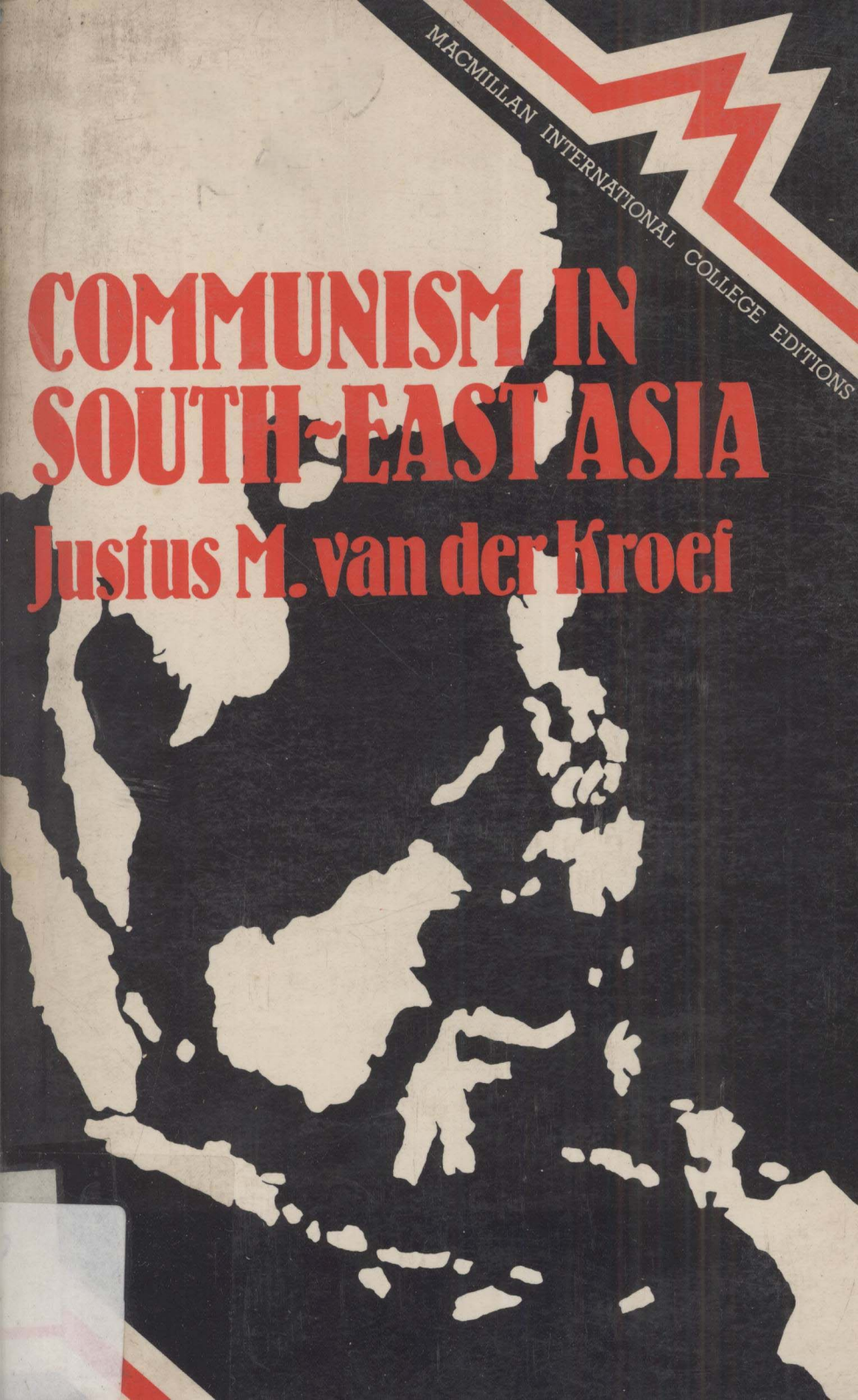


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COMMUNISM IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Justus M. van der Kroef



Communism in South-east Asia

Justus M. van der Kroef

General Editor: Dr A. Short, University of Aberdeen

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COMMUNISM IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

