

CONTESTING EQUALITY: A HISTORY OF THE MALAYAN PEOPLE'S
SOCIALIST FRONT, 1957-1965

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ABSTRACT

Like many other places in the world, Malaya was pushed to the frontier of decolonization after the end of World War II. Secularism, Communism, Islamic revivalism, as well as some other forces that represented particular ethnic or ideological interests competed with each other intensely in the political arena. Despite the heavy pressure of the Emergency Regulations against the communist remnants, left-wing political parties remained active in Malaya, as the leftists believed that their socialist ideology would provide an alternative to the ethnic-based politics of Malaya that had been deeply rooted on the British colonial rule.

On 30 August 1957, exactly the same day when the independence of Malaya was declared, the Labor Party and the Parti Rakyat formed the Malayan Peoples' Socialist Front in order to contest the first general election after the country's independence. Although the two constituent parties were actually dominated by Chinese and Malays respectively, the Socialist Front claimed that their non-communal approaches to independence would promise a brighter future for the people of Malaya irrespective of their races and origins. However, the Socialist Front only existed for a very brief period in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The disintegration of the Socialist Front was not only directly affected by its failure in attracting voters in elections, but also indirectly influenced by the coalition's intrinsic internal conflicts, which were caused by the leftists' different understandings on various political issues, largely due to the mono-ethnic nature of each constituent party.

On one hand, the conflicts between Malay leftists and their non-Malay counterparts could be explained by the primordialist view that “ethnic groups are characterized by deep, ineffable attachments related to family, language, territory, custom, and religion.” On the other hand, however, although the situationalist view on identity contradicts the primordialist one, its ideas are also applicable to the case of left-wing organizations in early independent Malaya, especially at the regional level: instead of being predetermined and static, the similarities and differences between ethnic identities were artificially constructed, modified and politically influenced. Despite sharing the same ideology and space of living, the “Malayness” and “Chineseness” seemed to be two contesting forces that alienated people from each other through the construction of distant connections with their respective ethnic “selves” who had very little life experience in common.

R. K. Vasil argued that Malaysian politics was more “communal” than “ideological”. In this thesis, however, I challenge the validity of this argument by not only exploring the rise and fall of the Socialist Front, but also by scrutinizing the roles that the leftists played in the major events in the formation of Malaysia. I will first demonstrate how the Socialist Front articulated its political ideal of “democratic socialism” and how the Malay left and non-Malay left were formed differently. Subsequently, I will investigate the three major debates that the Socialist Front engaged in, namely the making of Malaysia’s national language and education system, the merger with Singapore, as well as the dispute over the three territories in North Borneo. For this

part, my main sources are the newspapers published by the Socialist Front and its constituent parties, such as the Chinese newspaper *Huo Yan Bao*, the Malay newspaper *Suara Rakyat*, as well as some other official documents. In the third part, I will pay close attention to the deep-rooted divergence between the two constituent parties of the Socialist Front by comparing the two constituent parties' different understandings on Malaysian issues and their distinct approaches to the formation of the new country. Primarily focusing on various key issues that led to the collapse of the socialist coalition in 1965, this study attempts to provide an alternative interpretation of Malaysian politics by looking beyond the pure communalistic line. I argue that although eventually superseded by fundamental yet indeterminate factors such as race, religion and cultural resentment, ideological struggles and communal struggles are not mutually exclusive. Instead, left-wing ideology is in fact deeply embedded in the country's communal political struggles, within which various interests groups make efforts to contest the problematic "equality" under the banner of "We" (all Malaysians) instead of "we" (individual ethnic group).

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

From 2010 to 2012, Kankan Xie pursued his M.A. degree in Southeast Asian Studies at Cornell University, with a concentration in History. Prior to coming to the U.S., Kankan Xie obtained his B.A. degree in Malay Language and Literature from Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), China in 2010. He also studied at the University of Malaya in Malaysia for six months in 2009 as an exchange student. His academic interests include: nationalism and ethnicity, socialism and left-wing movement, Sino-Southeast Asia relations, Chinese Diasporas, etc. In recent years, he has been traveling frequently to Southeast Asia to conduct research projects, focusing on topics such as "State-run Development Project in Malaysia", "Malaysian Left-wing Movement during in Early Independent Era", "Sundanese plantation in West Java", etc. During his time at Cornell, Kankan Xie was awarded the 2011 Milton L. Barnett Scholarship for Malaysian Studies. He also received a research fellowship from the Clarke Program in East Asian Law and Culture at the Law School.

献给我最亲爱的父母

To my dearly beloved parents

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Contesting Equality: A History of the Malayan People's Socialist Front, 1957-1965

Kankan Xie

I. INTRODUCTION

Like many other places in the world, Malaya was pushed to the frontier of decolonization after the end of World War II. Secularism, Communism, Islamic revivalism, as well as some other forces that represented particular ethnic or ideological interests competed with each other intensely in the political arena. While the ideology-based Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was significantly handicapped during the Malayan Emergency,¹ the nationalist Alliance, which was largely consisted of purely ethnic-based political parties such as the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), gained considerable power not only because of the support of their respective ethnic group, but also the assistance of the British authority. In return, these communal parties took a firm anti-communist stance in hope of making themselves the most desirable candidates for the British to hand over their power.

Despite the heavy pressure of the Emergency Regulations against the communist remnants, left-wing political parties remained very active, as they believed that their

¹ A guerrilla war fought between Commonwealth and the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) led by the outlawed Malayan Communist Party (MCP) from 1948 to 1960.

socialist ideology would provide an alternative to the ethnic-based politics of Malaya that had been deeply rooted on the British colonial rule. And thus, their non-communal approaches to independence would promise a great future for the people of Malaya irrespective of their races and origins. In response to the upheaval of the left-wing resurgence elsewhere in the world, parties comprised of large numbers of students, labors and trade unionists started to launch aggressive struggles in the hope of realizing social justice, equality in the newly independent Malaya as part of their efforts in materializing a “brave new world”.² Although many of these forces suffered failures during this tough period, to a certain extent, some of them did pose challenges to the country’s more powerful communalism.

On 30 August 1957, exactly the same day when the independence of Malaya was declared, the Labor Party and the Parti Rakyat³ formed the Malayan Peoples’ Socialist Front in order to contest the first general election after the country’s independence. Although the two constituent parties were actually dominated by Chinese and Malays respectively, the Socialist Front claimed itself as a left-wing political organization built upon non-communal basis. Objectively speaking, the non-communal ideology of the Socialist Front did promote the solidarity of the newly established country and effectively bridged the estrangements between ethnic groups that had been existed throughout the colonial era. Their debates with the ruling Alliance, as well as those conducted within the

² Cheah, Boon-Kheng, 2006, The Leftwing Movement in Malaya, Singapore and Borneo in the 1960s: ‘An Era of Hope or Devil’s Decade’? *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7 (4) (12): 634-49.

³ The old Malay spelling was *raayat*. Sometimes, the party was also known as *Parti Raayat*, literally means “the People’s Party”.

Socialist Front itself also exerted far-reaching influences on Malaysian politics in many positive ways. However, the Socialist Front only existed for a very brief period. The disintegration of the Socialist Front was not only directly affected by its failure in attracting voters in elections, but also indirectly influenced by the coalition's intrinsic internal conflicts, which were caused by the leftists' different understandings on various political issues, largely due to the mono-ethnic nature of each constituent party.

On one hand, the conflicts between Malay leftists and their non-Malay counterparts could be explained by the primordialist view that "ethnic groups are characterized by deep, ineffable attachments related to family, language, territory, custom, and religion."⁴ Both Eduard Shils and Clifford Geertz believed that the core of primordialism is the emotional strength of "sacred" ethnic bonds, as Geertz argued: "(ethnic identity is)...a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."⁵ In this sense, ethnic identity is pre-determined and static, and therefore people's emotional attachments "do not develop and change in the course of social interactions but are natural affections. Thus, ethnicity has a fixed, compelling, a priori, and involuntary quality."⁶ This may also illustrate one of the reasons why the Socialist Front, although shared a common ideology and claimed to be non-communal, still ended up getting disintegrated due to their ethnic divergence.

