The communist threat in perspective

Political science academic **Bilveer Singh** has just published a book Quest For Political Power: Communist Subversion And Militancy In Singapore (Marshall Cavendish, 2015). He distils the book's findings in this article for The Straits Times.

ON DEC 2, 1989, the outlawed Malayan Communist Party (MCP) signed peace accords with the Malaysian and Thai authorities, ending 41 years of armed conflict, subversion, militancy and united-front activities targeted at Malaysia and Singapore.

Three weeks earlier, the Berlin Wall had collapsed, unravelling the Iron Curtain divide of Europe that began after World War II. The influence of international communism that had swept the world since the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 ended after nearly 75 years. It also marked the end of the Cold War between the communists led by the Soviet Union/China and the Free World led by the United States.

With the 25th 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 British colonial rulers, the Federation of Malaya under prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Labour Front governments in Singapore under chief ministers David Marshall and Lim Yew Hock and the People's Action Party (PAP) Government under prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and his successors, were against communism and those who wanted to establish communist rule in Singapore.

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

Foreign proxy

FIRST, the MCP was a foreign implant in Malaya and Singapore, and a proxy for foreign powers. Following the communist revolution in Russia in 1917, the Bolsheviks established 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 the Comintern tried to exert influence on the MCP, for the most parts, however, it was the Chinese Communist Party that exercised a significant influence over it. This was a serious issue in the context of the raging Cold War, with proxy battles being fought in many countries for political influence and dominance.

In the age of rising nationalism and nation states, no government or people would allow the existence of a militant political movement that was beholden or obligated to a foreign government or political entity, as this would undermine and compromise national independence and sovereignty.
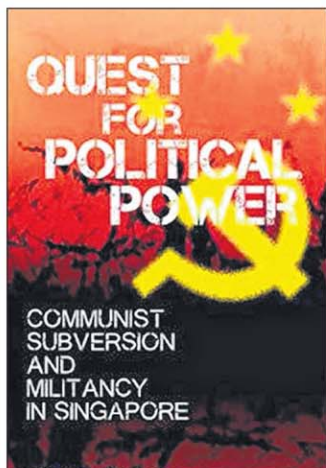
Communist order

SECOND, the MCP was totally dedicated to the setting up of a political system based on Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. It adopted the communist strategy of armed struggle and united-front tactics (supplemented by a vigorous propaganda effort) to seize power in order to establish a political-economic order based first on the Soviet model and, later, the Chinese communist system.

It was intent on destroying the existing political order which it viewed as neo-colonial, unjust and exploitative, in order to establish what it regarded as a "progressive" and equitable political-economic order.

But the communist systems in the 1950s and 1960s were anything but progressive, fair or humane. Tens of millions had perished in Joseph Stalin's purges and ill-conceived reforms, and Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward. The totalitarian control, the brutal suppression of religion and civil liberties, the misery and deprivations suffered by the people, and flawed economic system did nothing to endear the Free World towards it.

Armed struggle

THIRD, the MCP attempted to impose communist rule in Singapore and Malaysia by force. There is a tendency in some current writings to ignore or downplay the fact that the MCP was a militant political organisation 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 Malaysia and Singapore.

The communist armed struggle in the Malayan peninsula resulted in more than 11,000 fatalities and thousands of others injured and disabled for life. It is mainly for this reason that Malaysian former servicemen and their families as well as the political leadership objected to the late MCP secretary-general Chin Peng's return to Malaysia, 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 socio-cultural organisations to instigate strikes, protests and demonstrations to create a revolutionary environment and destabilise Malaysia and Singapore.

Students and workers were mobilised to support strikes 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 and control left-leaning student, 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 1930s 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 united-front organisations in one way or another. All were liable to be arrested, questioned and investigated. Those 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 multiracial 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 1950s 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 struggle against communism bequeathed two legacies to the present generation.

One is the use of preventive detention laws, including detention without trial, first in the form of the Emergency Ordinance introduced to counter the communist insurgency in 1948, and subsequently enshrined in the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance (1955), and, later, the Internal Security Act or ISA (1963).

There have been calls in Singapore for the ISA to be repealed on the grounds that the communist threat has been eliminated and that these laws had allegedly been abused by the authorities to detain political opponents.

The Government had rebutted these allegations and defended the need for the ISA. In view of the ongoing and worsening terrorist threat posed by Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and others, the ISA is set to remain in Singapore's statute books for the foreseeable future.

Second, the opposition to the ISA has also been accompanied by efforts to challenge the established "Singapore Story" and account of what happened in the 1950s and 1960s. The dominant discourse in Singapore is that the MCP, from the 1940s through to the 1980s, was a violent and subversive organisation that posed an existential security threat to Malaysia and Singapore; it aimed to seize political power through armed struggle and united-front strategy to establish a communist state. Due to this dangerous threat, the Singapore Government detained many MCP members and other leftists.

This discourse is now being challenged, with some former detainees and analysts arguing that most of those held in Singapore, especially under Operation Cold Store in 1963, were not communists or involved with the MCP. This counter-narrative portrays the group that was vanquished in the political struggle in the 1950s and 1960s as anti-colonialists who were detained because of their opposition to the PAP.

Ironically, the memoirs of top communist leaders such as Chin Peng, the secretary-general of the MCP, Eu Chooi Yip and Fong Chong Pik aka the Plen, the directors in charge of MCP operations in Singapore, as well as other leaders and activists, have confirmed the Singapore Government's narrative about the threat posed by the MCP and its united-front organisation.

Given the MCP's own testimonies, it would be a gargantuan task to argue that it was not a security threat in the 1950s and 1960s, that it did not aim to capture political power in Singapore, and that its principal united-front organisation, the Barisan Sosialis, was just an ordinary left-wing political party.

The crux of the matter is that the MCP did try to capture power in Singapore through subversion and militancy, and failed as it was effectively countered by the government of the day and rejected by the public at large.

After four decades of armed struggle and united-front activities, the MCP saw the futility of its efforts, and admitted defeat in the jungles, over the air waves and in the political arena.

It failed to win over the hearts and minds of Singaporeans and Malaysians with its secular ideology of constant class struggle, conflict and revolution. The MCP's cessation of hostilities in 1989 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 touches the half-century mark of its independence, it would have survived many challenges, including Western colonialism, Japanese Occupation, racial and religious strife, Indonesian Confrontation and, most importantly, the communist threat.

What these threats have meant for Singapore's DNA is that it has a special resilience capacity that can be mined to build internal strength and cohesion, and this would serve it well as it faces the next half century of its independent existence.

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Quest For Political Power: Communist Subversion And Militancy In Singapore is available at Kinokuniya bookstores (except the Jurong outlet) at $39.91, including GST.

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, 1989 – when the outlawed Malayan Communist Party signed peace accords – that 41 years of armed conflict, subversion and militancy targeted at Singapore and Malaysia ended. ST FILE PHOTO