

THE COMMUNIST INSURGENCY IN MALAYSIA, 1948-90: CONTESTING THE NATION-STATE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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I have chosen to write on this topic as it falls within Professor Nick Tarling's area of interest. As this paper was written for the New Zealand Asian Studies conference in Auckland held in January 2006 to commemorate his 75th birthday, I wish to offer this essay in honour of his outstanding contributions as a historian of Southeast Asia, especially his studies of the British Empire in the Malay world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The communist insurgency in Malaysia ended seventeen years ago on 2 December 1989 following a peace agreement signed between the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), the Malaysian government and Thai military commanders at Ha'adyai in southern Thailand. In this paper I shall look at its impact on the various ethnic communities, especially in their early political struggles for independence in Malaya, and in their efforts to mould a viable nation-state. I shall also discuss the end of British rule and the politics of nation-building in independent Malaya, focusing on social change, democracy, human rights, urbanization and economic development. My aim is to assess whether the communist insurgency left any enduring legacy in the nation-building of independent Malaya and in its later enlarged form of Malaysia. The paper will also assess briefly the impact of the 39-year-old communist insurgency in the east Malaysian state of Sarawak, which ended in 1990.

Origins of the Communist Insurgency

The CPM was formed in 1930 clandestinely under the authority of the Moscow-directed Communist International (Comintern) agent for Southeast Asia, Ho Chi Minh (of Vietnam). It adopted a multi-ethnic outlook by

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attempting to recruit Malays, Chinese and Indians, the three major ethnic groups in Malaya, but by World War II (1939-45) it had ended up as a mainly Chinese party. According to its 1934 constitution, its aim was to overthrow British colonialism, abolish Malay feudalism and set up a Malayan People's Republic.² Before 1941, the party was reported to have carried out acts of terror and violence, including assassinations of its 'enemies' who included British officials, police informers, party dissidents and members of the rival party, the Malayan *Kuomintang* (Chinese Nationalist Party). In December 1941, the CPM was finally recognized by the British administration when it supported the British effort to mobilize defence against the invading Japanese army. Its members volunteered their services for training as guerrillas under British officers to fight in the front line against Japanese troops as well as behind Japanese lines. The guerrillas later constituted the nucleus of its resistance force, the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, (MPAJA), which was funded and supplied with arms by the British Armed Forces during the war. After the war, when British troops reoccupied Malaya in 1945, the MPAJA was forced to disband. The CPM, however, maintained a legal existence as a political party. In the transition from war time to peace, food shortages in Malaya led to public riots and to workers' strikes and demonstrations for higher wages. The CPM involved itself in these causes, and came into conflict with the British Military Administration (BMA). In many incidents British troops clashed with its members and even opened fire to put down CPM-organized demonstrations and picket lines. When civil government returned, labour unrest escalated further throughout 1947-8. These events coincided with a constitutional crisis in Malaya, which was brought about by the British government's decision to introduce political reforms in the form of the Malayan Union constitutional proposals for the country's multi-ethnic population.

Britain, however, had no immediate plans to grant Malaya self-government, democracy or to set an early date for national independence. Malaya was 'Britain's great dollar earner'. Her rubber and tin were precious assets as dollar earnings from the U.S. and Britain was reluctant to give up this source of wealth so quickly.³ The Malayan Union plan merely aimed to merge the nine Malay States and the British settlements of Malacca and Penang into a unitary state to be called the Malayan Union, to be governed by a British governor. Britain offered equal citizenship to both Malays and non-Malays to inculcate unity and foster consciousness of a new 'Malayan' identity. It decided to transfer the nine Malay Rulers' sovereignty to the British Crown. Not only would it not allow self-government but at the same

² Gene Z. Hanrahan, *The Communist Struggle in Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1971, p. 170.

³ Victor Purcell, *Malaya: Communist or Free?* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954, p. 278.

time deprived the Malay Rulers of their authority, this plan in fact reinforced Britain's colonial power by introducing a centralized form of government under a British governor. It clearly amounted to annexation. The plan therefore met with strong Malay opposition, which finally forced the British government to restore the Malay Rulers their powers and to the Malay their special privileges. The anti-Malayan Union campaign, which stimulated Malay nationalism, led to the formation on 11 May 1946 of Malaya's largest Malay nationalist party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) under the leadership of Dato' Onn bin Jaafar. The British government's decision to abandon the Malayan Union plan came after negotiations with the UMNO and the Malay Rulers. They agreed to replace it with the formation of a Federation of Malaya. This federation proposal, in turn, met with opposition not only from non-Malays, but also from a small group of radical Malays who preferred Malaya to be federated instead with an independent state of Indonesia. The Federation of Malaya was structured as a 'nascent Malay nation-state', known in Malay as *Persekutuan Tanah Melayu* (literally Federation of Malay homelands). It was inaugurated on 1 February 1948 despite strong opposition from non-Malays.