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Preface

Compared to South-east Asia's other political and economic problems and developments, the rise, débâcles, resurgences, programmes and tactics of Communism and Communist parties in the region have suffered from a relative neglect. To be sure, the continuing conflict in Indochina first between the Communists and their opponents and now among Communist regimes themselves, has produced a spate of studies. But often these have focused only to a degree on the character of the Vietnamese Communist movement itself and more, say, on the balance between the two Vietnams or on the international implications of the US and allied involvement in the struggle in the region. Indonesian Communism similarly has been the subject of a number of studies in recent years. But the abortive 1965 coup in that country and the collapse of the Indonesian Communist Party have now tended to shift attention primarily to the Suharto regime's internal political and economic troubles or to its place in South-east Asia's post-Vietnam war regional security strategy. The Malayan jungle war between 1948 and 1960 during the so-called 'Emergency' has found its chroniclers but in Malaysian Communist developments since then scholarly interest has tended to wane. There are no full length or comprehensive up-to-date studies, certainly not in any Western languages, on the historical evolution and present state of Communism in Burma, Thailand or the Philippines. Yet all those are countries confronted by active Communist insurgent movements and active underground parties. Only an occasional essay in the past decade has focused on the more recent tribulations and tactics of Communist Parties in Peninsular Malaya and Sarawak. Particularly noteworthy is the dearth of comparative analytical approaches to South-east Asian Communism, e.g. of common themes in appeals to local classes and interest groups or in the use of common united front tactics. The last comprehensive volume which sought to describe the

Communist movement in the region as a whole, the trailblazing study of Brimmell, is now twenty years old.*

Communism in South-east Asia in this writer's impression tends to be a lot talked about, but notwithstanding the furore surrounding the Vietnam war and its once much discussed possible 'domino' effects on neighbouring states, and despite such dramatic events as the failed 1965 coup in Indonesia, or an occasional daring raid by Thai or west Malaysian Communists, it has actually tended to be only little analysed. Most frequently it is considered to be a part of a larger public policy problem of finding a viable domestic political format in a given South-east Asian nation. Or again it is seen as an extraneous oddity, some unassimilated feature of the national body politic the exact implications of which are only dealt with in passing. To study Communism in South-east Asia *per se* as if it had, just possibly, distinctive dynamics or objectives of its own, might even be considered suspect, though the central political reality of South-east Asia as a region today is that one segment of it is in fact Communist (if internally quarrelling) and the other part pursues relentlessly anti-Communist domestic policies. The reason for the suspicion, the present writer conjectures, may not be unrelated to certain attitudes in some academic and other intellectual circles in the West which regard preoccupation with Communism, even in a scholarly sense, as somehow reflecting an ideological bias on the part of the researcher. In short, the ghosts of the McCarthy era and of the Cold War even now tend to make the primary study of Communism somehow less respectable and attractive as a field also to younger scholars, notwithstanding its obvious importance.

The following pages are in no way intended to fill the relative lacunae in Communist studies on South-east Asia. This book is intended primarily as an introductory survey for the general reader, although it is hoped that here and there the specialist may also find matters of interest. Along with offering an historical introduction to party origins and developments in earlier decades of this century, the book also attempts to relate Communist tactics and appeals in individual South-east Asian countries to problems of the national political and economic environments in which they must operate. Some attempt is made to trace the paradoxes arising out of official domestic anti-Communist policies in the non-Communist segment of

* J. H. Brimmell, *Communism in South-east Asia: A Political Analysis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

South-east Asia with the current attempts to reach a new *modus vivendi* with the Communist states of Indochina. Two chapters seek to approach, in a comparative way, the programmatic themes, social appeals and organisational structures of the Communist parties themselves. Communists in China even before the formation of the People's Republic there, as well as of course the USSR, historically have influenced South-east Asia's Communism, and in recent years, particularly since the end of the Vietnam war, both Moscow and Peking appear to have altered their perceptions of the policies pursued by governments in the region. A separate chapter seeks to analyse this Soviet-Chinese-South-east Asian interplay, also in light of the current conflict between Hanoi and its Cambodian opponents. Throughout these pages an effort is made to deal with Communist and non-Communist South-east Asia as separate entities, which are now compelled by circumstance to find means of responding to each other's needs and interests.

