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The Postwar Appeal of Communism in Malaya, Vietnam and the Philippines

RAY COLE HILLAM*

From 1948 to the mid-fifties Malaya, Vietnam and the Philippine Islands were seriously threatened by Communist-led insurrections. The constituted authorities in Malaya and the Philippines were able eventually to suppress the insurgents, but in Vietnam, the French were less successful. The challenge of these insurgents was partly the result of the dynamic appeal of Communism in these three varied but similar revolutionary situations.

What Did Communism Seem to Offer?

Frustration was the raw material of the post-war insurrections in the Philippines, Malaya and Vietnam. It mattered little whether those who revolted were Filipino peasants, Vietnamese intellectuals or Chinese plantation workers in Malaya. Frustration tied them all into a brotherhood of revolt. For a variety of reasons many turned to Communism.

For some Communism provided a simple and often acceptable explanation for their deplorable environment and lack of opportunity. According to Communist pronouncements, was it not the Western imperialists who seized their countries, transforming them into colonies for purposes of economic exploitation? Was it not the West which was responsible for the growth of famines and epidemics, for the mass expropriation of the land of the native population and for the inhumane conditions of labor?¹ In Vietnam, was it not the French who deceitfully raised their standards of "Liberty, Equality and

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¹ Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International, 1919-1943: Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), II, 535.

Fraternity" while violating the independence and equality of the Vietnamese?²

In addition, Western imperialism became a convenient scapegoat. Since self-judgment is difficult and sometimes painful, it was easy to transfer the responsibility for political and economic underdevelopment to factors difficult to control, such as colonialism. Whether justified or not, many assumed that their miserable conditions and their inability to do much about them were a result of Western imperialism.

Many were receptive to Communism because it portrayed itself as a decisive enemy of Western imperialism and the champion of national independence. This portrayal enabled the Communists to pose as genuine nationalists. For instance, Ho Chi-minh of the Communist Vietminh repeatedly made conciliatory statements to collaborate tactically with non-Communists in order to win popular support. His militant opposition of French imperialism and close identification with the movement for Vietnamese independence enabled him to emerge as the most decisive and active champion of Vietnamese nationalism. In Malaya and the Philippines the Communist insurgents made every effort to champion the cause of anti-imperialism and to identify themselves with the cause of nationalism.³

Many also felt Communism provided an effective strategy for seizing power. The strategy, as it developed in China under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung, caught the imagination of the Vo Nguyen Giaps of Vietnam, the Chen Pengs of Malaya and the Luis Tarucs of the Philippines. This attraction was not only stimulated by the success of Mao's strategy in China but also by the prospects of achieving personal power.

Finally, Communism also seemed to offer a dynamic program for rapid self-directed industrialization and modernization. Many reacted to the material achievements of Russia much as the Chinese reacted. Long before the Communists seized power in China, Mao said:

²Quoted in the Communist Declaration of Independence for Vietnam, September 2, 1945. See Allan B. Cole (ed.), *Conflict in Indochina and International Repercussions: A Documentary History 1945-1955* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1956), pp. 19-21.

³The failure of the movements in Malaya and Vietnam were partly a result of the inability of the Communist to exploit the anti-colonial and national attitudes of the people.

There is much in common or similar between the situation in China and pre-revolutionary Russia. Feudal opposition was the same. Economic and cultural backwardness was common to both countries. . . . The October Revolution (in Russia) helped the progressive elements of the world, and of China as well . . . in determining the fate of the country. . . . The conclusion was reached that we must advance along the path taken by the Russians.⁴

The "progressive" approach of the Russians, when adopted and "perfected" by the Chinese, was particularly attractive to the frustrated intellectuals of Vietnam, Malaya and the Philippines.

Who Found Communism Appealing?

Many in the West assumed that the appeal of Communism in Asia was greatest among the peasant class. The appeal of Communism was greater among the intellectuals, who in turn, usually identified peasant demands with their own political objectives. They acted as the intermediary between the Communist movement and the manifestations of peasant unrest. The Communist appeal usually filtered through to the peasants by first becoming the political outlook of the intellectuals. It was the intellectuals who provided the ideas, leadership and organization to give peasant unrest its direction.