In the debates over the constitutional issue the CPM aligned itself with a left-wing coalition of Malay and non-Malay organizations, known as AMCJA-PUTERA,⁴ which opposed the terms of the Anglo-Malay 1948 Federation of Malaya Agreement. They presented a counter set of demands to the British government that were more progressive and advanced than that of the UMNO and the Malay Rulers. They asked for self-government for the Federation of Malaya, a fully-elected legislature and democracy for the people for an interim period which was to be followed by the granting of national independence. Their manifesto, 'The People's Constitution for Malaya (1947),' according to Victor Purcell, a liberal-minded British official then serving in Malaya, 'represented the agreed views of the two federations of Malay, Chinese and Indian parties' and was 'a comprehensive document.'⁵ The AMCJA-PUTERA also demanded the introduction of a nationality, called *Melayu* (Malay) for all its citizens, Malay to be adopted as the national language and all the Malay Rulers to be regarded as constitutional monarchs. This document became an important blueprint for many political parties in Malaya and in Singapore in the next two decades. It was a bold attempt to establish a united nation of all races who viewed Malaya as their home and the object of their loyalty. The British government, however, rejected their demands outright, as it was not ready to grant self-government and

⁴ PUTERA denotes Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (Centre of People's Power) whilst AMCJA stands for All-Malaya Council of Joint Action.

⁵ Purcell, *Malaya*, p. 334.

independence. The Malay Rulers and the UMNO also did not agree with the demands as they were not quite ready to ask for national independence yet.

Although the CPM had been secretly planning an armed rising, its plans were not finalized when a breakdown of law and order suddenly occurred in the country in June 1948. This was caused by the escalating industrial unrest, which reached its climax with a series of murders of European planters and managers in Perak and other states. The British administration, finding it difficult to control the situation, declared a state of emergency (hereafter Emergency). It blamed the troubles on the communists. The CPM, however, denied the charge, and countered that the Emergency was a ploy, the result of collusion between the colonial state and British capitalists to suppress labour. It rejected the claim that all the violence, strikes and disputes were the work of communist-led unions. Nevertheless, the Emergency caught the party off guard. The CPM's leader, Chin Peng, would later state in his memoirs (published in 2003)⁶ that it was the Emergency and the mass arrests of its members, that forced the CPM to issue a call to its members to revive its disbanded wartime resistance army, the MPAJA, and to take up arms again and escape to the jungles. The British authorities would later claim that they had seized the psychological initiative at the right moment to act against the communists and pre-empted their plans for a full-scale uprising. The CPM was proscribed.

The consequences of this insurgency were far-reaching. Many of the CPM's partners in the multi-ethnic coalition of parties, the AMCJA-PUTERA, disappeared underground with the communists. As a result, the CPM's guerrillas comprised small groups of Indians and Malays, besides large numbers of Chinese members. Malay communist leaders Abdullah C. D. and Rashid Mydin headed its 10th Malay Regiment. Not long after this, two affiliates of the AMCJA-PUTERA, the Malayan Democratic Union, comprising mainly English-educated radicals, and the Malay Nationalist Party dissolved themselves, on the grounds that the repressive Emergency regulations rendered 'open' politics untenable. The insurgents declared their immediate objectives were to disrupt the economy and to establish 'liberated' areas, and their insurrection was aimed at the overthrow of an oppressive British colonialism and to achieve freedom and national independence for the people of Malaya.

For the next two decades, the CPM would subscribe to the terms of the 'People's Constitution for Malaya,' and support that multi-ethnic movement's notion of a 'nation-state'. Its ideas and proposals were precursors of identical demands that the UMNO and other Malayan political parties would make later. The manifesto meant that the CPM had watered down or compromised its own goal of a 'Malayan People's Republic'. It is

⁶ Chin Peng, *My Side of History*, Singapore: Media Masters, 2003.

unclear whether this was a tactical move, or it had adopted this approach after a more realistic appraisal of the country's complex ethnic problems. However, in the 1960s, the CPM would begin to question the basic premises of that 1947 political programme and issue a revised manifesto declaring that it no longer regarded the Malays as the 'ethnic core' of the nation, and to state that all races should be treated equal. It would go on to reject Malay as the national language and demand that the languages of the three major races in Malaysia be made official languages.⁷

The Emergency (1948-1960): Origins of Authoritarian Rule

The Emergency lasted 12 years (1948-1960), but when it ended the insurgency still continued unabated until 1989. I shall here present a summarized account of how the insurgency affected the people's social life and politics.

Firstly, the communist insurgency led to the emergence of an authoritarian state. Seeking to combat communist subversion and influence, the British administration began introducing a series of draconian laws which have remained in use in Malaysia since—the Emergency Regulations of 1948, parts of which have survived within the Internal Security Act of 1960; the Sedition Act (revised in 1969); the Societies Act (amended in 1981); the Official Secrets Act (amended in 1986) and the Essential (Security Case) Regulations (1975). The subsequent amendments have increased the repressive features of the legislation by allowing the government to curtail the fundamental liberties of citizens, whenever it deems there is a threat to national security.

Politics in Malaya during the 1948-60 period were very much hamstrung by the Emergency regulations, which restricted freedom of movement, freedom of publications and freedom of speech. As the regulations allowed detention without trial, anyone suspected of communist sympathies or left-leaning ideas were liable to be taken in for interrogation or detention as sympathizers or collaborators. Newspapers were required to obtain licences annually to publish. Censorship of information was enforced. All social organizations and political parties had to be registered under the Societies Act. Public assemblies or demonstrations were prohibited. These measures were defended as necessary for national security and political stability. Freedom and basic human rights were, therefore, not nurtured in Malaya during the Emergency.

⁷ CPM document, commemorating its 40th anniversary, 1970, no date, cyclostyled sheet, published by the CPM.

Furthermore, the Federation of Malaya constitution of 1948 did not spell out basic human rights for the people nor introduce democracy, such as universal suffrage, elections, an elected legislature and self-government except to allow 'Federal citizens' the right to hold office in administration. Britain regarded the federation's constitution simply as introducing an interim phase of tutelage in citizenship. However, the people, without any actual experience of democracy, began to face the full force of authoritarian rule. War and insurgency at the end of 1949 saw 5362 persons detained with 214 dependents, mostly children. By the end of 1950, the figures rose to 8508 detainees and 527 dependents respectively.

