

Malaysian Communist Party (Mcp): Internationally Lack of Support and Locally Disoriented

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v10-i8/7669> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v10-i8/7669

Published Date: 16 August 2020

Abstract

An early communist movement in Malaysia (formerly Malaya) was a reaction to the emergence of the ideology and its movement in Indonesia and China. Malaysian Communist Party (MCP) was established in 1930 as a political and militant movement - mainly inspired by the communist Party in the Republic of China - though we cannot fully admit that the party was fully controlled by China or other communist countries. MCP's aim was to gain independence from the British colonialization but at the same time also aiming at securing the Chinese community in the country. MCP was popular among the Chinese but not the Malays in Malaysia. The methodology of this research is based on declassified data gathered from British National Archive (which later footnoted as CAB, CO, WO etc) and various secondary readings. This paper argues that although MCP was inspired and instigated by international communist movement it was actually problematic at a local (or societal) level- the failure was mainly in domestic political sphere. In relation to this, it would appear that the MCP strategy to conjunct international (and regional) forces cannot meet its domestic needs. The lessons from outside were actually not consistent with developments from within; they not well fitted in with Malaysian facts.

Keywords: Political disorientation, Communist, Security.

Introduction

Similar to other communist movements all over the world, MCP believed in the revolution of the masses and government. Yet its aim was to gain political power by establishing a Socialist Republic of Malaya. Similar to other revolutionary forces, MCP committed to a belief that international communist movement will at last lead to a change at local or societal level. Communism itself was not just a Marxist or Maoist manifesto but to MCP could be operationalized in Malayan context. Because of its revolutionary aims, MCP was then banned and treated as a threat to political security in Malaysia. Therefore, after World War II, the colonial government rejected any efforts to recognize MCP. The British Prime Minister himself was certain of the connection between Malayan lawlessness, the MCP activities and the Communist global strategy that he asked the permission to outlaw the MCP (Blackburn, 2000). The strategy to contain the Communists was not only military but political as declared by the Secretary State for War in 1950: 'I do not believe that that the army alone, as such, can finish them off. In order to finish them off we have got to have a large military effort...and an equally large police and administrative and political effort' (Blaschke, 2003) . Be this statement as it may, however, the development of MCP shows that their failure to establish a reliable political platform in Malaya was not simply due to lack of support by international communists but due to politically disoriented acts and event which led the party to decadence.

This paper argues that the MCP was not fully supported by international communists and at the same time disoriented by its local problem. Although International Communist representatives or the external emissaries in the Malayan region made a series of visits, it would appear that they only gave advice and clarification, leaving the question of a Malayan uprising to local decision (Chihiro, 1944). A lack of financial and moral support from other communist movements all over the world led MCP to decide and act for itself. Furthermore, MCP's strategy was a threat to political security in Malaya as it was perceived, portrayed and misinterpreted as a Chinese challenge to Malay political power. In addition, the British gave a provocative report by claiming that the Chinese instigated most of the trouble in Malaya as they opposed to the regime of the Chinese National Government in China (Ching, 2000). In order to understand this issue, the chronology of MCP movements and its political disorientation are discussed here. The article will first proceed to discuss: MCP early movement in Malaya, during World War II and after the War and then, to analyzed the international supports.

Methodology

The methodology of this research is based on declassified data gathered from British National Archive (which later footnoted as CAB, CO, WO etc) and various secondary readings. This article applies the methodology that tries to understand the historical and political development of Malaysian crises and emergencies by utilising declassified primary data from British National Achieve and various secondary data such as books, journals and newspapers. The classified data usually stored for about 15 years before it can be declassified. With regard to this research data were obtained from files such as CAB, CO and WO.

MCP During the Early Days

In early 1925, an Indonesian and Moscow-based Communist International (Comintern) representative for Southeast Asia, Tan Malaka, persuaded Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders in Canton to undertake the infiltration of left-wing groups in Singapore. A

CCP representative, reportedly named Fu Ta-Ching, was among the agents sent to Malaya to contact left-wing Chinese and Javanese. As a matter of strategy, CCP members joined the Malayan Kuomintang branch and formed the nucleus of a Communist group known as the Malayan Revolutionary Committee (Hashim, 1984). These immigrant members of a left-wing faction of the Kuomintang then spread Communism into Malaya in the 1920s (Kheng, 1979).

