

# The Failure of Stalinist Ideology and the Communist Parties of Southeast Asia

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## Introduction

While few people would deny the failure of communism in Southeast Asia, there has been little serious analysis of the various policies of the communist parties in the region that resulted in those failures. This paper represents an attempt to take a comparative look at the communist parties in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaya, Thailand and Vietnam. It is also an attempt to rehabilitate classical Marxism and show that the failure of Stalinism does not represent the failure of socialism or Marxism.

Because nationalism formed a very important part of the ideology of the various communist parties there have been those who tend to emphasize the local uniqueness of each party in adapting communism to suit local conditions. However, a comparative analysis reveals many similarities between each party and that the influence of Stalinist ideology forms the basis of such similarities.

Stalinist ideology is not merely the personal politics of the Russian leader Joseph Stalin, but represents a clear break with Classical Marxism as practiced by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg.<sup>1</sup> Stalinist ideas arose out of the defeat of the Russian revolution in the late 1920s and the consolidation of a new bureaucratic class which sought to build the Russian state into a superpower by abandoning the previous internationalist policies of the Bolsheviks to spread revolution to other industrialising countries. Instead the Stalinist bureaucracy built the Russian state by generating capital accumulation at the expense of the Russian working class.<sup>2</sup> This policy was called building "Socialism in One Country" and nationalism was an

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<sup>1</sup> Molyneux, 1998; Callinicos, 1991

<sup>2</sup> Cliff, 1974

important ideology in this project in much the same way as it is used by all capitalist ruling classes in an attempt to unite the population and reduce internal class conflict. The need of the Russian bureaucracy to promote the security of the Russian state in the international arena, at all costs, meant that Stalin tried, and succeeded in dominating the international communist movement, changing the policies of various communist parties around the globe to suit the needs of the Russian state.

There are three main policies which characterize Stalinism in Southeast Asia. Firstly there is the aggressive promotion of nationalism over and above class struggle within the country. What this amounts to is an attempt at promoting national development, within the context of capitalism, while relegating socialism to a distant future. While Marx and Lenin were supportive of nationalist struggles against colonial powers, they maintained the necessity for an independent working class current which did not compromise the class interests of workers to the interests of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalists.<sup>3</sup> Stalin changed this policy by advocating that the Chinese Communist Party dissolve itself into the bourgeois Kuomintang in the mid-1920s. From then on, nationalism became the over-riding policy of Asian communist parties at the expense of class struggle. Nationalism, in the guise of Third World communist anti-imperialism, was also a useful weapon for the Russian bureaucracy during the Cold War confrontation between Russia and the West. However, it runs against the grain of classical Marxism which stresses internationalism, class struggle and class solidarity.

The second main theme of Stalinism is the promotion of a cross-class alliance or Popular Front. While Marx, Lenin and other classical Marxists favored a clear distinction between the interests of the working class and all other classes and emphasised the opposing nature of working class and bourgeois class interests, Stalin blurred the definition of the working class to cover "all the people", sometimes including the peasantry. The deliberate lack of clarity about the working class fitted both the internal and international policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Russia. Internally the bureaucracy was in the process of oppressing workers in the interests of state-lead industrialisation, which it claimed was being carried out in the interests of "all the people" of Russia. Internationally, the rulers of Russia were busy creating alliances with non-working class forces in order to maintain the survival of the Russian state at all costs. The alliance with the Kuomintang in China is an example of this. The Popular Front strategy pursued by the Stalinist bureaucracy in relation to Western Europe was an attempt to build an alliance with Britain and France against Nazi Germany. In order to make this alliance work, the Russian bureaucracy proposed that communist parties in Western Europe cease to promote revolution. An example of this is the role of the Communist Party in Spain in 1936. In the Third World, the Popular Front was also used by Stalinist communist parties in an attempt to take part in the bourgeois nationalist movements and in attempts to enter nationalist government coalitions after independence.

Stalin's policy of dissolving the Chinese Communist Party into the Kuomintang had disastrous effects when Chiang Kaishek, leader of the Kuomintang, ordered the massacre of communists in all major cities.<sup>4</sup> It is this historical

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<sup>3</sup> Lenin, 1980

<sup>4</sup> Hallas, 1985, p.118; Harris, 1978, p.11; Hore, 1991, p.13

blunder which caused Mao to re-evaluate his original Marxist strategy of working with urban workers and helped launch him on the long march to the peasantry and rural armed struggle. Rural armed struggle using the peasantry forms the third main theme of Stalinism in Southeast Asia. It should be remembered that at the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Russia was just as much a country dominated by peasants as China, yet Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks rejected the peasantry as the main vehicle for change. The blurring of the difference between peasants and workers by Stalin and the ideas of cross-class alliances helped Mao to promote a pre-capitalist class (the peasantry) for the role of creating socialism, a profoundly un-materialist and un-Marxist concept.

