

“THE MARGINAL ENEMY”: THE IMAGE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF MALAYA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE THAI STATE, 1948–1989

*Thippaporn Inkum**

Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya,
50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
E-mail: thippaporn@siswa.um.edu.my

*Ho Hui Ling***

Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya,
50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
E-mail: hohuilin@um.edu.my

Published online: 25 January 2022

To cite this article: Inkum, T. and Ho, Hui Ling. 2022. “The marginal enemy”: The image of the Communist Party of Malaya from the perspective of the Thai state, 1948–1989. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 18 (1): 197–218. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2022.18.1.9>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2022.18.1.9>

ABSTRACT

The Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), also known colloquially among Thais as “the Chinese Communists” or “the Chinese Communist of Malaya,” was an anti-government paramilitary group that was active during the Cold War. In the context of the Cold War, successive Thai governments saw the CPM as an opposition group, but lesser in importance than the other threats it faced, such as the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and the separatist movements operating in the same area of operation as the CPM. At the same time, the CPM was the last communist group to disband (around 1989), despite the Thai government’s policy of amnesty, which began in 1981 under Order 66/23. This article argues that the Thai authorities viewed the CPM as a “marginal enemy” in terms of its geographical remoteness on the Thai-Malaysian border and security priority. As a result of this lower security priority, the Thai government approached the CPM as a threat that could be dealt

with through negotiations and political means rather than military suppression. It was arguably this different perspective that led to the divergent strategies between the central governments of Thailand and Malaysia vis-à-vis the CPM threat.

Keywords: Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), the Malayan Emergency, Communist Party of Thailand, Order 66/2523

INTRODUCTION

Communist propaganda first exerted its influence during the reign of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, r. 1925–1935), when members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and their sympathisers migrated for work in Thailand. From around 1928 onwards, they collaborated with the Vietnamese community in Thailand to push for the liberation of Vietnam from French colonial rule. Although most of the activists were Chinese or Vietnamese, they affected Thailand as the Chinese and Vietnamese communities exercised outsized economic and intellectual influence (Suma 1985: 20–22).

The spread of Communism became an increasing concern as the Cold War intensified. From the Thai perspective, Communism posed a clear danger. Under the second government of Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkhram (1948–1957), Thailand aligned itself with the United States. This alignment can clearly be seen in the Thai commitment to dispatch troops to fight in the Korean War. Nevertheless, in the domestic context, Communism continued to exist and even flourish, despite the passage of the Communist Action Act in 1952. The government's most formidable opponent at the time was the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT).¹ However, the CPT was not the only group the state had to contend with. Alongside separatist and bandit groups, the Thai state also had to contend with the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM)² on the Thai-Malaysian border.

This paper aims to present the CPM's historical background and the policy response of the Thai government from 1948 to 1989. Despite the Malaysian government's severe suppression of this group and Thai-Malaysian cooperation on this issue, the Thai government never saw the CPM as a serious threat. This difference in threat perception arguably led to divergent approaches between the two nations towards the same insurgent group.

THE CPM: BEGINNINGS AND OPERATIONS

Communism in the Malayan peninsula began to spread in the 1920s through the efforts of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) representatives. Subsequently, the CPC became the CCP. The movement concentrated its efforts on Singapore, which had a significant overseas Chinese population. It worked on exploiting the inequality between the Chinese and Malays, especially in terms of occupation, quality of life, and political rights. At the time, most Chinese were dissatisfied with the prevailing situation and felt great resentment against the colonial British government (Sebastian 1991: 275).

In addition to the CCP, the Chinese Nationalists also tried to exert their influence by promoting revolutionary ideals and nationalism among the Chinese-Malays. The Overseas Chinese Association was established to mobilise workers and students. The Nanyang (South Sea) Communist Party initially began as the Nanyang General Labor Union. By 1928, this party had based itself in Singapore. Its mission was to coordinate operations in Malaya, East Asia, South Asia, and act as a contact point for the Indonesian Communist Party operating in the Dutch East Indies (Chin 1995: 21–22).

The Nanyang Communist Party's activities developed slowly, as it was unable to recruit non-Chinese members (Samart 1979: 23). The Great Depression, which began in 1929, changed this situation. The founding of the CPM was announced during the Third Meeting of representatives, held at the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern in Shanghai in 1930. The founding of this new party was a tacit recognition of the Malayan communist movement's capacity to oppose Western imperialism, which had been weakened by the economic crisis (Yong 1997: 131–132). Furthermore, the Third Meeting also sought to decentralise revolutionary activities on the Malayan peninsula, although the CPM still came under the direct supervision of the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern (Chin 1995: 22).

The sudden purge of the Chinese Communists in Shanghai in 1931 disrupted this line of support (Miller 1954: 23). Consequently, the first phase of the CPM's operations was unsuccessful. The movement revived somewhat during the Japanese occupation of Malaya in World War II. During this period, the CPM became part of the anti-Japanese National Recovery Movement, albeit in collaboration with its pre-war opponent, the British Government. Nevertheless, their involvement in the anti-Japanese resistance enhanced the CPM's popular image (Clutterbuck 1973: 47; Short 2000: 25).

