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Communism in South East Asia

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Abstract and Keywords

In South East Asia the Marxist message came primarily to address issues of nation-building. The article traces the development of communist parties from their early diasporic networks and engagement with the Comintern, to their relations with the colonial powers, to the establishment of communist-ruled states after the Second World War, through to the Cold War and US efforts to contain communism. The article looks at the various forms that communism took in the region, from hybrid Chinese associations in British Malaya and Hồ Chí Minh's Indochina network, to the constitutional party of Sukarno's Indonesia, to the semi-Buddhist Burmese Way to Socialism of Ne Win, to the neo-dynastic communism of Pol Pot. Special attention is paid to the interplay between nationalism, internationalism, and communism.

Keywords: South East Asia, diasporic networks, Cold War, nationalism, internationalism, communism, Hồ Chí Minh, Burmese socialism, Pol Pot, Malayan Communist Party

> Marxism-Leninism cannot have national forms
>
> Soviet publication from 1980[2]

South East Asia the Marxist message, originally intended to address issues of class, came primarily to address issues of nation-building in a region where nations did not exist prior to the twentieth century. The nation-state was the product of externally-induced and internally-generated forces of modernity. Relatively unified kingdoms had existed historically in Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia; but the key spur to nation-building derived from the fact that all countries in the region, with the exception of Thailand, came under colonial rule. Nation-states only came into existence, however, as a result of the decolonization that followed the Second World War. An entity such as

Malaya, for example, was a federation of princely states under British rule that was neither politically nor ethnically homogeneous. It was the communist movement, mainly as it developed during the Second World War, that was critical not only in defining nationalist struggles politically—whether against the Western or Japanese colonizers—but also in articulating relations between ethnic groups not only in Malaya but in other new nations. Within traditional systems of tributary politics, such as were entrenched in Laos and Cambodia, complex hierarchies of ethnic groups existed. In Laos, for example, admittedly an extreme case, there were some sixty ethnic groups. The paradox of communism, an internationalist ideology par excellence, was that it served as midwife to ethnically homogenizing nation-states. At the same time, it served as an ideology that provided Western-trained intelligentsias and sometimes hereditary elites with a means to link their local political, economic, and social struggles to international developments and thus gain symbolic legitimation and material resources for their local concerns. It also promised the possibility that newly created nation-states might skip the capitalist stage of development. Yet one consequence of the role that communism played in forging nation-states in South East Asia was that after the Second World War, in Indochina, the 'elder brothers' of the communist movement in the region—China (p. 237) and Vietnam—would vie for influence. In a bitter irony, by the 1970s, supposedly internationalist communist parties would end up going to war against one another: Vietnam and Cambodia entered into conflict from 1973, Vietnam eventually invading Cambodia in 1978; and China and pro-Soviet Vietnam would clash in 1979.[3]

In mainland South East Asia, the first communist organizations were created by Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants whose vision of communism in the region was shaped by the cultural ecumenes associated respectively with imperial China and with the tributary system dominated by the Vietnamese.[4] Early Chinese communists sought to emancipate all the oppressed peoples of what they called the Nanyang region, a term meaning 'southern seas', that was coterminous with the region of the Chinese diaspora in South East Asia. The fact that Vietnamese communists originally called their party the Indochinese Communist Party, reflected Vietnamese aspirations to retain their influence across the relatively borderless system they had dominated historically.[5] This issue of naming adumbrated post-war nationalist developments. The change of name from the Nanyang Communist Party to Malayan Communist Party (MCP) influenced the emergence of Malayan nationalism; similarly, the change of name from Indochinese to Vietnamese Communist Party helped articulate a sense of Vietnamese national identity. One result of this was that ethnic groups that had traditionally been subordinate within the tributary systems remained alienated from emergent communist movements, some allying with anti-Communist political forces, such as the Japanese in the case of Burma or Cambodia, or the Malays in the case of British Malaya, or the USA in the case of the Hmong, which allowed them to articulate their own vision of nationhood.