⁴ Robbins, Vernon K., David B. Gowler, L. Gregory Bloomquist, and Duane Frederick Watson, 2003, *Fabrics of Discourse: Essays in Honor of Vernon K. Robbins*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 224.

⁵ Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 89.

⁶ *ibid.*

On the other hand, however, although the situationalist view on identity contradicts the primordialist one, its ideas are also applicable to the case of left-wing organizations in early independent Malaya, especially at the regional level: instead of being predetermined and static, the similarities and differences between ethnic identities were artificially constructed, modified and politically influenced. Edmund Leach did a great job in his research in highland Burma, in which he wonderfully demonstrated the fluid identities of the Kachin and Shan population.⁷ Rather than those primordial factors such as race, language or religion, it was the ever-changing political needs that constantly shaped people's identities and relative positions in the power hierarchy. In the case of island Southeast Asia, Malay left-wing extremists, taking an obvious pro-Indonesian stance, sought to link the destiny of Malaya to the newly independent Indonesia under the leadership of the left-leaning leader Sukarno. They further aimed to ultimately bring the Archipelago (the so-called *Melayu Raya*⁸ comprised of Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia) back to the glorious ages of the Malay nation-state, in which Malay sovereignty could be fully realized. By contrast, Chinese-Malayan leftists were deeply influenced by their counterparts from China, Singapore, and the banned MCP, drawing more from Chinese ethno-racial connections than any shared ideological orientation. Despite sharing the same ideology and space of living, the “Malayness” and “Chineseness” seemed to be two contesting forces that alienated people from each other

⁷ Leach, Edmund Ronald, 1965. *Political systems of Highland Burma: a study of Kachin social structure*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁸ Also known as *Indonesia Raya*

through the construction of distant connections with their respective ethnic “selves” who had very little life experience in common.

R. K. Vasil's *Politics in A Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia* is a major contribution on this topic. By investigating the marginal roles that the leftists played and by problematizing the general ethnic-based political climate in Malaysia, this book offered detailed introductions to the non-communal political parties in Malaysia.⁹ He made an argument that “Malaysian politics in its various manifestations has been more ‘communal’ than ‘ideological’”.¹⁰ However, Vasil only focused on the specific political struggles of these left-wing organizations and ignored the domestic and international backdrop within which non-communal ideology was formed and developed.

Therefore, I challenge the validity of Vasil’s argument by not only exploring the rise and fall of the Socialist Front, but also by scrutinizing the roles that the leftists played in the major events in the formation of Malaysia. In the first part, I will briefly introduce how the Socialist Front articulated its political ideal of “democratic socialism” and how it was distinct from the claims that the communal parties made. By paying close attention to the genesis of left-wing organizations in earlier period, I will also try to demonstrate how the Malay left and non-Malay left were formed differently. The second part consists of three major debates that the Socialist Front engaged in, namely the making of Malaysia’s

⁹ Vasil, R. K., and Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1971, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Published for the Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Also see Rustam A. Sani. 2008. *Social roots of the Malay Left: an analysis of the Kesatuan Melayu Muda*. Petaling Jaya: SIRD, P1.

national language and education system, the merger with Singapore, and the dispute over the three territories in North Borneo. For this part, my main sources are the newspapers published by the Socialist Front and its constituent parties, such as the Chinese newspaper *Huo Yan Bao*, the Malay newspaper *Suara Rakyat*, as well as some other official documents. In the third part, I will investigate the deep-rooted divergence between the two constituent parties of the Socialist Front by comparing their different understandings of Malaysian issues and their distinct approaches to the formation of the new country. Primarily focusing on various key issues that led to the collapse of the socialist coalition in 1965, this study attempts to provide an alternative interpretation of Malaysian politics by looking beyond the pure communalistic line. I argue that although eventually superseded by fundamental yet indeterminate factors such as race, religion and cultural resentment, ideological struggles and communal struggles are not mutually exclusive. Instead, left-wing ideology is in fact deeply embedded in the country's communal political struggles, within which various interests groups make efforts to contest the problematic "equality" under the banner of "We" (all Malaysians) instead of "we" (individual ethnic group).

II. ANATOMY OF THE MALAYAN PEOPLE'S SOCIALIST FRONT

2.1 Articulating Socialism

The Socialist Front was founded in 1957 and officially registered in 1958 based on the shared political and economic ideology of the Labor Party and the Parti Rakyat. Labeling itself as a non-communal association of socialist parties, it sought to establish a socialist country in Malaya through non-violent political struggles within the framework of its constitution, which was grounded upon concepts of “democratic socialism”.¹¹ The Socialist Front aimed to unite all parties with socialist ideals in Malaya through democratic and voluntary integrations.¹² Right after its inauguration, the Socialist Front set its main objectives as:

“(1). to organize and maintain a united front of all democratic socialist organizations in the Federation of Malaya;

(2). to establish a democratic socialist state in Malaya;

(3). to promote the merger of Malaya and Singapore;

(4). to cooperate with democratic socialist organizations in other countries in order to facilitate the works of the united front;

¹¹ Chen, Jianhong. 2000. *Malaiya Laogongdang Wenxian Huibian 马来亚劳工党文献汇编 (The Labor Party of Malaya: Selected Documents)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaiya Laogongdang Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui. p56

¹² Zhu, Qiyong, Yongcai Yan, and Malaiya Laogongdang Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui. 2001. *Malaiya Laogongdang Douzheng Shi, 1952 nian-1972 nian 马来亚劳工党斗争史 (The History of the Malayan Labor Party, 1952-1972)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaiya Laogongdang Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui, p149.

(5). to promote the liberation of all peoples in Malaya in terms of politics, society and economy.”¹³

Based on the draft that the Parti Rakyat composed, the Socialist Front passed its policy statement named *Towards a New Malaya* in 1959. The statement, regarded as a key material for propaganda and the blueprint for the implementation of socialist policies, demonstrated that “the Socialist Front, unlike other parties in Malaya, saw clearly that the struggle in Malaya must necessarily develop into a struggle between *Rakyat* (the people) irrespective of 'race', and the feudalist-capitalist groups.”¹⁴ The Socialist Front regarded the Alliance, which mainly consisted of communal parties such as the UMNO, MCA and MIC, as only representing the interests of the dominating elites from each of the three major ethnic groups.¹⁵ In the Socialist Front’s view, the tension caused by people’s cultural resentment would be further intensified if ethnic-based parties remain in power. In order to oppose such racial politics, the Socialist Front asserted that the people of Malaya must be re-categorized as oppressors and the oppressed, as they suggested that the current political system prevented the underprivileged labors from protecting their own interests and terribly blurred the internal differences within each ethnic group.

The Socialist Front regarded itself as the vanguard of the exploited working people. Constituted of the Labor Party and Parti Rakyat, the Socialist Front thus claimed that they represented both workers (largely non-Malays who worked in tin mines and rubber

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Malayan Peoples' Socialist Front, 1960, *Towards a New Malaya: Policy Statement*.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

plantations) and peasants (Malays who lived in rural areas). In the meantime, in order to gain more extensive support, the Socialist Front's definition of "working people" did not exclude the intellectual workers and the "national capitalists." According to their definition, the intellectual workers were those "gurus, ustaz, professionals, and technicians," who "earn their living not by their capital but by their labor;"¹⁶ whereas the loosely defined "national capitalists" covered a broad range of people, included all people who could accept the ideology and were supportive of the Socialist Front. In fact, most of these "national capitalists" were the funding sources of the Socialist Front: I will elaborate this point in a later chapter.

During the very period of the Malayan Emergency, almost every political force tried to distance itself from the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) as far as possible. It was not surprising that the Socialist Front was often linked to the MCP due to their similar left-leaning ideology and their anti-British, anti-capitalist stance. To survive the harsh Emergency Regulations, the Socialist Front positioned itself in a less extremist way, as it claimed that the Socialist Front "is a democratic socialist organization believing in the achievement of power in a democratic state by peaceful, non-violent, democratic and constitutional means." While carrying on its anti-oppression struggles, the Socialist Front conducted a series of debates against the ruling Alliance to justify its self-alleged socialist-yet-non-communist ideology. The Socialist Front pointed out that there was a widespread dissatisfaction amongst the "underprivileged classes", and the Alliance politicians, who received their pro-British education during the colonial era, were not

¹⁶ *ibid.*

able to sense the situation. The race-blind MCP and subsequently the Socialist Front, by contrast, would be capable to “meet the needs of the people and satisfy their wants.”¹⁷ The Socialist Front also asserted that their main goal was to conduct detailed analysis of the Malayan situation and find out a method to apply its ideology accordingly.