Despite their wartime cooperation with the British, the CPM never abandoned its initial objective of overthrowing British colonial rule. Upon Japan's defeat and withdrawal from Malaya in 1945, the British returned to Malaya and monitored all transportation routes to control the CPM's movement. The CPM appeared to have been caught out by the British's expeditious return and exertion of authority and responded with more aggressive tactics than previously, leveraging their wartime experiences.³ The CPM engaged in a campaign of insurgency and terrorism. Their main targets were the Malayan police and Japanese collaborators (Pye 1956: 71). Finally, the British Malayan Government declared the Malayan Emergency on 18 June 1948, which initially applied only to the central parts of Perak and Western Johor. Subsequently, on 12 July, the Emergency was extended throughout the country (Jittpratoom 1995: 11), indicating the seriousness of the CPM threat.

The British efforts to suppress the CPM met with success, leading to the withdrawal of CPM forces to Thailand. By the end of the Emergency in 1960, almost all CPM members were based in the area around the present-day Thai-Malaysian border in Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Yala Provinces (Rattanachaya 1995: 21). Despite this major setback, the CPM still adhered to their goal of overthrowing the Malayan government and the establishment of the Malayan Democratic Republic (Yodpijit 2000: 5).

Although the CPM's main objective did not pose a direct threat to Thailand, its communist ideology was in opposition to the Thai government's stated policies. In addition, their violent activities against Thai citizens and their property and demands for protection fees and illegal taxes from locals were causes for concern. Arguably the decisive factor that turned the Thai authorities against the CPM was their attempt to collaborate with the CPT, which posed a direct threat to the Thai state (Jittpoosa et al. 1982: 60–62). This attempted cooperation led to the active cooperation between Thailand and Malaya to suppress CPM activities from 1949 onwards.

THE THAI STATE AND ITS PERSPECTIVES REGARDING THE CPM

According to state documents, the Thai government had been involved in the CPM's suppression before its official agreement with the British Malayan Government in 1949 (Nik Mahmud and Yusoff 2002: 124–125). In April 1946, a meeting was held concerning the suppression of Chinese criminals

in the South. Representatives from the Thai Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence, the British Embassy in Bangkok, and the British Army attended the meeting. The Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs presided over the meeting. According to the minutes, the British had only one company⁴ available to assist in a crackdown on the CPM in Thailand. Given its inadequate capacity, the British requested that the 6th Army Division of Thailand⁵ be available to provide assistance in the event of an emergency, such as unexpected ambushes. The Thai government acceded to this request as the Thai Ministry of Defence immediately ordered the 6th Division to prepare its personnel to render this assistance, as required (FA 3.6.4/1, 15 April 1946).

Despite this earlier agreement, this cooperation was only recognised by the relevant operational departments. According to a Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs report dated June 1946, British troops were involved in raids on the dwellings of civil servants, retired government officials, merchants, and people in the Yala municipal area. These raids took place without prior notice to the Thai authorities and caused considerable alarm among the Thais in Yala. These incidents fuelled rumours that the British were attempting to infiltrate the South of Thailand with the aim of occupying and annexing the area. In response, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs held a press conference to clarify the existing agreements vis-à-vis the British cross-border raids (FA 3.6.4/5, 4 June 1946).

Thus, at this early stage, the main cause for concern from the Thai government's perspective appeared to be British overreach rather than the CPM's activities. For the Thai side, the more critical threats were the CPT and separatist movements that were active in the same area. The separatist movements were a direct security threat, as they aimed to force the secession of the majority-Muslim Southern provinces (Yodpijit 2000: 85). Equally, the CPT had been a threat since its founding in 1942. The CPT had extensive operations across most of the Southern provinces (Military Intelligence Unit 1987: 3–5), thereby posing a far greater threat than the CPM, which operated mainly in the Thai-Malaysian border area and were primarily a matter for Malayan concern. In addition, given the geographical remoteness of this area from Bangkok, as well as the Malayan government's successful suppression efforts, the Thai Government had even fewer incentives to take immediate action against the CPM.

Ultimately, the decisive factor that led to the CPM's dissolution was the Order of the Office of the Prime Minister, No. 66/2523.⁶ General Prem Tinsulanonda, the prime minister at the time, spearheaded this new anti-communist policy, which was based on persuasion and political negotiations

rather than solely on violent suppression. This new policy was aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the population and opening a way for the less convinced communists to return to normal society. The new measures did not mean an end to military measures, however. Military suppression still continued in parallel to exert pressure on the insurgent groups to come to negotiations. For example, in 1982, Lieutenant General Han Leelanond, Commander of the 4th Army Area, seized the Nam Khang Tunnels. These tunnel systems had been critical to CPM operations in the area and their capture exerted further pressure on the movement to come to the negotiations. These political efforts running in parallel with military operations were characteristic of the “politics leading the military” doctrine.

