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The Socio-Political Context Behind the Malayan Insurgency, 1948-1960

Dina Murad*

Abstract: This article examines the socio-political context surrounding the Malayan Insurgency (1948-1960) and how it shaped the outcome of counter-insurgency (COIN) operations in the Malayan peninsular. It will put forward the idea that the success of British COIN in Malaya was primarily due to the structure of Malayan society that was inhospitable towards a communist insurrection by analysing the significance of race relations, religion, culture and the impact of diaspora towards the changing social landscape of Malaya.

Keywords: Malayan Insurgency, British Counter-Insurgency (COIN), Malayan Society.

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengkaji konteks sosio-politik semasa Darurat Tanah Melayu (1948-1960) dan bagaimana ia telah menyumbang kepada kejayaan operasi-operasi menentang komunis di Malaya/Semenanjung Malaysia. Esei ini akan mengemukakan idea bahawa kejayaan pihak British dalam memerangi komunis di Tanah Melayu adalah terutamanya disebabkan oleh struktur masyarakat Malaya pada masa itu yang tidak bersekutu dengan ideologi komunis. Untuk menyokong hipotesis ini, analisis akan dibuat ke atas kepentingan hubungan kaum, agama, budaya dan kesan diaspora kepada landskap sosial Malaya.

Kata Kunci: Pemberontakan Malaya, Kaunter Pemberontakan British (COIN), Persatuan Melayu

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Introduction

The operation carried out by British forces against the Malayan communist threat has often been cited as counter-insurgency (COIN)'s biggest success story – in fact, with the exception of the Cold War, some may go so far as to describe it as "the only war the West won against Communism" (Burton, 2011). Compared to other failed COIN efforts by the French in Algeria or the United States in Vietnam, the Malayan operation was often credited for its effectiveness in eliminating communist influence due to Britain's strategic policies and skilled leadership (Paul, Clarke, Grill & Dunigan, 2013). While acknowledging the positive impacts of British COIN efforts, this article will nevertheless argue that the Malayan socio-political context throughout the insurgency was the dominant cause of defeat for the communist insurrection. To forward this idea, three points of argumentation will be addressed: First, the Malayan communists were primarily ethnic Chinese and were incapable of gaining enough support from the majority Malay population. Secondly**,** although the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), formed in 1930, had mainly Chinese members, the Malayan Chinese community itself was not monolithic and there existed internal disputes within CPM and Chinese Malayans who rejected the far-left turn. Finally**,** Malaya during the Emergency was gearing up for independence and its socio-political climate was one that aspired democratic self-governance over communism.

Background

The Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) and the Second Malayan Emergency which continued communist armed struggle from 1968 until 1989 was a predominantly guerrilla-style jungle affair which saw British, Commonwealth and Malayan forces in arms against the communist uprising, represented by CPM whose goal was to transform Malaya into a China-inspired People's Republic (Burton, 2011). Burton explains that when conflict broke out, the British-led Malayan government was insufficiently prepared and had to promptly mobilise security forces to face the communists who were armed and operating from camps in the jungle. The British government appointed High Commissioners Sir Henry Gurney and his successor Sir Gerald Templer to oversee anti-communist operations, security reform and whom history regards as being skilled in delivering effective initiatives.