Communist organizations in South East Asia were shaped by older cultural traditions and patterns of association. In Vietnam millennarian tendencies within Buddhism shaped the implantation of communist ideas. In Cambodia communists used the dynastic name of Kampuchea to give focus to their national liberation struggle. Similarly, ingrained associational patterns of kinship and study circles shaped the early communist movement. The MCP, for example, functioned in many ways like an overseas association of Chinese in Malaya. More generally, communism performed a function similar to that which text-based religions played in the millennium up to the nineteenth century, when these religions helped to promote the integration of small scattered polities into the centralized and relatively homogeneous kingdoms of Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam.[6] In a similar fashion, communist activity and discourse helped to forge the diffuse social and ethnic groups that had once existed within the loosely bordered polities of the region into nation-states defined by a dominant ethnicity and by borders that had first been drawn by the European colonial powers.

Yet despite the congruence between traditional ecumenes and the broad early visions of the Chinese and Vietnamese communists, from the first the Comintern favoured ‘national’ parties. One of the Twenty-One Conditions laid down in 1920 for parties to become affiliates of the Comintern was that a party should bear the name of a country.[7] In 1930 the Nanyang Communist Party gave way to more ‘national, parties, including the Communist Party of Indochina, led by Hồ Chí Minh, the Malayan Communist Party, and the Communist Party of Siam. A Taiwanese party was established in 1928, (p. 238) which was destroyed by arrests in 1931–4; and a Philippines party was created in 1930, with a close connection to the Communist Party of the USA. In some colonies, communist parties had close ties with those in the metropole. In the Dutch East Indies, Tan Malaka’s communist movement enjoyed the support of Dutch communists, and Hồ Chí Minh had backing from the French Communist Party. Yet this was not always the case: Japanese communists never truly supported the Taiwanese Communist Party, and British communists had no connections with the MCP. In addition, Hồ Chí Minh, the MCP, and the Taiwan Communist Party all complained that they received insufficient support from the Comintern.

The Origins: Communist Immigrant Networks in the Interwar Internationalist Moment

The Comintern did its best to control communist movements in South East Asia, but its ability to impose its will was limited by poor communications, insufficient financial and logistical support, interception of its directives by the authorities, and by periodic arrests

of militants. Notorious in this respect was the raid in 1931 by the International Settlement police on the Comintern's Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai, which was responsible for guiding the work of the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, Indochinese, Philippine, and Malayan communist parties. Finally, not least of the problems faced by the Comintern, was that its directives always had to be adapted by communist parties to domestic traditions and local circumstances.

Throughout Asia, the early communist movement used diasporic networks. The 'missionaries' of communism included Vietnamese in south China; Chinese in Japan, France, and Germany; Koreans in Russia; Japanese in the USA; and Indians in Burma.[8] These early networks had some affinities with global networks that were being developed at this time by such groups as Buddhists and Protestant missionaries, in that they internationalized a redemptive ideology at the same time as they indigenized it, using local and non-local cultural resources.[9] In a country such as Vietnam, communism vied with new forms of Confucianism and Buddhism that were also responses to the challenges of colonialism, that also promised national salvation, and that also operated in the modern public sphere.[10]

A certain Social Darwinist element crept into the discourse of the early communist movement, a sense that the Versailles peace settlement had entrenched the power of the 'fittest' nations and that the weakest were in danger of going to the wall. Communism presented itself as the key to ensuring the defeat of imperialism and the right of nations to determine their own future. At the same time, something of the same Social Darwinist spirit could be glimpsed in a communist tendency to perceive a hierarchy of nations or races. The Comintern organized Chinese worker unions in Russia in order (p. 239) to awaken them from their 'Chinese passivity'.[11] Chinese communists saw the Malays as lacking 'national consciousness' and sought to move Malayan civilization to a higher stage by bringing Malays into the party. Similarly, at least until the 1950s, Laotian and Cambodian communists resented the attitudes of cultural superiority assumed by many Vietnamese within the Indochinese Communist Party.[12] Such attitudes were reminiscent of those that had structured tributary politics in earlier times.

Yet the visions of Chinese and Vietnamese communists in the interwar period helped shape the nations that emerged with decolonization after 1945. During the Second World War the communist parties played a key role in resistance to the Japanese and in so doing helped root in the populace an idea of the nation. The Chinese, whether oriented towards the Guomindang or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—and the two were in alliance during the Second World War—helped to propagate through their active participation in the anti-Japanese resistance a conception of the nation as an entity organized around a strong bureaucratic state with clearly defined borders. In general, communist

understandings of nationhood proved more successful than less statist conceptions, such as ideas based on the Muslim community, the Malay *bangsa*, or ideas proffered by the millennarian religions such as Cao Dai and Hoa Hao in Vietnam, whose pan-Asianism caused them to side with Japan in the war against French colonial rule.