In spite of the military pressure, the CPM was the last major insurgent group to surrender to the Thai state. However, this late surrender should not be regarded as a sign of the CPM’s unyielding enmity against the Thai state. Indeed, the CPM’s policy was to avoid entanglements with the Thai state, as its main focus had always been Malaysia. It was arguably only when its political position became untenable in both Thailand and Malaysia that they were induced to surrender. This surrender took place in 1987, when the CPM’s remaining leaders decided to sue for peace with the Thai government. The reports of the Thai government agencies concurred that it was the CPM’s weakness that forced it to negotiate. The reasons for this weakness were as follows (Yodpijit 2000: 129–130):

1. The split between CPM forces operating in the Thai Southern border provinces and those in Malaya began in 1983. There was an internal conflict between the Chinese Nationalist Party members in Malaysia and Thailand, and a power struggle between the leaders of the party, which critically undermined the CPM’s overall unity.
2. The lack of a strong mass base of support, especially from Malaysians. Throughout its time, the CPM was unable to build and maintain mass support in both Thailand and Malaysia due to their own unpopular actions, as well as the successful suppression efforts on both sides of the border. In addition, given the abundance of natural resources in its area of operation, CPM members became more interested in pursuing their own economic interests rather than their ideological goals. Thus, they encountered supply and manpower shortages and were unable to carry out more ambitious operations.
3. The reduction of financial, material, and ideological support from the CCP. This process began in the 1980s and resulted from China’s desire to break its international isolation and prevent Soviet

encirclement. This policy gained momentum after Mao Zedong's death in 1976. In a departure from Mao's ideological focus, Deng emphasised economic reforms and friendlier relations with Southeast Asian neighbours, which meant cutting support for communist insurgent groups, including the CPM. Indeed, Deng had directly advised Chin Peng to begin peace negotiations with the Malaysian government (Cheah 2012: 45).

4. The Soviet Union's economic and political crises in the 1980s also prevented the CPM and others from courting an alternative source of support. Moreover, the superpower's decline discredited communist ideology.
5. The success of the new "politics leading the military" doctrine. This policy undermined the CPM's remaining local support base. The efforts of a secret unit that was established on the Thai side to negotiate with the CPM and coordinate with the Malaysian government was also a key factor to the eventual success of negotiations.

The CPM surrendered to Thai authorities on 2 December 1989. The Thai Government acted as the coordinator for the signing of the peace treaty between the CPM and the Malaysian Government. More than 1,000 CPM members agreed to cease their operations on the Thai-Malaysian border if the Thai Government provided them with a place to live and employment (Sebastian 1991: 283). The Thai government's agreement to these conditions led to the disbandment of the CPM's armed forces and their settlement in Thailand. At the same time, the Malaysian government allowed former CPM members, with the exception of their leaders, to return to Malaysia. These negotiations and their success greatly improved Thai-Malaysian bilateral relations and worked in favour of the Thai government's strategy to stabilise the country and make it an economic centre of Southeast Asia (Kunthic 2018: 43).

THAI ANTI-CPM OPERATIONS

A key difference between the Thai and Malaysian suppression efforts against the CPM was the scale of the violence. Since the Malaysian government considered the CPM to be a serious threat to national security, their policy and measures were primarily aimed at the total elimination of the movement (Miller 1954: 205; Purcell 1954: 88; Short 2000: 95–96). In contrast, the

Thai government appeared to exercise a lighter touch. This policy is all the more surprising, given the anti-communist nature of successive Thai regimes, from the time of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910–1925) up to the time of the Cold War. Indeed, throughout the Cold War, communists were portrayed as “devils” through propaganda and news. Leftist opponents of the military were routinely suppressed and eliminated as communists. The Thai government, particularly during Field Marshal Pibulsongkhram, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, and Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, highlighted their anti-communist policies to court support and financial aid from the United States. In light of this clear anti-communist bent, the Thai government should have been expected to crack down hard on a new communist threat. Yet, the government’s prevention and suppression strategy vis-à-vis the CPM underwent a subtle evolution.

Pre-1957 Prevention and Suppression Policy

Policies and actions during this period began with legal measures to prevent the spread of communist ideology and the rendering of aid to communists. The landmark legislation was the 1933 Anti-Communist Act, which was passed at a time when communist actions were yet to intensify. It was not until Field Marshal Pibulsongkhram’s second government that the 1952 Communist Party Act was passed and enforced. This legislation was a direct measure aimed at suppressing communism (Suma 1985: 94–95). Furthermore, the Printing Act was passed to punish those who supported and published communist literature. Anti-communist committees and agencies were also established, such as the Volunteer Guard Division and the Border Patrol Police. This anti-communist trend was also reflected in Thai foreign policy. Thailand aligned itself firmly with the anti-Communist West (Phuengkanthai 1978: 377–398). For instance, Thailand actively collaborated with the United States by deploying troops and providing supplies for the Korean War and Vietnam War. While Thailand was a member of the International Labour Organisation, the state attempted to prevent communist infiltration of domestic labour movements by establishing the Thai Labour Association, which operated branches in the provinces. The Thai authorities also closely monitored these activities (MI 0201.2.1.57/6, 15 September 1952). Yet, these measures appeared to be largely targeted at the CPT, rather than the CPM.