The students were also receptive to Communism. Highly impressionable and closely associated with the intellectuals, many were enthusiastic followers of the new "wave of the future." They became the transmission belt of revolutionary ideas from the intellectuals to the urban and peasant classes. In Communist-controlled areas they were often assigned as cadre to supervise reconstruction and reform projects.

The broad base for the Communist movements was usually provided by the peasants. Lenin, in speaking to a group of Asian Communists, said it was imperative to apply Communist theory and practice under conditions where the peasant is the primary class of the masses.⁵ Since China had few proletariat, Mao Tse-tung had to rely on the peasant. Winning the peasant support proved crucial to the Communist victory in China. In the Philippines, the Communist leaders received their principal

⁴Mao Tse-tung, *On People's Democratic Rule* (New York: New Century Publishers, 1950), pp. 2-4.

⁵V. I. Lenin, "Report Before the Second All-Russian Representatives Congress of the Communist Organizations of the Eastern Peoples," *Works* (Moscow, 1932) XXIV, 542-51.

support from the peasants. While less important in Vietnam, the peasants were a significant factor in the success of the Communist Vietminh.

The urban population, which formed a broad base of Communist support in Malaya and Vietnam, was also receptive to Communism. In Vietnam, almost half of the Vietminh guerrillas were recruited from the urban population.⁶ In Malaya, most of the Communist guerrillas were urban Chinese. Their movement, in turn, was largely supported by the *Min Yuen*, a secret organization receiving much of its support from the urban population.

Since Communism is so closely allied with nationalism, some members of the business and landlord classes were deceived into accepting the revolutionary objectives of Communism. Indeed some of the Communist elite came from the well-to-do or aristocratic classes. As a rule, few were receptive, but some yielded to the pressure of a "new democracy." With mere passive support from some members of the business and landlord classes, the Communists came close to achieving their ideal, a "United Front" of all classes.

Why Was the Intellectual Attracted to Communism?

A Western education made the intellectual particularly vulnerable to Communism because it condemned him to a form of separate existence. He became accustomed to Western ways and had little interest in returning to the kind of life unbefitting his new status. Many acquired a split personality. One concluded that:

We are habitual schizophrenes, divided within ourselves and resentful of this division. This resentment may flare up into hostility, and may turn us in hatred against what we have loved (the West), as it had made us unwhole for life.⁷

The inability to find their proper place in society produced a reservoir of frustrated intellectuals who in a state of restlessness were searching for an answer to their dilemma. Since many were sensitive to the need for national independence and the achievement of an economic and social revolution, and since many had developed an anti-capitalistic bias and a convic-

⁶George K. Tanham, *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: The Vietminh in Indochina* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961), p. 58.

⁷Han Su-yin, *A Many Splendored Thing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952), pp. 298-299.

tion that state-sponsored programs were the only answer to the enormous problems of underdevelopment, they saw in Communism a solution to the future and, perhaps more important, a means of personally directing the future.

Many intellectuals, on the other hand, had mixed feelings about Communism, but they were willing to tolerate its undesirable aspects with the hope of rapid industrialization and eventual democratization. In order to meet the challenges of underdevelopment and to "catch up," they were convinced that they must telescope centuries into decades. While some preferred methods of consent, the urgency of the matter tempted them to accept the more rapid route of coercion. They justified the latter on the basis that the future justified the present. In the words of one intellectual:

. . . Many of the best, the more honest among the intellectuals . . . chose. They forsook individual, personal freedom for a larger self than their own, although it meant a control, and a discipline stern and repugnant to a part of them. They chose what might overwhelm them, not through cowardice, nor through opportunism, but because they had a social conscience, they loved their people, and they had a deep need to be whole again, unfrustrated in service to a land so much in need of them. They chose against themselves, renouncing the small liberty of one, so insignificant-seeming when faced with the spiritual challenge of communism in lands where freedom from hunger has never been known. They relinquished a difference which had made them alien among their own people for a shared oppression which would free their energies for the good of mankind.⁸

Why Was Communism Appealing to the Student?

Students were among the first to join any new movement for change. Since they were young, ambitious, adventurous, outspoken and forward-looking, they found it easy to cultivate high political, economic and social ideals. Unlike their elders, they could afford all these privileges because they had relatively little to lose.