Among the most successful COIN operations devised was the Briggs Plan, credited to Malayan Director of Operations General Sir Harold Briggs, whose idea was to cut insurgents off from their supporters via creation of New Villages. The plan involved the forced relocation of about half a million rural Malayans squatters, mostly ethnic Chinese, who were living in the fringes of the jungle into fortified camps (Chin, 2009). As CPM fighters depended on rural Chinese for supplies (Hack, 1999), this population control strategy hit communist operations hard. Although the initial plan was received with resentment, in time sentiments changed as villagers were later given ownership of land along with improved living standards and financial aid (Burton, 2011). While the tactic was advantageous in starving out guerrillas hiding in the jungle, curbing communist support, removing networks of supplies and information, the relocation of Chinese squatters changed the geographic composition of Malaya's multi-ethnic population and contributed to long-term issues such as increased racial tension. Another strategy which Templer strongly advocated was the 'hearts and minds' approach which led to improved governance, expanding benefits to a wide range of communities and committing Malayans to the application and ownership of these policies (Stockwell, 2006), a move that managed to turn many potential communist sympathisers away from CPM. This included providing medical aid and food to Malays and indigenous tribes (Burton, 2011) and after 1952, providing resettled Chinese with medical, educational and social facilities (Hack, 2001). Government forces actively encouraged defections by dropping leaflets in the jungle promising "safe conduct" and monetary rewards for those who decide to leave CPM, restructured the Special Branch intelligence police unit and provided funds to pay informers (Deery, 2007). At the height of power, CPM commanded some 8000 guerrilla fighters but the number drastically dwindled to only 400 or so in Malayan territory by the end of 1953 as the rest sought refuge in neighbouring Thailand (Chin, 2009).

To further separate communists from the public, the British introduced a national registration system where photo identity cards bearing thumb prints were required to be carried at all times by all civilians above 12 years old (Oganesofy, 1964). As communist guerrillas generally avoided registration, this made it easier for security forces to detain suspects without ID cards for investigation.

While the significance of the policies above is recognised, this essay argues that they function primarily as tools to hasten CPM's defeat as it was the socio-political climate of Malaya during the emergency that ultimately contributed most to the communist downfall.

No Support of the Majority

Malaya during the years of insurgency was a tapestry of diverse ethnic backgrounds due in part to its centuries-old function as a central trade route between Asia and the West, and the movement of Indian and Chinese labourers by Britain to work the rubber estates and tin mines. Chinese movement to Malaya by the British started around the 1820s and by the time of the insurgency, the community already had a long established history in the peninsular (Paul et al., 2013). According to Paul *et al*., the population of Malaya in the 1940s numbered around 5.3 million, of which 49 per cent were native Malays, 38 per cent Chinese and 11 per cent Indian. Some studies put the number of Malay to Chinese communities in Malaya during the Emergency as approximately equal (Carnell, 1953), while others say that the Malays outnumbered the Chinese by a comfortable margin (Peng, 2015). Nevertheless, it is generally understood that the makeup of CPM was nearly all Chinese, and had immense difficulty attracting Malay members who were the majority of the population and likely regarded the insurrection as an alien uprising (Short, 1970) or a movement led by 'foreigners' (Yong, 1996).

Mackcinlay (2009) describes a winning COIN formula as I + POP > SF + GOV. The equation explains that when insurgents (I) are capable of acquiring the support of the population (POP), the balance of power would tip to the rebel side over that of the government (GOV) and security forces (SF). In short, the outcome of insurgent campaigns generally favour the side which is able to wrestle the support of the population. It is evident that through the four decades of armed struggle, the CPM failed decisively in securing the allegiance of the people due to their inability to attract enough Malay supporters (Sebastian, 1991). This arguably contributed most to their undoing as the communist campaign was bound to fail without population support. Although CPM included Malay and Indian members among its ranks, the numbers are negligible and the party was seen as being strongly Chinese-driven (Hack, 1999) with some 95 per cent of its fighters being Chinese (Sebastian, 1991).

Contrast this situation to that of the Việt Minh, who were successful in securing the allegiance of the majority of the Vietnamese population and therefore capable of winning the protracted war (Stockwell, 2006). In comparison, Stockwell explains that CPM had enough support to sustain an extended campaign, but were incapable of rallying enough of the population to achieve their goal. This was despite the CPM leadership's many attempts to appeal to the Malays (Sebastian, 1991).