Although the CPM would come to re-establish itself in the Thai-Malaysian border area, this had never been its original intention. In an interview, Chin Peng stated that: “...at that time we did not even think of using the South of Thailand” (Chin and Hack 2004: 151). The CPM’s original plan from 1948

to 1952 was to establish their headquarters in the North-eastern jungles of North Kelantan and South Pahang. However, British suppression efforts in the 1950s resulted in the exodus of rural Chinese to new villages (*kampung baharu*), which denied supplies to the CPM. Additional soft measures by the British further prevented recruitment. Thus, the CPM eventually decided to use the area of Betong District, Yala Province, in Thailand, as their main base from 1953 onwards (Hack 2008/2017: 198–199, 208).

In the first phase of the conflict, the CPM's operations in Southern Thailand had yet to have a noticeable impact on Thai national security although they were being monitored. According to a 1954 Ministry of Interior report, the CPM was not only active in the jungle, but had also infiltrated the rubber plantations. The report also suspected the Chinese working in the tin mines, factories, and markets of involvement with the CPM, either voluntarily or under duress. In response, the Ministry of Interior formulated a plan to deal with the CPM, which can be summarised as follow (MI 0201.2.1.57/12, 12 January 1954):

1. In the area covered by the State of Emergency, Chinese residents have to declare their names, occupations, and identification numbers to the district chief officer, the chief of police, or the appointed officers in that locality.
2. Administrative and police officers were to jointly monitor the Chinese under paragraph (1) to verify the accuracy of the submitted information. The officers temporarily kept the original identification documents, while their holders were issued copies. If Chinese residents wished to travel or reside elsewhere, they must obtain permission from the local administrative officers or the police.
3. Movement of Chinese residents and other suspect individuals in the area where the Emergency was declared were to be restricted to their area of residence to prevent terrorist movements.

Although the Ministry of Interior had been monitoring the CPM and its activities, this new suppression effort was arguably a result of the Thai government's agreement with its Malayan counterpart, as well as the CPM's activities, which were beginning to cause local alarm. These activities effectively pushed the Thai authorities to see the CPM as a problem that had to be dealt with in common with their Malayan counterparts. However, at this stage, the CPM remained more of a concern for the Malayan side rather than the Thai side (The News Division of Civil-Police-Military 43 Forces 1982: 17–18).

Prevention and Suppression Policy, 1957–1980

In the latter part of 1957, the Thai political situation became highly turbulent. The year saw a coup, the abolition of another constitution, and the dissolution of parliament. These events led to the establishment of a military dictatorship under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat who became prime minister in 1959. Under Field Marshal Sarit, political parties, political gatherings of more than five persons, and vocal opponents of the military were systematically banned and eliminated. These measures were enabled by Article 17 of the 1959 Constitution, which provided for the following:

During the period of this constitution's implementation, in the event that the prime minister sees the necessity of curbing or suppressing acts that undermine the kingdom's security, acts that disturb or threaten the peace whether they originate domestically or externally, the prime minister has the authority to issue orders or take actions through a Cabinet resolution. Such orders or acts have legal legitimacy.

When the prime minister orders or commits any of the acts referred to in the preceding paragraph, the prime minister shall inform the Parliament (Sopee 2017).

The application of Article 17 allowed the Sarit regime to maintain its power and enforce an uneasy political stability, albeit with the terminal decline of Leftist ideology in Thai political discourse.

At that time, existing communist suppression measures had already met with success. However, under Field Marshal Sarit, these measures involved more agencies and were much more systematic. Multiple agencies were now involved in tracking the communist movement, such as the Department of Central Intelligence, the Armed Forces Security Centre (AFSC), the National Intelligence Cooperation Centre, and the Directorate of Operations (Suma 1985: 99). From 1963 onwards, the main organisation in charge was the National Security Command, which focused on prevention rather than suppression. The Thai government also used psychological operations to prevent people from joining the communist movement and preferred to employ suppression measures as the last resort (Chayanam 2017: 125).