To curb the development of the Socialist Front, the Alliance-dominated government started to characterize the opposition left-wing parties as subversive forces that should be equally treated as communists under the Emergency Regulations. On one hand, the Socialist Front deemed the communist insurgency as part of Malayan People’s anti-British struggle, which aimed to completely liberalize the country. On the other hand, however, they must label themselves as “moderates” or “moderate leftists” in order to retain its legal status, so that they could be continuously recognized by the powerful British authority. As Malaysian historian Cheah Boon-Kheng put it, left-wing parties “found themselves on the horns of a dilemma”, since “whether to support or sympathize with the outlawed communist party in its armed struggle and goals, or to denounce it and keep their political distance from it, most started as anti-communist, or non-communist parties, but ended up eventually as ‘Communist Front’ organizations.”¹⁸ Compared to the Alliance, not only the Socialist Front positioned itself as taking a more pro-communist stance because of the shared ideological orientations, the Alliance government also

¹⁷ Chen, Jianhong, 2000, *Malaiya Laogongdang Wenxian Huibian 马来亚劳工党文献汇编 (The Labor Party of Malaya: Selected Documents)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaiya Laogongdang Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui. p67

¹⁸ Boon-Kheng, Cheah, 2006, The Leftwing Movement in Malaya, Singapore and Borneo in the 1960s: ‘An Era of Hope or Devil’s Decade’? *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7 (4) (12): 634-49.

intentionally labeled the Socialist Front as “communist sympathizers” in order to gain more substantial advantages in elections under the Emergency Regulations.

2.2 The Making of Malay and Non-Malay Left

The Socialist Front sought to introduce a non-communal alternative to the ingrained racial politics in Malaya, but in fact this idea was not new at all—the genesis of both the Labor Party and Parti Rakyat could be dated back to late colonial period. In other words, the predecessors of the Socialist Front had been long since struggling under the banner of non-ethnic-based left-wing ideology:

As early as 1945, Ahmad Boestamam, the founder of the Parti Rakyat, already worked closely with the KRIS (*Kesatuan Rakyat Indonesia Semenanjung*, Union of Peninsular Indonesia), which "considered the destiny of the Malays to be closely linked to Indonesia, and sought to declare joint independence for Malaya and Indonesia."¹⁹ Subsequently, Ahmad Boestamam also played a critical role in the formation of the Malay National Party (MNP), which officially declared that Malaya was an indispensable part of Indonesia in the same year. In 1946, Boestamam formed an extremist organization under the MNP named API (*Angkatan Pemuda Insaf*, the Awakened Youth Corps), which leaned towards the realization of independence through revolution rather than gradual evolution. Closely linked itself to other left-wing youth organizations both inside and outside of the Archipelago, the API launched a series of extremist movement in order to

¹⁹ Vasil, R. K., and Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1971, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Published for the Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press. P168

develop a sense of "patriotism" among Malays, which ultimately led to the first arrest of Boestamam.²⁰ After the MNP and the API were disbanded in 1948 and 1950 respectively, the Parti Rakyat was founded based on a very similar ideological orientation.

Significantly influenced by the newly established state of Indonesia under left-leaning Sukarno, the Parti Rakyat not only adopted a pro-Indonesia strategy in general, but also absorbed Sukarno's ideology of *marhaenism* into its constitution,²¹ in which the Malay leftists defined the party's main objective as the realization of socio-nationalism and socio-democracy through anti-dictatorialism, anti-racialism, anti-imperialism and anti-liberalism by supporting workers' struggles against capitalists.²² According to *Suara Rakyat*, the official newspaper of the Parti Rakyat, such kind of socio-nationalism was not based on shared blood or descent, but rather, it was shared destiny, shared interests, shared history, and shared understanding that had brought different people together and made them a nation.²³ Politically, it advocated establishing a socialist country and a just and prosperous society in Malaya through anti-colonial struggles. As regards to the economic policies, the Parti Rakyat asserted that a systematic and carefully planned nationalization must be conducted extensively in all sectors. The party believed that the state should play a more important role in the field of industrial production and wealth re-

²⁰ *ibid.* P169

²¹ The word *marhaen* is a Sundanese term for "peasant", and marhaenism was devised as the Indonesian style of socialism that favored the loosely defined proletariats. Sukarno also promoted this idea as an alternative to communism.

²² *Ibid.* P170

²³ "*Faham (sosio-nasionalizem) ini menetapkan bahwa syarat untuk melahirkan satu bangsa bukanlah persamaan darah atau keturunan melainkan persaaan nasib, persamaan kepentingan dan persamaan sejarah atau degnan lain-lain perkataan persamaan kemahuan untuk menjadi satu bangsa.*" Partai Rakyat Malaya. 1960. *Suara Rakyat*.

distribution. In doing so, “state own” must be prioritized, in which all resources that related to people’s daily life should be controlled and arranged, or at least overseen by the state.²⁴

Moreover, it was the vision of *Melayu Raya*²⁵ that formed an important object of the Parti Rakyat's political struggles, although the idea was not explicitly demonstrated in the party's constitution or manifesto.²⁶ The fantasy of *Melayu Raya* attempted to link the formation of Malaya to the glorious ages of Malay nation-states such as Malacca and Srivijaya in the past,²⁷ where "all Malays in one region should come together and see themselves as One Race, speaking One Language, and belonging to One Nation..."²⁸ However, there was a strong resistance of the non-Malay communities against the idea of *Melayu Raya*, as they believed that the idea was a sheer racist plot, because the sum of all Malays in the region would far outnumber the Chinese and Indians.²⁹

By contrast, the ideological root of the Chinese-dominated Labor Party could be traced back to the political ideals of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which aimed to achieve the independence of Malaya on the basis of equal rights shared by all ethnic

²⁴ “*Segala sumber penghidupan rakyat haruslah dipegang dan diatur atau sekurang-kurangnya diawasi oleh negara.*” *Ibid.*

²⁵ Literally means the “Great Malay Homeland” that included Indonesia, Malaya, and Borneo territories. It can be interchangeably understood as *Indonesia Raya*.

²⁶ Kahn, Joel S., and Francis Kok-Wah Loh, 1992, *Fragmented vision: culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. P265

²⁷ *ibid.* P263

²⁸ Cheah, Boon Kheng. 1979. *The Masked Comrades: A Study of the Communist United Front in Malaya, 1945-48*. Singapore: Times Books International.

²⁹ Kahn, Joel S., and Francis Kok-Wah Loh. 1992. *Fragmented vision: culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. P265

groups. The MCP was the first self-alleged non-communal party in Malaya, yet it ended up being very ethnic-based and Chinese-oriented due to a reality that they had to face: the belief of “Malay supremacy”—which called for the revival of the glorious pre-colonial past in Malay history—was deep-seated within Malay communities; whereas the “equal rights” only “directly appealed to the Overseas Chinese and Indians.”³⁰ Very similar to the MCP, the Labor Party also became more and more communal in the process of articulating the equal rights on behalf of the non-Malay communities.³¹

Exactly like the non-Malays who were nervous about the establishment of *Melayu Raya*, the Malays also worried about the possible communist/Chinese takeover, which would tremendously undermine their dominant position in the region. It seemed that all political parties that represented Malays, irrespective of leftists or others, unanimously rejected the idea that the MCP had initially proposed, which aimed to realize equal rights among all nationalities through revolution. As Muhammad Ikmal Said argued, "Neither the Malay left-wing organizations nor the MCP had the vital ingredient--Malay-Chinese unity or multiracial unity as a whole--to forge a combined spirit of struggle for independence and national liberation."³²

³⁰ *Democrat*, 1 December 1946, quoted in Hanrahan (1971: 96).