After the expulsion of the Communists from the Chinese mainland in 1927 and the ineffectiveness of the attempt by the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai to establish the *Nanyang* (South Seas) Communist Party, the MCP was formed in Singapore in early 1930. In place of the general South Seas organization, the MCP and a Malayan General Labour Union were established under the direct control of the Pan Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in Shanghai, which was itself the control organ of the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau. However, most of the members of the MCP were Chinese (phuakl.tripod.com/eTHOUGHT/MPAJA.html accessed 25/4/2016) and, as noted by Anthony Short, 'the party was more related to the cause of Chinese nationalism' (Kheng, 1983). The movement was not attractive to the local Malays because of several factors such as lack of funds, the difficulties of language, contempt for the Chinese and general apathy of local Malays for any movement led by foreigners (Kheng, 1981).

Moreover, the Malays' attitude towards the British and the Japanese occupation was different from that of the Chinese. Some Malays had collaborated with the Japanese. This led to British distrust of the Malays as a whole. However, there were also Malays who fought alongside the British against the Japanese (McLane, 1996). The Malays, although previously irritated by the British administration, still accepted the British military as the best form of protection and maintained their support to the British (McLane, 1966). On the other hand, the Chinese were more anti-Japanese, especially after the mass massacre known as 'Sook Ching', when the Japanese killed a large number of Chinese as a means of ethnic cleansing (McVey, 1958). When the Japanese invaded Malaya in December 1941, the Japanese aggression provoked strong patriotic feelings among the Chinese community in Malaya and the MCP exploited these sentiments, forming anti-Japanese groups which attracted the Chinese, the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Union (MPAJU) and its military wing the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).

Mcp During the World War II

During World War II, the MCP cooperated with the British against the Japanese in Malaya. While the analysis of the MCP movement in the pre-war era suggested that the MCP was a threat to the British, especially since the ideology of Communism was anti-British and anti-Colonial, the war against the Japanese in Malaya had led the MCP to offer military assistance to the British. The adoption of this policy and strategy was actually in line with international Communist policy (Peng, 2003). This cooperative policy was adopted by MCP in the hope that they would be allowed to play a political role in post-war Malaya. However, for the British, co-operation with the MCP or other resistance movements was only a part in their plan to fight and reoccupy Malaya (Short, 1975).

The decision to cooperate was taken at a time when MCP was in a strong position, had experience of underground organization in Malaya, and was in an exceptionally good position to foment serious strikes and disturbances. However, the MCP was pragmatic and realized that it had to remove the Japanese before fulfilling its aim to establish a Communist state. This political aim was stated in the MCP nine-point 'Anti-Japanese programme' in 1943: Its first objective was to drive the Japanese fascists out of Malaya and establish the Malayan

Republic; at the same time, it looked forward to co-operation, presumably after the war, with Russia and China in supporting independence struggles in the Far East (Strachey, 1950).

It is important to note that the MCP strategy of cooperation with British was a tactical move rather than a long-term policy. The Party's principal objective remained anti-British and the institution of a socialist state. Since both the British and the MCP were in need of military cooperation against the Japanese, the Communists' long term political aims were not obvious. Each party had its own interests and demands. To the MCP, the willingness to cooperate was based on the expectation that they would receive 'political concessions-particularly for the Chinese community' (Jones, 1948). According to McLane, the Communist documents indicated that the British made a promise related to the post-war policy of Great Britain (Jones, 1948). As a result, the MCP presented an Eight Point programme, which abandoned the Party's demand for the establishment of a Malayan Democratic Republic. Instead, it sought only self government. As part of the cooperation, the British trained the Communists in a special jungle and sabotage training centre known as the 101st Special Training School (101st STS) in Singapore. A British special force unit, Force 136, cooperated with and supported the MPAJA (Linehan, 1948).

However, the cooperation between the British and the MCP benefited each party in different ways. From the British military point of view, steps were taken by the British to establish a network of subversive agents who could operate against the Japanese from jungle bases. The only organization capable of undertaking this task was the MCP, and, although the British Administration had misgivings about using it in this manner, there was no alternative since the British distrusted the Malays as result of a British intelligence report on the cooperation of KMM with Japanese intelligence (McLane 1966). On the MCP's part, the cooperation gave them opportunity to plan for future leaders and cadres. As part of their plan for a Malaya Communist Army, the Politburo of the MCP wanted a nucleus of trained men as future leaders of force which would probably have to be employed against the British after the war was over (Sweet, 1945).