Field Marshal Sarit's successor, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, continued his predecessor's anti-communist policies. Notably, this period saw a new agreement between Thailand and Malaysia. Signed on 13 March 1965 and amended twice (on 7 March 1970 and 4 March 1977), the agreement established the General Border Committee (GBC) and the Thai-

Malaysian Regional Border Committee (RBC). The main objective of the agreement was to establish effective measures to counter and eliminate the communist insurgency along the Thai-Malaysian border. However, the Malaysian government considered separatist groups to be beyond the remit of the agreement (Chayanam 2017: 126). The exclusion of these groups from the agreement reflects the Malaysian understanding of the complexity of the situation on the Thai side of the border.

By 1972, a group calling itself the “Southern Patriotic Federation” had spread throughout the Southern border provinces. Headquartered in Songkhla, this group came under the Thai authorities’ close surveillance. The Federation had three objectives: (1) Prevent the separation of the Southern provinces, (2) Elimination of corrupt authorities and officials who abused their power, and (3) Take action against the CPM members and Chin Peng (FA (2) 18.2.2/3, 23 February 1972). Although the movement explicitly targeted the CPM, it was not their focus. This group distributed Yawi leaflets to local police stations in Surat Thani, Narathiwat, and Yala Provinces, warning and intimidating police officers to stop abusing the people. Thus, the underground movement was constituted from disgruntled Muslims who were dissatisfied with the exploitation by corrupt state officials, as well as the CPM’s actions. The existence of this and other groups indicate the complexity of the operating environment in the Southern border area.

In the late 1970s, the Thai security situation had undergone changes, with a greater distance from the United States and a new focus on strengthening relations with neighbouring countries, as well as the People’s Republic of China. Despite the overtures to communist nations, the Thai government remained gravely concerned with the continuing expansion of communist operations. This concern was especially seen during the short tenure of Prime Minister Thanin Kraivichien (1976–1977). During this period, Thailand renewed its old focus on the alliance with the United States and radical anti-communism (Chulasiriwong 1993: 128–135), since by this time communist forces had conquered Indochina and posed a direct risk to Thailand.

With regard to communist suppression efforts, the new security atmosphere led to the renewed focus on military operations and search and destroy actions. The success of these operations was measured in terms of body count, in accordance with the contemporary American practice (Bamrungsuk 1998: 36). Controlled areas were also used to prevent communist operations (Rakdee 2004: 54–55). The Thai government also employed additional mechanisms to deal with the CPM, such as exchanging information with Malaysia and using the GBC and RBC to coordinate activities which led to the destruction of targets in the border area (Rakdee 2004: 99–100).

Prevention and Suppression Policy in the 1980s

The radical and violent approach evolved again in the 1980s under General Prem Tinsulanonda's administration. General Prem Tinsulanonda used a peaceful approach in parallel with military measures. This new approach was expressed in the Order of the Office of the Prime Minister, No. 66/2523 (also known as Order 66/23). The order called for the treatment of communists as misguided people, who should be given the chance to repent, rather than as enemy combatants who had to be eliminated. "Politics should lead the military", i.e., persuasion should be used to sway people in the communists' target area to support the government. Alongside political persuasion would be measures to develop the economy, society, education, and public health. For those who remained intransigent, military force remained an option (Yodpijit 2000: 109–110).

General Prem Tinsulanonda recognised that communism could be suppressed by force but at the cost of many lives and much treasure. This fact is reflected in the cost of the Malayan Emergency. Although the effort was ultimately successful, the costs were immense, running to USD 90 million in 1953 alone. Moreover, an average of 18 police officers and soldiers had to be deployed to suppress one CPM insurgent (Hanrahan 1971: 130–131). More than 4,000 officials lost their lives in the course of the Emergency (Barber 1973/1973: 420–421). Thus, while military solutions could lead to success, it would only come at great cost. There was also the chance that the investment may not succeed at all, as demonstrated by the disastrous Vietnam War. Thus, a less costly solution was sought. General Prem Tinsulanonda drew on his experiences as the 2nd Army Area Commander (1974–1977) in the Northeast, where his political overtures to the CPT had met with success, to formulate a possible national political solution.

In addition to enforcing Order 66/23 at the national level, the regions had some leeway to express their own variation of this policy in accordance with the conditions on the ground. This leeway was especially important for the Southern border provinces that had their own distinctive identity. The 4th Army Area established a "Peaceful South" policy, based on the close cooperation and mutual understanding between government officers and the local people. The main objective of the policy was to create security, which would facilitate the success of other measures. In addition, a secure Thai-Malaysian border would be key to the economic restoration of border provinces and the improvement of bilateral relations (Rakdee 2004: 61).

The 4th Army Area also had its own “ten commandments” for its troops, as follows:

1. Continue to exert military pressure,
2. Do not focus on holding CPM bases,
3. Control the flow of consumer goods,
4. Conduct population surveys and census,
5. Inspect vehicles entering the controlled area,
6. Protect the people and resources in the controlled area,
7. Visit the people at the border area,
8. Send local delegates to conduct negotiations,
9. Call for the CPM’s immediate surrender, and
10. Follow Order 66/2523.