³¹ Kahn, Joel S., and Francis Kok-Wah Loh, 1992, *Fragmented vision: culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. P267

³² Cheah, Boon Kheng. (1983:299). Quoted by Muhammad Ikmal Said. 1992. *Ethnic Perspectives of the Left in Malaysia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. P265

III. THE LEFTISTS IN THE FORMATION OF MALAYSIA

On 27 May 1961, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman of the Federation of Malaya gave a speech at a hotel in Singapore, officially announced a plan to form a new country called Malaysia, which would include five former British colonies, namely the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Brunei, Sarawak and Sabah. This plan was not only expected to impede the expansion of communism more effectively by realizing independence in these colonies through the establishment of a shared constitution, but also aimed to balance the population ratio between individual ethnic groups. It was commonly believed that the merger between Malaya and Singapore would be grounded upon more solid foundations due to numerous commonalities they shared: politics, economy, culture, history and so on so forth—they were “essentially an inseparable entity”.³³ As regards to Brunei, Sarawak and Sabah, the unification seemed to be more complicated. However, based on the result of an investigation conducted between 1956 and 1960, the UMNO-led Alliance officially identified the indigenous peoples of North Borneo Territories as part of *bumiputera*,³⁴ which could make the incorporation of these three British colonies into Malaysia more “feasible”³⁵— the idea of *bumiputera* further expanded the scope of being “indigenous”

³³ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Xing Ma Hebing he Tongyi de Jichu shi Shenme? 星马合并和统一的基础是什么? (What is the Foundation of the Merger and the Unification between Singapore and Malaysia)", *Huo Yan Bao = Nyala*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 15, October, 1961.

³⁴ Malay term, which can be literally translated as “the son of the soil”, indicates the indigenous people (predominantly Malays) of Malaysia.

³⁵ Chen, Jianhong. 2000. *Malaiya Laogongdang Wenxian Huibian 马来亚劳工党文献汇编 (The Labor Party of Malaya: Selected Documents)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaiya Laogongdang Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui, P359.

in the Malayan context, which had been stereotypically known as being “*Orang Melayu*” who lived in Malay Peninsular. Instead, it became a more loosely defined concept of people that might refer to anyone who originally came from a broad range of geographical spaces across the Archipelago.

Given the fact that the Socialist Front emerged during the very period of the formation of Malaysia, it is impossible to neglect the roles that the leftists played in the process of decolonization and nation building. It is true that there was a wide range of options given to Malayan people by various political powers that represented different interest groups, but nevertheless, the central issues always concentrated on the debate over the issue between two camps: the *Bumiputera*, who advocated the revival of the Malay sovereignty that had existed in the pre-colonial era, and the non-Malay immigrants, who struggled for equal rights and permanent citizenship of the new country. In many Malay extremists’ view, “immigrants formed an inextricable part of the colonization process” and thus, the realization of the decolonization must be conducted with the emphasis on the Malay special rights that “the land belongs to the Malays.”³⁶ In contrast to the Malays, the Chinese and Indians were particularly craving decolonization through popular sovereignty, which included the participation of the immigrants by granting them equal rights as the indigenous. As Muhammad Ikmal Said argued in his *Ethnic Perspectives of the Left in Malaysia* piece, “(Malay special position or equal rights) is an open question and is an object of struggle. Such a struggle, of course, would not occur if the immigrant communities in question are small, as they could be accommodated, that is, ‘controlled’,

³⁶ Kahn, Joel S., and Francis Kok-Wah Loh, 1992, *Fragmented vision: culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. P261

easily. On the other hand, if they form a large proportion of the population, an economically stronger majority as in the Malayan case, the implications are very different."³⁷

As of 1961, there were 7.19 million people living in Malaya, 3.57 million of which were Malays, who accounted for the majority of the total population; whereas the population of Chinese and Indian was 2.63 and 0.77 million respectively. By contrast, the ethnic ratio was quite different in Singapore: 0.23 million Malays, 1.27 million Chinese and 0.14 million Indians. In North Borneo, however, there was no single ethnic group dominated the three territories, the ethnic ratio was reasonably even.³⁸ By adding the population of all these former British colonies together, there were 3.99 million Malays, 4.25 Chinese, and 0.72 million others. From these figures, we can tell that the number of Chinese population was actually larger than that of Malays. As a matter of fact, however, there were only 0.88 million out of 2.63 million Chinese people had the citizenship of Malaya. Similarly, although the Chinese population accounted for 80 percent of Singapore's population, Chinese ethnics who had rights to vote were only 0.65 million, which was not even half of the total.³⁹ In this sense, each ethnic group was big enough to contest the others, but none of them had the absolute strength to take the lead without making certain compromises. This fact also determined that almost all political issues in Malaysia must

³⁷ *ibid.* P276.

³⁸ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Malaixiya De Yiyi He Qiantu 马来西亚的意义和前途 (The Meaning and Prospect of Malaysia: Lim Kcan Siew's Speech in Johor)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 3, Issue 10, May, 1963.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

be approached through communal struggles, or at least in most circumstances, communal interests should always be taken into primary consideration.

In the formation of the new country, the two constituent parties of the Socialist Front basically followed the same pattern of their previous direct and indirect predecessors, which was based on the interests of communal group they represented respectively. It was not surprising that the two parties opposed the formation of Malaysia in 1961, which was initially welcomed by the Front as an essential step in the process of decolonization, since neither the Labor Party, nor the Parti Rakyat felt satisfied with the outcome that largely built upon the compromise made between the constituent parties within the Alliance. Ostensibly, the Labor Party and the Parti Rakyat reached many consensuses and thus, put forward a number of joint statements to contest the Alliance Government. Under the façade of solidarity, however, each constituent party of the Socialist Front also brought up nuanced reasons for opposing this plan, due to the divergence of their respective vision and objectives in the process of nation building:

3.1 “Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa”

From 16 to 21 September 1956, the 3rd Congress of Malay Language and Literature (KBPM)⁴⁰ was held in Johor Bahru and Singapore. There were 500 representatives of 59 organizations from across Malaya attended this event. On this congress, the *Balai Pustaka*,⁴¹ a small office under the Ministry of Education, was upgraded into *Dewan*

⁴⁰ KBPM is the acronym of the Congress’s Malay name, *Kongres Bahasa dan Persuratan Melayu*.

⁴¹ Malay for The Literature Office

Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP),⁴² as an independent government body aimed to develop Bahasa Melayu into a national and official language of the new country. The newly established DBP adopted a resonant slogan as its founding philosophy—*Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa*, or “language is the soul of the nation.”

Language was never an easy task in the process of nation building for countries that had just gained its independence from colonial rules, and this was particularly true in plural societies like Malaya. No one should take for granted that Bahasa Melayu got selected as the national language automatically, rather, it went through numbers of heated public debates and tough political struggles, many issues remained unsettled even after the DBP was formed and the slogan “language is the soul of the nation” had been officially brought up to the public sphere. From the view of the Socialist Front, there are four prevailing tendencies in the making of the national language(s) and the education system, which would ultimately push Malaya to four completely different directions:⁴³

(1) The Socialist Front criticized the Alliance for acting as the “hired thugs” of the British colonial power, which aimed to “promote English by sacrificing Bahasa Melayu and suppressing other ethnic languages.”⁴⁴ The Leftists further pointed out that the *Education Ordinance* and its succeeding version produced by the Alliance was “filled with the odor

⁴² Malay for The Institute of Language and Literature

⁴³ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, “Yuwen Jiaoyu De Lunzheng 语文教育的论争(The Debate on Language Education),” *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 3, October, 1960.

⁴⁴ This was not necessarily true, the Alliance, which was largely comprised of communal parties, did have a lot of internal debates about the language policies. Quite possibly, the SF just wanted to use these internal conflicts to criticize the Alliance for political purposes.

of colonialism,”⁴⁵ which reflected the Alliance’s goal to ultimately destroy the “already quite sophisticated” Chinese education system in Malaya.

