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Malaya 1947–60

Executive Summary

The Malayan Emergency was an internal conflict within the British colony of Malaya (and later in the independent state of Malaysia) between the government(s) and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and its military wings from 1947 to 1960The conflict stemmed from ethnic segregation and unequal treatment of the Chinese migrants brought to Malaya during the nineteenth century to work on the rubber plantations. Prior to the insurgency, ethnic Malays and Chinese served in the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) to resist their World War II occupiers. After the war, Britain reoccupied its colony and created the Malayan Union in 1946. Nevertheless, ethnic Malays largely disapproved of the union, as it upheld civil rights for minorities. These actions exacerbated tensions between the two largest ethnic groups, the Malays and the Chinese, resulting in more than a decade of conflict.[1]

In January 1948, the Malayan Union was reformed into the Federation of Malaya. The new government denied voting rights to minorities and provided preferential treatment to ethnic Malays. In response to the new constitution, Chin Peng, the Secretary-General of the Malayan Communist Party, raised former ethnic Chinese guerrillas from the wartime Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army to contest the government. London officially announced the emergency in June 1948 after guerrillas from the Malayan People's Anti-British Army (MPABA) murdered three Europeans and several Chinese plantation workers.[2]

Early British counterinsurgency operations included brutal tactics and mass arrests and deportations of Communist insurgents and sympathizers and increased support for the uprising.[3] The Communist guerrillas received their support almost exclusively from within the ethnic Chinese population, with logistics, rations, and intelligence provided by Chinese communities. Sir Henry Lovell Goldsworthy Gurney, the British High Commissioner of Malaya, realized the importance of the Chinese population to the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) and stepped up his strategy of intimidation by imposing collective punishment and destroying several Chinese communities.[4]

In April 1950, Lieutenant General Harold R. Briggs was appointed Director of Operations for the government forces; Briggs laid the foundation for successful counterinsurgency tactics. Acknowledging the extensive aid that Chinese Communists provided the guerrillas, particularly in the rural areas, he isolated the Malayan Communist Party from its noncombatant lifeline. Briggs launched his plan in May 1950, constructing a streamlined intelligence network between district, state, and federal officials to improve the distribution of information. He then ordered the resettlement of approximately 500,000 landless rural Chinese into fenced and guarded "New Villages," severely hampering the MCP's local support infrastructure.[5]

Chin's response to the resettlement policy was to commission a "Guide to the Anti-Resettlement Campaign," which reorganized the insurgency operations toward combating the New Villages to reestablish supply lines for the Malayan Communist Party through coercion, but this ploy further isolated

the insurgents from the population.[6] In October 1951, the MCP Central Executive Committee authorized the "October Resolutions," to draw down the violence, downscale insurgent cells, rejuvenate the public support they had garnered early on, and establish friendly ties with the aboriginal peoples of the peninsula.[7]

In February 1952, Gerald Templer replaced Gurney and Briggs as High Commissioner and Director of Operations in Malaya. He advanced the strategy implemented by Briggs to win the hearts and minds of the population and to find a solution to the conflict. Templer's initiatives in the New Villages upgraded living conditions for the residents, further isolating the Chinese populations from the Malayan Communist Party.[8] Moreover, Templer's promises of self-governance effectively removed the anticolonialism and anti-British rhetoric from the insurgent narrative.[9] A road map to independence was announced in 1953, albeit under almost exclusively ethnic Malay rule. This announcement resulted in a sharp decline in insurgent violence by 1953.[10]

Assessing the Five Factors

1. **Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?**

   Yes. The population demographics of Malaya at the onset of the conflict were 49 percent Malay, 38 percent Chinese, 11 percent Indian, and 1 percent other.[11] A large proportion of the non-Malay ethnicities brought over to work the rubber plantations a century before the conflict found themselves more connected to the Malayan nation than to their homeland. This sense of connection was especially true for the second-largest ethnicity, the Chinese, who had few ties with mainland China. At the time of the conflict, most Malayan-born Chinese viewed themselves as Malayan nationals.[12] The 11 percent of the population of Indian origin were almost exclusively urban merchants and tradesmen and tended to identify with their new homeland. Extensive research into the identity politics of the Chinese population completed for the Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) shows that a minority of the ethnic Chinese supported a separate Chinese cultural identity and the aims of the Malayan Communist Party.

2. **Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?**

   No → Yes. Colonial governments were rarely, if ever, seen by the indigenous population as legitimate. Given this premise, it can be inferred that more than 15 percent of the population of colonial Malaya did not believe the British colonial government was legitimate. Perceptions of government legitimacy changed when the British granted independence to Malaya and a majority Malay government took control of the new state of Malaysia in August 1957. When Great Britain granted Malaysia independence, it acceded to the insurgents' primary demand and enabled the formation of a government that most of the population considered legitimate.

   After independence, virtually none of the ethnic Malay population, none of the ethnic Indian population, and only a fraction of the ethnic Chinese population willingly supported the Communist uprising.[13] The Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) was formed in 1949 to contest the MCP influence within the Chinese population and enjoyed success, particularly with urban Chinese. The Malayan Chinese Association worked closely with the colonial government to improve Chinese living conditions and strengthen the Chinese political voice in society.[14] Overall, it was successful in convincing many Chinese to be a part of the government after independence, further isolating the Malayan Communist Party.

