MALAYA: COMMUNIST OR FREE

?

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PREFACE

MALAYA DEVELOPED VERY rapidly between the two world wars. Its population more than doubled between 1911 and 1941, largely by the immigration of Chinese and Indians, and it thus became a 'plural society' of which the elements were unfused. Nevertheless its several races, under a firm 'colonial' government, lived harmoniously side by side, and, given continued peace and prosperity, there seemed every hope that a sense of common interest would grow and eventually bind the people into a nation. But the Japanese occupation, bringing communal clashes in its train and the exposure of the people after the surrender to the pull of external nationalism and Communism, made the prospect of Malayan unity seem vastly less encouraging.

It is probable that as wartime Director General of Information and in other capacities I did more to publicize the British achievement in Malaya than any other individual. (A recent book by a Communist, Mr. Palme Dutt, refers to me as 'the apologist of imperialism'). What I wrote, said, and broadcast in many countries was supported by a belief in the British intention and ability to help Malaya towards nationhood and self-government. The Clementi policy of the early 'thirties had aroused a suspicion that powerful influences at home wished indefinitely to divide and rule, but the establishment of the Malayan Union after the war was a convincing proof of British sincerity. When the Union was abandoned in face of Malay opposition, I, for one, was dismayed, but when it was replaced by a reactionary constitution, taking Malaya back to pre-Treaty days, I was dumbfounded. I visited Malaya in 1950 and I was to some small extent reassured by what Sir Henry Gurney told me of his plans for correcting the crass feudalism of the Federal constitution and setting Malaya once more on the road towards self-government, but when I again visited the country in 1952 I was brought up with a jolt. Malaya had become a vast armed camp in which no one could call his soul his own, and the clock of progress, it seemed, had been stopped

for the duration of the Emergency. The basic policy was a crude 'Divide and Rule'. If this was the logical consequence of eighty-odd years of British administration and development, I had better think again, and from the beginning.

I have thought again, and I have come to the conclusion that the present state of Malaya was by no means the logical consequence of British policy. Some serious mistakes had been made before the war, while the present situation was basically due to external pressures, but to my mind a fatal step had been taken early in 1952 when it had been decided that Malaya was henceforth primarily a military problem and that the clearing up of the terrorists must take precedence of all political questions. A professional soldier was then appointed to the post of High Commissioner with greater powers than those enjoyed by any one of his predecessors and with instructions that relegated political and constitutional reform to the position of psychological warfare in aid of a military objective. The result was a complete departure from the traditions of a century and a half in which the British possessions and protectorates in Malaya had been administered as a civilian trust and not as a strategic outpost in a 'cold war', and marked a development without a precedent in British colonial history.

The policy declared by Mr. Lyttelton on his visit to Malaya in December 1951 was, in brief, 'Complete military victory before self-government'. In face of the protest aroused in Malaya by this announcement, the policy was modified to provide for the creation of democratic institutions during the course of the war against the Communist guerillas. The basic policy, however, remained as originally stated, and the 'steps towards self-government' turned out to be nothing but window-dressing.

In 1953 it was officially admitted that the Communist jungle force was probably greater than it was in 1948 and was obtaining all the recruits it needed. In his Budget speech of 25 November the High Commissioner claimed that the guerillas were being eliminated at the rate of 100 a month. The 'hard core' of the Communists, however, was as yet unbroken. The decreases in 'incidents' (since increased again in some areas) was, in fact, primarily due to the change in Communist policy decided upon before General Templer's arrival and forced upon them by his predecessors. The main success against the Communists was, in fact, won before General Templer's arrival. On the other hand

the Communists had entirely failed to create a 'liberated area'. The situation was correctly described by the Singapore correspondent of *The Times* as a 'stalemate'.

But even assuming that the 'shooting war' stops altogether, in the absence of a Malayan national army, peace will last only so long as a large force of British troops remains in the country as 'stiffening'. The record for 'kills' is held by Gurkhas, Fijians, etc.; the British troops come only second. General Templer's bid to create a Malayan army with proportional representation of the several communities has entirely failed. If, as things are, the British troops were to be withdrawn, the Communists would take over.