(2). Some extreme Malay nationalists advocated recognizing Bahasa Melayu as the only legitimate national and official language, as they believed that languages spoken by immigrant communities (Chinese and Tamil) had played similar roles as English did in enslaving Malays. The Socialist Front also strongly condemned such kind of Malay-centric view, tried to depict these Malay nationalists as arrogant self-isolated extremists who showed no regard to the contributions that Chinese and Indian ethnic groups made to the Malayan society, “although they had made the right decision by firmly taking the anti-colonist stance.”⁴⁶

(3) To many people’s surprise, the SF did not really stood side by side with the Chinese community in their efforts to make Chinese “the second national language”,⁴⁷ as they argued in its statement on September 18, 1960: “We acknowledge the contribution that Chinese education made in the anti-colonial struggles in the past, but the system is out of date and it no longer fit in with the changing environment. We should prevent this kind of racist sentiment from penetrating to our minds.”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ After the Socialist Front disintegrated in 1965, the Labors Party completely shifted its policies to support the continuation of Chinese education and to realize “equal rights” for Chinese language.

(4) Instead, the Socialist Front insisted on its steadfast principles that “English must go home.” and “The legal status of English must be terminated as soon as possible.” While putting forward a compromise proposal to develop Bahasa Melayu as the national language, it also called for accepting Chinese and Tamil’s significance in the social life of non-Malay communities, as the Socialist Front suggested that the two languages had their progressiveness in “propelling the socialist movements and making great contributions to the development of the socialist society.”⁴⁸ In doing so, rather than changing Chinese and Indian schools into English ones, the Socialist Front proposed that these schools should be kept as what they were until 1967,⁴⁹ when the legal status of English was eliminated as that had been planned in the Constitution.

Based on such language policies, the Socialist Front proposed to build up a unified National School System with three different layers, namely the fully-government-assisted national comprehensive and regional primary schools, partially assisted conforming schools, as well as independent schools, in which Chinese and Tamil languages were used as the medium of instruction. In its *Educational Policy*, the development of Bahasa Melayu and the continuation of ethnic minorities’ languages were both highlighted, as the Socialist Front believed that “Unity Through Diversity”⁵⁰ was

⁴⁸ Chen, Jianhong. 2000. *Malaiya Laogongdang Wenxian Huibian*, 马来亚劳工党文献汇编 (*The Labor Party of Malaya: Selected Documents*), Kuala Lumpur: Malaiya Laogongdang Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui., P569

⁴⁹ This was proposed by Parti Rakyat, but many members of the Labor Party strongly opposed the idea, as they believed that the Chinese education should be maintained forever.

⁵⁰ This term is very similar to the national motto of Indonesia, “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika”, which can be literally translated as “Unity in Diversity”, but it is not clear here if the two mottos shared the same origin.

essential to develop a Malayan consciousness and outlook to assist in the formation of a United Citizen Body, that is a Malayan Nation.⁵¹

In doing so, the Socialist Front first accused the Alliance Government of its inconsistency in dealing with the language issues,⁵² not being able to carry out a timely plan that can be implemented effectively,⁵³ and “ignored the past and (sought to) build a future unrelated to the existing social systems”.⁵⁴ Subsequently, the Socialist Front suggested to implement three initiatives: 1) to establish common curriculums under the real social and cultural context; 2) promoting Bahasa Melayu as the National Language, and making Malay language courses compulsory to all students irrespective of their respective race; 3) to gradually establish a kind of linguistically-mixed schools, in which Bahasa Melayu, Chinese, Tamil, and English courses would be offered in accordance with people’s needs.⁵⁵ The Socialist Front’s plan would ultimately lead to the establishment of the

⁵¹ *Ibid.* P599

⁵² The Socialist Front pointed out the discrepancies between two reports published by the Alliance Government in 1956 and 1957 respectively in its policy statement published in *Nyala*, the official newspaper of the Labors Party: In the 1956 Report, Tun Abdul Razak (the Prime Minister) said: “the ultimate objective of education policy in this country must be to bring together the children of all races under a National Education System in which the National Language is the main medium of Instruction...”, whereas in the *1957 Education Ordinance*, however, the Alliance admitted that “the Education Policy of the Federation is to establish a national system of education acceptable to the people as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as nation, with the intention of making the Malay Language the National Language of the country whilst preserving and conserving the growth of the language and culture of the peoples other than Malaya in the country.”

⁵³ This is quite understandable that within the Alliance, communal parties representing different ethnic groups could hardly reach quick consensus due to their respective interests.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Shezhen de Jiaoyu Zhengce Gaiyao 社阵的教育政策概要 (The outline of the Socialist Front’s Education Policies)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala

comprehensive National School System, within which other schools could be gradually assimilated while the existing systems, especially the Chinese and Indian independent schools “must be assisted as long as there is a need for them”.⁵⁶

Although openly admitted that language education was the most sensitive and controversial subjects in the plural society of Malaya, the Socialist Front firmly believed that language education would not constitute a serious issue if socialism could be fully realized, since “the egalitarianism (with the emphasis on non-racism, non-chauvinism, and prioritizing the common interests of the people) that reified in the socialist world could ultimately solve all problems.”⁵⁷ In other words, the Socialist Front actually regarded the language issues as “minor tasks in the socialist movement.”⁵⁸ Bearing this in mind, the leftists thus interpreted the struggles of the language as part of its struggles for the rights and interests of “the oppressed”—“During the colonial era, the main interest in Education was to create a distinct and separate class of people with knowledge of English to assist the Colonial Government in its economic and political exploitation of the non-English educated mass.”⁵⁹ Therefore, the Socialist Front generally based all its

Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 11, June 1961. The third point was specified in the Article 152 of the Constitution.

⁵⁶ Chen, Jianhong. 2000. *Malaiya Laogongdang Wenxian Huibian* 马来亚劳工党文献汇编 (The Labor Party of Malaya: Selected Documents), Kuala Lumpur: Malaiya Laogongdang Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui, P598

⁵⁷ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Yuwen Jiaoyu de Lunzheng 语文教育的论争 (The Debate on Language Education), *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 3, October, 1960.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Chen, Jianhong. 2000. *Malaiya Laogongdang Wenxian Huibian* 马来亚劳工党文献汇编 (The Labor Party of Malaya: Selected Documents), Kuala Lumpur: Malaiya Laogongdang Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui, P600.

claims upon the association's principles against the British colonialism or the pro-British Alliance Government, which was accused of practicing neo-colonialism.

However, in the articulation of the language policies, the Socialist Front did not make much difference comparing to the Alliance,⁶⁰ as both associations had their respective internal fractions that derived from the fact that each constituent party had to take care of its own communal interests. Thus, the selection of national language and the making of education policies were also key issues hotly debated between the Labor Party and the Parti Rakyat. Due to its radical left-leaning standpoint, the Parti Rakyat, which largely represented the voices of Malays, initially opposed the idea of multilingualism, since they believed that the Malayan people as an united nation, had to share a common language as the national identity, and this language should be no other than Malay. As a result, they also suggested that Malay should be used as the sole medium of instruction in schools. In the first issue of *Suara Rakyat*, the official newspaper published by the Parti Rakyat, a contributor made a loud appeal to construct a "new culture" in Malaya by promoting Bahasa Melayu as the national language. "Extracting cultural elements from each ethnic group would not be enough to develop Malayan culture," he noted, "rather, we should absorb 'progressive cultures' from abroad...we should learn from Indonesia, unifying our spelling system as soon as possible; we should also import more Indonesian books, so

⁶⁰ As mentioned above, the Alliance illustrated its language policies in the 1957 *Education Ordinance* based on the compromises made between UMNO, MCA and MIC, which represented Malay, Chinese and Indian respectively, that "the Education Policy of the Federation is to establish a national system of education acceptable to the people as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as nation, with the intention of making the Malay Language the National Language of the country whilst preserving and conserving the growth of the language and culture of the peoples other than Malaya in the country."

that more people could participate in the struggles with a shared culture, and (our society) would develop faster.”⁶¹ By contrast, distinct from the view of the Parti Rakyat, the Labor Party called for the continuation of Chinese and Tamil education, even though they did not really oppose the idea of making Bahasa Melayu the national language. The Labor Party argued that the realization of equal rights should not be only limited to rights to vote, but also rights to practice different culture, language and access to equal economic opportunities.⁶²

On 15 September 1960, Chairman Ahmad Boestamam of the Parti Rakyat delivered a public speech, in which he advocated closing Chinese and Indian schools. In his opinion, as soon as the legal status of English education could be terminated by 1967, the Chinese and Indian vernacular schools too should be closed so that a unified Malay-medium education system could be firmly established with fewer obstacles. Of course, this speech was strongly rejected by the Chinese-dominated Labor Party. Although this dispute was later superseded by the two party’s joint struggles against the formation of Malaysia, the divergence on education issues became a hint that foreshadowed the disintegration of the Socialist Front.