At the same time, while they were crucial in promoting nationalism, communist networks encouraged visions of a pan-regional, pan-Asian, or a global future. Such visions were not confined to Asia, as is evidenced by African immigrants in France and the USA who at the same time were contemplating the establishment of a Black International. In Paris, especially, different anti-colonial movements intersected: Hồ Chí Minh and Lamine Senghor established an Inter-Colonial Union in 1921, close to the French Communist Party. Such initiatives prepared the ground for post-1945 regional organizations, such as the Pan-African Congress.[13] They also facilitated the 'division of labour' agreed between Stalin and Liu Shaoqi in 1949, in which Stalin proposed that China take responsibility for promoting revolution in the East, while the Soviet Union would remain responsible for revolution in the West.[14]

The 1920s and 1930s: The First National Communist Parties

The first communist party organized in Asia was the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in 1920. It was also the earliest party to stage an armed rebellion—against Dutch colonial rule in 1926—and the first to be bloodily suppressed. Dutch communist Hendrick Sneevliet, who was active in the Dutch East Indies labour movement, was the godfather of the policy of the united front between 'nationalists' and 'communists' which he later persuaded the Comintern to apply in China. Typical of the first generation of locally produced communist leaders was Tan Malaka (1897–1949), who became chair of (p. 240) the PKI in December 1921. As a Western-educated intellectual who trained as a teacher and worked periodically as a journalist, he typified the new breed of indigenous nationalist intellectual. His career exemplifies, too, the diasporic range of his revolutionary activities. Convinced as a young man that the Dutch East Indies must be freed through revolution, he trained as a teacher in the Netherlands, returning to Indonesia in 1919. He became active in the revolutionary movement in Sumatra and Java, where in 1920 he set up a people's school affiliated to the nationalist organization, Sarekat Islam. As a consequence of his revolutionary activism, he was deported to the Netherlands, where in 1922 he stood as a Communist Party candidate in parliamentary elections. By October 1922 he had arrived in Moscow, where he stayed for more than a year before being sent in December 1923 to Canton, as Comintern representative for South East Asia. By July 1925 he had moved to Manila, where he was in contact with the

Progressive Workers' Party, thence on to Bangkok. Following the abortive uprising by the PKI in 1926, he fell out with them and founded a new party, the Partai Republik Indonesia. In August 1927 he returned to Manila, where he was arrested, an act that galvanized Filipino nationalists in protest. Following deportation to China, he seems to have dropped out of revolutionary activity for a few years, but by 1931 he was reportedly working once again for the Comintern, based in Shanghai. In 1942 Tan Malaka finally returned to Indonesia after Japan occupied the Malay peninsula. There he would acquire prestige as a brave opponent of collaboration with the Japanese and later of the reimposition of Dutch rule.[15]

Other revolutionary movements used diasporic networks similar to those used by Tan Malaka. The Vietnamese Communist Party originated in a 'frontier enclave', Canton, which was then the revolutionary base of the Guomindang and its Soviet advisers.[16] Hồ Chí Minh organized a communist youth group, Thanh Nien, in the city, while working together with Fu Daqing as an interpreter and an assistant of Mikhail Borodin, the Soviet adviser in the city. Fu Daqing, born in Jiangxi province, had become fluent in English at a missionary school and had been trained for three years at the University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow.[17] Ho and Fu would go on to found the MCP in 1930. After the collapse of the United Front in southern China in 1927, Hồ moved his networks back to Siam where they had been before the relocation to Canton in 1925. In Siam Chinese and Vietnamese networks intersected. After the formation of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930, Hồ Chí Minh lobbied to ensure that it remained under the Comintern bureau in Shanghai rather than under the Chinese-led Nanyang Party in Singapore.[18]