The main priority was placed on the second and seventh provisions. The second provision meant that the authorities would focus on the destruction rather than seizure of CPM bases, thereby denying them shelter and supplies. The seventh provision obligated officers to visit and provide explanations for the local people to prevent misunderstandings. At the same time, they are also to communicate with the CPM by disseminating Thai, Chinese, and Yawi-language leaflets to persuade them to leave the movement. The Thai authorities also emphasised that former CPM members could remain in Thailand, if they wished, rather than be deported to Malaysia (Rakdee 2004: 62).

The key provision under Order 66/23 provided for the rehabilitation of former communists who had surrendered and were not the subject of criminal convictions. The rehabilitation project was known as the “Thai National Developer Project”. The 4th Army Area estimated that almost 700 former CPM members availed of this provision. The Thai government established five “Piyamitra” villages and four “Rattanakitti” villages on the borders of Yala, Narathiwat, and Songkhla Provinces for former members of the CPM to resettle in Thailand. Subsequently, the name of Rattanakitti villages were changed to “Chulabhorn” villages in honour of Her Royal Highness Princess Chulabhorn Krom Phra Srisavangavadhana, who also took these villages under her Royal Patronage. In 1997, the oversight of these villages was passed to the Provincial Governor (Rakdee 2004: 64).

This peaceful approach permanently solved the CPM issue and brought additional security benefits to Thailand, including the resolution of numerous other economic, social, psychological, political, and military issues

in the Southern border provinces. This policy also improved Thai-Malaysia relations, as reflected in the increases in cross-border military cooperation, as well as economic, social, and cultural exchanges. Examples include cooperation on cross-border jetties and car ferries, lighthouses, cultural exchange programmes, and exchange visits of government officers and sports teams (Yodpijit 2000: 138–140).

THE CPM’S “MARGINAL ENEMY” IMAGE

From the Malaysian perspective, the CPM’s operations had a great impact on internal peace and security. Thus, the Malaysian government deployed all measures to suppress the CPM and its activities. However, the movement’s withdrawal to Thailand prevented its total elimination, although it still posed an existential danger to the Malay state. At the same time, the Thais did not see the CPM as an urgent danger despite its communist nature, but more of a “marginal enemy” due to its location in the geographic and political periphery. Thus, the issue of the CPM became a matter for bilateral negotiations between Thailand and Malaysia.

In this article, the meaning of “margin” in the context of political sciences is defined as a group of people existing far from the centre of power in both the geographic and social sense. The “marginalised” people were often geographically displaced from their homeland as a result of natural, economic, political, and social phenomena (Vajanasara 2012: 17–36). According to this definition, the CPM was arguably a “marginal enemy” to the Thai state, due to the following reasons:

The CPM’s Goal

According to its 1932 statement, the CPM originally intended to “...eliminate all British imperialism out of Malaya and overthrow the power of the sultan, landowner, and the representatives of foreign companies...” (Cheah 1992: 104–110). Their ultimate goal was to establish the “Malayan Democratic Republic” (Jitpoosa et al. 1982: 75). Subsequently, even though the British succeeded in forcing their withdrawal to Thailand, the CPM still focused their efforts on Malaysia. The CPM’s training programme and campaign reflects the adherence to this goal. In 1964–1965, CPM members were trained and returned to conduct underground work in Malaysia. Two years later, the CPM mobilised their forces and propaganda to infiltrate labour unions and

political parties especially in Penang, Kedah, and Perak (Rattanachaya 1996: 22). In 1975, a number of high-ranking police officers and 500 soldiers were assassinated in Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh in just four months (Clutterbuck 1984: 284).

The CPM's official non-hostile stance to Thailand was confirmed in leaflets that were distributed throughout the border area. These leaflets were addressed to the general public, military, and civil servants, stating that the movement wished only to purchase food and supplies from the local markets. They also stated that they had no desire to fight with the Thai authorities. If Thai patrols kept their distance from their jungle bases, the CPM would not create any disturbance. This tacit agreement seemed to have held, as the Thai authorities also had no desire to intervene forcefully in the South (Chin Peng 2014: 546–547). This condition corresponded to subsequent statements by Chin Peng:

... the government in Bangkok was not strict on the control over the four Southern provinces as long as we were far away and did not cause chaos. The police and the Siamese army would not interfere with us if they did not meet us. It meant there was reciprocity. During that time, there were bandits operating around the Southern border provinces and we got rid of them in Sadao. This was a great way to reduce the unrest for the local police and to restore order. Overall, they welcomed us at the time (Chin Peng 2014: 407).

From the above information, even though the CPM infringed on Thailand's sovereignty, they did not pose a direct threat to national security as much as the CPT and other insurgent groups. Moreover, due to the geographical remoteness of the area, full-scale confrontations were rare, decreasing the urgency for the Thai government to suppress the CPM.