MCP after World War II

Immediately after the war ended, there were no clear and prominent security threats, from either the Communist party or the Kuomintang. They were also unable to take advantage of the situation to establish a government of their own. Based on the MCP Central Committee Statement on 25 August 1945, the party was split into two different organizations, which were the open and the clandestine organizations. The first organization would set up MCP offices in major cities, while the latter would monitor these open activities. From the end of the war to the establishment of civil government in Malaya, political activity among the Chinese community was dominated by the MCP and radical movements. The role of leadership in the Chinese community was taken over by a group of Chinese leaders who belonged to the resistance movements, such as the MPAJA and MPAJU. These groups were controlled by the MCP. The MPAJA and the MCP leaders decided to co-operate with the returning British and adopt a constitutional line of struggle (Sweet, 1945).

However, the war had also left a political vacuum in Malaya for a few weeks because the Southeast Asian Command (SEAC) was unable to send its troops into Malaya immediately after the unconditional surrender of Japan. During this time, the SEAC decided to increase the strength of Force 136 personnel in order to control the resistance forces in Malaya. In September 1945, apart from Force 136, the Anti Japanese United Front (AJUF) was the sole

force in control of the country (Denning, 1945). At the same time, the MCP was legalized and attempted to fulfil its eight point programme by cooperating with the British (Denning, 1945).

In addition, the British faced difficulties in connection with the AJUF. Firstly, it consisted entirely of domiciled Chinese whose citizenship status was inferior to that of the Malays, and secondly, their organizations were officially illegal (MacKenzie, 1945). Despite this fact, SEAC decided to concede the recognition of the guerrilla forces on 4 September 1945. The MCP's prestige was enhanced by the Allied powers, which recognized them as part of Southeast Asian Command's troops. The BMA also recognized the Kuomintang and its youth wing the San Min Chu II Youth Corps. Although most of the members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce were still associated with the Kuomintang and their orientation was still towards the motherland, their position did not threaten the British interest (Sweet, 1945).

The cooperation between MCP and BMA deteriorated when some extreme factions of MPAJA attempted to take over power in certain areas vacated by the Japanese forces. However, Chin Peng in his book 'My Side of History' recently argued that it was done by some Chinese gangsters and not by the MCP members. Chin Peng explains that the Communists at first assumed that Malaya would be reoccupied by a Chinese Army. Once this rumour proved unfounded, the Communist leaders acted indecisively, largely because of a divided counsel within the party. A subsequent internal rift then developed over the adoption of post war policy by the Communist leadership. They carried out summary executions against policemen, detectives, *Kempetai* informers, and others whom they considered traitors or collaborators with the Japanese Military Administration. As the Malays were not particularly hostile to the Japanese and some Malays were involved in the Japanese police force, the MPAJA's actions caused racial riots in many parts of the Malay Peninsula. These acts of violence and terrorism only brought the MPAJA into disrepute and a costly mistake to the MCP in general, which cost the organization the trust of the people, especially the Malays. The MCP found itself rejected by the Malays and identified by them as a Chinese organization (Kheng 1983 and Kheng 1981). This was also a starting point for a long lasting communal problem between the Chinese and the Malays. As noted by Cheah Boon Kheng, stories of the lack of respect by some Chinese, mostly MCP, towards Malay custom and religion increases hostilities towards the Chinese. When Malays saw these actions they failed to distinguish between Chinese Communist and non-Communist (Bevin, 1949).

In short, MCP was established purposely to serve Chinese interest in this region. It was manipulated by the British against the Japanese during the war and later given legal status for a short while. However, these developments only show a widening of a Malay-Chinese gap.

How Far MCP is Internationally Instigated?

This paper argues that although there were evidence that MCP was internationally inspired but but the decision to act locally was independently done by the party. The MCP was not driven by external communist forces and to guide the party to politically survive in domestic level but it had acted isolately and solitarily. British report is analyzed here to understand the velocity of linkage between international communist and MCP. According to the report, MCP's meeting in Singapore from 17 to 21 March 1948 marked a turning point in the strategies of MCP. Based on the meeting, the MCP was briefed about the Communist international struggle, which echoed the 'Zhdanov doctrine' in saying that the world had been divided into two camps, with cooperation no longer possible. This made a new policy and the aim of 'complete independence' imperative based on a united front of the lower sections of

workers, 'armed struggle' and 'people's revolutionary war were inevitable.