Many have assisted me with comments and advice during the preparation of this book. But I would especially wish to express my appreciation to the library staff of the University of Bridgeport for its ever friendly readiness to obtain needed reference materials. I am also particularly grateful to Mrs Judith Augusta for a conscientious and careful typing of a difficult manuscript.

This book is for J.O., *isteri setiawan*.

Bridgeport, Connecticut

Justus M. van der Kroef

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>Preface</i> | vii |
| 1: Communism's rise in South-east Asia | 1 |
| A. Historical origins | 1 |
| B. The Communist victory in Indochina | 36 |
| C. A summing up: some characteristics of the Communist evolution | 58 |
| 2: The contemporary political environment | 70 |
| A. The non-Communist countries | 70 |
| B. Indochina | 113 |
| C. Summary: South-east Asian political patterns today | 126 |
| 3: Party programmes and tactics | 133 |
| A. Class, race, and religion | 133 |
| B. The special case of the students | 155 |
| C. Vietnam and Laos | 163 |
| D. Cambodia | 170 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 4: Party organisation and appeals | 177 |
| A. The organisational outreach | 177 |
| B. The problem of armed insurrection | 191 |
| C. Three models for the search for power | 202 |
| D. Indochina | 207 |
| 5: Between Peking and Moscow | 217 |
| A. Relations with People's China | 218 |
| B. ASEAN and Indochina | 235 |
| C. The influence of the USSR | 242 |
| D. The Indochina question and the world | 251 |
| 6: Conclusion: a look ahead | 261 |
| A bibliographical note: suggestions for further reading | 283 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 295 |
| <i>Index</i> | 330 |

Communism's rise in South-east Asia

A. Historical origins

When, during the second decade of the present century, Communist organisations began to appear in that part of the littoral and archipelagic region of the Far East that today is called South-east Asia, they had to come to terms with varied and widespread sentiments and movements of nationalism that had already taken root there over a number of years. Both the concept of a distinctive South-east Asian region, comprising Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and the Communist states of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, as well as the advent of nationalism in it, are linked to the historic impact of the West. Primarily since the sixteenth century, Western commercial contacts had gradually begun to evolve into patterns of colonial domination, from which only Thailand, of all the countries in the region, was to be formally exempt. Superimposed on or displacing indigenous South-east Asian cultures and political structures, that had been moulded in turn over the centuries by the religious, literary and feudal-bureaucratic heritage of neighbouring Hindu-Indian and Chinese civilisation, and still later by Islam, were the legal and administrative norms of the Western metropolitan powers – mainly England, the Netherlands, Spain, and France. The Western impact could be direct and incisive, touching religion, language, family values, law and organisation of the economy, as, for instance, in Spanish rule in Luzon. It could also proceed more gradually, making a virtue out of what came to be known as 'indirect rule' and which left the formal structure of the authority of the

indigenous rulers and of their feudal vassals, as well as the religious and legal lore of the rural folk, relatively untouched. British control in Burma and Peninsular Malaya was of this kind. In either case, however, decades before the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik seizure of power, the slowly widening impact of modern education and Western values through the matrices of colonial rule provided powerful nationalist impulses. Equally significant, however, especially in Indonesia and Malaya, was the influence around the turn of the century of Islamic modernism and reform movements, emanating from Cairo.