### **The three main themes of Stalinism in Southeast Asia**

#### *1) The aggressive promotion of nationalism at the expense of class struggle*

Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese communist leader, was attracted to communism in 1920, "not by ideas such as the historical dialectic, surplus value, or modes of production, but by Lenin's attack on imperialist oppression and support for revolutionary movements of national liberation".<sup>5</sup> Later, when the Viet Minh was set up under the control of the party, it stated that the coming Indochinese revolution was going to be a national liberation revolution, not a socialist revolution.<sup>6</sup> The Vietnamese communists were the only communists who were able to win state power by adopting the policy of nationalism. They were fortunate during the Second World War to be in a position to be able to oppose both their local Western colonial power and the Japanese. The reason for this is that the French authorities in Vietnam were allied to Vichy France and hence enemies of the Russian-Western Allies. Not only did this mean that the communists were free to oppose French rule throughout the war, but it also meant that the Japanese authorities allowed the French to run Indochina for most of the war and did not make any serious attempts to sponsor a local anti-French nationalist movement that could have rivaled the Vietnamese communists as in the case of Indonesia. In this period the Vietnamese communists were able to gain anti-colonial and nationalist credentials while communist parties in other countries, such as Malaya and the Philippines, had to suspend their anti-colonial policies against the British and the United States.

The Vietnamese communists were much more effective as nationalists than the other nationalist bourgeois parties. The Vietnamese Constitutional Party was so moderate that it collaborated with the French while the Vietnamese Nationalist Party was too conspiratorial to survive. The communists managed to effectively combine social questions, such as taxation, literacy and land reform, with the struggle for national independence. However, working class struggle was never a priority. The 1945 and 1975 seizures of power never involved the working class. This was not because there were no workers in Vietnam. The first recorded strikes in Vietnam took place in 1922. By 1930 there were strikes involving 32,000 workers.<sup>7</sup> In December 1936 workers' strikes reached insurgent levels with 50,000 workers from the Saigon arsenal, the railways, the Tonkin coal mines and numerous textile and rice mills on strike.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Marr, 1981, p.317

<sup>6</sup> Khanh, 1982

<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> Murray, 1980, p.367

On May Day 1938, 20,000 workers marched through Hanoi demanding higher wages and improved working conditions. These workers' struggles were not ignored by all sections of the Left. Vietnamese Trotskyists in organisations like *Ta Phai Doi Lap Thang Muoi* (The October Left Opposition) and those around the newspaper *La Lutte*, numbering around 3,000, had a strong presence among workers in the south. However, French repression and violence from Vietnamese Stalinists at the beginning and end of the Second World War destroyed these organisations.<sup>9</sup>

When in power, the Vietnamese communists never promoted workers' power or workers' democracy. Between 1951 and 1986 the party's Central Committee did not contain a single working class representative<sup>10</sup> and the infrequency of party congresses (four in a 50-year period up to 1976) ensured a lack of internal democracy. State power in Vietnam, under communist party rule, can in no way be described as workers' power or socialism in the classical Marxist sense.

In Malaya the communist party mounted an impressive anti-Japanese nationalist resistance, due to the high proportion of ethnic Chinese workers in Malayan cities who were fiercely anti-Japanese. By the end of the war the Malay Peoples Anti-Japanese Army, organised by the Malay Communist Party, was the *de facto* official power in the country with an estimated armed force of 10,000.<sup>11</sup> This position of strength was thrown away by the party's alliance with Britain during the war, which meant that the British were allowed back into Malaya without a fight and given time to consolidate their rule before initiating a crack-down on the communists which eventually led to the collapse of the party.