For most of the 'shooting war,' as the Emergency came to be called, the armed forces were everywhere—troops at barbed wire check-points or road-blocks, and police in patrol cars, were engaged in checking and screening operations on a large scale. Not a day went by without some member of the community being searched or detained either for arms, or in order to check on their *bona fides*. The identity card system had been introduced to facilitate the screening of people. By 1952 there were over 32,000 regular troops in Malaya, about three-fifths of them Europeans from the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia. Other regular troops were Gurkhas, Fijians, the King's African Rifles, seven battalions of the Malay Regiment, and Dayak jungle trackers from Borneo. In addition, there were 73,000 police (mostly Malays), and 224,000 home guards (mostly Malays), the latter a local militia who were enrolled in their own villages to defend themselves from attack.⁸ Besides ground troops, there were air force squadrons from the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, and a few small warships. The financial cost of fighting the insurgents mounted from US\$ 83,000 a day to over US\$ 234,000.00 a day in 1953 and accounted for one third of that year's annual federal expenditure. The joint cost to both Britain and Malaya was estimated at US\$ 1.4 million a week. The costs could not have been borne by the two countries if Malaya's economy had not benefited from the Korean War, which caused a 'boom' in rubber prices, and increased substantially Malaya's revenues to pay for the 'shooting war'.⁹

After the British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney, was assassinated by communist insurgents on 7 February 1952, Malaya came under a military regime headed by General Gerald Templer, who conducted himself like a dictator. Templer was a feared man, who became notorious for his violent temper and intemperate language. He did little to conceal his contempt of the Chinese community because he said a large number of their members were 'Communist bastards'. The Chinese community stood solidly

⁸ Lennox A. Mills, *Malaya: A Political and Economic Appraisal*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957, p. 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*; Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 6.

to a man behind the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) when it denounced Templer's official endorsement of a book, *Jungle Green*, about the insurgency by a military officer, Major Arthur Campbell, which was full of racial slurs against the Chinese community. Templer imposed collective punishment on Chinese in towns such as Permatang Tinggi, Tanjong Malim, and Pekan Jabi, confining the people in their homes for 24 hours and imposing daily curfews for a week. Features of his authoritarian rule were highlighted and even criticized by *The Times* of London in two articles published on 1 and 2 October 1953:

Communist propagandists say Malaya is a police state and so in a way it is. The Emergency regulations have increased the power of the executive at the cost of the individual. The effective government is a military oligarchy, with a command apparatus demanding absolute obedience, which is also a system of police surveillance. The power of the security forces is almost absolute.... The military forces are in support of the civil powers, but the High Commissioner is their commander-in-chief and director of operations, and in effect the Legislature—nominated and heavily weighted with official members—is their civil affairs branch.... Broadly the Malayan case is that police and barbed-wire cannot hold back Communism.... More power must be given to Malaysians.

This last point sank in before long into the minds of the British government, which instructed Templer to introduce elections for an elected legislature and then ordered him home to London. He was re-assigned to a military appointment in Germany. Although scholar Richard Stubbs has described Templer's policies during his period in office as a combination of the 'carrot' and the 'stick',¹⁰ the political reforms which constituted the 'carrot' came about largely because the strategies of the 'stick' had failed.

The high financial costs of the war, the high casualty rate and the economic and social hardships in Malaya led the British government to realize that the war would remain a long-drawn out one and could not be won without the support of the people. In 1951 it began to expedite the pace of self-government, and to ensure that a locally-elected non-communist government would become involved and take over the war against the insurgents.

¹⁰ Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds*, pp. 164-8.

The Emergency (1948-60): The Rise of Communalism and Communal Politics

The colonial authorities were, therefore, forced to move away from their hard-line measures to encourage politics, democracy, elections and self-government. They could not prevent political parties of different political hues from being organized and perforce had to accord a greater freedom of action and organization to the people. By a coincidence the outlawed CPM also shifted its strategy from military conflict to political struggle in its 'October 1951 Directive' and allowed its cadres to take part in 'legal' political parties by infiltrating their ranks and concealing their true identity.¹¹ Communist cadres would infiltrate registered parties whose aims and programmes were found to be basically acceptable. Within the next five or six years socialist parties would be formed, and these would also be infiltrated by communist agents, but the overall political arena was dominated by communal parties which had a head start in the field.

Communalism was initially aroused in 1948 by the debates over the Federation of Malaya constitution when Britain constructed the federation as a 'nascent Malay-state', *Persekutuan Tanah Melayu*. By restoring Malay rights and privileges after scrapping the Malayan Union constitution, which had offered equal citizenship to both Malays and non-Malays, Britain provoked strong non-Malay opposition to the terms of the federation's constitution. But this opposition made little headway. As the Emergency saw the disappearance of non-communal parties especially those in the leftwing multi-racial AMCJA-PUTERA from the political arena, politics gave way to the dominance of communal parties such as the UMNO, MCA, formed under British sponsorship in 1949, and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), formed in 1946. As political scientist K. J. Ratnam has rightly observed, communalism did not arise out of prejudice but because circumstances rendered it politically relevant.¹²

Communal tensions became marked when thousands of able-bodied Chinese youths refused to register for national service and left by the shiploads for China. Very few Chinese youths enlisted in the police and armed forces, although traditionally even in China these careers had been looked down upon as those fit only for the riff raff. In contrast, a Western scholar observed:

The Malays firmly supported the government, and enlisted by thousands in the Malay Regiment and the police Up to the middle

¹¹ Purcell, *Malaya*, p. 12; Chin Peng, *My Side of History*, p. 280.