The emergence of new élites in the professions and commerce, and a resurgent political self-consciousness stirred by various international developments ranging from the 'Young Turk' movement in the dying decades of the Ottoman Empire, to Japan's victory in its war with Russia (1905), eventually found expression in a variety of nationalist organisations, or less structured movements. Some of these, like the so-called Katipunan (*Kataastaasan Kagalanggalang Katipunan ng Mga Anak Ng Bayan* – 'Highest and Most Respected Association of the Sons of the Nation') in the Philippines, founded in 1892, were essentially secular and dedicated to the attainment of independence from colonial rule by revolutionary means if necessary. Others like the *Budi Utomo* ('Noble Endeavour') in Indonesia, founded in 1908, reflected the interests of the Javanese aristocracy and concerned themselves primarily with educational development, social service, and the revival of 'native arts and sciences'. Yet others were impelled by the dominant religion in the country. Thus in the first two decades of the present century, Young Men's Buddhist Associations were organised in Burma, led by the Buddhist clergy. Interest in these associations soon shifted from promoting a religious and indigenous cultural revival, however, to problems of political independence. The *Kaum Muda* (literally 'Youthful People') in Malaya focused their interest on a modernisation of Islam, in harmony with Western science and principles of democratic and constitutional government and took their inspiration from the Malay language periodical *Al-Imam* ('The Leader') which began publishing in 1906. Still other Muslim groups, like the *Sarekat Islam* (Islamic Association) in Indonesia, founded in 1912, reflected the economic interests of Muslim merchants, landowners and petty industrialists and though at first proclaiming its loyalty to the Dutch colonial government, soon moved in a more radical direction.¹ In this mixture

it would be difficult to find much similarity in the substance of national development or independence, let alone in the methods to be used in achieving them.

Perhaps not surprisingly, from the beginning, controversy and uncertainty characterised the attitudes of most Bolshevik leaders and their Asian friends toward these and later nationalist manifestations in South-east Asia and, for that matter, in other colonial areas. Optimistically, when writing in *Pravda* in June 1913, Lenin had noted the 'spread of the revolutionary democratic movement' in the 'Dutch Indies' (Indonesia), and the 'amazing speed with which parties and unions' were being founded there. In this connection, Lenin projected an alliance of the 'proletariat of the European countries' with the 'young democracy of Asia'.² But as to just who the adherents of this 'young democracy' in Asia were, and in what way, specifically, they might be mobilised as allies in the struggle against 'imperialism' which Lenin, it will be recalled, viewed as the terminal stage of capitalism, soon became a matter of some dispute. For Lenin, the 'bourgeoisie' of what he called 'advanced Asia' was democratic and 'still siding with the people against reaction', whereas in 'backward Europe', he wrote, the 'decay' of the 'entire' bourgeoisie was evident, leaving the proletariat as the 'sole advanced class'³ there. The concept of collaboration with the bourgeoisie in the colonial independence struggle and in its 'democratic' movement, if temporary to be sure and requiring such execution as not to jeopardise the proletarian cause, was also endorsed by Lenin in his draft 'Theses on the National and Colonial Questions' presented to the Second Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) held in Moscow from 17 July to 7 August 1920. Lenin's views provoked dissent, however (notably from the Indian Communist delegate M. N. Roy), over the question of the reliability of those 'bourgeois democratic' movements in colonial areas which turned out to be not really 'revolutionary' after all, but merely reformist.⁴ Admittedly Lenin's revised theses urged the Comintern only to endorse 'revolutionary movements of liberation', but even so among the 'Supplementary Theses' on the 'National and Colonial Questions' adopted by the 1920 Comintern Congress one reads, among others, that (a) for the overthrow of foreign capitalism, which is 'the first step toward revolution in the colonies', the co-operation of 'the bourgeois nationalist revolutionary elements is useful', and (b) that while the leadership of the revolution should be in the hands of the Communist Party, 'the revolution in the colonies is

not going to be a communist revolution in its first stages', but will go through 'successive' periods of 'revolutionary experience'. Presumably this allowed a place for 'bourgeois' and 'democratic' elements, and indeed for a preliminary 'bourgeois-democratic' phase in a multi-stage revolutionary process.

