

## Correspondence

The Editor,  
Journal of Southeast Asian Studies.

Dear Sir,

I refer to the article, "A Study of Three Early Political Parties in Singapore, 1945–1955," by Yeo Kim Wah, in your *Singapore Commemorative Issue* of March 1969, and in particular to that section entitled "The Malayan Democratic Union (MDU)."

According to the writer, two different accounts of the formation of the MDU were given to him: one by me, and the other by Philip Hoalim and Seow Cheng Fong. The writer goes on to say: "From available evidence it is not possible to verify these versions of the birth of the MDU." There is no meaning to this statement, which appears to be merely a rationalisation of the writer's apparent inertia. Singapore is a very small place, all three persons named by him are alive, and good friends to boot, and he could easily have discovered, not which account of the birth of the MDU is correct, but rather that he puts words into my mouth which I never used to him.

However, let's get the facts of the birth of the MDU straight. The idea of the MDU was conceived by Lim Hong Bee and the MCP during his association with the MPAJA in Endau during the Japanese Occupation. With the Japanese surrender, Hong Bee made various contacts to sell this idea. On the one hand he contacted persons like Philip Hoalim and Lim Kean Chye. On the other, he, accompanied by Wu Tian Wang who was then the Singapore representative of the Malayan Communist Party, came to my home in Chapel Road and asked me to be responsible for the Eurasian side of recruitment to the MDU. I accepted and later recruited Dudley Siddons and John Eber. When, a few months later, I left Singapore to go up to Kuala Lumpur to edit the Communist English-language paper, "The Democrat", I invited John Eber to take my place on the executive committee of the MDU, and this he did.

The writer also suggests that we were "encouraged by the announcement of the Malayan Union Scheme in October, 1945, to believe that a new democratic order would soon be introduced into Malaya." The Malayan Union Scheme played practically no role whatsoever in our positions. It was the Japanese Occupation which had convinced us that the old order was gone for good; that any new order could only be built by us, on our own responsibility; and that this was our task and nobody else's. After the Japanese surrender, what the British did or did not do was only important tactically, not strategically. In our minds the British were finished, and were only carrying out a holding measure in Malaya. What was relevant was that we should all get together to establish our own self-governing unit of Malaya and Singapore combined.

In a note on the Pan-Malayan Council of Joint Action which produced the "People's Constitutional Proposals", the writer says: "The British Government rejected this proposal and accepted the Federation Agreement." This is incorrect in its implications. The order was reversed. The British Government, the UMNO and the Sultans' representatives met in secret, in 1946, for six months to draw up the Federation Agreement. In other words, they had reached their own conclusions at least eight months before our People's Constitution was drawn up and published. It is true that the Government then set up a Consultative Committee to give differing opinions on the Federation Agreement a chance to voice their dissent, but we boycotted this Committee.

Further on the writer says, in relation to the citizenship proposals of the People's Constitution, that "The MDU approach was unacceptable to the Malays for several reasons," which he goes on to enunciate. Here again he oversimplifies. The MDU approach on citizenship, as defined in the People's Constitution, was the united and unanimous approach of all the members of the Pan-Malayan Council of Joint Action. This latter body included the Malay Nationalist Party, the Angkatan Pemuda Insaf, the Angkatan Wanita Sedar, the Malay Peasants' Union and about 80 smaller Malay religious, cultural and other associations. These Malay organizations unanimously agreed with the non-Malay bodies in the Council that there should be set up a full national

status to be termed Melayu for all who accepted this country as their home and the object of their loyalty, the latter to be ensured by an oath of renunciation where applicable.

On the question of whether the MDU was a communist-dominated organization, the writer has again got his facts wrong. He states that "none of the four members constituting the cell mentioned by Osman China were in the Central Executive Committee before May 1948," and that this lasted only for a month, because the MDU was dissolved "a month later." Now the four members of the cell as mentioned by Osman China alias Lee Boon, and as quoted by the writer, were "Willy Kok, Jacko, Gerald de Cruz and Myself." This is correct, but I had returned to Singapore from K.L. in September 1947 and was quickly joined there by Willy and Jacko and, much later, by Osman China. So Willy, Jacko and myself were co-opted on to the MDU Committee from about October 1947. In addition, it is quite probable that by this time, Eu Chooi Yip had also become a Communist. I gathered this from his attitude towards me. We had always been very friendly but now, in addition, I sensed another dimension in his relationship: that we shared some great secret. I was not officially informed of this, nor did I enquire: we had all been thoroughly indoctrinated in the need for utmost security by our Communist training.

On the other hand, the writer is quite correct in his conclusion that the MDU "was not communist-dominated." He is however wrong in adding that this happy situation obtained only "before late 1947" and that "After that, however, it was increasingly manipulated by the MCP into supporting distinctly pro-Communist activities such as sponsoring the welcoming celebrations for the communist delegates returning from the Calcutta Conference in February 1948. Apparently by then, it had become communist-dominated, though still retaining independence in matters of lesser concern to the communists."