Only an independent, self-respecting Malaya with a will to defend itself from any outside interference can deal effectively with the Communists threat, and towards this end no effective progress is being made. In official propaganda great play is made of democratic elections to the town councils, whereas, in fact, a city like Kuala Lumpur, with a population of nearly 300,000, has an electoral roll of only about 7,000. The vast majority of the Kuala Lumpur ratepayers, who are mainly Chinese, are disenfranchised under the Selangor local-government law. The new 'village councils' are scarcely more representative than the town councils and have fewer powers. The so-called 'Member System' is held out to be a first step towards a kind of cabinet government, but unlike Ministers in the Gold Coast and Nigeria, for example, the 'Members' in Malaya are in no way responsible to the Legislature which remains entirely nominated.[1] Moreover, the MCA-UMNO alliance, the most powerful political force in the country, was, until late in 1953, entirely unrepresented. Even now it has only two of the quite arbitrarily selected eleven Members. As regards the equally advertised extension of citizenship rights, it is officially estimated that, despite the 1952 amendment to the citizenship law, less than 70 per cent of the Chinese and 30–40 per cent of the Indians are eligible for citizenship. Malaya early in 1954 is politically one of the most backward territories in the British Empire.

Owing to the Emergency controls, potential leaders—the Gandhis, Nehrus, Sukarnos, Thakin Nus, or de Valeras of Malaya—are either under lock and key, behind barbed-wire, or in exile. In fully independent India, Indonesia, Burma, etc., the

[1] See p. 230 for reactions to the report of the committee on elections.

'intellectuals' who now sit in the seat of power are those who opposed rather than co-operated with the colonial governments, and there is no reason to suppose that this will not prove to be the case in a fully independent Malaya. Official policy is to 'build a Malayan nation', whereas in every other case the 'nation' has come into being in opposition to the colonial power. Britain cannot 'build a Malayan nation', but she *can* delay the growth of one, and that is what she is doing. As regards the real meaning of the war in Malaya, General Templer has publicly stated that what is happening in Malaya is no different from what is happening in Indo-China. If this is so, the Communist guerillas really represent a national movement which the British are opposing. The British case, however, depends on the assumption that General Templer is wrong in his opinion (as I have attempted to show he is). If, however, the present policy is continued, the situation in Malaya will in time not differ materially from that in Indo-China and will be just as hopeless.

The official substitute for self-government under the Templer régime is charity and 'uplift'. On the one hand there is barbed-wire, curfews, and abuse; on the other hand a large army of European welfare workers trying to infuse life and hope into the bare shacks of the 'new villages'. Imagine the aftermath of a moderate earthquake and you have a fair picture of much of rural Malaya today.

The strongest links in the chain of 'Communist containment' in Asia are the independent countries of India, Burma, and Indonesia: the weakest are those that are directly controlled by a colonial power (notably Indo-China and Malaya). The independent countries ('stable' or 'unstable') are resisting foreign interference, whether from the East or the West. The best that can be hoped for is that Malaya will become another 'India'; if the present policy is continued it will eventually become another 'China'.

The announcement that General Templer is to leave Malaya in June 1954 should be the signal for a complete reconsideration of British policy.

In the process of re-thinking, I compiled for myself an *aide memoire* which may serve as a short primer of Malayan politics. In doing so I have been at pains to include the case for, and stated by, any authority or interest I have criticized. To this primer I have added a chapter in which I have ventured to set

out certain principles and lines of action that might, even now, pave the way for a self-governing Malaya resistant to the expansion of Communism and able, within the British Commonwealth, to stand on its own feet.

. . . Yet time serves wherein you may redeem
Your banished honours, and restore yourselves
Into the good thoughts of the world again.

VICTOR PURCELL.

March, 1954

In this second half of the twentieth century, we in Malaya, which is an integral part of the most ancient, most civilized, most populous and largest continent in the World, almost alone in Asia still live in a state of subservience under a purely and essentially autocratic form of colonial government, despite the oft-declared policy and promise of the powers-that-be to guide the citizens of the Federation and Singapore to responsible self-government within the Commonwealth.