¹² K. J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967, p. 212.

of June 1957, 1700 Chinese civilians had been killed, as against 318 Malays, 226 Indians, 106 Europeans, 69 Sakai (aboriginal) and 37 'others.'¹³ At the end of the Emergency, the final toll in lives was as follows: security forces 1865 killed and 2560 wounded, civilian casualties 4000 killed and 800 missing. Police casualties were 1346 and 1601 wounded.¹⁴

Despite Chinese civilian casualties being higher, the Malay press questioned the loyalty of the Chinese community and their support in the fight against the communist insurgents. Malay voices were also raised against the British government's request to the Malay Rulers to allow Chinese squatters to be moved from jungle fringes to 'new villages' to be built on Malay state lands. There were complaints that the 'new villages' enjoyed better facilities such as electricity and water supplies than Malay villages, despite Malays having given greater support and loyalty to the government in the war against the insurgents.¹⁵

To diffuse these rising tensions, the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, Malcolm MacDonald, took the initiative to bring leaders of the different communities together in a 'Communities Liaison Committee' to enable them to sit down and discuss Malaya's political future and ways to bring about national unity. Although the discussions were informal, they succeeded in bringing about cooperation and understanding among these leaders, who included the UMNO's president Dato' Onn, the MCA leader Tan Cheng Lock and the leader of the Ceylonese community, Dato C. Thuraisingam. It was largely due to these discussions that Dato' Onn was persuaded to put aside his Malay nationalism and to work for a multi-ethnic 'Malayan' nationalism. But in so doing he ran against a strong tide of Malay opinion within his own party. He resigned from the UMNO in 1951 when UMNO members disagreed with his decision to open its doors to non-Malays and turn itself into a 'Malayan' party and to support liberal citizenship terms for non-Malays.¹⁶

Dato' Onn went on to form the multi-ethnic Independence of Malaya Party (IMP), but it received lukewarm support from Malays and other communities. This forced him to dissolve the IMP and to form another party, the Party Negara, in which Malay nationalism again became a driving force. Before long, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who had taken over as the new leader of the UMNO, formed an alliance with the MCA to contest municipal elections

¹³ Mills, *Malaya*, p. 51.

¹⁴ Brian Stewart, *Smashing Terrorism in the Malayan Emergency*, Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 2004, p. 239.

¹⁵ Purcell, *Malaya*, pp. 111-21.

¹⁶ Ramlah Adam, *Dato Onn: Pengasas Kemerdekaan*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992, p. 192-212.

in the country. After winning most of the municipal elections in 1952 and 1953 as a coalition, the alliance was eventually enlarged and formalized as a grand coalition of three communal parties, known as the UMNO-MCA-MIC-Alliance representing the three major races in Malaya.

In July 1955, after Templer's departure, Malaya held its first general elections in which the multi-ethnic UMNO-MCA-MIC Alliance Party won 51 of the 52 contested federal seats. The various communities in Malaya seemed to prefer communal party representation to safeguard their own communal interests, thereby intensifying the trend of communalism in politics. The Alliance formed the federal government and immediately offered amnesty to the communist insurgents. It also began negotiations with the British government for full self-government and national independence. To discuss the amnesty terms, Tunku Abdul Rahman, leader of the Alliance government, met with the communist leaders at Baling (in Kedah state) on 28 and 29 December 1955.

Baling Talks, December 1955: CPM Fails to End Insurgency

Since 1953 the communists had experienced military setbacks in their struggles, and their guerrilla units were eventually forced to retreat to the Malayan-Thai border for refuge. They had suffered huge losses of men, food shortages and a breakdown in communications among their regiments due to the successful operations conducted by the security forces and British military intelligence. The Briggs Plan brought about a serious food crisis for the insurgents because it isolated them from their food suppliers—the Chinese squatters living on the jungle fringes who were forcibly removed by the government and transferred to fenced-up 'new villages' that came under government control.¹⁷

At the Baling talks, the communists asked for peace, but on honourable terms. The CPM leader Chin Peng's strategy was to seek amnesty and gain a foothold in the independence talks that the Alliance leaders were scheduled to hold with the British government in London in February 1956 by playing a 'trump card'. This came about on the last day after Tunku Abdul Rahman had rejected the party's two demands: that if the CPM accepted the amnesty and laid down its arms, it would be recognized as a legitimate political party in Malaya, and, secondly, communist insurgents who accepted the amnesty would not be detained and screened by the police. Both demands were rejected. In introducing his trump card, Chin Peng said that the CPM would cease its hostilities and lay down its arms if the Alliance government could obtain the powers of internal security and defence from the British

¹⁷ Chin Peng, *My Side of History*, pp. 299-301.

government. Tunku Abdul Rahman promptly accepted the challenge and promised to obtain these concessions from London. Great publicity was given in the media to this dramatic challenge from Chin Peng.

The challenge, indeed, served to strengthen the Alliance government's bargaining position at the London talks. Anxious to end the Emergency, the British government agreed to concede those powers of internal security and defence and to the demand for independence for Malaya by 31 August 1957, if possible. Chin Peng would later claim that his challenge had hastened the arrival of independence by at least three years and that Tunku Abdul Rahman had acknowledged the importance of the Baling talks when the latter wrote in 1974 that 'Baling had led straight to *Merdeka* (Independence).'18 After independence, the communists asked for a second meeting with Tunku Abdul Rahman, but this was turned down. The communists would later claim that this was the reason they did not make good their promise that they would lay down their arms and cease hostilities.