We supported and co-sponsored the welcome home for MCP delegates from Calcutta, where they had attended an Indian Communist Party Congress, not because we were being "increasingly manipulated" by the communists, but because the MCP and its fronts were now and had been for some time with us in the Pan-Malayan Council of Joint Action, of which they were, of course, most important units. We would have paid similar fraternal respect to any other member-organisation of our Council. In fact, it was mainly because the Malay Nationalist Party and other Malay nationalist organizations decided to boycott the February 1948 Legislative Elections in Singapore, that the entire Council of Joint Action, including the MDU, decided to boycott the elections also, as a sign of the unity and fraternity between the Malay and non-Malay organisations in the Council. Tactically, of course, it was a stupid and self-defeating move, and Philip Hoalim, Snr., chairman of the MDU, did his best to make the Executive Committee realise this at that time. In the upshot the voting of the MDU Executive on this issue was fourteen votes against participation in the elections, and only one — Philip Hoalim's — for participation. With this boycott, every existing political party in Singapore had declared itself against participation, for they were all under our banner. Only then did C.C. Tan and a few others form The Progressive Party, to contest the six seats offered for election.

One of the main reasons why the MDU, although it had pro-Communists and Party members in its executive committee, was not a mere stooge of the MCP, was because the Party members like myself and others in its Executive Committee were not yet totally indoctrinated with communism; another was the very high calibre of the non-Communist members of the Committee; a third was that, on many important issues, no directive could be expeditiously obtained from the MCP whose Central Committee was, in that period, scattered about the Peninsula, organising the Party and its various front organizations, in particular the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions. As a result, and on more than one occasion, it was the MDU which made up its mind and having come to a decision, had to sell its decision to the MCP. On one such occasion, I distinctly remember that Lim Kean Chye and I were sent to the Queen Street Office of the MCP in Singapore, to convince the MCP that our MDU determination to fight the new societies' ordinance which the BMA were trying to re-introduce, was the correct one. "I am prepared to go to gaol on this matter,"

our chairman, Philip Hoalim Snr., had declared. But the MCP wanted us to compromise, which we would not do. A long and wearing argument ensued before Kean Chye and I were able to make Chang Ming Ching, the MCP Singapore representative at that time, see the light. As we left the MCP office late that evening, Kean Chye said wearily to me: "Well, thank God we can say that at least the MDU has a strong tail — the Malayan Communist Party!"

In footnote 47, Yeo Kim Wah states: "It is believed that at this Calcutta Conference a decision from the Russian Communist Party was transmitted to the MCP directing the latter to take to arms."

I think the decision was made known to the MCP long before this, in mid or late 1947, probably when Chin Peng went secretly to mainland China. But I know definitely that what happened at the Calcutta Conference was twofold:

(a) Len Sharkey, the Secretary-General of the Australian Communist Party, delivered, on behalf of Stalin, a scathing criticism of the "right wing deviationist line" of the Communist parties in the colonies, and placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the British Communist Party for misdirecting these Parties.

(b) that a very clever strategy was worked out for the MCP in order to create the conditions which would make their return to the jungle both logical and effective. After the Calcutta Conference, Sharkey came to Singapore and spent two weeks here, dotting the i's and crossing the t's of the decisions arrived at by the Conference.

The writer states that John Eber "apparently drafted the People's Constitutional Proposals for the AMCJA-PUTERA." In fact it was a plenary session of the AMCJA-PUTERA which unanimously agreed on the six basic principles of the People's Constitution. The session then appointed Willy Kok, John Eber and myself to do the drafting of the Constitution. We met almost every day at John Eber's home in Amber Road for three months before we completed the job. I would like here to draw attention, without in any way deprecating Eber's many contributions to the discussion, to the outstanding intellect of Willy Kok. He was, in my view, the most profound thinker of the MCP and his premature death in the jungle has been a great loss not only to the revolutionary movement, but also to our nationalist cause.

Further on the writer states that after the Emergency was declared in June 1948, the MDU "leaders decided to voluntarily dissolve the party to ensure the safety of party members; and in note 64, that "all the MDU leaders I interviewed were fully agreed on this point." Not all. For the record, I argued vigorously against dissolution in the executive committee and was outvoted by 14 to 1 against.

Finally, I wish to draw attention to two more over-simplifications in the writer's assessment of the early political parties. He states that "the Singapore political parties of this period not only lacked organisation but enjoyed no mass support." And that "the MDU concentrated on the dissemination of political ideas." Legal political activity only came into being in the post-war years and it was therefore necessary for a large part of any political party's time to be spent in educating the general public to the necessity of politics, of the struggle against imperialism, of social justice, and of freedom. But the MDU, in addition, was the spearhead of a gigantic national front, the AMCJA-PUTERA, which held within its ranks all the political parties of the time, ON BOTH SIDES of the Causeway (except for UMNO and the just-born Progressive Party.) This national front, in addition, included the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions which controlled more than 80 per cent of the organised labour movement of the period. The MDU led this formidable, multiracial nationalist movement into a series of actions, like mass meetings, demonstrations and hartals (in Malacca, Perak and finally Malaya-wide) that shook this country up as it had never been shaken up before by political activity against imperialism and for independence. No organisation before or since has enjoyed such wide mass support as the MDU did, through the Pan-Malayan Council of Joint Action. It is interesting to speculate what would have happened if the Council had not been stabbed in the back and ultimately destroyed as a result of Stalin's ordering the MCP into armed revolt.

Yours sincerely,

Gerald de Cruz