This country since the conclusion of the last World War has been at almost a standstill politically, economically, and socially. Thanks to the Emergency, Malaya has in many respects become a police state in which the power of the executive has been tremendously increased at the expense of the individual.

Though there has been much talk of fighting for the hearts and minds of the people, in actual practice we Malayans are not permitted to co-operate with Government on equal terms, so that there is a lack of confidence and contact between Government and people, and the Government has struck no root in the life of the people.

Our Legislature is impotent, and unrepresentative of the people.

. . . It is obvious that Malaya to all intents and purposes has made no appreciable advance towards responsible self-government and political democracy.

The answer to Communism in Malaya is to provide a government that is satisfactory to the people. This responsibility rests on the Metropolitan Power who controls Malaya, and the sooner it is met the longer will be her stay in this land.

The minor benefits that an autocratic form of government, like the one in Malaya, confers on the country can never compensate for the spiritual degradation it involves. . . . —SIR CHENG-LOCK TAN, President of the Malayan Chinese Association, in a speech on 27 December, 1953.

INTRODUCTION

ALL GOLDEN AGES are legendary and some are entirely mythical, but Malaya's 'golden age' of between the wars has a firm foundation in fact. The subjection of jungle and swamp and the defeat of malaria have the makings of an epic; the introduction of rubber from the forests of Brazil was a major gift to mankind, and the creation of a modern country from insignificant beginnings in a small space of years was an achievement without a parallel. The *Pax Britannica*, maintained with a light and civilized hand, had established peace and at least an outward harmony, and living conditions in this new country compared favourably with those in most other parts of an impoverished and overcrowded Asia. No one who knew the country in that era could deny the enterprise of Malaya's planters, miners, or merchants, nor doubt the ability and the devotion to duty of its public servants. In the pre-war Malaya there was an almost complete absence of the strident, the theatrical, and the minatory (Malaya had, and needed, no Cromwell and no Lord Lloyd). It was Raffles, scholar and littérateur, who had set the fashion for government at the very outset of British dominion. Had he not written of Britain's achievements and aims:

> '. . . These monuments of her virtue will endure when her triumphs are an empty name. Let it still be the boast of Britain to write her name in characters of light; let her not be remembered as the tempest whose course was desolation, but as the gale of spring, reviving the slumbering seeds of the mind and calling them to life from the winter of oppression.'

The language, by our standards, is a trifle inflated, an echo from the age of Burke. The truth is that here Raffles is aiming to justify and sublimate the activities of his employers, the East India Company, and to spur them on to more exalted efforts. He was fortunate (as J. S. Furnivall has pointed out) that the

interests of British commercial expansion at that time coincided with those of world progress. But there was much more in Raffles's aspiration than that. The historian of Java, the botanist who discovered the world's largest flower (*Rafflesia Arnoldi*), and the principal founder of the London Zoo, envisaged in Malaya a cultural synthesis of East and West leading to eventual fusion. His successors, however, interpreted British aims in altogether less imaginative terms—not surprisingly since not one of them approached him in insight or mental calibre. Moreover, the generations of Disraeli, Salisbury, and Chamberlain called for a brassier note of prophesy, while those of Bonar Law, MacDonald, and Baldwin involved a complete change of key.

Whereas in South and Central America the union of the Spanish and Portuguese cultures with those of their colonies brought forth something quite new and gave birth to some notable poets and writers, and even in India Britain had created a hybrid of some quality, the impact of Britain on Malaya was culturally sterile. In spite of the great material achievements, of the provision of a livelihood for millions where there had been little or nothing before, the British produced in Malaya a plural society with no corporate soul. But while this must be admitted, and while it is true also that the seeds of many of the present discontents were sown, the Malaya of between the wars, contrasted with the Malaya of today, was free, cultivated, and even glorious.

In the autumn of 1952 the immediate impression made on a visitor who had been in Malaya only two years before was of a great improvement in morale, especially in the case of the Europeans. Roads, hitherto deserted for fear of ambushes, were thronged with traffic, trains ran to their normal timetables, new buildings were going up all around. In the clubs there was an air of heightened confidence, amounting (at week-ends) almost to jubilation, though it had that self-conscious quality one heard in wartime London after an air-raid when the 'all clear' had sounded (who knew when the siren would whine again?).