Among the other important 'Theses on the National and Colonial Questions' adopted at the Second Comintern Congress which were to be of particular significance for South-east Asia were the condemnation of the 'pan-Islamic' movement (described as an attempt by Turkish 'imperialists' to strengthen their power) and of the 'reactionary medieval influences of the clergy', and the admonition to Communists to support 'the peasant movements in backward countries against the landowners and all feudal survivals'. The need to give these peasant movements a 'revolutionary character' was also stressed, along with a warning that it would be 'extremely erroneous in many of the oriental countries' to attempt to solve 'the agrarian problem' according to 'pure Communist principles'. Rather, according to these 'Theses', in the early stages of revolution, 'petty bourgeois reform clauses' including 'division of land' would have to be adopted. This did not mean, however, that revolutionary leadership would have to be surrendered to the 'bourgeois democrats'; on the contrary. Proletarian parties should continue vigorously to propagate the 'Soviet idea' and to organise 'peasants' and workers' Soviets as soon as possible'.⁵

All this was not merely idle theorising. For by the time that the Second Congress of the Comintern convened, and even as Bolshevik power was still struggling to consolidate itself in Russia, South-east Asia already had its first formal Communist Party. On 23 May 1920, the Communist Party of Indonesia (eventually called *Partai Komunis Indonesia* – PKI) had come into existence at a meeting in Semarang, Central Java, of a Marxist organisation, founded six years earlier, the *Indische Sociaal Democratische Vereeniging* (Indian, that is, Indonesian, Social Democratic Association). Initiatives for the founding of both the latter organisation and of the PKI (which is, in fact, the oldest Communist party in all Asia) had come from the redoubtable Dutch Communist H. J. F. M. Sneevliet, who as a Comintern representative under the name 'Maring' was also to play a role during the nineteen twenties in the Chinese Communist revolution. The party's initial programme was brief and poorly developed but by 1920 had become more specific. Not only creation of 'Soviets' (from the factory to the

provincial level) was demanded but also universal free education, the eight-hour working day, and freedom of speech and political action. From the start, the PKI had particular difficulties in implementing some of the Comintern's 'Theses'. For example, in the previously named Sarekat Islam, which had grown rapidly and by 1920 had tens of thousands of followers throughout Indonesia, including younger intellectuals attracted to modern Muslim reform organisations, the Comintern's attack on 'pan-Islamic' movements had come to be interpreted as an attack on Islam itself.⁶ A similar problem was eventually encountered in Malaya when such PKI (and Comintern) representatives as Tan Malaka began cautious attempts at proselytising there. The Comintern's criticism of 'reactionary medieval influences of the clergy' did the Communist cause no good either, nor could the rural Javanese bourgeoisie of Muslim landowners and small traders take much comfort from the Comintern's support of 'peasant movements' directed against them.

At the Fourth Comintern Congress held in Petrograd and Moscow (5 November to 5 December 1922), Tan Malaka raised the question of pan-Islamism again, declaring, in effect, that the pan-Islamic movement was a movement for national independence and hence wholly merited Communist support.⁷ But the Fourth Comintern Congress's 'Theses on the Eastern Question' still viewed pan-Islamism as but a means by which the Great Powers would be able to exploit the masses, and asserted that as the 'national liberation movement' grew, pan-Islamic 'watchwords' would be replaced by 'concrete political demands'.⁸ One should not exaggerate the Comintern's influence on the Indonesian Communists. But the Comintern leadership's apparent inability to perceive that pan-Islam's 'watchwords' were not mere slogans but also reflected something of the rising political self-consciousness and deep nationalist aspirations of the Muslim bourgeoisie, certainly was to contribute to the increasing polarisation between the PKI and the then most influential nationalist organisation in Indonesia, the Sarekat Islam. The polarisation seemed to diminish if not nullify the possibility of Communist participation in a bourgeois-democratic stage of political change.

Perhaps it would not have been possible, in any case, for the PKI to forge, however temporarily, a tactical alliance with the new Indonesian bourgeoisie in these formative years of nationalism and of prologue to the eventual Indonesian revolution. Even so, one might note that the Fourth Comintern Congress's sharp warning against the