One of the reasons CPM fared badly in gaining Malay support was the pre-existing tension between the two largest ethnicities, aggravated in part by the British 'divide-and-rule' system (Carnell, 1953), which made it less likely for the Malays to join CPM. The Chinese community's economic strength was a source of insecurity among many Malays, who felt their position in the country to be under threat (Finkelstein, 1952). This rift was exacerbated further by the 1951 assassination of Gurney by CPM's guerrilla wing, the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA). Gurney's death magnified anti-Chinese feelings among the other ethnic groups (Edwards, 2012), escalated public rejection of the communist campaign and created widespread fear for public safety (Burton, 2011). In another view, the insurgency could be translated by some Malays as an immigrant minority's attempt to forcefully seize power and impose a totalitarian system in Malaya (Morrison, 1948).

It can be argued that armed revolt is only as strong as the propaganda war it wages. Unfortunately for CPM, language barriers hampered their efforts to reach out to the other ethnic groups and limited their ability to transfer ideology as few CPM members spoke Malay or Tamil (Yong, 1996). Then-Home Minister Musa Hitam described a CPM strategy to overcome this by improving radio broadcasts and producing Malay-language pamphlets (Sebastian, 1991) but the efforts did not appear to bear much fruit. Furthermore, Chinese dialects were often used as the lingua franca among communist units which may cause Malay recruits to feel alienated from the group (Hack, 1999).

History suggests that Malay culture and nationalism preferred the negotiating table over armed struggle. Unlike Indonesia which underwent armed conflict against the Dutch empire, Malaya's independence was largely achieved via diplomatic channels (Ahmad Fauzi, 2007) although this might also be attributed to Britain's post-war decolonisation efforts. Even until recently, Malaysia has looked to non-confrontational means

to resolve conflicts such as when it negotiated the 2017 release of its embassy staff held 'hostage' in North Korea by Pyongyang (BBC, 2017) or swiftly brokered a 2014 deal with pro-Russian rebels to retrieve MH17 plane crash bodies from a war zone in Donetsk, Ukraine (NBC News, 2014). However, this paper does not purport to dismiss all forms of Malay armed revolt. In 1875, Malay resistance figure Maharaja Lela led an uprising against the residential system which resulted in the murder of the state of Perak's first British resident, James Birch (Stockwell, 2006). Another Malay nationalist figure Mat Kilau is also highly regarded in Malaysian history for leading a rebellion against British presence in Pahang from 1891-95 (Stockwell, 2006). Nevertheless, for the most part armed resistance like the instances of Maharaja Lela and Mat Kilau have been limited to specific states in Malaya and there was never a unified national armed uprising involving the entire peninsular to demand autonomy from Britain. Finkelstein (1952) points out that the Malayan independence movement never grew to the magnitude of India and Indonesia, and appeared 'tame' in comparison to French Morocco. He describes the nationalist movement in Malaya as one that eschews revolutionary activity, preferring instead to cooperate with Britain. This seemed a reasonable solution as both Malaya and Britain had similar objectives at the time - independence and decolonisation. It would have been a counter-intuitive move for the Malay community to opt for communist insurgency over a relatively-peaceful transfer of power and establishment of democracy via negotiations.

An under-examined aspect of CPM's inability to attract Malay supporters is the role played by the Malay rulers, whose history stretch back to the Malacca Sultanate of the 15th century. The Malay community, for the most part, is loyal to its monarchy and attempts for armed subversion without royal approval is unlikely to succeed. While contemporary Malaysia functions as a constitutional monarchy and does not have codified *Lese Majeste* laws as that of neighbouring Thailand (Tee, 2019), the significance of the Malay Rulers still remain. Sedition laws, originally introduced to maintain British Rule during the colonial era, has been used to protect the Rulers from criticism (The Star Online, 2019) while the 'Rukun Negara' or code of national philosophy introduced in 1970, lists loyalty to King and country as its second principle, after belief in God. Burton (2011) even describes the Malay community at the time of insurgency as "overwhelmingly