They had acquired a deep sense of ambivalence toward all things western and a criticism of things indigenous. They reacted against traditional parental control, arguing that their elders were too old-fashioned to understand the world of modern politics. In Malaya, one student had the following to say:

⁸*Ibid.*

My father was a very old person and naturally had no political ideas. . . . When I was a young child, I used to obey my parents, but as I got older, I realized they knew very little about affairs and that only young people understood politics.⁹

Since they had been raised in a political atmosphere of violence, many were convinced that hostility and aggressiveness were characteristic of political activities and that physical violence was likely to be the final arbiter. One ex-Communist youth said: "My father was a quiet man. . . . I used to like to argue a lot and fight with people. That is why I was interested in politics." Another said:

My father knew nothing about politics. If he ever heard any fights or quarrels, he would get afraid. I never heard him discuss political questions or argue with people. He never swore at people and therefore I know he never belonged to any party or association. He was a person who was afraid of affairs.¹⁰

This attitude toward politics made it easy for the young to accept the violent expressions of Marxism-Leninism. When the Communist Party assumed the most active and dynamic force in the community, the students were impressed. Because of their unrest they were inclined to hitch their ambitions to any dynamic, forward-looking political movements which posed as the symbol of resistance to things both Western and indigenous.

Many were swept up by the "patriotic" enthusiasm of the "new order." The passionate idealism of the "new order" expressed "with heart-stirring words, with love of country and giving purpose to living, making death negligible, dazzling today with songs of glorious tomorrows" genuinely inspired the hearts and minds of the young.

In some cases where emotionalism for the "new order" did not win their support, the Communist concept of leadership by an educated elite would do the trick. The prospects of achieving positions of leadership and responsibility in the "new order" were attractive to those students who were restless and anxious about their future.

⁹Incian Pye, *Guerrilla Communism in Malaya: Its Social and Political Meaning* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1956), p. 167.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 168.

Why Did the Peasant Go Along with the Communists?

The vast majority of the peasants were landless and alienated by landlordism. This alienation was a result of abusive treatment and resentment. Also many peasants learned to resent the negative and indifferent attitude of their government. The Communists, exploiting this situation, agitated and politically organized them with promises of land and an improved status once the new "peasant" government took over.

The peasants, however, were rarely moved by ideological arguments. In the Philippines, only a minority of those who joined the Communist movement were influenced by Communist ideology.¹¹ Many were moved by such simple slogans as "land for the landless." In Vietnam, some simply waited to see who was to win before they made any commitment. They cared little about the ideological question nor did they understand it. They wanted to belong to the future and would support the faction which seemed to be winning.

Some peasants, however, had no choice. They were either tricked or forced to join the movement. One peasant youth told how he was "invited" by the guerrillas to assist them in carrying their supplies into the jungle. By the time they arrived at their destination, he had become "convinced" to remain with them. Another was invited to "volunteer" in exchange for the release of his kidnapped sister. It was hoped that these irregular means of recruiting would soon be forgotten and through proper indoctrination the victims would become effective Communist guerrillas.

When support could not be won through subtle techniques of persuasion and deception, the Communists often resorted to more drastic means of striking fear into the peasant masses. The assassination of government officials and village leaders became a common objective, and citizens who collaborated with the government were marked for torture and assassination. The Communists, however, made a genuine effort to gain popular support through persuasion. Often they backed up their promises by initiating reform, restraining the abusive conduct of the landlords and in some cases turning the land directly over to the peasants.

¹¹In interviews conducted among 95 ex-Communist Huks, Alvin H. Scaff concluded that well over half became members without being moved by ideas. Alvin H. Scaff, *The Philippine Answer to Communism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1955), p. 116.

Conscious of the importance of popular support, the Communist guerrillas were directed to do everything within their power to befriend and assist the peasants. Even during the most hostile periods of the campaign, they sought their friendship and support. In the Philippines, they were instructed to:

Clean the houses provided by the people. . . . Speak in a friendly tone. . . . Buy and sell things fairly. . . . Return the things we borrow. . . . Pay for the things we destroy. . . . Do not do, and even refuse to do, things which may harm the people. . . . All actions that may encroach upon or harm the people are forbidden. Any offender of this rule will be severely punished. Forcing the people to work for the army is forbidden. Coercion, beating or insulting the people are forbidden. . . . Help the people in plowing, transplanting, harvesting or in cutting wood whenever it does not hinder the actions of the army.¹²

This kind of behavior was often contrasted by the abusive treatment of the peasants by the Philippine constabulary forces or the traditional conduct of Asian military forces.