The Comintern relied on Chinese communist networks, as well as a network of seamen, for communication with the parties in South East Asia.[19] In the late 1920s, cells belonging to the CCP, consisting mainly of immigrants from Guangdong and Fujian, were created in many places throughout South East Asia including Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Phnom Penh.[20] In 1939, during the war against Japan, Zhou Enlai was able to use the newly established Southern Bureau of the CCP in Chongqing to build the anti-Japanese United Front among Chinese communists in South East Asia, partly using Comintern networks established in the 1930s. A similar network was that based on Indian migrants. Indian immigrants were the first communists in Burma, (p. 241) which remained a province of British India until 1937. Between 1930 and 1938 Burma experienced a wave of student, worker, and peasant turbulence in the course of which the Dobama movement emerged to demand independence from British rule. Based largely on radical students, it was influenced by socialist ideas coming from India and from Burmese in London. It was out of this that the Burmese Communist Party (CPB) emerged in 1939, following the mass labour and students protests known as the '1300

revolution', 1300 being the year 1938, according to the Burmese calendar. Bengali intellectuals played a significant role in the formation of the party.[21]

The MCP, founded in 1930, exemplifies the centrality of transnational networks to the growth of communism in South East Asia. Chinese communists started to come to Malaya from the early 1920s and established the Nanyang Regional Committee of the CCP in 1926.[22] A key element in their discourse at this stage was an emphasis on overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) as an oppressed people of the colonial world. This idea emanated from the time when Sun Yat-sen was seeking support from overseas Chinese and other Asian nationalists for his revolution against the Qing dynasty. The Chinese communists continued this theme, orienting to native-place organizations formed in the Chinese diaspora, yet promoting the idea of a unified Chinese nation. The CCP welcomed the creation of the MCP, seeing in it the continuing internationalization of the Chinese revolution and nationalism. For their part, however, Chinese leaders of the MCP saw the foundation of the MCP as an opportunity to establish autonomy from the CCP. In propagating an idea of a Malayan nation, generally referred to by its Chinese name of malaiya minzu, it helped embed the MCP in the local environment and transformed it into a vehicle of Malayan nationalism. In this it had some support from the Comintern, which wanted the MCP, based in Singapore, to become the hub of its network in South East Asia, a means to revive the PKI and to spread communist influence into India and Burma. In pushing the MCP to establish connections across the region, the Comintern fostered intraregional links of Chinese communist cells that were rather hybrid in character. As a result, by the outbreak of the war with Japan in 1937, when the Guomindang and the CCP re-established a united front, the CCP had at its disposal a network of connections, loose and incomplete to be sure, through which it could cooperate with the communist parties in South East Asia. All this serves to show how complex was the interplay between internationalism and nationalism in the region.

The Comintern, like the Guomindang and CCP in the late 1920s, encouraged the involvement of non-Chinese in the MCP. Yet up to the Second World War, the membership of the MCP barely exceeded 1500 and the number of Malays in the party was negligible, as was that of Indians. In Singapore, moreover, Chinese communists failed to connect with Indonesian communists who had escaped to Malaya from Dutch repression after the PKI was suppressed. In 1930, 20 per cent of its members were categorized as 'liberal businessmen', but it had also a significant number of shop and restaurant employees and servants in the houses of foreigners in its ranks. Under the British the party was illegal and its leaders were subject to periodic arrest and persecution. Nevertheless the MCP organized several strikes, notably at the Batu Arang coal mine in 1937.[23] In April 1939, Lai Teck, noted for his strong grasp of Marxist theory,

became (p. 242) general secretary of the MCP, but he was to be exposed in 1946 as a triple agent of the French, British, and Japanese.

To a certain extent, the rise of the MCP was influenced by Guomindang ideology. Around 1930, the Guomindang government intensified its propaganda towards Chinese overseas communities in order to counter attempts by the Japanese to extend their influence in South East Asia. This was a continuation of the policy of early nationalists in the late-Qing era to encourage overseas Chinese to identify with the fate of the motherland. As a result, a generation of locally born Chinese grew up who identified strongly with a Guomindang idea of minzu (the Chinese nation/race), even as they resented any attempt to subordinate their activities to the Nationalists in mainland China. Following the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, the Guomindang in Malaya and the MCP, along with other Chinese organizations, raised funds to support the Chinese war effort. The main such organization, the Anti-Enemy Backing Up Society, which was an MCP front, laimed about 40,000 members in 1939 and 200,000 in 1941, largely consisting of students. This was considerably greater than the membership of the MCP, which stood at only 1,000. This disparity was explained by the party leadership as a failure to lead the ‘masses’, but in part it was due to the policies of the MCP, which at the height of the popular protests in the fall of 1939 gave priority to anti-bourgeois and anti-British issues.