Unlike the other communist parties in Southeast Asia, the Indonesian party started life before the rise of Stalinism. In May 1914 the Indies Social Democratic Association (ISDV) was founded by a Dutch-born socialist called Sneevliet. It was one of the first organisations in the world to welcome the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 and its leaders advocated the same revolutionary road in the Dutch East Indies. Rather than a purely nationalist struggle, the ISDV argued that because capitalism had reached the Indies, socialism was therefore possible.<sup>12</sup> In 1920 the ISDV changed its name to *Perserikatan Kommunist di India* (PKI). Four years later its name was again changed to *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI). Between 1919 and 1926 there was constant democratic argument within the PKI about the exact relationship which communists should form with the bourgeois nationalist movement, the *Sarekat Islam*. The burning question was how communists should relate to the mass nationalist movement without losing their independent working class politics. Such open debate is missing from Stalinist organisations. In this period the PKI was involved in urban workers' struggles, placing the working class at the center of its politics, but also attempting to build a relationship with the peasants. In November 1926 an unsuccessful uprising by the PKI was crushed by the Dutch. It is possible that this uprising was encouraged by a 'left turn' in the now Stalinist Comintern to cover its tragic mistake of an alliance with the Kuomintang in China eight months earlier.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Khanh, 1982; Sacks, 1969; Ngo Van, 1995

<sup>10</sup> Thayer, 1988

<sup>11</sup> Shamsul, 1986, p.59; Khong, 1987, p.12

<sup>12</sup> McVey, 1965, p.15

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*



By the time the PKI recovered from 1926, it was thoroughly Stalinist in outlook, stressing nationalism above class struggle. In the early 1960s Aidit, a leading member of the PKI stated that "...the class struggle is placed below the national struggle"<sup>14</sup> and this was after more than a decade of independence. Similarly, in the Philippines the *Partido Komunista ng Philipppines* (PKP) argued in 1953, seven years after full independence, that the highest priority was the need for an anti-imperialist war. In both cases the stress on the nationalist struggle was an attempt to present a militant face without upsetting local bourgeois leaders with whom alliances were being sought. If militant class struggle, rather than nationalism had been proposed, this would have upset such cross-class alliances. However, the problem, as Peregrino Taruc, leader of the PKP admitted, was that "...it was hard to make peasants see the connection between their problems and American Imperialism".<sup>15</sup> For the peasantry, the actions of the local police and landlords were much more pressing.

The Thai communist party went one step further and invented the need for national liberation in a country that had never been colonised. As with the other parties in the region, the Thai party deemed Thailand to be "semi-feudal, semi-colonial" even in the late 1970s. Somehow they had simply lost sight of capitalism. The Thai party announced in 1965 that "...we do not care what class people come from so long as they are prepared to join a united fight for the nation and democracy".<sup>16</sup> The party called for a popular front of workers, peasants, students, intellectuals and patriotic capitalists. The Thai peasantry must have also found it hard to understand how the USA was responsible for their economic problems and the repression they experienced at the hands of the Thai ruling class.

It is not argued here that United States imperialism was not a problem for the peoples of Southeast Asia. The United States, in its Cold War attempts to maintain influence in the region, supported the most reactionary military dictatorships, including the brutal crushing of the Indonesian communists in 1965. It also used direct force throughout the Vietnam war in an attempt to prevent Vietnamese self-determination. However, classical Marxists have always believed that anti-colonial struggles should be conducted simultaneously with the class struggle for socialism. When nationalism eclipses class struggle, as in the case of Vietnam, the result is a nationalist government which operates in a world capitalist system, even if it is headed by a party calling itself "Communist". As for workers and peasants in Third World independent nations, the main enemy has always been their own local rulers. The adoption of nationalist policies by the Southeast Asian communists, outside Vietnam, has had the effect of diverting the struggle away from a clear class orientation.

## 2) *The Popular Front strategy of cross-class alliances*

Not only was the Stalinist Popular Front strategy of uniting all patriotic classes, including the local capitalists, linked with the adoption of nationalism, but it was also an attempt by various communist parties in the region to gain acceptance by their local rulers in the hope that communists could influence state power via the back door. Inevitably, such cross-class unity only worked if the lower classes did nothing to encroach upon the interests of the local

<sup>14</sup> Mortimer, 1981

<sup>15</sup> Kerkvliet, 1977

<sup>16</sup> Suchart, 1974, p.396

capitalists. This meant that the various communist parties had to tone down working class struggle.

In 1948 the Malay Communist Party called for a coalition government of all classes, including the national bourgeoisie.<sup>17</sup> The British authorities, the Malay state functionaries and Chinese bourgeoisie responded by using force to crush the party. The communists' failure to stress the issue of class was a contributing factor which allowed the British, and later the Malay rulers to use ethnicity to divide the working class between Chinese and Malays. This tactic is still being used up to the present day.

