A Summary of Malaysia-Singapore History

Sunday 21 October 2007, by KHOO Agnes (Date first published: September 2007).


1786 — The British gradually colonised the Malayan Peninsula (including Singapore). Malay State officials and masses resisted British control but were brutally suppressed

1900 — Malaya experiences economic boom because of growth in the tin mining industries and rubber production. Chinese and Indian migrants brought from China and India to work in tin mines and rubber estates respectively

1930 — Great Depression - Malaya also suffered

1937 — Japan invaded China, widespread resistance against Japanese invasion among people in Malaya, especially the overseas Chinese

1941 — Japan invaded Malaya, mass uprising against the invasion in Malaya. Despite the initial reluctance of the British colonial government to train and arm the local resistance, they finally did train several hundreds of Malaysians in Singapore. After the military training, they were sent to the Peninsula to establish the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA)

1941-45 — Japan occupied Malaya, anti-Japanese war continued

1945 — Japan surrendered; the MPAJA took over the government of the Peninsula temporarily. In certain mining and plantation areas, the communist red flags were raised

1946 — The British colonial government returned to resume control over the country through harsher repression and persecution of the left wing, communist forces and by taking back control over the tin mines and rubber estates, which is the main economic source of the country

20 June 1948 — British colonial government declared Martial Law over Peninsula Malaya and Singapore with mass arrests under the Emergency Ordinance Regulations. The British banned communist-controlled trade unions and organizations in Malaya and Singapore. Freedom of movement, speech, assembly and publications were severely curtailed. Internal Security Act (ISA) gives the authority, power to detain anyone suspected of being a communist or a national security threat, and they can be detained without trial indefinitely. Compulsory identity card system was introduced to control people’s movement. The Societies Act was implemented to register and control all social and civic organizations and political parties. The Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) took up arms again

1949 — People’s Republic of China established under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

1950 — Communist agents tried to assassinate the British Governor Gimson but failed. The British colonial government implemented the School Registration Ordinance to stem out communist influences in Chinese schools. Under the ordinance, police could search any Chinese schools for communist documents, arrest students and teachers and close down the school.
1951 — In Singapore, the police arrested leftwing groups such as the Singapore Teachers’ Union, Singapore Cooperative Society, the University of Malaya and its students, as well as journalists. Also raided Chinese schools and detained the students, including Lim Chin Siong who later became a well-known Trade Union leader in Singapore. He was detained under the ISA twice, first by the British colonial government and then later by the Singapore government, after being successfully elected into the Singapore Parliament. He was the youngest parliamentarian at the age of 22. After his second arrest and release, he went into exile in Britain until his return to Singapore in the 1980s.

The British repression of Chinese schools prompted the Chinese in Malaya to raise funds to build a private Chinese-medium University - Nanyang University which was abolished by Lee Kuan Yew in the 1970s. Nanyang University becomes today’s Nanyang Technical University because Lee Kuan Yew wants to build closer economic ties with China after it began its economic reforms under ex-Premier Deng Xiao Ping.

When the British government began drafting Singapore youths for military training to fight the CPM forces, the Singapore Chinese students organized class boycotts, demonstrations and refused to enlist. This struggle against national military service led to the occupation of the Chinese High School in Singapore for one month. During this time, the students established the leftwing Singapore Chinese Middle School Students’ Union but was not legalised until 1955. Students’ resistance continued from 1950s to the 1970s in Singapore.

October 1951 The CPM tried to build a united anti-colonial front through constitutional means and in urban areas by taking part in lawful political and social activities. Leftwing and communist elements were active in the Anti-British League (ABL). Those dissidents who were detained during colonial and post colonial times had included students, journalists, writers, lawyers, artists, workers and trade unionists.

1954 — In Singapore, The Labour Front, affiliated to the Singapore Trades Union Congress won the majority in the elections and went on to form the government

13 May 1954 — 900 Chinese school students demonstrated against the military draft near the Governor’s House and 48 were arrested for unlawful assembly and rioting. This was how Lee Kuan Yew began his contacts with leftwing groups and mass organizations in Singapore by becoming the students’ defence lawyer. Through this, he got to know leftwing leaders and trade unionists who later formed the People’s Action Party (PAP) with him. However, Lee turned against these leaders when he came into power.

1955 — CPM guerrilla forces retreated northwards to the Thai-Malaysian border. The historical Baling Peace Talk between Tunkul Abdul Rahman (Prime Minster of Malaya), David Marshall (Chief Minister of Singapore) and the CPM broke down because of Tunkul and Marshall’s insistence on an unconditional surrender by the CPM

Singapore was given limited self-government with David Marshall as its Chief Minister and he remained in office for only 14 months. He resigned after the British government rejected his proposal for full independence of Singapore. Britain insisted on retaining control over Singapore’s defence, external affairs and internal security. Marshall was succeeded by an anti-communist Lim Yew Hock who began to arrest leftwing leaders in Singapore. These arrests allowed the moderates like Lee Kuan Yew and his group to strengthen themselves in PAP. Lee Kuan Yew secretly worked with the colonial Chief Secretary, William Goode and the Chief Minister, Lim Yew Hock to eliminate leftwing influence within the PAP. Lim Yew Hock was subsequently charged with corruption and escaped from Singapore. Until today, nobody knew where he is.