In addition, the British viewed the Communist threat as inspired by the international Communist movement and considered it critical to the whole security of Southeast Asia (Bevin, 1949). In 1949, a paper prepared for cabinet by the Permanent Under-Secretary of State stressed the danger that would affect the whole security of Southeast Asia from a powerful Communist Fifth Column, corroding it from within (Deery, 2003). The Soviet Legation at Bangkok was clearly designed to be the centre of Soviet activity in the whole region and Soviet couriers passing through Singapore en route for the Far East or Australia were a constant source of danger. L. L. Sharkey, the general secretary of the Soviet leaning Communist Party of Australia, stopped in Singapore, and persuaded the MCP to adopt a policy of violence (Deery, 2003). Despite this however, the driving force to the MCP was held by the British to be the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), not Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU), even though links with the CCP were very tenuous and there was no evidence of direct assistance (Minutes of Meeting Russia Committee, 1948) The Southeast Asia Department of Foreign Office also articulated that the increase of Communist activities was also linked with the Communist International Conference held in Calcutta in 1948 and the inauguration conference of Cominform (Outline of Communist Strategy in Southeast Asia, 1959).

In relation to the above communists decision, MacLane (1966) explained that three resolutions were adopted by MCP. Firstly, it was concluded that the Labour Government in Britain was irredeemably imperialist. In this situation, the struggle for independence must ultimately take the form of 'people's revolutionary war' and the MCP would provide leadership in this task. Secondly, with regard to political strategies, two tasks were set before the party: the reversal of the former 'ostrich policy' of 'surrenderism' and the preparation of the masses for an uncompromising struggle for independence. Thirdly, the need to restore party discipline was stressed in the context of the Loi Tek scandal.

McLane (1966) also explained that on 19 May 1948, the MCP held the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee and adopted a twelve-point plan of struggle to counter the government's programme. It also confessed the constitutional failure and resolved to proceed with a strategy of revolution. The Fifth Plenum decided to attack British imperialism through the workers and to use trade unions as its main weapon in the struggle. The 'plan of struggle' also emphasized the primary use henceforth of 'illegal action'; it called for strikes specifically aimed at the disruption of the Malayan economy, demanded a more vigorous assault on the democratic parties and on the national bourgeois (including Chinese elements sympathetic to Kuomintang), and proposed measures to attract intellectuals and peasants to the Communist cause. During the reorganization of the MCP, apart from the Chinese, the Indian section was separated and was put under the direction of the Communist Party of India but operated in conjunction with the MCP. The Malay section was abandoned as unprofitable.

A closer analysis of MCP cautious us against oversimplification or naive interpretation of British record office to judge MCP as fully instigated by international communists. The British argued that no evidence of MCP been assisted by CPSU. But the report maintained that MCP was driven by CCP. However, to my analysis, what actually happened was not a concerted effort by international communists (either CPSU or CCP) and MCP but merely a shift of communist policy and focus to Southeast Asian communist party such as MCP. Although the MCP was on the periphery of the international Communist movement, there was also a shift of policy by the Moscow to concentrate more on the Southeast Asian region than the Western world. The sole systematic analysis of the Communist International Conference argued that:

The main point made by the conference – that there could be no compromise in the struggle against imperialism – could have led easily to the conclusion that the only remaining path was that of armed struggle...The militant tone displayed by the Calcutta Conference may well have given encouragement and added prestige to the more extreme elements among the Southeast Asian Communists. Later...they could look on the conference's declarations as an ideological justification for their decisions to try the way of violence' (McVey, 1975).

As MCP was not fully instigated by either CPSU or CCP, the party had to act independently without a solid financial and moral support. This had led the party politically disoriented.

Conclusion

It has explained MCP development which peculiar to its political disorientation. First, as a response to colonization, MCP was developed. However, these movements were not nationalistic enough in a sense that they were struggled for Chinese cause and not for Malaya itself. Second, colonial rule transformed MCP constitutional struggle into illegal one. Third, after the war, British rule also nearly paved the way for the MCP to establish their form of government.

This article then argued that MCP was not fully instigated by international communists and the party was in itself isolately and solitarily acted. Therefore, it was pretty much explained that due to lack of international assistance, MCP was politically disorientated and ended up in distortion.

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