The Exigency of CPM Suppression for the Thai Government

In Thailand, the major organisations that oversaw anti-communist policy implementation and military action in the South were the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) and the Army Operations Centre (AOC).⁷ Throughout the Cold War, the primary target for these organisations was always the CPT. The CPM came last. As General Han Leelanond, the former commander of the 4th Army Area stated:

The CPT in the Southern area were very good at fighting; they had been trained in Beijing, Vietnam, and Russia. They fought well until Russia had their conflict with China and the fighting in the Northeast and North declined. After the battle in the Northeast was done, there was no more bloodshed and gunfire. Only the communists in the South remained. After assuming command, we announced the 'Peaceful South' policy...to cope with the CPT first. Once they were finished, we turned to the other insurgency movements, and then the CPM... internal security was the most important issue (Rakdee 2004: 81).

In addition, Lieutenant General Visit Artkhumwong (his rank at that time), the 4th Army Area Commander from 1 October 1983 to 30 September 1986, stated in a radio interview on 8 November 1986 that: "In the past, the danger from communist terrorists and the insurgency were at a very high level. We could not devote ourselves to the struggle against the CPM. But later, we were able to reduce threat from the communist terrorists and the insurgency movements. We then turned our efforts to solve the CPM problem" (Rakdee 2004: 82). This and other statements reflected the low priority of the CPM in the Thai security community.

The difference in priority was also a consequence of the differences in Thai and Malaysian policy. For the Thai government the CPM was always seen as a local-level problem. Thus, the central government placed the onus on local police forces to coordinate and suppress the CPM. In 1967, the Royal Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur reported the outcome of a meeting between General Tunku Osman, Chief of the Malaysian Defence Forces (1964–1969), and the Thai ambassador. During the meeting, General Tunku Osman expressed his great concern about the CPM and its activities. Subsequently, he addressed his concerns to General Praphas Charusathien, then the Deputy Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, that the Thai government should urgently deploy its military forces against the CPM due to their effective supply lines and strategy. The general warned that Thailand should commit to this effort as soon as possible or the situation may evolve to be as serious as that in Vietnam. However, the Malaysian government received no positive response on this issue from its Thai counterpart (FA (2) 18.2.3/1, 17 October 1967).

Arguably, the Malaysian government saw the CPM and its suppression as a national priority, especially as the CPM continued its violent activities against Malaysian interests. In response, the Malaysian authorities implemented draconian measures to respond to "...the threat of the CPM, by taking violent measures, and strengthening cooperation with neighbouring

countries to suppress Communist activities and achieve the objective of suppressing and preventing the expansion of Communism in the country” (Rakdee 2004: 88). The Malaysian Army’s strategies and tactics followed the British military pattern. They dealt with the insurgents by using day and night-time operations in all terrains and climate. The expansion of the military budget continued into the 1980s and accelerated national development, especially in the northern Malaysia border states. This development took place in part to facilitate military access to their operational areas. For example, the East-West Highway facilitated aggressive efforts against the CPM across the east-west axis of the Malayan peninsula (Rakdee 2004: 89).

Compared to Malaysia, Thailand had many other insurgent groups in the South. Apart from the CPM, which was a late arrival to the scene, the Thai government already had to deal with the CPT’s Southern branch and other separatist movements. However, given the limits on resources and combat troops, the Thai authorities could not yet afford a full-scale suppression effort.

The Intensity of the Communist Problem in the Northeast

A radio broadcast on 23 June 1954 reflects the perspective of Thai leaders with regard to the communist threat, which they saw as a system that sought to destroy religion and monarchy and sought to exploit workers without respecting the rights, freedoms, and properties of people (MI 0201.2.1.36/31, 23 January 1954). The dominance of ethnic-Chinese among the CPT membership also made them seem like a foreign threat. The communist threat from Indochina added another dimension of concern. These communist threats were sources of grave anxiety, given Thailand’s clear anti-communist stance, its involvement with the Korean War under the aegis of the United Nations, and its close alliance with the United States (PMO 0201.89/7, 17 March 1951).

In contrast to the Thai-Malay border, communist infiltration along the Mekong River in the Northeast was more intense. Unlike the CPM, the CPT in the Northeast sought and received foreign support for its operations in Thailand. More worryingly, communist movements were encountering uninterrupted success. The Lao communists succeeded in taking over the Southern and central regions of Laos with the assistance of the Vietnamese. At the same time, there was no sign that the communist parties in Laos and Vietnam were going to confine their activities to their respective countries. Therefore, the security situation in the North-eastern border area was very critical (Kerdphol 2011: 50).

Thailand was very concerned about the strategic threat from Vietnam, as reflected in its decision to send troops to fight in Vietnam and Laos, as well as engage in secret operations in Cambodia. In Thailand, the insurgency was concentrated in three areas, the Northeast, the North, and the South, each with different causes. The Northeast was the main conflict area, while the Northern and Southern regions were given less attention as the movements there did not pose such a great and direct threat to the government's authority (Kerdphol 2011: 206). As such, it made sense for the Thai authorities to dedicate their efforts and resources to combat the expansion of communism in the Northeast, rather than the South.

