The communist threat in perspective

Political science academic Bliveer Singh has just published a book Quest For Political Power: Communist Subversion and Militancy in Singapore (Marshall Cavendish, 2015), He distills the book’s findings in this article for The Straits Times.

A blown-up car in Singapore on Dec 20, 1974. The Malaysian communists in the car were on their way to plant bombs at the home of a factory managing director — but one of the bombs accidentally blew up. The communists were most active in the 1950s and 1960s, and it was only after Dec 2, 1959 — when the declared Malayan Communist Party signed peace accords — that 43 years of armed conflict, subversion and militancy targeted at Singapore and Malaysia ended.

The communist threat in perspective

ON DEC 2, 1959, the outlawed Malayan Communist Party (MCP) signed peace accords with the Malayan government, committing itself to ending 41 years of armed conflict, subversion and militancy and to end all acts of violence and terror against the state.

Three weeks earlier, the Berlin Wall had collapsed, unravelling the iron curtain that had separated Europe from Asia. China and Singapore. It also marked the end of the Cold War between the communist bloc and capitalist blocs in Union/China and the Free World led by the United States.

With the 29th anniversary of the signing of the peace accords and ongoing discourse about the communist threat in Singapore in newspapers, blogs and websites, it may be timely to reflect on the nature of the communist threat, what it was all about and why the international communist movement collapsed in 1959 in Malaysia under prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Labour front governments in Singapore under prime ministers David Marshall, Lim Yew Hock and the People’s Action Party (PAP) government under Lee Kuan Yew and his successors, were able to succeed in subduing and deporting those who wanted to establish communist governments in Malaysia.

Six aspects of the communist threat to Singapore are worth noting.

Foreign proxy

FIRST, the MCP was a foreign import in Malaya and Singapore, and a proxy for foreign powers. Following the international resolution in Russia in 1917, the Bolsheviks were against the Communist International or Comintern with the aim of forming similar communist political systems abroad.

The MCP was set up in 1930 although communists had already been active since the mid-1920s. While there was no direct influence from the Comintern, for the most part, the MCP was the Communist Party that existed in the region. It was this serious issue in the region that led to the Malayan Communist Party, which began in 1941, by proxy battles being fought in many countries for political, economic and ideological control.

In the age of rising nationalism and independence, the MCP and its sympathizers or people would allow the existence of the communist movement that was beholden or obligated to a foreign government or political entity, as this would undermine the independence and sovereignty.

Communist order

SECOND, the MCP was totally dedicated to the setting up of a political system based on Marxist-Leninist-Maoism. It adopted the communist strategy of violent struggle and unframed tactics of terror, a characteristic of the Comintern and a general agenda of terror to seize power in order to establish a political-economic system model and, later, the Chinese communist system. It was intended on destroying the existing political order in Malaya viewed as neo-colonial, and was dedicated to establish what it regarded as a “progressive” and inevitable political-economic system.

But the communist systems in the 1950s and 1960s were anything but progressive, enlightened, intersectional systems. In the Malayan and Indonesian revolutions, and Mao Zedong’s Great Leap Forward, the totalitarian state controlled, the brutal suppression of religion and civil liberties, the misery and deprivation suffered by the people, and failed economic system did nothing to endure the free world towards it.

Armed struggle

THIRD, the MCP attempted to impose communist rule in Singapore and Malaya by force. There is a tendency in some current writings to ignore or downplay the fact that the MCP was a militant political organization that resorted to acts of violence and terror to achieve its political goals.

It had established armed regiments to fight the national armed forces of Malaysia, and “mobile units” to carry out assassinations in Malaya and Singapore.

The communist threat was relentless, attacking thousands of others and disabled for life. It is mainly for this reason that Malayan communist services and their families as well as the political leadership offered to the late MCP secretarial general Chin Peng’s return to Singapore, not even his remains.

Subversive methods

FOURTH, the MCP adopted subversive methods to capture political power. This included the infiltration of open and legal organisations such as political parties, trade unions, student movements and social-cultural organisations to instigate strikes, protests and demonstrations to create a revolutionary environment and destabilise Malaya and Singapore.

Students and workers were mobilised to support acts of terror and protest actions that resulted in riots and civil disorder, deaths and destruction of property.

The MCP’s penetration of the PAP was its most ambitious undertaking as success would mean capture of the party and government of Singapore and the establishment of a base from which to subvert Malaya and accomplish its political goal of establishing a communist Malaya.

‘Useful idiots’

FIFTH, in the process of trying to capture control left-leaning students, labour and political organisations, the MCP implicated many individuals who, though not party members, were either sympathisers, fellow travellers or “useful idiots”, a term coined in the 1940s by a former secretary-general of the Comintern.

They were effectively part of the communist web and political-military-ideological machinery to overthrow the constitutionally elected governments of Malaysia and Singapore to establish a communist state.

Given the subversion and violence of the MCP, the authorities in Singapore and Malaysia took no chances and made no distinction between MCP members and those who were involved in its unframed front organisations in one way or another. All were liable to be arrested, questioned and investigated.

These involved in subversive and violent activities were detained for a period of time while those who were marginally involved were released.

The communal card

LASTLY, in its endeavour to capture political power in Singapore, the MCP played the communal card, a dangerous strategy in a multicultural society. Knowing how dear Chinese education, language and culture were to the Singaporean Chinese, the communists exploited these issues to the hilt to win the support of the Chinese-speaking community in the 1940s and 1960s. By appealing to Chinese communal issues, the MCP, a mainly ethnic Chinese political organisation, rallied the Chinese middle-school students, Nanyang University students and the majority Chinese-speaking community against the authorities.

Singapore’s statute books for the foreseeable future. Second, the opposition to the ISA has also been encouraged by efforts to challenge the establishment’s account of what happened in the 1950s and 1960s. The dominant discourse in Singapore is that the MCP, from the 1940s through to the 1960s, was an anti-colonialist organisation that posed an existential threat to the security of Malaya and Singapore. It aimed to seize control through armed struggle and a united-front strategy to tap into the communist state. Due to this dangerous threat, many political leaders, and Chief Minister Lee Kuan Yew who was the director of the MCP’s Eu Hooi Yip and Tong Chong Pik who was the PAP, directed the government to use the ISA, as well as other laws and activities, according to the Singapore government’s narrative about the threat posed by the MCP and its united-front organisation.

Given the MCP’s own testimony, it would be a gargantuan task to argue that it was not a serious threat in the 1940s and 1960s, that it did not aim to capture political power in Singapore, and that its principal united-front organisation, the Karen Social, was just an ordinary left-wing political party.

The crucial matter is that the MCP did try to capture power in Singapore through subversion and militancy, and failed as it was effectively courted by the government, the government of the day and rejected by the ISA.

After four decades of armed struggle, murder and terror, the MCP saw the futility of its efforts, and admitted defeat in the jungle, oven in the open, in the courts and in the political arena.

Thus, the hearts and minds of Singaporeans and the international community of constant class struggle, conflict and resolution. The MCP’s cessation of hostilities in 1949 was timely, coinciding with the decline of international communism and the end of the Cold War. For Singapore, these momentous developments marked the end of an era, putting an end to the serious threat to peace and stability.

As Singapore celebrates the half-century mark of its independence, it faced many challenges, including West-British colonialism, racial and religious strife, Indian Constitution and, most importantly, the communist threat.

One of the things that these threats have meant for Singapore’s DNA is that it has developed a unique capacity that can be mined to build internal heritage that would serve it well as it faces the challenges of its independent existence.