While both opinions were imbued with a sense of unity that emphasized the equality and solidarity between different ethnic groups, the education policies of this self-alleged non-

⁶¹ Partai Rakyat Malaya, 1960, “Cong ‘Guojia Yuwenju’ Xiangqi从 ‘国家语文局’ 想起(Reflection on Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka),” *Suara Rakyat (People's Voice)*, May 1st, 1960

⁶² Kahn, Joel S., and Francis Kok-Wah Loh, 1992, *Fragmented vision: culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. P275

communal party coalition nevertheless ended up being very similar to the policies proposed by those ruling communal parties. Both coalitions reached a minimum consensus in the end by presenting policies acceptable but not favored by all constituent parties, regardless of whether or not they are ethnic-based.

Although being regarded as unfair and incomplete, this result became the *de facto* of Malaysian language education, which still remains pretty much the same today—no one has ever come up with an idea of finding an effective and comprehensively feasible way to deal with the relationships between the four languages (Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English) that had been widely spoken in the country. Although Malay has been successfully made the only national language, and the UMNO-dominated government has been conducting promotions of Bahasa Melayu for decades, the outcome has never been satisfactory, and the resistance from non-Malay societies has never died out. As a “non-racist” language, and more importantly, an indispensable part of Malaysia’s global competitiveness in embracing modernity and technological advancement, English has never been removed from the daily life of the people in the Malaysian plural society. The three-layer school system proposed by the Socialist Front became an unexpected legacy of the early debates—*Sekolah Kebangsaan*, the Malay-medium national schools, get full financial supports from the UMNO-dominated government. *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan*, the non-Malay-medium National-type Schools, also known as “vernacular schools” that use Chinese and Indian as the medium of instruction, only receive partial financial assistance from the government on the understanding that Bahasa Melayu would be taught as a compulsory subject. The third layer is the independent schools. Thanks to

persistent communal struggles, Chinese and Tamil education has been preserved and retained by relying on private donations from their respective communities. But the non-Malay societies still have a serious concern about their constantly jeopardized education system, as independent schools can hardly get any support from the government, the diplomas of Chinese and Indian independent schools remain unrecognized by the authority, and thus, their graduates have no chance to be admitted by the state-run national universities. Ironically, the three-layer system initiated by the Socialist Front with the view towards the realization of egalitarianism among the citizens ended up becoming one of the most criticized issues of today's public debates regarding the language education in Malaysia.

3.2 Merger with Singapore

Due to the unprecedented upheaval of global communist movement after the Second World War, the British authority and later the pro-British Alliance Government had been very hesitant to approve the merger request that sought to bring the Federation of Malaya and Singapore together. There were two major reasons that led to their reluctance: first, the merger would bring about the “imbalance” of ethnic ratio, that is, the Chinese population would outnumber the Malays;⁶³ secondly, there were allegedly too many left-wing pro-communist extremists in Singapore, who would “jeopardize the security and

⁶³ Up to 1961, the population of Malaya consisted of 3.57 million Malays, 2.63 million Chinese, and others; and Singapore had 0.23 million Malays, 1.27 million Chinese. Lim Kcan Siew, "Malaixiya De Yiyi He Qiantu—Malaiya Laogongdang Zongmishu Lin Jian Shou Tongzhi Wei Roufozhou Zhengxunban Zhi Jianghua 马来亚劳工党总秘书林建寿同志为柔佛州政训班之讲话 (The Meaning and Prospect of Malaya: Comrade Lim Kcan Siew's Speech at Johor)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 3, Issue 4, December 1, 1962.

interests of Malaya and its people.”⁶⁴ Thus, the Alliance believed that excluding Singapore from Malaysia, at least temporarily, would prevent those “pro-communist” leftists from intervening the politics of Malaysia. As a result, by maintaining its control over the power of the country’s internal security, the central government would also be able to muzzle the communist sympathizers, Chinese-chauvinists, and the left-wing anti-colonialists more effectively.⁶⁵ As Tunku put it:” in fact, the people of the Federation of Malaya are very concerned about the prospect of the merger with Singapore—those Chinese, who account for the majority of Singapore’s population, have close ties with China, and there is a tendency that many of them are firm believers of Chinese-chauvinism, which can be seen from the fact that they even have a Chinese-medium university.”⁶⁶ Then, he added, “Even the Prime Minister of Singapore admitted that Singaporeans are inclined to engage in communism and the related activities, we have confirmed this situation through our (the Federation of Malaya) sources of intelligence.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Xing Ma Hebing he Tongyi de Jichu shi Shenme?—星马合并和统一的基础是什么(What is the Foundation for the Merger and the Unification between Singapore and Malaya)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 15, October, 1961.

⁶⁵ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Xin Ma Hebing De Zhengque Tujing: Zhengshi Jian Pipan Donggu Li Guang Yao Yu Ying Zhiminzhe Zhi Hebing Lundian 新马合并的正确途径: 正视兼批判东姑李光耀与英殖民者之合并论点 (The Right Path for the Merger of Singapore and Malaya: To Correctly Understand the Tunku, Lee Kuan Yew and British Colonizers' Viewpoint on Merger), ", *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 16, November, 1961.

⁶⁶ Here, Tunku referred to Nanyang University

⁶⁷ These two quotations of Tunku Abdul Rahman’s speech are directly translated from the Chinese records published in *Huo Yan Bao*, the original English (or Malay) materials are not available. *Ibid.*

To many people's surprise, on May 27th, 1961, however, Tunku announced a merger plan that would not only bring Malaya and Singapore together, but also incorporate Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak into a united federation. This move, although ostensibly seemed to be quite distinctive from the Alliance's previous assertions on the merger issue, was soon criticized by the left-wing opposition parties from all five places, as they saw the ways in which Malaysia would be demarcated was a sheer racist plot. According to this plan, Sabah (North Borneo), Sarawak and Brunei would be accepted as the 12th, 13th, and 14th state of Malaysia respectively, enjoyed the same rights and positions as other states did on the Malay Peninsula; whereas Singapore would only be incorporated as a companion--"Singapore is to Malaysia just what Northern Ireland is to Britain. ".⁶⁸

As mentioned above, there would be more Chinese than Malays in terms of the size of population if the merger between Malaya and Singapore were to take place. The number of Chinese population would also account for a higher percentage of the total population than that of Malays if all these five former British colonies were to join together. To maintain the quantitative advantage of the Malay population, there were essentially two options available to the UMNO leaders who largely represented the communal interests of ethnic Malays and had the final say to Malayan politics at that time: 1) to enlarge the scope of the Malay ethnic group through a new set of categorization, that is, incorporating all indigenous people in Malaya and the three British colonies in North Borneo by labeling them as *bumiputera*, or 2) to reduce the size of non-Malay

⁶⁸ Tunku Abdul Rahman's parliamentary speech on October 16, 1961, *ibid.*

populations by isolating them from one another, especially by alienating the Chinese-dominated Singapore from the center of the political arena.

Of course, the UMNO leaders also needed to take good care of the interests of their non-Malay partners, that was why the merger plan with Singapore was carried out anyway. The plan appeared in a way as if every ethnic group's voice had been heard and considered carefully, and the decision was made based on the communal parties' agreement. But nevertheless, the Alliance's merger plan was still opposed by the Socialist Front, who insisted on the merger in the first place, as they saw the essence of the plan was to "prevent Singaporean people from enjoying their legitimate rights, while keep forcing them to fulfill the same amount of obligations."⁶⁹ The followings are the stances that the major political parties took on this issue:

In the Alliance Government's view, the merger was acceptable, but a complete incorporation of Singapore into Malaya was not. While the autonomy over labor and education issues raised by the People's Action Party (PAP) were negotiable, they believed that the power to control Singapore's internal security, defense, and diplomacy must be handed over to the central government of the federation. The Alliance Government also further asserted that the merger would not automatically turn Singaporean citizens into the citizens of the new federation, as they still had the concern about the Chinese issues in Singapore that might challenge its rule. Similarly, the

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Alliance was also very cautious in assigning the seats in the parliament: the number would be depending on the autonomy that Singapore would enjoy.