Why Was the Urban Class Receptive to Communism?

The newly urbanized, which included the uprooted people who had not found social and economic security, were often attracted to Communism. They were either lured to the city or driven to it, and in the process they saw the possibilities for a much better life. The obstacles to the achievement of their aspirations, however, led to a high degree of restlessness.

The problem of rapid population growth without industry to absorb the growth was a pressing problem. Since the need for labor did not expand much, the result was low wages and unemployment. It was largely these newly or misplaced urbanized elements, who, dissatisfied with their lot, found their way into front organizations and eventually into the Communist Party.

Many were attracted to Communism because they saw it as a means of gaining security, status, and a formal recognition of their capabilities. Some saw it as the most effective means of "career advancement." One ex-Communist in Malaya said he never thought he could be anything except a worker, but the Party made him dream that he could become an official.¹³ In

¹²Luis Taruc, *Born of the People* (New York: International Publishers, 1953), p. 69.

¹³Pye, p. 317.

spite of the difficulties in becoming a member of the Communist Party, the standards were not too high provided a person had some leadership ability as well as dedication. Achievement as a Communist did not require the ability or recognition that is often required in fields of Western knowledge. Since revolutionary zeal became the prime criterion, Communism gave the less educated an attractive opportunity.

Did Communism Appeal to the Business and Landlord Classes?

The Communist approach in Asia was adjusted to appeal to the business and landlord classes as well. Theoretically, they were supposed to be the final link in what is commonly referred to as the "United Front." In reality, few were deceived into thinking that they had a future with Communism. The most that was achieved was the softening of their resistance.

Some indication of how their role was visualized was revealed in the following remarks:

As Communists we consider that you are exploiting your workers; but we realize that, at the present stage of China's economic development, such exploitation is unavoidable and even socially useful. What we want is for you to go ahead and develop production as fast as possible and we will do what we can to help you. You may be afraid of what will happen to you and your family when we develop from New Democracy to Socialism. But you need not really be afraid. If you do a really good job in developing your business, and train your children to be first-class technical experts, you will be the obvious people to put in charge of the nationalized enterprises and you may find that you earn more as managers of a socialized enterprise than as owners.¹⁴

In the early phases of the movement, even the landlord class was given reason to think its members might have a future with Communism. The pacification of both the business and landlord classes was aided by the fact that it was futile for them to resist.

Summary

Communism seemed to offer the frustrated Filipino, Vietnamese and Malayan a simple explanation for their conditions and a convenient scapegoat for their dilemma. It posed as genuine nationalism while portraying itself as the most decisive

¹⁴Quoted by Michael Lindsay in O. van der Sprinkel (ed.), *New China* (London, 1950), p. 139.

enemy of Western imperialism and its imposed institutions. Also it provided an effective strategy for seizing power, and finally, it offered a dynamic program for rapid self-directed industrialization.

What Communism seemed to offer was not uniformly appealing to all sectors of the people. The appeal varied according to cultural differences, conditions of development, and even differences within a given class. Generally the appeal was greatest among the most significant element of Asia, the intellectuals. Somewhere down the line, depending on the situation, the students, peasant and urban classes fell into place.

The nature of Communism's appeal was also varied because of the broad scope of the appeal. The intellectuals and students were attracted for related yet quite different reasons. This was likewise true of the peasants and urbanized. Where the intellectuals were impressed with the logic of their position as leaders, the students were impressed with the idealism and emotion of the movement. The peasants and working class were attracted by the simple slogans of "land for the landless" and "jobs for the jobless."

Of course, the attraction to Communism was largely the result of a high level of individual and collective frustration resulting from the aspiration to overcome poverty, ignorance, disease, unemployment, and a measure of other problems associated with underdevelopment and a long experience with colonialism and war. This condition produced a vulnerability to the efforts of the highly motivated Communist revolutionary who seemed to provide the people an escape from their problems.