communist pogrom, Konfrontasi clashes declined and an end to the conflict was declared. On events in Indonesia, see Törnquist (2020).

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