In Malaya, The Alliance Party in Malaya comprising three communal parties, each representing the Malays, Chinese and Indians won the elections. The Malay Party, United Malays National organization (UMNO) is the dominant party in this coalition. This Alliance Government is made up of UMNO – MCA (Malayan Chinese Association) and the MIC (Malayan Indian Congress). They won all seats except one. The only opposition went to the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PAS). This Islamic Party is today in power in the State of Kelantan, Malaysia.
31 August 1957 — The British government finally transferred power to UMNO-led coalition and Malaya became independent. This coalition has remained in power until today.

1957 — Leftwing and communist parties and mass movements were severely repressed and the CPM went underground. The British allowed the nationalist and communalist parties in Malaya to take over and reluctantly granted Malaya independent. But Britain retained control over its economy, internal security and the military. Independent Malaya upholds Malay special rights, Islam became the official religion and the Malay Rulers became constitutional monarchs. In return, the Chinese and Indians could become citizens of the newly independent country.

1959 — In Singapore, the People’s Action Party (PAP) led by Lee Kuan Yew ousted the Labour Front led by Lim Yew Hock in the Singapore General Election and went on to form a majority government. Both Labour Front and PAP were anti-communist even though they collaborated with the communists and other leftists to gain electoral support. The leftwing faction of the PAP finally bolted out of the party and formed the Socialist Front (Barisan Socialis).

The CPM did not intend to capture political power in Singapore since it has always considered Singapore as part of Malaya and not as an independent entity. However, its cadres, members and sympathizers were successful in influencing trade unions and mass movements inside Singapore and commanded enormous popularity among the grassroots.

In Malaya, the left secured several seats in the country’s Parliament and swept most of the town council elections, from the 1960s onwards.

1948-1960 — The British sent a Commonwealth army comprising of soldiers from Fiji, Britain, New Zealand, Australia and Nepal to control Malaya

1960 — The General Secretary of the CPM, Chin Peng left for Beijing, China and remained there for 29 years, alongwith several members of its Central Committee

August 1961 — The leftwing faction of the Lee Kuan Yew-led People’s Action Party (PAP) in Singapore left and formed the Barisan Socialis, taking with them 70% of PAP’s rank and file. Control of almost all PAP offices and branches fell into Barisan’s hands. They opposed the merger of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore to form the Federation of Malaysia which they saw as an anti-communist British plot.

The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), the Indonesian government under Sukharno and the People’s Republic of China condemned the Malaysia concept as a ‘neo-colonial’ plot, which would allow Britain to decolonize and yet help it to retain its colonial influence within Malaysia

1 September 1962 — In Singapore, PAP held a referendum to allow the people of Singapore to decide on the issue of merger within Malaysia. However, PAP only won through manipulation in the process. After this, the British authorities immediately arrested all the leftists in Barisan Socialis.

2 February 1963 — In Singapore, the police launched Operation Cold Store using the ISA, more than 110 trade unionists and opposition leaders including those from Barisan Socialis were arrested. With this move, Lee Kuan Yew consolidated his power inside PAP and in Singapore. PAP remains in power until today.

1960-1968 — Broad leftist alliances formed and were active and successful in Malaysia and Singapore. The British responded by even greater repression over social movements in Singapore and Malaysia, leading to mass arrests and deportations. The government repression also succeeded in dividing the left movement along ethnic lines.

September 1963 — The Federation of Malaysia was formed despite leftwing opposition. The British colonial government manipulated the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, comprising of Malaya Peninsula, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak, with the cooperation of pro-Britain and pro-West local leaders,
just before Malaya’s independence.

Confrontasi, an episode of political and military tensions escalated between Indonesia (under the leadership of its Nationalist leader, Sukharno) and Malaysia as a result. Indonesia considered the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia as a western plot against the interests of Indonesia. Indonesian troops parachuted into Johor State (in Peninsula Malaysia) and infiltrated across Kalimantan in Borneo into the State of Sarawak.

1964 — The controversy over the formation of Malaysia continued to divide most political parties and resulted in a swing in votes in favour of the left and the opposition in the municipal elections. The Alliance Government led by UMNO responded by suspending all local elections for an indefinite period. Ethnic riot erupted in Singapore

1965 — The PAP under Lee Kuan Yew tried to push communal interests and issues to the forefront of Malaysian politics until finally the UMNO-dominated Alliance government decided to expel Singapore from Malaysia. Singapore and Lee Kuan Yew had no choice but to declare independence.

Sukharto instigated a coup d’état against Sukharno and imposed military rule over Indonesia with the support and help of the USA. Massacres of the leftists including members and sympathizers of the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) took place. Until today, the real figure of people killed is still unknown.

9 August 1965 — Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia and declared itself independent

1969 — Ethnic riot erupted in Malaysia

1970s — Indochina (i.e. Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) became Communist. Student Movements in Malaysia and Singapore were again at its peak, also in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries

1965 – 1975 — China’s Cultural Revolution

May 1976 — The Socialist International decided to expel the Singapore PAP government because of its authoritarian rule and repression inside Singapore

1989 — Haadyai (Hatayai) Peace Agreement reached between the CPM, Thai and Malaysian governments

REFERENCES