The PAP of Singapore led by Lee Kuan Yew alleged that they were going to make efforts to realize the merger at any cost. Distinct from the Alliance who was reluctant to incorporate Singapore as a normal state of Malaysia, the PAP did not really oppose the idea of complete merger, although they also acknowledged that the current situation was premature to realize this goal. While proposing to keep the autonomy in terms of labor and education issues, the PAP agreed to deliver over its power in internal security, defense, and diplomacy to the central government of the federation. The PAP did not think that the debates over Singaporeans' citizenship would constitute an issue if the merger could be successfully achieved.

On the left-wing side, however, there were more different opinions expressed regarding the merger issue even between the closely connected the Socialist Front and the *Barisan Socialis Singapura*.⁷⁰ The leftists in Singapore provided an either-or option: (1) to turn Singapore into a normal state of the Federation, in other words, to undertake a complete merger with Malaya; or (2) to maintain the complete autonomy of Singapore, including the state's internal security, and the central government of the Federation would only in charge of defense and foreign affairs.

⁷⁰ Literally translated as the Socialist Front of Singapore

From the Malayan Socialist Front's perspective, however, neither the Alliance's merger plan, nor the requests raised by the two forces from Singapore were completely acceptable. In their opinion, Singapore should be incorporated into the Federation just like Melaka and Penang, the other two states of the Strait Settlements. Additionally, the Socialist Front also believed that as a normal state sharing the equal rights and obligations, Singapore's request for autonomy in labor and education issues were absurd, since the autonomy had no basis of logic if the merger were to be conducted completely.⁷¹ As a response to the Alliance's plan that attempted to limit the number of seats of Singapore in the parliament, the Socialist Front suggested that the seats should be assigned based on the population of each state, and Singaporeans should be granted the citizenship of the Federation once the incorporation had been successfully achieved. If such conditions cannot be fulfilled, the two sides must come up alternative ways to carry the unification forward by strictly following the principle that "the merger should not be turned into a conspiracy of selling out the country."⁷²

Due to remaining political uncertainties in the three British colonies in North Borneo, the Socialist Front suggested that realizing the merger between Malaya and Singapore first would be more feasible. While the Parti Rakyat showed no particular interests in incorporating Singapore into the Federation,⁷³ the Labor Party was very keen on this merger issue, as they deemed the relationship between the two places were "as close as

⁷¹ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Xing Ma Hebing he Tongyi de Jichu shi Shenme? = 星马合并和统一的基础是什么(What is the Foundation for the Merger between Singapore and Malaya)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 15, October, 1961.

⁷² "合并不等于出卖," *ibid.*

⁷³ The Parti Rakyat was more enthusiastic about the idea of *Melayu Raya* that sought to unify the whole Malay World, which seemed to be quite unattainable in the short run.

lips and teeth”⁷⁴ and repeatedly asserted that Singapore was a part of Malaya and there was no basis for their separation.⁷⁵ In one of many articles published in *Huo Yan Bao*, the official newspaper of the Labors Party, the Socialist Front explained, “no matter in terms of economy, political cultures, history, geography or the genealogy of the residents, (Malaya and Singapore) had and are still having close ties with each other...therefore the tight and stable cooperation of the two peoples appears to be more indispensable today in anti-colonization and the struggles for independence, self-determination, and unity.”⁷⁶ Consistent with its other claims, the Socialist Front targeted at the British for being ill intentioned in causing the separation of the two places, as well as those pro-British right-wing parties from both sides,⁷⁷ who “sing to each other’s tune”⁷⁸ stealthily in impeding the process of the unification. The Socialist Front further suggested that the most solid foundation where the merger could be based upon was the solidarity of the left-wing anti-colonial forces from both sides. However, they also pointed out, while the left-wing struggles were quite active in Singapore, the leftists on the Malayan side were not strong enough: “the great majority of Malay peasants are still largely under the influence of the

⁷⁴ “唇齿相依”, a commonly used Chinese idiom referring to two objects that are closely related and mutually dependent. Barisan Socialis Malaysia, Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Xing Ma Hebing he Tongyi de Jichu shi Shenme? 星马合并和统一的基础是什么 (What is the Foundation for the Merger between Singapore and Malaya)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 15, October, 1961.

⁷⁵ Kahn, Joel S., and Francis Kok-Wah Loh, 1992, *Fragmented vision: culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.. P195

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Indicating the Alliance of Malaya and the PAP in Singapore

⁷⁸ Chinese idiom “一唱一和”, Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Xing Ma Hebing he Tongyi de Jichu shi Shenme? 星马合并和统一的基础是什么 (What is the Foundation for the Merger between Singapore and Malaya)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 15, October, 1961.

UMNO, which significantly strengthened the domination of the pro-British rightists. This is considered the major obstruction in the realization of unification.”⁷⁹

To work on the merger more effectively, the Malayan Socialist Conference was held in Kuala Lumpur in February 1962. On this conference, the left-wing parties⁸⁰ reached a consensus that the realization of the unification must be based on equality, that is, all Singaporean citizens should be recognized as the citizens of the Federation, and the seats of the parliament should be assigned according to the ratio of each state’s population. However, as demonstrated in the joint communiqué of the conference, the leftists also acknowledged that there were a number of unsolvable difficulties that they were facing to actuate the complete merger. Hence, they unanimously agreed that rather than integrating peoples from the two sides more closely, the partial merger plan proposed by the pro-British Alliance and PAP would only lead to a larger fracture between different ethnic groups. As the result, the leftists claimed that they would support Singaporeans’ struggles for the complete autonomy if the complete merger could not be realized.⁸¹

The relationship between the Socialist Front and People's Action Party (PAP) of Singapore, the ruling party of the city-state was also worth discussing. On 16 November 1961, the PAP Government of Singapore publicized the “Memorandum Setting out

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ These Parties included seven left-wing organizations from across Malaya, Singapore, Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak. The North Borneo issues were also discussed on this conference. I will elaborate this point in next section.

⁸¹ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Joint Communiqué of the Malayan Socialist Conference". *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 20, March, 1962

Heads of Agreement for a Merger between the Federation of Malaya and Singapore”, which was signed by both Lee Kuan Yew and Tunku Abdul Rahman. The Socialist Front deemed this scheme as a plot of “pseudo-merger”, which would sell out the real interests of people from both sides for the politicians own political gains. For instance, according to the memorandum, Singapore could only have fifteen seats in the parliament, which number was significantly lower than it was supposed to have if the seats were to be assigned based on the size of the population. Therefore, from the Socialist Front’s perspective, the merger scheme actually exposed Lee Kuan Yew’s real intention, which was to strengthen his rule in Singapore by getting closer with Tunku in the merger issue.⁸²

In the year of 1962, however, the Socialist Front found it increasingly difficult to accomplish its goal to realize a complete merger with Singapore that they had initially proposed. Therefore, the Socialist Front started to seek for possible opportunities to interact with the PAP. Despite the sharp divergence of understandings on many subjects, particularly the communist issues, the Socialist Front agreed to cooperate with the allegedly right-wing yet still pro-merger PAP. The PAP was then invited by the Labors Party to participate the Malayan Socialist Conference that I discussed above. But the PAP eventually withdrew from the conference, since other left-wing parties could not accept

⁸² Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Women De Taidu He Lichang 我们的态度和立场(Our Attitude towards the Memorandum Setting out Heads of Agreement for a Merger between the Federation of Malaya and Singapore), " *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 17, December, 1961

the idea of Malaysia that the PAP insisted on.⁸³ The collaboration between the Socialist Front (esp. the Labor Party) and the PAP finally broke off when the “Chinese chauvinist and ideologically extreme” *Barisan Sosialis Singapura* (the Socialist Front of Singapore), the opposition of the PAP and a close partner of the Labors Party, was identified as a party worked closely to the “underground MCP”.⁸⁴

The “pseudo-merger” scheme was carried out anyway. On 16 September 1963, Singapore officially became part of Malaysia. During the brief period of unity, exactly like other non-Malay communal parties and the Socialist Front, the PAP also aggressively tried to contest the UMNO’s controversial policies that unprivileged the non-*bumiputera* communities. In 1964, two inter-racial riots broke out in Singapore, in which 36 people were killed and hundreds of others were injured as Chinese and Malays fought against each other.⁸⁵ Felt increasingly threatened by the large Chinese population as well as the uncontrollable tensions between different ethnic groups after the inclusion of Singapore, the UMNO decided to expel Singapore from the Federation. As Tunku explained at the

⁸³ As mentioned above, the PAP intended to ultimately realize the complete unification between Malaya and Singapore, but it also acknowledged the fact that the current situation was premature to reach this goal. As the result, it accepted the merger plan proposed by the Alliance government, which was to allow Singapore to join the Federation as a companion, and in the meantime, maintaining its autonomy in labor and education issues.

