

RISE OF MALAYAN NATIONALISM

Though Malaya has a long history, much of it is not relevant to a study of the rise of nationalism. Most of the peoples of Malaya are recent immigrants, and the historical and racial consciousness of these peoples are the outcome of the historical experiences of the countries from which they migrated to Malaya.

Consequently it is difficult and probably incorrect to impose a continuing pattern of history upon the struggle against alien conquerors. However we must not forget that in the past the people who lived in Malaya have resented foreign rule and have to the best of their abilities fought against imperialists. Our history books do not deal at any great length, if deal with them at all, about these struggles. They were not struggles against the imperialists of the same order as the revolts of the Tonkinese, the 'Sepoy Mutiny' and sporadic revolts of areas in the Indonesian islands.

Malaya, when the Western imperialists came was very much a divided country ruled by a number of feudal chiefs whose power, except that of the Sultan of Malacca, was limited to the riverine valleys in which they lived. There had been no concept of national unity because the peoples of Malaya had never been welded into a nation. There was not even a racial consciousness - petty chiefs with very grand titles were content to safeguard as far as possible their petty interests. The struggles of these petty chiefs against the Siamese, Portuguese, Dutch and the British could only be local revolts which could not inspire action throughout the country. They were sparks that never became fires, and died out after some ineffective crackle.

From the above very cursory survey of history, it is obvious that the roots of Malayan nationalism are not very old. Malaya as it is today began to develop only very recently. Until the beginning of the 19th century, the country was very sparsely populated. But after 1800 there was a continuous and increasing flow of immigrants from the islands of Indonesia and China. The discovery of large tin deposits, the introduction of coffee plantations and later rubber plantations required cheap labour, and this led to the bringing of large numbers

of Indians, Chinese and Indonesians. The development of Malaya, and its prosperity compared with the land ~~hungary~~, overpopulated and poverty-stricken surrounding countries of India, Indonesia and China led to an increase in the flow of free immigrants.

This tremendous expansion of population, as a result of the coming together of three groups of people who were of different races, culture and religions retarded the growth of nationalism. The immigrant people particularly the Chinese and Indians had not come with the intention of settling in Malaya. They looked upon Malaya as a place of work and not a country to settle in. In this respect they differed from the Malay immigrants. The Malay immigrants were settlers. Malaya became their home.

The Indians and Chinese were not interested in the political future of Malaya. Those that had any political interest, were concerned with the struggles in India and China. For them the British in Malaya were useful rulers, who made it possible for them to earn a living, save money and for a few, support the revolutionary struggles in their countries. Thus two factors had very ^{great} influence in slowing the pace of nationalism in Malaya - racial and cultural separateness of the various peoples who lived here and the political, emotional and cultural link with countries of origin among the Indians and Chinese. We can sum up the position by saying that nationalism is of late growth in Malaya because the way in which the population expanded was such that it did not constitute a nation but was even incapable of desiring a Malayan national consciousness. Even more, they were incapable of recognising the need for a national consciousness. There must be some vestige of nationalism, or at least a desire for a Malayan nation before there can be Malayan nationalism.

Even among the Malays, the more settled section of the population national consciousness was not very marked. Malay nationalism was limited to a few intellectuals who were influenced by the developments in Egypt and in Indonesia. But this did not develop into a mass movement. There may be a large number of reasons for the stunting of Malay nationalism - the influence of feudalism and the alliance between

the feudal class and the British, the very limited integration of the Malay peasantry into the monetized economy of the plantations and the mines, the discouraging of the growth of a Malay proletariat. There is also I think the impact of the plural society. The presence of a large number of Indians and Chinese in the country, made many Malays feel that once the British were driven out the hegemony would pass to the Chinese and Indian immigrants. This was encouraged by the British and also by the fact that Indians and Chinese continued to remain compact and unassimilated groups within the country. The British colonialists took on the role of protectors when, in fact, they encouraged and used the immigrants to service the sectors of the economy that were valuable to them. But the exploitation of the country and the people would not be limited to these sectors only. The Malay peasantry had to be exploited too, and this exploitation was done for the British by some of the immigrants. Thus, we had a situation when the British were posing for the Malaya and were accepted by them as protectors when they were facilitating and benefiting from the exploitation of the Malay peasantry by some sections of the immigrants.

This political inertia changed completely during the war years and the past years have seen the slow emergence of Malayan nationalism from the political consciousness that was based, for many sections of the population, on communal interests. The political consciousness of the people that had been kept in check by the imposing power of Britain was released when that power crumbled under the onslaughts of the Japanese imperialists. All the King's tanks and all the King's bayonets could not put humpty-dumpty together again.

There were two major signs of this political consciousness. The Malay organisation the K.M.M. aided the Japanese in fighting the British while the Chinese, conscious of the Japanese atrocities in China and in furtherance of the Chinese struggle against Japanese imperialists, took up arms to fight the Japanese. The Chinese in Malaya under the leadership of the M.C.P. formed the back-bone of the Resistance against the Japanese.

A people who had suffered and fought and who had aided in the defeat of the Japanese could not be tucked away nicely and neatly in the cubby-holes created before the war. They had to be given political rights. Many of the Malays who had aided the Japanese had been disillusioned and they organized the M.N.P., the API and other left-wing organisations.

The British answer to the situation was MacMichael Treaties and the Malayan Union. Resistance to this produced the Malay right-wing parties. 1945 to 1948 were years when the issues were being fought out between an alliance of the British and the Malay right-wing on one side and the Chinese under the leadership of M.C.P. in alliance with the Malay left. In 1948, the M.C.P. revolted and this was essentially a revolt of the Chinese left. It failed because it had very little support among Malays.

Just as the Japanese invasion released political forces that they had intended, the fight between the British and the M.C.P. released new forces. The struggle made the people more and more politically conscious. Malaya which had been outside the Asian Revolution due to her unique population structure, both by demonstration effect of what was taking place outside and as a consequence of events inside was drawn into the Asian Revolution.

The British, as a consequence decided to hand over power to the Alliance because it was the most representative organisation. In Singapore after considerable difficulties, the P.A.P. representing the forces of Malayan nationalism took over power under a new but limited constitution.

The most interesting and important feature in the situation today is the fact that in such a short time most of the people recognize the need to create a Malayan nation. It is true that many of even those who recognize the need for a Malayan nation think very often in communal terms. But it is the best evidence that Malayan nationalism has finally come into its own that very few people are not consci-

of the need for the Malayan nation. It is a great achievement of Malayan nationalism that even the rank communalist pays lip service to the Malayan nation. The historical role of Malayan nationalism is to make possible for the various groups of immigrants to live peacefully in Malaya. Its historical importance is that it offers all the people in Malaya a way that can prevent a civil war. That is why we must advance the cause of Malayan nationalism. Nationalism in most countries is only a way to political freedom. In Malaya, it has an additional role. In preventing a civil war it would make it possible for us to enjoy the freedom.