'hybrid, imperfect and intermediate forms' of capitalism in the colonial countries, and against the obstacle presented to 'successful mass struggles there' by 'bourgeois democracy', seemed in marked contrast to the 1920 'Supplementary Theses' of the Second Comintern Congress urging Communist co-operation with the 'bourgeois nationalist revolutionary elements'. Even in supporting anti-imperialist 'national revolutionary movements', the Comintern advised in 1924 that a 'consistent revolutionary line' based on active mass support and on an 'unreserved break with all advocates of compromise with imperialism' was necessary. In Indonesia, despite the counsels of Tan Malaka, other PKI leaders were driving their young party into a sharp confrontation with virtually all other Indonesian groups, except those in the trade union movement in which the party had some influence.⁹ Committing itself according to its 'action programme' in 1924 to developing factory and village Soviets could have little practical significance and meant, in effect, the PKI's increasing isolation because it had little consistent outreach among the peasantry, even as its doctrinaire hostility to the more dynamic indigenously Indonesian 'bourgeois nationalist' elements, if anything, deepened further. In 1925, in response to a new Comintern directive, to be noted presently, the PKI was to change its tactics and become more sympathetic toward all those regardless of class who had nationalist aspirations. But by that time the damage was done.

In retrospect, the Comintern's early tactical counsels, or at least the spirit of these counsels, to what its 1924 'Theses on the Eastern Question' – *pace* Lenin – now chose to call the 'backward East', contributed in the case of Indonesian Communists to that hothouse atmosphere of revolutionism which Lenin had already castigated as 'an infantile disorder' and which was to be a factor in the débâcle, in 1926, of the first of the PKI's three coup attempts in its history thus far. Whether Comintern leaders in the absence of frequent and regular contact with Communists *in situ*, particularly those in its Executive Committee (EKKI), had an altogether realistic perception of the social and political changes taking place in South-east Asia may well be doubted.

Moreover, not South-east Asia – and certainly not its individual countries – but China held the spotlight of their concern. It sometimes seemed as if South-east Asia was considered a mere appendage of China in Comintern strategic thinking and the early founding of the PKI owed more to Sneevliet's initiatives than to Comintern direction.

Chinese Communists figured prominently in developing the Communist movement in the region not least because it was believed that the communities of Overseas Chinese in the various South-east Asian countries (numbering in all an estimated 2.8 million by 1925) offered a useful recruiting ground. Thus in 1923, six cadres of the Chinese Communist Party, led by Lin Xue (Lin Hsueh), left Shanghai to begin their proselytising among the Thai Chinese, and in 1925, upon Tan Malaka's suggestion, the Chinese Communist Party in Guangzhou (Canton) sent its representative, one Fu Ta-ching to Singapore and Malaya to work among Chinese there and to maintain contact also with PKI representatives. The Lin Hsueh and Fu Ta-ching missions were to lay the basis for the subsequent founding of the Thai and Malayan Communist parties, respectively. The Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai meanwhile funnelled Chinese Communist organisers into the Malayan branches of the Kuomintang party. These branches were major Overseas Chinese support groups for the Kuomintang with adherents in the Singapore-Malayan area as well as in Indonesia. In an evident bid both to strengthen its hold on South-east Asia's Chinese and to provide co-ordination generally for the Communist movement in the South-east Asian region, including Communist-led labour unions in Indonesia and Malaya, the Chinese Communist Party, in 1926, formed a 'South Seas Committee'. The latter group sought to maintain contact with 'national revolutionary' organisations in Indochina, Burma, Thailand, Malaya, and Indonesia. But within two years the disastrous PKI coup attempt in west Java and west Sumatra, as well as the break between the Kuomintang and the Communists in China, necessitated still closer direction. By early 1928, at the Comintern's urging, fresh Chinese Communist organisers had been sent to Malaya. These, building on local Communist-led trade unions and radical Chinese student groups in Malaya, but also charged with wider organisational concerns, began developing a more structured, intra-South-east Asian Communist regional grouping called the *Nanyang-kung-ch'an-tang* or 'South Seas Communist Party'.¹⁰

With the PKI lying shattered, all Communists and their sympathisers not only in Indonesia but also in Malaya and indeed as far away as Indochina, Burma, Thailand and the Philippines as well, were at least formally expected to adhere to this party and its predominantly Chinese Communist leadership. A degree of nationalist resentment of this regional and Chinese-dominated party struc-