

1st MBRAS Lecture 2021

“The Malayan Emergency”

by David Alfred

Saturday, 24 April 2021, 3 p.m.

* A virtual event via Zoom

The Malayan Emergency which lasted from 1948 to 1960 was a success story of how a small country at the tip of the Asian mainland in South East Asia had overcome and beaten off a communist-led terrorist insurgency which had started as an insurrection against the lawful Government of Malaya. Aided by her friends in the Commonwealth, the multi-racial and multi religious population of the country — which at the height of the Emergency in 1951 only numbered 5.5 million — succeeded in overcoming the Emergency after a 12-year intense struggle on the ideological and military fronts. This achievement was unique in the annals of the history of the Commonwealth. In this talk, David Alfred will deliver an overview of how the Emergency began, strategies used to address it and finally how the Malayan citizenry and Government managed to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. The speaker will also share his personal experiences of the Emergency, living in Kuala Lumpur at the time.

David Chelvasingam Alfred is an avid student of the Malayan Emergency. He is a barrister of the Middle Temple and was called to the English Bar in November 1969 before being admitted as an Advocate and Solicitor of the High Court of Malaya on 31 May 1971. From January 2015 to May 2019 he served as a Judge of the High Court of Fiji. He holds a LL.B (Hons) from the University of London (as an external student.)

The MBRAS lecture on the Malayan Emergency by Mr David Alfred was moderated by Dato’ Henry Barlow who first introduced the former to the participants by giving a brief account of his professional background and accomplishments. Mr Alfred prefaced his talk by first relating several incidents relating to the Emergency

involving members of his own family and those he personally witnessed, such as being ordered to hide under the bed by his parents when communists were firing at the adjacent quarters occupied by (later Tan Sri Sir) Claude Fenner at the Kuala Kubu Hospital, where Mr Alfred's father was the medical officer in charge, in 1948; the sight of a dead communist slung on a pole and brought to his house at Circular Road, Kuala Lumpur by British soldiers who asked for a post-mortem in 1950 and the chilling encounter in 1949 when his father's car which was stopped by communists in the dead of night on the way to Tanjung Malim where he had to attend a patient.

Mr Alfred commenced his talk on the Emergency by first laying out the historical background of the Communist Party in Malaya where its presence was first noted in 1925 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretly opened a branch in Singapore, exclusively for the Nanyang or the countries of the South Seas. This branch then became dormant following police action. In April 1930, an exclusively Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was established which aimed at the overthrow of the British government in Malaya and its replacement with a Soviet-style republic. This was followed by the establishment of the communist-led Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) in March 1942 which, with the exception of a short campaign against the Japanese, never developed into a full resistance movement and instead sought safety in the jungle until just before the war was over. In the interregnum period between the Japanese surrender in mid-August 1945 and the return of British forces in early September 1945, the MPAJA unleashed a reign of terror that was to have an impact on future race relations in the country.

Some explanation was provided by Mr Alfred as to why the Emergency was not described as a war, namely, that no other foreign country was involved and that to describe it as a war would mean to acknowledge that the MCP had some justification for challenging the authority of the government of the day. Mr Alfred also disabused any notions that the MCP (and its Malayan National Liberation Army—MNLA) were freedom fighters or nationalists who accelerated the pace of independence. Mr Alfred also dwelt at some length on the uneasy working relationship between High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney, William Nicol Gray, the police chief and Colonel (later Major-General Sir Charles) Boucher which later caused divisions in the fight against the communists.

This acrimonious state of affairs only ended with the appointment of Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs in April 1950 as director of operations. However the emergency showed no signs of abating despite reinforcement of troops from Hong Kong and United Kingdom. This was attributed to strengths of the MNLA, namely its controlling mind, the continuing recruitment of the MNLA, and the presence of squatter settlements which provided the MNLA with money, food and supplies. It was the eponymously named Briggs

Plan which broke the back of the insurrection. The plan involved the resettlement of squatters in secure areas, giving them a sense of security, breaking up the Min Yuen in their areas and isolating the communists and the squatters so that their links would be severed. As a result, the communists would be forced to leave their jungle hideouts and be forced into an encounter with the government security forces waiting to apprehend them. The plan resulted in over 500 000 squatters being resettled over the next three years in over 400 resettlement areas, termed New Villages.

All these efforts may have slowed the insurrection but did not defeat the communists. The emergency's aim, according to Briggs, was to make the Chinese commit to the government by making them feel that Malaya was their home, and not communist-led China. Briggs acknowledged that without Chinese cooperation, it would be difficult to bring the emergency to a successful conclusion. Mr Alfred then turned to several events between 1948–1951 which illustrated how brutal the insurrection was, namely the bold attack on the Bukit Kepong police station in February 1950 and the cold-blooded assassination of Sir Henry Gurney in October 1951.

Next, Mr Alfred turned to the arrival of General Sir Gerald Templer's in February 1952 which changed the momentum in the counterinsurgency, and highlighted Templer's efforts to defeat the communists by forming a multiracial army in the form of the Federation Regiment and the Federation Armoured Car Squadron, to augment the existing Malay Regiment. These efforts led Chin Peng to change his tactics in which he negotiated for peace with the newly-elected leaders of the Federation government in 1955. Tunku Abdul Rahman, however, emphasised to the communists that what mattered was their loyalty to Malaya, and nothing else. Chin Peng promised that the communists would cease its hostilities and disband upon Tunku's return from United Kingdom where he was to proceed to negotiate for independence. However, upon Tunku's return, with the British government's commitment to Malayan independence, the MCP did not keep its word and never disbanded. The insurgency only ended in July 1960.