1940s: New States

Neither the Malayan, Indochinese, nor Burmese communist parties were a threat to the European colonial powers prior to the Second World War, but as a result of their resistance activities against the Japanese occupation they would become so. Following the Japanese invasion of South East Asia in late 1941, many Chinese joined guerrilla groups led by the communist parties, as in Malaya, where massacres of Chinese by the Japanese army merely intensified resistance. The MCP made peace with the British who armed and trained the guerrillas and communists became an important component of the 3,500-strong Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army.[24] In Burma communists played a major role in setting up the Anti-Fascist Organization, which was central to the resistance against the Japanese, although its role was downplayed by the Allies.[25] A section of Burmese nationalists, however, notably Aung San, who was at that time general secretary of the CPB, backed the Japanese as a counterweight to the British. In December 1941, Aung formed the Burma Independence Army which fought alongside the Japanese until 1945, when it joined with the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL). On 27 March 1945, the army under General Aung San led a national uprising in which communists played a major part. In Vietnam, the Japanese occupation shattered the

image of French military power and provided communists with a chance to capitalize on patriotic opposition to both the French and the Japanese. The Việt Minh, the communist-led coalition for national independence formed in 1941, capitalized on the (p. 243) famine that broke out after the Japanese overthrew French puppet emperor, Bảo Đại, in 1944. They took the lead in distributing rice from granaries and thereby helped to win the confidence of village conservatives. In Vietnam, alone of the colonies, the communists and their allies had gathered enough military force to take power in 1945.[26]

After 1945, European colonial powers returned. Hồ Chí Minh and Sukarno declared their countries independent, but had to fight to oust the colonialists: the Vietnamese fighting the French until 1954, and the Indonesians fighting the Dutch until 1949. Burma and the Philippines were the only two new nations which obtained their independence by political means. Until 1946 communist parties maintained the policy of a united front with nationalists and sought to work in legal trade unions, but in that year all switched to armed uprisings. Communist revolts occurred in India, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia, and the Philippines. As a result, the Cold War powers were drawn into the many local 'civil wars' of the region. It is tempting to think that this radicalization of communist policy must have emanated from Moscow. Yet no explicit instructions were issued by the Soviet Union.[27] It is true that Zhdanov's two-camp line, propounded in Calcutta in February–March 1948, legitimized local parties seeking to shift from a united front with bourgeois parties towards a 'united front from below', and this was used to legitimize the new policy of armed struggle.[28] Of all the parties, however, only the PKI explicitly sought advice from Moscow—and from Dutch communists—during the Madiun revolt of September 1948 against the newly elected republican government.[29] The radicalization of line was largely a matter of local parties responding to the changing domestic situation and then turning for outside ideological and material support. The communists turned to Moscow, whereas the anti-communist forces turned to the USA.

In Burma in February 1946, Thakin Soe, founder of the CPB and inspirer of the AFPFL, broke from the party, accusing it of 'Browderism', i.e. of endorsing constitutional methods to achieve national independence. Against a background of mass rallies and strikes—including one by the Rangoon police—the British governor offered Aung San and other AFPFL leaders seats in the Executive Council, which they accepted in September 1946. On 2 November the communists were expelled from the AFPFL for denouncing this as 'kneeling before imperialism'. In the elections to a constituent assembly in April 1947 Aung San and the socialists won a huge majority, while the communists fared badly. The assassination of Aung San and his cabinet colleagues on 19 July sent shock waves through Burmese society and strengthened the determination of the communists to revive a united front with the AFPFL. But radicals within the party had become convinced the British were out to sabotage any move to independence. In February 1948, a wave of

strikes organized by the trade-union congress occurred in Rangoon alongside mass rallies by the All-Burma Peasant Organization at Pyinmana. It was in Pyinmana in March that a section of the CPB rose up in armed struggle after the government ordered the arrest of party leaders.[30]