But in the mind of one who had known Malaya well in the past doubts very soon began to rise. The first thing to disquiet an incurably civilian mind was the over-powering dominance of the military machine. One felt plumb in the middle of a huge armed camp. Military vehicles—cars, jeeps, tractors, lorries—were in constant motion; aeroplanes and helicopters droned overhead. There was an atmosphere of martial urgency and everyone was

on their toes. The distant sound of artillery might mean that field-guns were shelling a bandit area, or it might mean that the Navy was carrying out a bombardment from the sea. (One night I lay awake as aeroplanes pattern-bombed a few square miles of virgin jungle and I estimated the cost of the operation, bomb by bomb, to while away the time.) It was hard to believe that here was no army massing for a general offensive on a wide front but one combatting a few thousand hidden terrorists. In off-duty hours the *padangs* throughout the country resounded with the click of polo-sticks and the clatter of ponies' hoofs, providing a sort of signature-tune to a serial programme of brisk belligerency.

There can be no doubt that this evidence of a new will to end the Emergency once and for all was encouraging to a people who had endured over four years of terror. In a part of the world, too, where personalities are more important than principles, there were many who welcomed the (as it were) charismatic leadership of General Templer. But there was another side to the picture. For one thing (though no one knew it at the time) the Communists were, by their new directive, switching from sabotage and mass terrorism to infiltration, and the problem of Malaya had become more of a political one than ever. Martial music, therefore (even of the toneless kind), needed to be soft-pedalled. But that was not how the new High Commissioner saw it, and, because of his profession, quite naturally so. Soon after his arrival he had said in the Federal Legislative Council:

> 'I am a professional soldier. I deem it my duty, in the capacity in which I have been chosen, to take a considerable part in the operational side of my task. I take that part as a commander of all the forces available in the Federation today. It must mean that a great deal of my thought and a great deal of my energy must be focused in that direction. That in turn must mean that I will not be able personally to devote as much time to certain aspects of what in the past have been the High Commissioner's duties. I believe this stands to reason.'

In fact, the political side was to be subordinate to the non-political. That was in the spirit of the Colonial Secretary's Directive.

There was also this point—a psychological one. The military bustle and impatient confidence seemed to take for granted a complete restoration of the prestige lost in those humiliating

weeks of 1941–2, culminating in the surrender in the Ford factory in Singapore. The sober, unobtrusive determination of the military arm in 1950 seemed to be more in keeping with realities, more regardful of the oriental theory of 'face'. The 1952 spirit could be justified only by a speedy and overwhelming victory over the Communist guerillas resulting in their wholesale surrender.

Even more indicative of the new spirit was the omnipresence of the police. The official theory was that it was the military who were acting in aid of the police and not the other way round. The police impregnated and coloured Malayan life as fluorescein will colour a stream. Every few miles there were road-blocks of oil-drums through which the traffic was filtered and minutely examined for food for the terrorists in 'Operation Starvation'. There was no human activity from the cradle to the grave that the police did not superintend. Their great powers included those of summary arrest and detention up to twenty-eight days. No one opened his mouth to speak to the smallest group without the knowledge that he was overheard. A wedding, a funeral, a committee meeting, or a cocktail party were incomplete without the detective in plain clothes. Letters looked as if they had been opened, even if they had never been. The creak of the bedroom door might—or might not—have been the wind; the man who came to inspect the water-meter or the air-conditioning deserved only a provisional smile of welcome. It was no surprise, therefore, when a Malayan who had inadvertently uttered a mildly liberal opinion checked himself suddenly and looked round him with a sickly grin. The real rulers of Malaya were not General Templer or his troops, but the 'Special Branch' of the Malayan police.

That all this was not the product of a morbid imagination is sufficiently proved by the statement of Colonel Young, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner who had been seconded to reorganize the Malayan police, that when he had arrived he had been appalled to find what he called a 'Police State', 'in that the force was neither independent nor impartial, and was under the direct orders of Government'. It is likely that Colonel Young did much to humanize the police system in his fourteen months of secondment; but the prevailing spirit was hostile to such reform. To most police officers to be a party to this wholesale invasion of private life must have been distasteful. Those police officers I dealt with personally were courteous and amiable gentlemen.