Mr Alfred summarized that the Emergency was a unique historical event in which normal life continued despite the prevailing restrictive conditions in place. It was a situation where the military and police acted in aid of the civilian government, with the latter assuming a leading role in the battle to defeat the insurgents. Resolute action was taken by the government against the MNLA, which had transformed from bandits to communist terrorists seeking to establish a communist republic against the wishes of the Malayan people.

Mr Alfred also recorded his own observations made one evening in 1956, of a new village in Mambau, situated on the trunk road to Kuala Lumpur from Port Dickson, when they were stopped at a road block. The

resettled village was surrounded by a double apron barbed wire fence, with flood lights at every corner, and wooden houses neatly arranged in rows, situated by the main road. Mr Alfred provided several examples of New Villages which survive till today such as Kampung Coldstream in Perak, along with Salak South and Jinjang North on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Mr Alfred concluded his lecture by acknowledging the sacrifices made by members of the security forces in order to safeguard the newly independent state of Malaya, and that this brave show of loyalty must be recorded for posterity.

The talk resumed with a question-and-answer session after a brief interval. A comment was forwarded to the moderator asking for more details on the Second World War in Malaya. Mr Alfred replied that the Pacific War in actually began on 8 December 1941 with the Japanese invasion of Kota Bahru, 70 minutes before Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese Navy. Mr Alfred commented that with the large number of troops at his disposal, there was no excuse for General (Arthur) Percival not to take resolute action to stop the Japanese advance at the border with Siam. Prime Minister Winston Churchill had given full authority to (Air Chief Marshall Sir Robert) Brooke-Popham, Commander-in-Chief of the British Far East Command, to launch Operation Matador if it became clear that the Japanese would attack Malaya. Instead the British army took the line of least resistance, with the result that the Japanese swept through Siam and landed on the beach at Kota Bahru. The ensuing reaction of Governor Sir Shenton Thomas suggested the casual and somewhat contemptuous attitude of the British towards the Japanese, as if to suggest that it would be easy to repel them. However, it was a case of 'orang putih lari!' (the white man is fleeing), and Mr Alfred quipped that there was little to be said in defence of the Imperial British Army, which simply fled and did not stand and make a fight. An example was given of Major-General Gordon Bennett, the commander of the 8th Australian Division, who did not want to take orders from Percival and retreated all the way back to Australia. This scenario led the MPAJA to think that they could take over Malaya upon the departure of the Japanese. However they were unable to do so as the MPAJA was an alien force, and not a domestic or local force.

A question was asked concerning the 30 000 or so people who were deported to China and whether or not they were allowed to return after the Emergency. Mr Alfred replied that the number may well have been closer to 50 000 and there were no records indicating their return because they had shown by their action and thoughts that Malaya was not their homeland.

The second question sought to draw attention to Mr Alfred having singled out the interregnum following the Japanese surrender as the most negative event in terms of impact on race relations. The other part of the question related to how during the Emergency both the communists and the police force were seen as competing with each other ideologically by seeking to cultivate a multiracial character, and the questioner

sought to engage Mr Alfred by pointing out that in spite of the New Economic Policy, the security forces are still seen to be monoracial in character and seemingly dominated by one ethnic group.

Mr Alfred commented that in the few weeks between the 14 August and 13 September 1945, there was a complete breakdown of law and order, during which the MPAJA arrogated to themselves the glory of having defeated the Japanese. They had not shown any bravery in resisting either the Japanese or returning British forces. Both sides had been taken by surprise that the war would end in 1945 with the surrender of Japan. The MPAJA were unprepared and were not given clear instructions; they had thought that they would only be assisting the returning British forces. So the MPAJA turned on the police force, which they accused of collaborating with the Kempeitai, and also organized what was known as 'the people's court', summary trials where those who they considered to be traitors were executed. This reign of terror caused a great deal of bloodshed and ill feeling, vestiges of which survive to this very day. Mr Alfred pointed out that the racial composition of the MRLA was 90% Chinese, with the remaining 10 % made up of Malays and other races. There was a Tenth Regiment in Pahang under Abdullah C.D. and there was also Rashid Maidin: however, the non-Chinese elements in the MRLA were simply a façade to give the impression of a multiracial army whereas the substance was essentially or exclusively monoracial. Mr Alfred pointed out that when the Malayan government started the national service in 1950, they called on the people to join the police force. However one group of people refused to do so and decamped to Singapore, Hong Kong and China, under the justification that the government was wasting the talents of their youths by making the best of them join the security forces. But when it was pointed out that Singapore, Hong Kong and China were doing something similar, their answer was that the youths were there 'among their own people'. With Malaya, apparently their response was signally different: they refused to render service and defend the land that had fed and nurtured them during its hour of need. According to Mr Alfred, this was the reason there was no multiracial security forces to this day although Templer tried very hard to initiate this by setting up the Federation Regiment.

A question was received as to why acts of communist terrorism continued in East Malaysia even after the CCP had stopped supporting the MCP following the visit of Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein to China in the 1970s.

Mr Alfred pointed out that the question seemed to lie outside the scope of his presentation that afternoon, which was to talk about the Emergency in Malaya between 1948–1960. However Mr Alfred made the point that from what he had hitherto gathered during his readings, there was no assistance or support in whatever form, moral or material, from China and the CCP to the MCP. Therefore it can be safely said that the Malayan

insurrection between 1948 and 1960 was internally generated, and that there was no external input or infusion.

Upon making this point, the moderator pointed out that the session had drawn to an end, and proceeded to thank Mr Alfred for his extremely interesting and stimulating talk, and for his contributions to the Society. The president Tengku Fauzi also expressed his deep appreciation to Mr Alfred and pointed out that, thanks to the enlightening lecture by Mr Alfred, he now has a more complete picture of the Malayan Emergency than before. The entire talk, including the question and answer session, took about 90 minutes in all.