3. **Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?**

   No → Yes. Gurney initially failed to protect the population from the Communist movement. In 1950, the Briggs Plan successfully relocated and concentrated approximately 500,000 Chinese squatters directly under government administration in highly controlled ethnic Chinese settlements called New Villages. The British also mandated that all civilians carry identification cards. Since at least 95 percent of the insurgents were ethnically Chinese, the obvious ethnological differences made it much easier for the security forces to identity possible MCP sympathizers.[15]

4. **Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?**

   No. During the height of the conflict, the Communist guerrillas had no substantial external sanctuary or support for their insurgency. The remoteness and harshness of the jungle border with Thailand made cross-border sanctuary impracticable. Thailand also tightened border enforcement on its side of the border. After 1953, many of the senior MCP leaders fled Malaya and sought refuge in Thailand, but the rank and file largely remained in the remote northern mountain jungles of Malaya.[16]

5. **Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?**

   Yes. At the start of the conflict, the Malayan government had 10 battalions of soldiers from British, Gurkha, and Malayan backgrounds. The police force numbered another 10,000 men. Both the police and the military underwent a sharp increase in numbers during the conflict, and local village militias augmented the security forces in the rural areas.[17]

Outcome

At the strategic level of war, Great Britain lost this conflict. At the beginning of the conflict, Great Britain owned the colony of Malaya; the government was comprised entirely of British citizens, and Malaya was "British red" on the classic imperial map of the British Empire. Although fighting did not formally end until 1960, Britain's ownership and governance of Malaya effectively ended in 1955 with the first parliamentary elections of a government comprised of the indigenous Malay people. By granting full independence in August 1957, Great Britain acceded to one of the insurgency's primary goals. A case can be made that the conflict was initially a war of colonial independence fought using guerilla tactics against Great Britain and not a true insurgency. Regardless, however, in the SOIC definition of outcomes, the government that was in power at the start of the insurgency in this case was brought down during the conflict, and the British packed up and went home. That constitutes a government loss. One of the Five Factors, government legitimacy, was against the British government, so the outcome of the insurgency (independence) supports the Five Factors model and the primacy of government legitimacy in successful outcomes.

Fighting continued for three years *after* independence, and these three years could be considered a true insurgency (two groups of citizens of the same country fighting for political power). Soon after independence, however, legitimacy of governance reached more than 85 percent, putting all Five Factors in favor of the government, at which point the insurgency effectively collapsed. Virtually all of the insurgents and noncombatant support for the insurgents came from the ethnic Chinese population—primarily from the poor, rural Chinese demographic. Per factor 2, throughout the early 1950s, the Malayan Chinese Association successfully peeled away support for the insurgency, particularly among the urban Chinese population.

With a combination of population control, the advent of independence (the Malayan Communist Party's stated primary goal), and the work of the Malayan Chinese Association in urban areas, the Malayan Communist Party lost critical mass. Combat operations began to decline after 1953 with the announcement of a road map to independence, the isolation of much of the rural Chinese population in the New Villages, and successful British mediation in the alliance between urban Chinese and Malayan leaders.[18] The conflict was formally declared over in 1960. For eight years after 1960, the remaining Chinese guerillas hid in the remote mountain jungles of northern Malaysia, reduced to nuisance-level activity. Thus, the second phase of the conflict also supports the Five Factors model, as after independence all of the Five Factors were in favor of the government, the insurgency was, for a time, defeated.

The internal conflict with the Malayan Communist Party flared up again in 1968 and continued until 1989, a period sometimes referred to as the "Second Malayan Emergency." This second conflict period lies outside the scope of the Study of Internal Conflict, as a total of 155 deaths were recorded during this period, well below the threshold for consideration in the study. It should also be noted that all five factors were again in favor of the government during this phase, and the conflict again resulted in a government victory. If the Second Malayan Emergency were included in the conflict list, it would also support the Five Factors model.

MALAYA 1947–60		
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES	
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO →	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	NO →	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO	
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES	

Endnotes

1. Marc Opper, "Malaya, 1948–1955: Case Outcome: COIN Win," in *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies*, ed. Christopher Paul and Colin P. Clarke (RAND Corporation, 2013), 52–53, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.14.
2. Opper, "Malaya," 53–54.
3. Karl Hack, "'Iron Claws on Malaya': The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30, no. 1 (1999): 102, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20072108.
4. Opper, "Malaya," 56.
5. Brian J. Tyler, "Operational Intelligence in the Malayan Emergency," in *Paths to Victory*, 44.
6. Tyler, "Operational Intelligence," 44.
7. Hack, " 'Iron Claws,' " 104.
8. Opper, "Malaya," 60.
9. Hack, " 'Iron Claws,' " 124.
10. Hack, " 'Iron Claws,' " 107.
11. Charles Hirschman, "Demographic Trends in Peninsular Malaysia, 1947–75," *Population and Development Review* 6, no. 1 (1980): 111, https://doi.org/10.2307/1972660.
12. Dina Murad, "The Socio-Political Context Behind the Malayan Insurgency, 1948–1960," *Intellectual Discourse* 27, no. 2 (2019): 404, https://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/id/article/view/1426.
13. Hack, " 'Iron Claws,' " 101.
14. Murad, "Socio-Political Context," 405.
15. Murad, "Socio-Political Context," 399–400.
16. Murad, "Socio-Political Context," 399–400.
17. Opper, "Malaya, 1948–1955," 55.
18. Opper, "Malaya, 1948–1955," 61.

https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/Research-Commentary/Study-of-Internal-Conflict/SOIC-Conflict-Studies/