If a citizen of the 'protecting power' visiting a country that for twenty-five years had been his second home and who had somewhere to which he might hope to escape felt like this, what were the thoughts of the inhabitants of the 'new villages'? They lived behind barbed wire, defied the curfew at their peril, and at any time the family wage-earner might be arrested for questioning and might be indefinitely detained. At any time, too, the rumble on the road outside might mean the approach of the Juggernauts of Retribution, the High Commissioner's eight armoured cars, to be followed by the palsying reproof and the blinding affront of an all-powerful displeasure. There was no redress. There was no appeal. It was as final and as arbitrary as the 'all-dreaded thunder-stone'.

Yet the Emergency Regulations and some of the wide powers of the High Commissioner and the police had also existed in 1950. In what then lay the revolutionary change? The answer is—in the spirit of the administration. Hitherto the country had been only partially mobilized. What General Templer had ordered was virtually a levy *en masse* in which there were no longer any civilians and the entire population were either soldiers or bandits. Private status and private life had been suspended 'for the duration'. In 1950 what had been tacitly regarded as temporary and regrettably necessary adjuncts to an essentially civilian régime had been elevated into the mainspring of thought and action. The means had become superior to the end. Force was enthroned, embattled, and triumphant.

Malaya, however, was still a British protectorate and a British responsibility. Although the Emergency regulations had suspended basic civil rights, and although the Federal Legislative Council was much less representative of the people than the old Russian Duma, there was incessant talk of 'justice', 'democracy', 'representative institutions', 'welfare', 'service', 'partnership of the communities', 'winning the hearts and minds of the people', in Council Chamber, in the press, and on the radio. While the population was lulled, flattered, or cowed, measures were introduced with the professed object of granting Malaya a measure of self-government by easy stages within the present century, and recalling to mind the refrain of a song of G. K. Chesterton, 'The day we went to John o' Groats by way of Beachy Head'.

Humbug is the tribute which (in British protectorates) force

pays to civilization. It was inevitable that political reform relegated to the role of psychological warfare should give an impression of unreality. Thus from the official 'hand-outs' the unwary visitor might receive the impression that the 600,000 Chinese squatters and Malay peasants were corralled behind barbed-wire for the express purpose of providing them with electric light, water, and pedigree pigs. (The Government White Paper No. 33 of 1952 speaks of establishing 'the foundations of a better life in the new villages' . . . of the 'encouragement of civic sensibility'.) 'Culture', too, is a dangerous word at any time, but in a war-torn, distracted, and educationally backward country it is doubly so. Yet it was bandied about in such a way that one expected to find an exhibition of Rembrandts hidden away in an armoured car, chamber music at curfew, and (almost) gilded barbed-wire for the Coronation. Terrorists were exhorted to come out of the jungle to 'lead a man's life', Malayans were suddenly dowered with the gift of nine nationalities and no vote, and a kind of celestial Narkover was envisaged for the entire population when the existing Borstal had been abolished.

What was so terrifying about the régime was not its harshness or its brutality, but its bankruptcy of imaginative resource, its stultifying reliance on threadbare platitude, its complete lack of all mental content. It was a terrifying combination of crassness and voodoo. The whole civil edifice was shored up by a few able men working against the tide and a few struggling 'retreads' (retired officers re-employed). Corruption had increased so much that the High Commissioner had appointed an Integrity of the Services Commission. The financial black market dealt in tens of millions of dollars (one newspaper spoke of transactions of $20 million a day). Before my eyes had become accustomed to the new light I was astonished to see several notorious rascals of the old days who had answered General Templer's call to leadership and were basking in the sunshine of official ignorance. One or two of them I would have wagered enjoyed equally the confidence of the Government and of the terrorists in the jungle. The old Secret Societies (the 'Triad'), which had practically disappeared for decades, had been brought back to life again by the vastly increased opportunities for extortion and the exaction of 'protection money', so that they were now the subject of a special police drive. In social life, types had appeared which had never been known in Malaya before—men with peremptory scowls and 'fire in the