In the Philippines the PKP made desperate attempts to woo capitalist politicians, forming alliances with the *Nacionalistas* in 1945 and then the Liberals in 1947. This policy went hand in hand with opposition by the party to the peasant-led Huk rebellion in the period between 1946 and 1948. After 1948 the party then decided to opportunistically support the Huks.<sup>18</sup> Earlier the PKP had failed to win much influence in the anti-Japanese and peasant-led *Hukbalahap* because it suggested that rural landlords should be allowed to join the movement. Not surprisingly the peasantry were unimpressed. Courting the Philippines ruling class and then switching sides to support the Huks had little positive effect. In 1950 the government conducted mass arrests of party members. By 1957 the PKP had become a moribund organisation. Similarly in Singapore, the section of the Left which was still influenced by the ideas of the Malay Communist Party joined hands with Lee Kuan Yew, in the Peoples Action Party, in the hope of sharing state power, only to be crushed by Lee and his friends in the British security forces.<sup>19</sup>

The Indonesian communists managed to develop the tactic of the Popular Front alliance to a fine art in their support for the nationalist President Sukarno. Sukarno had been promoted by the Japanese during the Second World War as Indonesia's nationalist leader against the Dutch. Despite his great political stature in the eyes of many Indonesians, Sukarno was no firebrand nationalist hero. He had to be kidnapped by young militants and forced to declare Indonesian independence at the end of the war. Between 1954 and 1965 the PKI's main political emphasis was its support for Sukarno. This suited Sukarno because his Indonesian Nationalist Party lacked a truly mass base. In contrast, the PKI had an estimated following of 20 million by 1965 and could use its influence among workers and peasants in support of Sukarno. The other mass force which Sukarno relied upon was the army which had been the key organisation which fought against the Dutch. Sukarno skilfully balanced the influence of the conservative army against the radical PKI. Although the Popular Front strategy seemed to increase the profile and influence of the PKI on a national scale, it came at a very high price.

In January 1946, Tan Malaka, leader of the PKI urged support for both the "Peoples" government of Sukarno and the army, down playing the role of workers. Only four months earlier, workers had seized control of the railways, the Djakarta tramways and various radio stations from the Japanese.<sup>20</sup> The 5th congress of the PKI in 1954 emphasised the need for self-denial among

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<sup>17</sup> Khong, 1987, p.19

<sup>18</sup> Kerkvliet, 1977, p.179

<sup>19</sup> Tremewan, 1994, p.20

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, 1972

workers and their “responsibilities” to the nation. Workers’ strikes were seen as damaging the growing alliance with Sukarno.<sup>21</sup> In 1957 workers were involved in the spontaneous occupation of Dutch companies. The PKI did nothing to help this or to stop the army from re-imposing “order” by taking control of these firms on behalf of the state.<sup>22</sup> Finally during the economic crisis of the early 1960s the PKI could not campaign among workers for better living standards for fear of alienating Sukarno.<sup>23</sup> The result of neglecting urban working class struggle for the sake of a place at Sukarno’s table was tragic. When Suharto launched his brutal coup in October 1965, Sukarno could not and did not protect the PKI. The working class were not ready to organise strikes, factory occupations or street confrontations with the army and the right wing. For years they had been told to rely on the President and reforms from above. At least one million communists were massacred by Suharto’s reign of terror.

The Popular Front strategy never worked for the communist parties in Southeast Asia. The only result was the blunting of class struggle and the disarming of the working class. Nationalism had equally dismal results, in terms of working class interests. Despite this, it would be a mistake to believe that the millions of rank and file workers and peasants who flocked to communism did not believe in socialist revolution or militant class struggle. They merely lacked the ideological means and the leadership to achieve these goals.

### *3) The strategy of rural armed struggle*

It has already been described how Mao developed the strategy of rural armed struggle, using a peasant army, as a result of the blunders of Stalinism. Due to the success of the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army in winning state power, this strategy became an increasingly attractive option for the communist parties in Southeast Asia. However, the results of applying the rural armed struggle in Malaya, Thailand and the Philippines were far less spectacular than in China.

In Malaya the rural guerrilla war was conducted at the expense of ignoring the struggles of urban workers, both in peninsular Malaya and in Singapore. In 1946, 260,000 ethnic Malay and Chinese workers staged a general strike in Singapore and Selangor against the imprisonment of an MPAJA (Malay People Anti-Japanese Army) war time resistance leader. Yet, by 1948, the leadership of the Malay Communist Party had decided on a strategy of rural armed struggle. That year, as communist leaders were leaving Singapore for the jungles of Malaya, working class militancy on the island was on the rise.<sup>24</sup> By 1951 the armed struggle was clearly failing.