In Malaya the MCP felt under extreme political pressure following the return of the British, as the latter proceeded to curb trade-union activity and clear communist-supporting squatters from the fringes of the jungle. After three uneasy years, the British declared a state of emergency in 1948, causing the communists to go back into the jungle. For individuals this choice represented a 'claim to liberation, meritocracy, and to (p. 244) being modern' as well as a way of avoiding arrest.[31] The MCP justified its decision to prepare for armed revolt in June 1948 by invoking Zhdanov's two-camps line, but many in the party were unconvinced that conditions were ripe.[32] Malay hostility to the Chinese-dominated party had increased after the Chinese communists supported the aborted Malayan Union Plan of 1946–8.[33] Transnational networks continued to be operative, with the parties of China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand assisting the MCP as it struggled—ultimately unsuccessfully—to defeat the British army.[34] In the Philippines, the USA had quickly granted independence in July 1946, but its imposition of controls on trade and its insistence on maintaining a military presence were unacceptable to the communist-led peasant insurgency known as the Hukbalahap. Deprived of seats in congress by more conservative nationalists, the Huks began an armed struggle which was not finally crushed until 1954. In 1950 the Communist Party had the support of over 10,000 people in central and southern Luzon. By 1958, there were just 500 Huks left and the Communist Party was outlawed.[35]

In the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1948 was also a year of a change. In 1945, the Vietnamese communists had risen to power with little bloodshed, by accommodating colonial elites, the bureaucracy, and local mass groups into the Việt Minh government. Although rivals in the Vietnamese Nationalist Party and the Vietnamese Revolutionary League, not to speak of Trotskyists, were purged, the communists made substantial concessions to their non-communist partners in the coalition government. After war broke out with France in December 1946, the French quickly re-established control of most towns. Hồ Chí Minh's efforts to bring about a negotiated settlement were rebuffed, so the Việt Minh prepared for a long fight. Strains built up inside the coalition in the course of 1947, and by early 1948 the party was looking beyond national independence towards socialism. It stepped up land reform in the north, but was more cautious in breaking with the united front than parties elsewhere. Only in 1950 did full civil war break out after the French- and US-led anti-communist camp concluded an agreement with Vietnamese Emperor Bảo Đại and established a state in South Vietnam. The Indochinese Communist Party secured support from China and the Soviet bloc.[36]

The Cold War of the 1950s–1960s

With the onset of the Cold War the fate of communist movements in South East Asia became even more determined by differing combinations of local conditions and global forces. The newly created nation-states of the region were anxious to keep the communist challenge at bay but at the same time had little enthusiasm to become directly involved in the bipolar struggle to contain communism. For their party, communist parties struggled against both independent nationalist governments and against attempts by the British and French to preserve their imperial influence in Malaya and Vietnam. The epic defeat of the French army by the Việt Minh at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 raised hopes that the communist revolution was on the rise globally, but it also firmed up US determination to roll back the communist menace. A further factor that influenced the (p. 245) fortunes of the communists in South East Asia was the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, and its subsequent efforts to extend its influence across the region.[37] In 1949, the parties of Malaya, Indonesia, and Burma proposed to the CCP to organize a Cominform of the East, but Mao at that stage rejected the proposal because of the ongoing civil war in China.[38] In the course of the 1950s, however, the PRC did support communist insurgents with instructions, arms, and money. Chinese communities in South East Asia were, consequently, seen as a threat to national security by non-communist states, as well as to the economic success of native populations.

In April 1955 President Sukarno played host to the Bandung conference, an attempt by Indian and Indonesian leaders to produce a movement of peoples, mainly from the colonial world, that would be independent of Washington and Moscow. Sukarno famously advised the leaders of the twenty-nine Asian and African countries to view Asia through the glass of nationalism rather than of communism.[39] The PRC, in contrast to the Soviet Union, supported the Bandung conference in a bid to promote its image as benevolent patron of emerging nations. Despite the flirtation with non-alignment, it would not be long before it would denounce the Soviet Union for abandoning the struggle against US imperialism and briefly seek to take leadership of that struggle.