traditional, monarchist and devout Muslims". A unique point in history when nationwide open (non-violent) civil disobedience occurred among the Malays was over Britain's 1945 Malayan Union proposal, which was eventually scrapped following widespread protests. A large number of Malays gathered in demonstrations against the agreement which the Malay Sultans had allegedly been coerced into signing and which would have eased citizenship requirements of Malayans and stripped significant royal power from the state monarchies, the latter a move seen as disrespectful to Malay Sultans and *ʻādat*/culture (Ho, 2015), and indirectly weakening Malay political control. Acknowledging Malay loyalty to the Sultans, it appears implausible that the community would support the CPM agenda, which included overthrowing "feudalism as represented by the Sultans" (Yong, 1996). Ngoi (2015) explains that religion is another critical factor behind CPM's inability to appeal to the Malay population: Being Muslims, Malays were likely resistant to communism which is often perceived as being an areligious doctrine, and Malay leaders encouraged this perception by emphasizing the need to counter communism with "a strong Islamic faith". CPMs attempt at producing propaganda to prove that communism is compatible with Islam largely failed and managed to convince only a small number of Malay recruits (Carnell, 1953).

CPM's leadership was chiefly Chinese - its most prolific member being Chin Ping who headed the party through both insurgency campaigns. Although there were Malays like Abdullah C.D., Musa Ahmad and Rashid Maidin who were prominent members (Stockwell, 2006), their efforts to influence fellow Malays to join were largely ineffective. Despite Abdullah C.D.'s claim that CPM proposed to uphold the special position of the Malays, acknowledgement of Islam as an official religion, protect Malay culture and support a constitutional monarchy, his statements did not make much headway (Ngoi, 2015). It could be that Malays felt CPM, as a predominantly Chinese party, had little incentive to uphold policies which were not favourable to their ethnic majority. Additionally, the lack of Malay leaders could also be interpreted as having less ability to direct the course of CPM to uphold pro-Malay policies (Ngoi, 2015).

Segmentations within the Malayan Chinese community

The Chinese Malayan community during the emergency was not a singular one. While CPM members were predominantly Chinese, the party itself did not manage to garner full support from the Chinese diaspora. After years in Malaya, many Chinese had assimilated and embraced a worldview different to that of communist China. There existed a changing landscape of identity where some Malayan-born Chinese now regard Malaya as their home (Finkelstein, 1952) over a China they have never visited. A British estimate puts the number of potential communist sympathisers to only around one million, approximately 20 per cent of the Malayan population in the 1950s (Hack, 1999). Hack describes the Malayan Chinese community as being at a crossroads where loyalties are divided between Malayan nationalism and Communist China, cultural introversion and engaging in the creation of a budding Malayan state to which the Chinese community could contribute its mark. He further points out that the "over-abundance of identities" and choices within the Chinese community not only decreased the number of possible communist supporters, but it also inadvertently increased potential enemies for CPM.

Among those who were unlikely to welcome a communist revolt were a group comprising Chinese traders and those from the middle-class (Finkelstein, 1952). The economic migration which the Chinese community underwent upon moving to Malaya meant that Malaya was also nurturing a burgeoning business-oriented segment of that society which was considerably large and influential (Hack, 1999). Anticipating a negative impact on their business interests, it was a logical step for these commerce-driven individuals to reject CPM and the communist system it idealised.

Hack explains that the establishment of the democratic-leaning political party, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) provided a counter-weight to communist influence, drawing from its ranks many members of the Chinese community who were involved in commerce. He adds that MCA, led by Tan Cheng Lock, was set up as a Chinese mirror to the Malay political party United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and played an important role as an intermediary between the government and the Chinese community by managing social welfare in New Villages, promoting communist surrenders, assist in detainee

screening and providing a channel for Chinese political expression. MCA's well-coordinated machinery, its influential members who could negotiate directly with the government and its function as a channel for addressing Chinese grievances made the moderate party an appealing and safer alternative for the Chinese community to engage in political activity without having to turn to CPM's armed revolt. Most importantly, MCA promoted a nationalistic Malayan outlook and was a point of unification for the Chinese community. It endeavoured to raise awareness amongst the Chinese that "their social, economic and political states were far more intertwined with the future of Malaya than with their traditional homeland" (Ongkili, 1974).