In Thailand the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) adopted the rural armed struggle tactic in 1961. Yet by 1965, when the communists finally took up arms in remote areas, the Thai government was facing an increase in the number of urban strikes, which forced it to ease legal restrictions on industrial action.<sup>25</sup> In early 1973, the urban strike wave reached historical proportions and by October a mass uprising by students and workers had overthrown the military regime. However, the CPT took a decision not to become involved

<sup>21</sup> Mortimer, 1981

<sup>22</sup> Caldwell & Utrecht, 1979

<sup>23</sup> Mortimer, 1981

<sup>24</sup> Morgan, 1977, p.170; Tremewan, 1994, p.14

<sup>25</sup> Mabry, 1979, p.51

in this mass movement.<sup>26</sup> Although the party became involved in student and workers' struggles after 1973, the rural armed struggle always took priority. By the time of the brutal crackdown against democracy in 1976 the party had abandoned the urban struggle entirely, leaving workers to fight on alone.

The armed rural struggle in Thailand was never a serious threat to the Thai state. Part of the reason was the balance of forces, but another reason was that it was conducted in the name of a struggle for national liberation. The Thai state was soon able to undercut support for the CPT by a policy of political liberalisation. Another nail in the coffin of the CPT was the nationalist dispute between China and Vietnam and the growing friendship between China and the Thai government, which confused and undermined the ability of the CPT to conduct operations from neighbouring countries. The party ceased to exist by the mid 1980s.

In the Philippines, the adoption of the Maoist armed struggle strategy was partly a reaction to the conservative and inactive nature of the old PKP. In 1967 a breakaway faction established a new communist party (CPP) under the leadership of Amondo Guerrero. The party established the New Peoples Army (NPA) in 1969 along with José Maria Sison and Bernabe Buscayno (Commander Dante). However, the politics of the new party and its army were still Stalinist. In 1973 the CPP formed the National Democratic Front (NDF) in order to bring together all forces hostile to the US-Marcos dictatorship. In 1986 some of the main points in its political programme included; the overthrow of US imperialist rule and its local allies and the establishment of a democratic national coalition government to carry out land reform and national industrial development.<sup>27</sup>

In 1969 the CPP and NPA issued the following statement: "By building stable base areas to encircle the city, the biggest graveyard of the enemy forces are created. It is here in the countryside that the enemy becomes exhausted and defeated ...".<sup>28</sup> By 1997, it was in the countryside that the NPA was becoming exhausted and defeated, not the other way round. In contrast, it was in the city that the power of the Marcos dictatorship was crushed. By not placing its main priorities in the cities, the CPP, like the Thai party before it, risks becoming an irrelevance.

### **Stalinism in Southeast Asia today**

In Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, the original organisational forms of the Stalinist Left, the communist parties, have long ceased to exist. In the Philippines, the organisation is in disarray. In Vietnam the party has embraced the free market, seeking to join the ranks of the newly industrialising countries of ASEAN. However, it would be a mistake to believe that Stalinist ideology is dead and buried. The ideas of nationalism in the struggle against imperialism still exist among those who attack the IMF and the World Bank "structural adjustment" policies or the presence of foreign military bases. The ideas about building a modern democratic political system through cross-class coalitions and alliances of activists are still proposed in the various democracy

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<sup>26</sup> Pornpirom, 1987, p.13; Seksan, 1989, p.39

<sup>27</sup> Davis, 1989, p.54; Nemenzo, 1984, p.90

<sup>28</sup> Nemenzo, 1984, p.90



movements, the most recent being in Indonesia. The working class is still under-estimated and ignored by all except a handful of Marxists. Instead of the peasantry, the middle classes have become the new hope for change in the minds of demoralised communists. The Stalinist activists of the past have become the non-government organisation (NGO) and pro-democracy activists of today. A good example of this is in Thailand where the main leaders of the democracy and social movements are often activists who were associated with the CPT in the past. They have changed their belief in armed struggle or the need for state control of the economy, but their current views are not very different from Stalinism in other respects. Despite the sincerity of their belief in social justice, they were never really Marxists or revolutionaries in the first place.

The lack of an organisational form of the Left should not be understood to mean that left-wing ideas have disappeared from society. It is commonly accepted by millions of Southeast Asians that society is divided by class, that there is a glaring gap between the rich and the poor and that something needs to be done about it. Most also believe that the rich run society, even in democratic countries and now, after the Asian crisis of capitalism, more people are starting to question the suitability of capitalism. Added to this is the constant class struggle conducted by a growing working class in the region. Such class struggle occurs with or without an organised Left. In fact the record of the past shows that the organised Left has tended to play a role in dampening down class struggle. The history of the Left in Southeast Asia has not ended in the 1990s. There is still a future for socialism.

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