In 1951, following the dismemberment of the Indochinese Party, separate communist parties were formed in Cambodia and Laos, and communist influence in those countries began to grow. In Cambodia Khmer nationalism developed late, the first Khmer language newspaper only being published in 1936. The communist Khmer People's Revolution Party, led by former Buddhist monks, was based on the nationalist movement that had been formed in 1945 with the backing of Thailand, in order to fight the French colonial masters. After independence was granted by the French in November 1953, Prince Sihanouk struggled to prevent Cambodia from being dragged into the widening Vietnam

conflict, despite an attempt on his life by President Diem of South Vietnam. Prince Sihanouk was far from sympathetic to communism, yet he recognized that the USA could not win the war in Vietnam and in 1965 allowed North Vietnam to set up bases in the east of the country. Heavily reliant on the goodwill of China, he allowed military supplies from China to reach Vietnam via Cambodian ports, but China proved a broken reed once the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966. Sihanouk was ruthless in dealing with internal opponents, including the faction that became the Khmer Rouge, and failed to appreciate the threat posed by the latter's ultra-nationalism. From March 1967, Cambodia descended into civil war.[40]

The French had sponsored Lao national identity as a way of countering Thai influence in Laos. Although the French allowed limited self-government in 1949, Prince Suphānuvong, a member of the Indochinese Communist Party, allied with the communist Pathet Lao, meaning 'Lao Nation', upon its formation in 1950. As early as 1953, Laos was dragged into the Vietnam War when General Giap led Việt Minh troops into the north-east of the country as part of the fight against the French. When Laos gained full independence under the royal Lao government in 1953, the Pathet Lao continued to control two provinces adjacent to North Vietnam. War between the Pathet Lao and the government was to continue for two decades, and would involve the North Vietnamese and the US extensively, as well as Thailand, South Vietnam, and the Hmong minority.[41]

(p. 246) In Indonesia the PKI grew rapidly during the 1950s, gaining 16 per cent of the vote in the 1955 general election. It advocated a cautious policy on domestic issues and a strongly nationalist one on foreign issues. When in 1959 President Sukarno and the generally right-wing army leaders agreed to replace constitutional democracy with a populist-nationalist system of 'guided democracy', communist leaders acquiesced in it. The calculation seemed to pay off, since between 1959 and 1965, the Party's mass organizations—of youth, women, peasants, estate workers—grew to the point where by 1965, the PKI would claim 27 million supporters,[42] making it the largest communist party outside the socialist bloc. This growth, however, had been matched by that of Muslim and so-called secular-nationalist parties, and as the economy spiralled downwards, it led to increasing political tension. In 1965 a small group of military officers assassinated six generals and General Suharto accused the communists of masterminding this 'coup', if such it was. A bloodbath was unleashed in which at least half a million were killed either by the army or by Muslim and secular-nationalist vigilantes. In March 1966, as Suharto effectively supplanted Sukarno as head of state, the PKI was declared illegal.[43]

In Burma the military government, though hostile to communists, received Soviet aid and called itself 'socialist'. The AFPFL was in power for most of the period from 1948 to 1962, and though established by the CPB, it waged war against the communists, who were debilitated by splits between pro-Beijing and pro-Moscow wings and by separatist

movements of minorities such as the Shan and Kachin. The AFPFL, though resolutely non-aligned and even pro-Chinese in its foreign policy (it shared a 1,000-mile border with China), proved acceptable to the USA because of its anti-communism. In 1961 Prime Minister U Nu, who had once been a Marxist, campaigned to make Theravada Buddhism the state religion in order to counter the influence of communists in rural communities.[44] He continued the earlier pattern of using international networks to promote national goals by sponsoring the Sixth Buddhist Council, 1954–6. Following a military coup in 1962, General Ne Win pursued a chauvinistic, semi-Buddhist 'Burmese Way to Socialism', which was viewed indulgently by Moscow in spite of its ongoing suppression of communist guerrillas.[45] By the late 1980s, the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' had brought the country to economic ruin. In July 1988, the new military government gunned down the so-called 8888 uprising of students, monks, ethnic minorities, workers, and farmers, claiming that it had been instigated by the communists. In fact, the role of the latter'—and that of the separatist movements with which they were allied—was marginal.