Emergency ends in 1960, but Threat to Internal Security and Defence Remains

The independent Federation of Malaya, which came about in 1957, was a further extension of *Persekutuan Tanah Melayu* and its constitution which included articles upholding the dominant position of the Malays and their rights, privileges and 'special position'. Malay became the national language, the Malay Rulers constitutional monarchs and citizenship was offered to qualified non-Malays who swore loyalty to Malaya and who were guaranteed their rights to practice their religion, language and culture. Most of these points had been embedded in an UMNO-MCA-MIC Alliance memorandum, which they called a 'social contract' that they had submitted to the constitutional commission. The national government under Tunku Abdul Rahman set to work to build up national unity among the various races and to achieve Malaya's economic and social development, while fighting the insurgency.

Chin Peng has revealed in *My Side of History* (2003) that in 1960 the CPM was militarily routed when the government confidently ended the Emergency by declaring all areas in the country 'white', that is, free of communist guerrilla activities. The party had withdrawn all its guerrilla forces to the Thai border and quietly accepted defeat and was on the brink of winding down its military operations. In December of that year Chin Peng fell ill. As the party's demobilization began taking place, it was decided that he should leave for Beijing to recuperate and direct its final operations from

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 490, 512.

there. Chin Peng would, however, remain in Beijing for the next 29 years and the party would not lay down its arms until 1989. The reasons for this reversal of the party's decision to disband, explained Chin Peng in his memoirs, was the advice given to him by the Vietnamese communist leaders in Hanoi, the opening of the second 'Vietnam War', which was followed by China's Cultural Revolution, all of which stressed a strong militant line to be taken by Asian communist parties. The insurgency in Malaya, therefore, continued, with the insurgents increasing their attacks, ambushes of military convoys, bombing of national monuments and assassinations of marked police officers and political 'enemy targets'. The insurgency, which began as a war against the British colonialists was now transformed into a war against 'feudalists, compradore capitalists and lackeys of British imperialism'.

As the insurgency spluttered on, the national government did not relent in its vigilance. It maintained a high security alert. It devoted one-third of its national budget to defence and internal security needs. It requested British, Australian and New Zealand troops and military bases to remain in the country until its internal security and national armed forces could be built up and the foreign troops were gradually phased out.

As the country's national defence was taken care of by the foreign troops, and the communist insurgents were isolated at the Malayan-Thai border, the national government was free to strengthen internal security and concentrate on national development and infrastructure projects such as education, rural development and social welfare. Although it lifted the Emergency in 1960, the government refused to annul many of the specific laws which were still in force, such as those allowing censorship of information and detention without trial on the grounds that they were still needed to fight the ongoing communist insurgency.

The Emergency (1948-1960): Massive Urbanization and Demographic Change

During the early years of the Emergency before independence was granted, the British administration initially attempted to repatriate to China thousands of 'stateless' Chinese squatters living in rural settlements at the fringes of jungles and hills who were suspected of aiding the communist insurgents by being the source of their food supplies and financial support. But the repatriation succeeded in seeing only a few thousands of these squatters being sent to China before the procedure was foiled by the communist government in China which closed all Chinese ports to foreign ships due to fear of an impending Western military attack. Only a few ships got through before the ban, while others carrying repatriated Chinese had to stop at the port of British-ruled Hong Kong but not allowed to proceed further to China.

Eventually all those repatriated Chinese were brought back to Malaya. The British authorities were forced to think seriously of alternative ways to resolve this issue.

The remedy was the Briggs Plan, which saw half a million rural people who were suspected of being communist sympathizers and helpers uprooted and removed into temporary camps or 'new villages'. The impact of this big shift changed the demographic picture of Malaya and (later Malaysia) and led to rapid urbanization and in the concentration of Chinese in towns.¹⁹ In pre-Emergency Malaya many Chinese were transients and unable to acquire land legally, 'squatting,' that is, illegal occupation of vacant land, was therefore a common form of Chinese colonization. All unalienated land in the Malay States was invested in the Malay Rulers and land titles in each state were granted only on the authority of the Ruler-in-Council. Much of the land could, therefore, be alienated only to Malays. The main causes of the sharp increase in the rural squatter population appeared to have been: natural increase, illegal immigration during and after the Japanese occupation (1941-1945), movement of labourers from closed mines and run-down plantations, and exodus of town-dwellers into the countryside to grow food.²⁰

The resettlement programme, which was initiated by a committee under Sir Harold Briggs, the director of operations charged solely with the prosecution of the Emergency, comprised two exercises. The first was to regroup people living near jungles and hills which were considered 'security zones' into existing villages, which were thereby enlarged, while others became suburban appendages to towns, sited near main roads easily accessible to government security forces. The majority (80 %) of these 'new villages' were in the western part of the Malay Peninsula and altogether 480 of them were established between 1950 and 1960 and involved the transfer of 573,000 people, 86 % of whom were Chinese.²¹

The settlements, enclosed by barbed wire and their entrances guarded by police-posts, had been likened to 'concentration camps', but they were mitigated by the provision of facilities such as electric lights, piped water, schools and clinics. The other exercise involving a total of 650,000 people of different races was the re-groupment of labourers on rubber estates, tin mines, factories and sawmills and other places of employment as well as Malay and Orang Asli (aboriginal) settlements. The major difference between (a) the labour and the 'new villages' and (b) the Malay settlements was that the former were fenced in, while the Malay and Orang Asli villages were not. Attempts to resettle the Orang Asli into fortified zones were not successful.