Looking inward, cracks were showing even within CPM itself. The unmasking of secretary-general Lei Teck as a triple-agent came as a shock betrayal to the party's Central Committee, which was already plagued by grievous financial troubles (Chin, 2009). The collapse of party unity, internal disputes and intra-party killings created competing groups which frequently clashed over territory (Sebastian, 1991) and led to a fragmentised CPM incapable of moving forward with its operations. As Stockwell (2006) observes, although CPM fighters had immense courage, stamina and will power, this could not make up for the growing party schisms, youth and inexperience of the party leadership, lack of food, intelligence and ineffective communication channels between its members who were dispersed around the peninsula.

Putting aside internal divisions and the party's failure to convey ideology convincingly, CPM also committed many tactical errors which led to the estrangement, even likely resentment from their target group. Compared to the Malays, the Chinese community was most affected by communist terror (Carnell, 1953) with CPM members even admitting to the party's excessively coercive campaign (Hack, 1999). By October 1948, only shortly after the Emergency was declared, the MNLA had killed more than 200 mostly-Chinese civilians who were reluctant to support the uprising (Paul, et al., 2013). The brutality and tactics of intimidation carried out against their own Chinese population was a double-edged sword for CPM. While it induced fear and obedience, it also turned potential supporters away, creating antagonism among the Chinese who were CPM's main source of support. The rural Chinese whom CPM depended on suffered more as the burden of providing

supplies was thrust upon them, effectively crippling their own economic security (Hack, 1999).

To make matters more difficult for CPM, the international political climate of the day was unfavourable towards it. By 1974, Sino-Malayan relations had normalised and while Beijing could not officially denounce CPM, it nevertheless moved to end the provision of material aid to the party (Sebastian, 1991). It is uncertain how much additional damage this would have dealt CPM because unlike their compatriots from Vietnam, the support CPM received from China was almost negligible indicating that the party's communist struggle was an isolated one (Stockwell, 2006). Geographically as well, Malaya was a peninsular which bordered only Thailand. This limited CPM's capability of expanding supply routes, safe havens and foreign supporters. Looking at the Malayan communist struggle, it appears unfeasible that a minority-led uprising holding a communist agenda so antithetical to the general culture of Malaya could even hope to successfully carry out a popular uprising when it did not even have strong external backing to compensate for a lack of internal support.

The Road to Independence

The Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945 was remembered as one of Malayan history's darkest years – marked by starvation, immense brutality and institutionalised fear. The Japanese had first come to Malaya and attempted to counter British support in the peninsular by playing a propaganda war titled "Asian for Asia," (McDonald, 1950) which was marketed as an empowerment movement but was later revealed to be just another form of colonial suppression. After the defeat of Japan, the British returned to rule in Malaya but sentiments had changed. Malayans who had spent some 150 years under British colonialism were now disillusioned by Western power after witnessing the defeat of the British army by Japan (Ahmad Fauzi, 2007). Malayan society was now one that was walking a steady path towards democratic self-governance, especially with the establishment of the Federation of Malaya in 1948. The arrival of communism was in opposition to that zeitgeist. This is further compounded by the view that a Chinese-led communist government would be seen as a scion of China. A fair question would be whether the communist insurgency hastened the decolonisation of Malaya. It can be argued that Malayan independence

was a compromise for Britain who was channelling significant resources to Malayan COIN efforts at a time of post-WWII financial constraints. After all, the insurgency cost Britain an estimated £700 million between 1948 and 1957 (Deery, 2007). However, there is debate on this issue. Hack (2001) describes the Emergency's impact on decolonisation as 'complex and unanswerable'. Nevertheless, the fact that the communist insurrection took place within the same timeframe as Britain's worldwide move to decolonise particularly in the 1950s was especially damaging to MCP's cause. Both sides of the conflict appealed to the Malayan anti-colonial sentiment but Britain's promise of self-governance proved to be the more attractive option.