New Generation, New Insurgencies: 1960s–1970s

The decade of the 1960s was dominated by the escalating war in Vietnam. From 1959, the Việt Minh fought to reunite the country, by promoting the National Liberation (p. 247) Front (NFL) in the South. The NLF carried out rent reduction and land redistribution in areas wrested from the control of the Saigon government, though after the US escalation of the war in 1965, villagers were driven from their homes and many of the reforms were undone. The NLF largely fought a guerrilla war against anti-communist forces, whereas in the North warfare was more conventional, with US and South Vietnamese forces relying on air superiority and overwhelming firepower. The massive bombing campaign gradually extended to Laos and Cambodia. Following the Tet Offensive in 1968, US ground forces began to be withdrawn, although fighting continued, even after the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973, until the fall of Saigon in 1975. One by-product of the Vietnamese victory was that the Khmer Rouge—in general no friend of the Vietnamese communists—took power in Cambodia in April 1975. In December of the same year, the People's Revolutionary Party in Laos ousted the king in a bloodless coup and installed a pro-Soviet, pro-Vietnamese regime with Prince Suphānuvong as president.

In the 1970s the generation that had been the founders of the communist parties began to pass away. Parties undergoing the transfer of power to a new generation of leaders often went through considerable ideological soul-searching. The Sino–Soviet split had divided communist parties across the region, with older parties in Burma, Thailand, and Indonesia tending to side with China. But 'Maoism' meant many different things in

practice.[46] In the countries where communists were not in power, such as Thailand and Philippines, the new generation of leaders tended to favour an activist ‘Maoist’ policy based on rural insurgency. In the MCP splits appeared between the Revolutionary (1970) and Marxist Leninist factions (1974), which only reunited in 1983.

In Cambodia the first generation of pro-Vietnamese leaders was replaced by a younger generation of French-educated leaders such as Pol Pot, educated but without secure employment. In 1970 the Sihanouk regime was overthrown by General Lon Nol, who established a Khmer republic by orchestrating the massacre of thousands of Vietnamese residents. US bombing of Cambodia, which continued until 1973, drove many into the ranks of the Khmer Rouge. The latter espoused a hybrid of international communism and a status-conscious traditional culture, which has been characterized as a ‘neo-dynastic internationalism’. According to Ben Kiernan, it was ‘the exportable sacred language of a bilingual clerisy’, who aimed to propagate nationalism among the masses,[47] and was a sharp challenge to Vietnamese cultural superiority. Its traditionalism was symbolized in the use of the dynastic name of Kampuchea to designate the country. Pol Pot carried out ‘socialism in one country’ to an extent that would have made Stalin blench. He broke off relations with socialist and capitalist states and classified the entire population in terms of class categories, policing their sexual lives and language. The genocide of 1975–9 targeted ‘internal enemies’, which included ethnic minorities, Muslims, and ‘Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds’. Half the ethnic Chinese population perished, although China continued to support the Khmer Rouge after it was driven out of power by the Vietnamese invasion of 1979, It also suited the US and Thailand to support the Khmer Rouge as a counterbalance to Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge continuing to hold a seat in the United Nations until 1982.[48]

(p. 248) The 1980s and 1990s: Reform and Surrender

Today in South East Asia only two states remain socialist: Vietnam and Laos. The fall of the Soviet Union exacerbated Vietnam’s economic problems, and in the same way as in the PRC, the government disbanded agricultural collectives, privatized much of the economy, and promoted export-oriented industry and integration into the world market. In those countries where communist movements had since the 1950s carried out a stubborn, costly, and ultimately futile struggle for power, many simply gave up as the communist bloc began to unravel. In 1982–3, Thailand’s ‘Maoists’ experienced wide defections. In 1989, the MCP signed a peace treaty with the government, and now many veterans from the Emergency live peacefully in southern Thailand.[49] In 1994 Cambodia restored the monarchy. It would be rash to conclude that communism is now dead in the

region but it is in dire straits. In the Philippines—where Asia's anti-colonial revolutions first began in the 1890s—communists continue to engage in war on the government and parliamentary politics. One of the country's communist parties, the Communist Party of the Philippines, established in 1968, calls itself Maoist, although it apparently advocates land reform, a mixed economy, and democratic pluralism. Yet a mark of just how low the fortunes of international communism have fallen came in December 2011 when the Chinese Communist Party announced that it was breaking off relations with the Communist Party of the Philippines because it is on the list of 'terrorist' organizations drawn up by the USA and the European Union.[50] The region that suffered so grievously from the USA's attempt to 'contain' communism militarily has seen communism duly contained, but ironically this came about more because of the collapse of faith of the communists themselves than because of US intervention.

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Notes:

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