CONCLUSION

There has been a lack of detailed study of the CPM in the history of Thailand, since to understand the CPM in a proper context requires knowledge of both the Thai and Malayan political contexts. The CPM escaped from suppression in Malaya that began in earnest at the end of World War II and continued to operate against Malaysia from their refuge in Thailand until their dissolution in 1989. On the Thai side, the Thai authorities attached greater importance on the threat from the CPT and their operations in the Northeast. At the same time, the Thais also had to consider the effects of the CPM's presence on the local people and Thai-Malaysian bilateral relations.

It also has to be emphasised that the CPM's ultimate purpose was to foment revolution against the Malaysian government and establish a Communist regime on the Malayan peninsula. This goal was the key factor that precluded the CPM's expansion of its operations beyond the Southern border provinces, as their aim was not to fight the Thai government. Consequently, the CPM did not pose as great a threat to the Thai authorities as the CPT. Clearly, the Thai government was able to distinguish between the CPT and the CPM, as reflected in the different approaches taken to deal with the two communist movements. With the CPT, the Thai government used a combination of cutting the CPT's Chinese support through diplomatic negotiations, as well as military suppression. In contrast, with the CPM, the Thai government acted as the intermediary for negotiations between the Malaysian government and the CPM. In both cases, the Thai government provided a viable political exit for moderate members of the movement to leave gracefully and be rehabilitated into ordinary society.

Furthermore, it should be noted the CPM withdrawal to Thailand occurred amidst a period of political instability in Thailand. The internal political situation in Thailand meant that the Thai central government had other priorities to deal with. The CPM was also used as a tool to mount political attacks. A notable case is that of General Phao Sriyanond, Deputy Director of the Royal Thai Police, where he claimed in 1949 that the CPM was responsible for the murder of four former ministers from Isan (Northeastern Thailand), who were prominent opponents of Field Marshal Pibulsongkhram. Although General Phao presented no evidence to substantiate his claim, it demonstrated the idea that the CPM could be seen as a threat. In the Thai political context, however, this claim could be seen as an attempt to deflect the responsibility of the suppression of political opponents by the central government at the time.

Thus, the Thai government's attitude towards the CPM is complex and, despite the avowed anti-communist stance of successive governments, very different in detail from its attitudes towards other communist insurgencies. The explanation of these differences requires an understanding of the contemporary political contexts in both Thailand and Malaysia, as well as within the CPM. It is also possible that local factors, such as the attitude of local officials and economic conditions may also be factors that can be further investigated in detail.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research received grant funding from Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's Personal Affairs Division. We are grateful for the editor and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions which strengthened this article. The authors would like to extend gratitude to Lieutenant Colonel Assistant Professor Apisake Monthienvichienchai in editing and reviewing the revised manuscript.

NOTES

- * Thippaporn Inkum is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of Malaya, Malaysia. She has a bachelor's degree in history from Thammasat University and a master's degree in history from Chulalongkorn University. She is also a lecturer at Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy (CRMA) in Thailand. Her research interests include contemporary history in Southeast Asia, international relations, state policy, and national security. Her thesis project focuses on Thai government's policies towards the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) between 1949 and 1989.

** Ho Hui Ling, PhD, is a senior lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Malaya (UM), Malaysia. She received her Doctoral degree from the UM in 2003, thesis entitled “Keadaan Sosial Di Tanah Melayu, 1948–1960 (Social Conditions in Malaya, 1948–1960).” Her research areas are about the history of communist and emergency, and ethnic relations in Malaysia, especially areas of Sarawak and Sabah. She has taken the positions of panel member and advisor of the Ministry of Education, Malaysia from 2017 to 2022.

- ¹ The Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) was founded officially on 1 December 1942.
- ² The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) is officially known as the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). This article will use the latter term.
- ³ This policy was decided by Chin Peng (Chen Ping), who became the Secretary-General of the CPM in 1947.
- ⁴ One company in the Royal Thai Army consists of 176 soldiers, commanded by a captain.
- ⁵ In 1943, the 6th Military Circle became the 6th Division, which commanded the 17th Infantry Regiment and the 15th Artillery Battalion based in Nakhon Sri Thammarat Province, as well as the 18th Infantry Regiment and the 13th Artillery Battalion based in Songkhla Province.
- ⁶ This law is often known simply as Order 66/2523 or Order 66/23.
- ⁷ The Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) is a Thai military unit responsible for national security issues. It was established in 1965 with the assistance of the United States to coordinate nationwide anti-communist operations. Its predecessors were the Central Security Command (CSC) and the Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC). The Army Operations Centre (AOC) acts as the command and control centre and is responsible for the planning, directing, coordinating, and overseeing the Army’s subordinate units and special task forces and ensuring their compliance with ISOC’s orders, instructions, and policies.

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