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Singapore's Struggle Against CPM: What if the Barisan Sosialis Had Won?

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

On the 25th anniversary of the end of the long struggle against the Communist Party of Malaya, it is critical that the conflict be remembered and evaluated accurately. Due regard should be given especially to the sacrifices of those Singaporeans who suffered or perished as a result of Communist violence. To do any less would be a travesty.

Commentary

THIS YEAR marks the 25th anniversary of the signing of the peace agreement between the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and the Malaysian and Thai governments in Hat Yai, which ended four decades of conflict. On 8 December 2014 a marker of the 'Struggle Against the Communist Party of Malaya' was unveiled at Esplanade Park in Singapore near the Cenotaph and Lim Boh Seng Memorial on Queen Elizabeth Walk.

The marker is intended as a timely reminder of the approximately 8,000 civilian and security personnel casualties during the Communist insurgency in Malaya (including Singapore) from 1948 to the end of the 1980s. 2014 also marks the 60th anniversary of the People's Action Party (PAP), which has formed the government of Singapore from self-government to independence till today. This year is also the 51st anniversary of Operation Coldstore, the historic internal security sweep carried out by the British, Singapore and Malayan governments against the Communist United Front (CUF) in Singapore on 2 February 1963.

Communist United Front not imaginary

The social media has been abuzz with debate revisiting the merits or otherwise of Coldstore. Revisionist commentators downplay the notion of a Communist network. They argue that Coldstore was in fact a political exercise to demolish a progressive Left opposition - exemplified by the Barisan Sosialis, the party formed by PAP rebels who broke away in 1961 - to lobby against merger with Malaya, ostensibly through peaceful constitutional means.

Mainstream commentators counter that the Communist Front, which included the Barisan, was not imaginary and without Coldstore the Communists could have possibly secured power in Singapore.

This would have raised the spectre of conflict between a staunchly anti-communist Malay-dominated Federation and a Communist-led Chinese dominated Singapore.

Hence mainstream judgment is that it was fortunate the non-Communist and, at that time, struggling PAP rallied to win the 1963 elections. That development led to Singapore's entry to and eventual separation from Malaysia, which ultimately catapulted it on its remarkable journey from third world to first in a single generation.

One skeptic however commented that as with any choice one makes in life, just because one chose Option A and it turned out well, does not mean Option B would have been worse or a bad option. We just cannot know. The observer was suggesting that Option B - a Barisan Sosialis victory - could well have turned out historically just as good or a better option for Singapore.

New Singapore History?

In fact revisionist scholars, bloggers and former Coldstore detainees appear engaged in constructing a New Singapore History. Three themes stand out: first, the 'Communists' were in fact peaceful Progressive Leftists unjustly accused of being part of some nebulous 'Communist conspiracy'. Second, their life histories and struggles should not be forgotten and are as important and as valuable as those of History's winners. Third, the Option B of a Barisan-led Singapore after 1963 was a tragic 'path not taken'.

The historical record suggests that the New Singapore History is flawed. Two hard facts stand out.

Firstly and most crucially, the CPM was no fantasy. It was a real entity formed in 1930 with the long-term aim of setting up a politically unified Communist Republic of Malaya (including Singapore). The CPM saw itself as part of an international fraternity of like-minded parties spearheaded by the former Soviet Union and later on Mao's People's Republic of China.

The struggle against the CPM was thus part of a wider conflict between the democratic capitalist West led by the United States and the Soviet and Chinese-led Eastern bloc. The CPM, keeping very much abreast of international trends in Communist doctrine, toggled between the complementary strategies of armed revolution, and a united front strategy involving penetration of Chinese-educated student, labour, cultural and rural associations, as well as leftwing political parties.

The CPM thus sought to secure power in Malaya and Singapore through armed insurgency from 1948 to around 1954, when operational reverses up north precipitated a switch to a united front strategy in Singapore itself. Between 1954 and 1956 the island was beset by strikes, riots and disturbances instigated by a CUF involving Chinese-educated students and labour unions. Following the Labour Front government crackdowns of October 1956, however, the hydra-like CUF shifted to a strategy of lying low while intensifying efforts at capturing the PAP.

"Barisan Sosialis communist-controlled"

The ensuing struggle within the PAP between the non-Communists and the Communists/pro-Communists culminated in the Big Split over the issue of the proposed merger with the Federation of Malaya in July 1961. The CUF was flushed into the open with the Barisan Sosialis as its leading edge. CPM Secretary-General Chin Peng himself publicly acknowledged that the Barisan was influenced by the CPM.

Originally skeptical British officials in Singapore concurred, conceding in confidential dispatches to London by December 1962 that 'conclusive evidence' had been unearthed that the 'Barisan Sosialis are Communist-controlled' and that 'the Communists seem to be sufficiently entrenched to control policy and action'.

Coldstore was thus mounted to decimate the CUF because among other things, Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman did not want a CUF-dominated Singapore inside the Federation.

The second hard fact is that the pro-Communists only portrayed themselves as peaceful Progressive Leftists for instrumental purposes. Their internal communications made it clear that if they were strong

enough and the opportunity presented itself, they would consider employing violence to secure power. In fact between 1950 and 1970, about 27 ordinary Singaporeans – including factory workers, bus drivers, merchants, and police - were killed by CPM hit squads.

Shootings, bombings, arson, grenade and acid attacks were not unknown. A plot to assassinate the Singapore Commissioner of Police in December 1976 was foiled. The Malaysian Inspector-General of Police had been murdered two years earlier.

A Barisan Option B? Think again

An Option B with the CPM-influenced Barisan in charge of Singapore after 1963 would hence have been anything but peaceful and successful. Such an assessment is only reinforced by the evident abject failure of doctrinaire Communist governance worldwide by 1989.

Moreover, while the life histories of dedicated, if tragically misguided, CPM members may deserve retelling, should they not also acknowledge accountability for their own past errors? Do the next-of-kin of the victims of CPM violence – unknown to most Singaporeans today, except to their bereaved loved ones - deserve less consideration?

The long struggle against the CPM will always be an integral part of the Singapore Story. It is however important that the conflict be remembered accurately, with due regard especially for the sacrifices of those Singaporeans who suffered and even perished as a result of Communist violence. To do any less would be a travesty.

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