Independence was a win-win option for Britain and the general Malayan population. Suffering from the aftermath of World War II and unable to financially maintain the expansive empire they once held (Deery, 2007), Britain's calculus was that decolonisation and a transfer of power to a reliable Malayan government would "prevent a communist take-over of a much-valued country" (Stockwell, 2006). Independence would also translate to the best outcome for Britain, which could continue amicable relations with a Malayan government friendly to British interests and trade while ensuring that the "front-line state in Asia's Cold War" (Stockwell, 2006) would have an established government with which to address the continued communist threat. With Britain promising self-governance (Carnell, 1953), a political alliance had been formed by Malayan parties comprising the three major ethnicities – UMNO representing the Malays, MCA representing the Chinese and the Malaya Indian Congress (MIC) for the Indians (Hagiwara, 1972). Although the Alliance began as a temporary arrangement between MCA and UMNO to contest in the 1952 municipal elections, it strengthened with MIC in 1954 and in 1955 won the first general election before officially registering as a political organisation and taking over the reins of government after independence in 1957. The stability and political representation offered by the Alliance Party had proven to be a more logically enticing option for the average Malayan compared to the uncertainty of a communist revolt.

Conclusion

In the years following the 1989 peace accord between CPM and the Malaysian government (Sebastian, 1991), the threat of communism fast

dissipated. The country's 40-year battle with communist insurgents is often lauded as one of the few successful COIN operations in recent history. Much credit had been attributed to British efforts in curbing the spread of the communist ideology using strategies which, although not immune to criticism (Chin, 2009), were still overall effective. Noteworthy was the Briggs plan which cut off CPM from their main source of supplies, food and intelligence by forcibly relocating some half a million Chinese Malayans and implementing population control. If the Briggs plan succeeded in cutting off communist lifelines, Templer's 'hearts and minds' strategy further aggravated communist operations by turning the population away from CPM and towards the Malayan government.

However, the question remains why these COIN efforts, while successful in Malaya, did not produce similar outcomes in insurgencies around the world, namely in Vietnam, Palestine and Algeria (Hack, 1999). This paper argues that Malaya's victory in confronting communism compared to similar methods employed elsewhere was due to its unique local conditions. It is the socio-political environment of Malaya which was the deciding factor in determining CPM's future and while British policies were effective in countering communism, it would not have been able to do so without capitalising on Malaya's societal, cultural and political context.

This essay proposes that the main reason behind CPM's defeat was because the Malayan ethnic makeup was against them – CPM was unable to gain the allegiance of the Malay majority and therefore, could not amass enough support to mobilise a successful insurrection. The reasons why many Malays did not buy into the communist ideology could be due to the reasons addressed in this essay: the idea that the communist movement was a 'foreign' uprising, pre-existing racial rifts between the Chinese and Malays, language barriers, Malay reverence to their Sultans and the perception that communism was antithetical to Islam, the religion professed by the majority Malay population.

Furthermore, the Chinese themselves did not wholly support the communist agenda. Among the Chinese who rejected communist ideology were those who identified themselves as Malayan and preferred national independence. The growth of a pro-business and middle class Chinese community were unlikely to accept a communist system

which would principally be in opposition their financial freedoms. The establishment of MCA provided a channel for political voice and produced a safer, more stable alternative to the communist influence. Moreover, CPM's tactics of fear-mongering and brutality did little to win supporters to their side. Taking into consideration CPM's internal dispute and lack of external support, it appears that the party did not just have trouble attracting Malay members, they could not even secure the full support of their own Chinese community.

Finally, in analysing the cause of communist defeat, one cannot ignore the atmosphere of impending freedom and independence that caught Malaya in the years of the Emergency, and later a nationalistic spirit to maintain that long-sought independence post-1957 until the end of the insurgency. This paper holds that although British strategies contributed much to the success of the counter-insurgency efforts, it is the factors discussed above which were the primary cause of the communist defeat. In the end, the main battleground CPM failed to conquer was the population – the most important chess piece that cost them their revolution.

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