¹⁹ Kernial Singh Sandhu, 'The Saga of the "Squatter" in Malaya', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 5 No.1 (March 1964), pp. 143-177.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

The whole re-settlement programme cost the British administration M\$100 million to implement.

Ultimately the resettlement programme created 216 new urban centers in Malaya, with the urban Chinese element increasing from 43.4 % to 73 %. 'It increased Chinese domination of the urban areas and added to their political power in the towns,' says geographer Sandhu.²²

Before the 1969 Riots: Insurgency's Influence on Politics

Following independence, the political arena saw the appearance of socialist parties like the Labour Party and the Party Raa'yat (People's Party). The CPM's cadres soon began to infiltrate these political organizations. The 1960s are usually regarded as the high tide of left-wing ascendancy in the world, and Malaya and other parts of Asia were no exception.²³ In Malaya in the late 1950s and in the 1960s the leftwing socialist parties achieved a remarkable degree of electoral success by gaining a wide influence or dominance over the public. They secured several seats in Malaya's Parliament and swept most of the town council elections, leading the Alliance Government eventually to suspend local government elections. As the communist insurgency was still on, the 'communist bogey' came into play in politics, so did the forces of communalism and nationalism.

The CPM's strategy of 'open' political struggle reached its highest point in the mid-1960s with its opposition to the formation of Malaysia in line with Indonesia's 'confrontation' of Malaysia. The leftwing parties in Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and Brunei followed this line by mounting a campaign against Malaysia, but they failed. By 1966, the Labour Party had dissolved itself and other leftwing parties in the region were in disarray, or suppressed, if not in retreat due to ideological or communal differences. Suppression in the form of mass arrests of leaders by the authorities crippled their activities. The CPM's campaign to oppose the formation of Malaysia, and Singapore's independence in 1965, would increasingly be discredited. The United Nations (UN) and other world bodies would recognize both nations, and later, even the communist countries came to accept them as a *fait accompli*. By the end of the 1960s the CPM would abandon its support for political struggle and call for militant struggle and revolution in line with the Vietnamese people's war of national liberation and China's 'Cultural Revolution'. This would lead the party's cadres to take to the streets to engage in further violent confrontations with the authorities. Their 'open'

²² Ibid., p. 171.

²³ Willie Thompson, *The Left in History: Revolution and Reform in Twentieth-Century Politics*, London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997.

front organizations and their supporters would suffer further suppression during such confrontations.

May 13 1969 Riots: Communalism, Not Communism, Stronger

The May 13, 1969 communal riots have been attributed to many factors. Although Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman would blame the communists for causing these riots,²⁴ not many studies have confirmed this. A greater number of specialists have concluded that the riots occurred because of Malay dissatisfaction over Tunku Abdul Rahman's liberal policies towards non-Malays and non-Malay challenges to Malay rights and privileges. In fact, the failures and weaknesses of multi-ethnic and non-communal parties like the socialist parties in Malaysia²⁵ allowed the forces of communalism to grow stronger. The negligible participation of socialist parties in the May 1969 general elections, for instance, indicates that they had allowed the communal parties, by default, to dominate the field. After the riots, communalism, not communism, began to be in the ascendancy. With the departure of Tunku Abdul Rahman from office in 1971, his successor Tun Abdul Razak's administration saw Malay political primacy in the ascendancy, the Malay language enforced more vigorously in education and in the public domain. Razak's New Economic Policy (NEP) was vigorously implemented in favour of Malays. Although Chin Peng claims that the riots led the insurgency to gain many recruits drawn from discontented Chinese youths who fled to its bases at the Thai border,²⁶ the insurgency still did not turn into a racial conflict. The greatest threat remained that of destabilizing the country by its acts of terrorism.

Despite Insurgency, Malaysia Achieves Rapid Economic Growth

Despite the insurgency, Malaya's early development kept apace. In the early years of Malaya's Emergency, (1948-1951), the communists attempted to destroy the economy by slashing rubber trees and blowing up tin mines in an effort to disrupt these two key industries. But its 'October 1951' directive put an end to this phase, as the CPM realized that such destruction of the economy was counter-productive and threatened the livelihood of the people. Thereafter, until its guerrilla forces retreated to the Thai border, the CPM did not resort to any further efforts to disrupt the economy. Consequently,

²⁴ Tunku Abdul Rahman, *Mei 13: Sebelum dan Salepas*, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu Berhad, 1969.

²⁵ R. K Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971.

²⁶ Chin Peng, *My Side of History*, p. 463.

Malaya's economic development gained momentum. Malaya's economy until the formation of Malaysia in 1963 was well-managed, achieving each year either a balanced budget, or budgets with available surpluses. Its finances were fundamentally sound, and when compared with other countries its economy was said to be 'outright enviable,' according to one specialist.²⁷ Malaysia, in its turn, embarked on the construction of massive infrastructures in the rural areas under its five-year development plans. Malaysia sustained an average economic growth of 8.00% from 1975 to 1995. Malaysia's GDP nearly quadrupled from US\$ 27 billion in 1981 to US\$ 100 billion in 2001, while annual per capita income rose from less than US\$ 2000 in 1981 to about US\$ 4500 in 2001. Malaysia also reduced poverty to 7 % in 2001 from around 50 % in 1970.

Malaysia's Education System: Insurgency's Influence

The liberal-minded Tunku Abdul Rahman's policies of social engineering and nation-building allowed both an integrated and parallel two-tiered system of education to emerge. This dualism seemed to satisfy the various ethnic communities in the country up to the present. The integrated system comprises a national education system in Malay (the national language) while the parallel system allows government-aided Chinese vernacular primary and secondary Chinese schools and Tamil vernacular primary schools to exist, as well as non-aided but privately-funded Chinese secondary schools. Both systems, however, follow a national curriculum. These policies were arrived at after a compromise among the communal parties within the ruling Alliance and after much debate, and to overcome dissatisfaction among Chinese educational groups. It was clear to the governing parties that if a compromise was not reached, Chinese dissatisfaction over Chinese education and Chinese language could be exploited by the communist insurgency to stir up trouble for its own interests.

Communist subversion in Chinese schools had appeared intermittently in the 1950s when Chinese students demonstrated spectacular acts of violence, but the educational issue did not take on the dimensions of a major political problem, as it did in Singapore, largely because the MCA and Chinese educational groups had dominated the national debate on Chinese education and involved themselves in negotiations with the moderate government leaders of the UMNO under Tunku Abdul Rahman's leadership. However, in terms of social engineering and national integration, the introduction of a national educational system in which Malay, the

²⁷ Karl Von Vorys, *Democracy without Consensus: Communalism and Political Stability in Malaysia*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 221.

national language, was widely used to teach a common curriculum did attempt to foster national unity and a national identity for all students in schools. Although the CPM in the 1960s had adopted a new policy to treat all races as equal and to demand the languages of all races be made official languages,²⁸ the continuing public acceptance of Malaysia's language policy and national educational policy increasingly sidelined the CPM's new language and culture policy.

Malaysia's New Foreign Policy Circumscribes Insurgency Further

Under the administration of Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second prime minister (1970-76), Malaysia's foreign policy underwent a dramatic change: from a pro-West and anti-communist policy, that was adopted by Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, to one of neutrality. Razak made this change to meet Malaysia's national security needs, which required it to live in peaceful co-existence with all countries, communist and non-communist. Malaysia proposed the neutralization of Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), and joined the Movement of Non-Aligned Nations (NAM). These new directions in foreign policy not only muted the CPM's criticisms that Malaysia was 'a lackey of Western imperialism' and enabled Malaysia to emerge eventually as a voice of the Third World in the next two decades and into the new millennium. Razak further undermined the CPM's criticisms and isolated it further when Malaysia recognized Communist China (People's Republic of China, PRC) the CPM's patron, after U.S. President Richard Nixon (1969-74) had reached détente with China in 1972. During his official visit to China, Razak held talks with Chinese communist leader Chairman Mao Zedong (1949-76) and urged him to stop giving aid to the CPM. During the administration of Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed (1981-2003), further talks succeeded in persuading China to downgrade its ties with the CPM. This was an important factor that contributed to the CPM's decision to end its armed struggle.²⁹

Insurgency's Decline and End in Peninsular Malaysia and in Sarawak

The 1970s and 1980s saw the CPM intensify its activities of terrorism and clashes with the security forces. Communist groups attempted to blow up the National Monument in Kuala Lumpur, carried out ambushes of police field

²⁸ See CPM document, 1970, on its 40th anniversary.

²⁹ Chin Peng, *My Side of History*, pp. 482-3.

forces and succeeded in assassinating the police chief of Perak state and the Inspector-General of Police. These activities were due to a rivalry among three factions in the CPM. The split had been over party purges and strategies and each faction tried to outdo the other in militancy and violence. The communist threat was so serious during the administration of third Prime Minister Hussein Onn (1976-81) that it was alleged the government had been infiltrated and there was communist influence among UMNO politicians. These allegations arose in the heat of UMNO politics during the party's annual elections for top posts, and were taken so seriously that two UMNO deputy ministers and several Malay journalists were detained for communist activities.

However, in 1973-4 a major victory was scored by the government when one of the Sarawak Communist Organization's (SCO) leaders, Bong Kee Chok, was persuaded to surrender with 481 followers. The group made up about 75 % of the total communist force in the state. The rest followed suit under another peace accord in 1990. The Chinese-led insurgency in Sarawak began immediately after the Brunei uprising in December 1962 when SCO members joined the Brunei rebels in the jungles and teamed up with Indonesian troops under Indonesia's 'confrontation' of Malaysia. The insurgents formed the North Kalimantan Communist Party (NKCP) in 1970. Communism had spread from China through Sarawak's Chinese schools in the 1940s, and after the war spread further in the labour movement and through infiltration within Sarawak's first political party, the predominantly-Chinese Sarawak United People's party, which was formed in June 1959.³⁰

To reduce the local people's support for the insurgency in Sarawak, the federal government decided in 1965 to introduce 'controlled areas' by resettling some 10,000 settlers in the First Division and the Third Division near the border areas with Indonesian Kalimantan. The settlers were placed in three 'new villages' fenced in with barbed wire, similar to those set up during the 1948-60 Emergency in Malaya.³¹ As a result of this operation, the insurgents like their counterparts in Malaya could not receive food supplies and other means of support from their Chinese and Dayak supporters. Skirmishes with the security forces took place intermittently until overtures were made by the Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Rahman Ya'akub to the insurgents and he succeeded in persuading them to lay down their arms. Communist influence in the SUPP was only brought under control after the party adopted a change of policy after the riots on May 13, 1969, when it finally supported the formation of Malaysia and agreed to join the ruling Alliance coalition in the Sarawak Council Negri.

³⁰ Vernon L. Porritt, *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Sarawak, 1940-1990*, Clayton, Victoria: Monash Asia Institute, 2004, p. 59.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-8.

In Peninsular Malaysia, the split in the CPM eventually brought the surrender of two factions which had merged and comprised 700 guerrillas. They surrendered to Thai troops in December 1987, and it was reported that only 1300 guerrillas of the original CPM's 8th, 10th and 12th Regiments remained active.³² On 5 November 1989 the Malaysian government revealed that it was holding discussions with the CPM and the Thai military commanders and groups close to the CPM. The talks had gone on for almost a year. On 2 December 1989 the CPM agreed to end its armed struggle and signed separate formal peace treaties with the Malaysian Government and Thailand's southern military commanders.³³ It was this agreement that persuaded the Sarawak guerrillas in the NKCP to lay down their arms as well in 1990. Six months later, the Deputy Inspector General of Police reported that the CPM had fulfilled its obligations by surrendering its arms, which were destroyed. He also reported that CPM members were helping to find effective ways to destroy some 45,000 booby traps laid by its guerrillas along the Malaysian-Thai border.

Conclusion

It is one of the ironies of the communist insurgency in Malaysia that in its struggle for national liberation it was unable to integrate itself with the forces of nationalism. Unlike their communist counterparts in China and Vietnam, who projected themselves successfully as nationalists, the communist insurgents in Malaysia failed to transform themselves and their ideology beyond the struggle for independence, and therefore, for much of the post-independence period, they appeared to be fighting for the sake of their ideology and remained isolated from the mainstream politics of the new nation-state. In Malaya and Sarawak the goal of the predominantly Chinese-led insurgencies was to establish a communist republic.

But both the insurgencies had a limited scope, as they did not develop into a civil war, or an ethnic conflict, although, as one observer commented,³⁴ paradoxically, in Malaya, 'the largely Chinese insurrection was met by largely Malay resistance; that the Chinese among the civil population suffered the heaviest casualties; among the security forces the heaviest casualties were suffered by the regular and auxiliary Malay police...' Nevertheless, the insurrection, he pointed out, did make a contribution when

³² Aloysius Chin, *The Communist Party of Malaya: The Inside Story*, Kuala Lumpur: Vinpress, 1995, p. 234.

³³ *New Straits Times*, 3 December 1989; and, Chin, *Communist Party of Malaya*, pp. 239-48.

³⁴ Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1948-1960*, London: Frederick Muller, 1975, p. 50.

it reached 'to the point where a British Government insisted on, and Malay and Chinese leaders accepted, a multi-racial basis for independence.'

The communist insurgency was a feature of the global Cold War after World War II, but it was also undeniably a national liberation struggle. Communist insurgencies had occurred almost simultaneously in Malaya, Burma, Indonesia, and in the Philippines in 1948 as the peoples in these territories were fighting for social justice, freedom as well as for national independence as part of post-war Asia and Africa's struggles for self-determination and the end of European colonialism.

In this context, Tunku Abdul Rahman has accorded the communist insurgents in Malaysia appropriate recognition for their armed struggle for independence, in his memoirs, *Lest We Forget* (1983):³⁵

Just as Indonesia was fighting a bloody battle, so were the communists in Malaya, who, too, fought for independence; with the difference that the communists of Malaya were not the indigenous people of the country and they were fighting to set up a communist regime which the believers in the faith of Islam could not support, nor could those orthodox people who believed in democracy and freedom. So the struggle for the independence of the country was carried out by the communists alone and they fought a subversive as well as a shooting war, losing many of their men and at the same time killing many of our men and the Commonwealth soldiers. The battle continued for 12 years and would have gone on had the British government not yielded to our demand for a general election as a step towards independence.

The long-term consequences arising from the *causes and effects* of the communist insurgency, however, reveal that human actions often vary with, and sometimes are contrary to, the results that were intended or expected. As Short has said, it is difficult to state which was the more important in time and form for the future of Malaya—the attainment of independence or the defeat of the communist insurrection.³⁶ The communist insurrection had led to a prolonged Emergency, the rise of communalism, an authoritarian regime to combat communist subversion and influence, ethnic urbanization and polarization, the end of colonial rule and the birth and building of a new nation, which saw the communist insurgency equally as a threat. The scars, pains and weapons of the Emergency continued to remain long after the colonial presence had disappeared. The popularly elected government, like the colonial government, used authoritarian measures to suppress citizen

³⁵ Tunku Abdul Rahman, *Lest We Forget: Further Candid Reminiscences*, Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1983, pp. 94-100.

³⁶ Short, *Communist Insurrection in Malaya*, p. 503.

dissidents and discontents, much in the same way as they had been used to suppress communist subversion and influence.

The insurgency's major threat had always been to internal security and national defence. But it is ironic that when that threat actually ceased seventeen years ago laws that were previously introduced in Malaysia to combat communist subversion and influence were not removed from the statute books and were still defended as necessary to safeguard internal security. This legacy of authoritarian rule from the time of the Emergency has been the most negative aspect of the communist insurgency. The executive authorities and the police force have been empowered with extensive powers, which have been frequently used to curb citizens' human rights and impede the development of civil society. On the positive side, however, in its efforts to undermine the rationale of the insurgency and isolate it further, the Malaysian government had over the years pursued economic growth, industrialization, an independent non-aligned foreign policy, as well as flexible policies of multi-culturalism in education and culture.