⁸⁴ Kahn, Joel S., and Francis Kok-Wah Loh, 1992, *Fragmented vision: culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press... P208

⁸⁵ There were two riots took place in July and September respectively. In the July riot, 23 People were killed and 450 people were injured, accompanied by significant loss of property. In the September riot, 13 people were killed and other 106 people were injured. Although there are many different interpretations, Lee Kuan Yew and some other foreign observers attribute the causes of the riots to the ultra-nationalist faction in UMNO, see Lau, Albert 1998. *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement*. Singapore: Times Academic Press.

parliament: “We find that there are only two courses open to us: to take repressive measures against the Singapore government or their leaders for the behavior of some of their leaders, and the course of action we are taking now, to sever with the state government of Singapore that has ceased to give a measure of loyalty to the central government.”⁸⁶

On 9 August 1965, Lee Kuan Yew proclaimed the independence of Singapore, which officially marked the end of the debates over the merger issue of the two territories. At a press conference around noon, Lee Kuan Yew said with disappointment: “For me, it is a moment of anguish. All my life, my whole adult life, I believed in merger and unity of the two territories.”⁸⁷

Major discourses usually attribute Singapore’s separation from Malaysia to the friction between the central government of Malaysia led by the UMNO and the PAP-led state government of Singapore, which was triggered by the rigid interethnic relationship.⁸⁸ However, the Socialist Front pointed out that the separation was actually jointly conspired by Tunku, Lee Kuan Yew, and the British—“it was the establishment of Malaysia that evoked the people’s resistance across Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah and the

⁸⁶ On 9 August 1965, Tunku Abdul Rahman gave a speech at the parliament in Kuala Lumpur on the separation of Singapore from Malaysia, in the first reading of a resolution to pass the Constitution of Malaysia (Singapore Amendment) Bill.

⁸⁷ Press Conference, Lee announcing the separation of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia, 9 August 1965

⁸⁸ See George, T. J. S. 1973. *Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore*, London: Deutsch.

Federation.”⁸⁹ Rather than enjoying the prosperity of the united nation, the Socialist Front suggested that Singaporean people suffered a lot from the suppression of the Alliance Government during brief period of unity, which could be seen from the increasingly frequent interracial riots and the arrests of progressive student activists.⁹⁰ According to *She Xun*, a news bulletin published by the Penang Branch of the Labor Party, Lee Kuan Yew had no choice but to shirk his own responsibility and shift the blame onto Tunku. In order to mitigate the anger of Singaporeans, Lee chose to adopt a racist approach to contest the domination of the UMNO, who largely represented the interests of Malay ethnic group. Felt greatly threatened by Lee’s aggressive provocation, some senior members of the UMNO suggested that the central government should take over Singapore and arrest Lee Kuan Yew. The British authority was thus forced to make another arrangement by separating the two territories that had already been united, as they realized that the contradictions between the Alliance and the PAP— “its right and left arms”—could be further intensified.

Rather than labeling Lee Kuan Yew as the savior or hero of Singaporeans as many people did, the Socialist Front regarded him as the British authority’s puppet that had betrayed his people. In the Socialist Front’s view, Lee Kuan Yew not only intended to maintain his domination in Singapore by borrowing power from the Alliance Government, but also longed for the supreme leadership of the whole Malaysia. In doing so, while alleged to be representing the fundamental interests of the public, Lee also tacitly consented to the

⁸⁹ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Jiesan Dama, Xiaochu Zainan 解散大马，消除灾难 (Disband Malaysia, Eradicate Disaster)," *She Xun*, Penang: the Penang Branch of the Labor Party, Vol. 10, 7 October 1961

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

suppression and persecution that the British and the Alliance conducted against Singaporeans.⁹¹ Therefore, quite distinct from its initial assertions that aimed to actuate the complete merger between the two territories, the Socialist Front commented on the separation of Singapore at last as follows: “(the reactionaries) had no choice but to make this decision that may tentatively ease the intensification of its internal conflicts. This is a great victory for people in their struggles to oppose the illegitimate state of Malaysia, and a big progress to ultimately crumble and destroy it.”⁹²

3.3 Borneo Issues and the Konfrontasi

While actively engaged in the merger negotiations with Singapore, the Socialist Front also sought to play a more significant role in the debates on the issues of Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak, largely because of its close connections with the left-wing counterparts in North Borneo, as well as those in Indonesia, who also claimed sovereignty over these territories. It was noteworthy that the Socialist Front really made great efforts in reconciling the conflicts between different parties at the early stage: In 1961, the Socialist Front sent a high-level “fact-finding mission” to Borneo,⁹³ and concluded in a less extreme way that “Borneo fits into the Malaysian Region of Sumatra, Java and

⁹¹ The Socialist Front thought that the PAP failed to take care of Singaporeans’ interests after the state was incorporated into Malaysia, particularly in following three aspects: (1) the number of seats in the parliament was limited to 15; (2) economy was stifled, as the central government took away 40% of its revenue; and (3) The British and the Alliance utilized the military bases in Singapore to suppress the anti-colonial (or anti-Malaysia) struggles in Singapore and North Borneo.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Cheah, Boon-Kheng, 2006, The Leftwing Movement in Malaya, Singapore and Borneo in the 1960s: ‘An Era of Hope or Devil’s Decade’? *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7 (4) (12): 641.

Malaya.”⁹⁴ The report of the Socialist Front asserted that the people in Borneo Territories must be given a chance of self-determination, which would not harm the interests of either Indonesia or Malaysia.

However, the reality was far more complicated than what the Socialist Front’s report had suggested. Indonesia, Malaya and the Philippines were all eager to incorporate the vast territory—either completely or partially—into its own sphere of influence. Indonesia made its sovereignty claim over North Borneo because its leaders saw the whole Kalimantan Island as an entirety. From this perspective, despite the fact that the British and Dutch had ruled North and South Borneo respectively during the colonial era, Indonesia believed that the two territories were inseparable both culturally and geographically. Being the actual ruler of Southern Kalimantan, Indonesia thus deemed itself as the legitimate inheritor of North Borneo as well. The Philippines also had a sovereignty claim over Sabah, the easternmost land of North Borneo. As a reward from the Sultan of Brunei, Sabah was granted to the Sultanate of Sulu prior to the coming of European colonizers. Since 1878, however, the British North Borneo Company had been leasing the territory of Sabah until the Federation of Malaysia was established in 1963.⁹⁵

On 27 May 1961, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the then prime minister of the Federation of Malaya proclaimed in his speech in Singapore that all former British colonies in the

⁹⁴ *Report to the Socialist Front, The Borneo Territories*, 16 November 1961

⁹⁵ The Philippine government broke its diplomatic relations with Malaysia when Sabah was incorporated into the federation. The relations had not been officially resumed until 1989, when the Philippine government agreed to put the claim on back burner as they sought to establish a tighter political and economic relationship with Malaysia.

region, included Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei would be brought into a new federation, namely Malaysia. In some people's view, Tunku's proclamation was a little bit too sudden, but it was fair to say that the idea of Malaysia mentioned in Tunku's speech was not totally unexpected. When talking about the formation of Malaysia, the concept of *Melayu Raya*⁹⁶ must be discussed because it is the source of Malaysia's ideological roots. The origin of *Melayu Raya* could be traced back to the early 1900s,⁹⁷ when Malay-speaking nationalists and progressives from across the region gathered together and came up with this idea that aimed to create a great Malay nation-state that would cover the broad areas of Southern Thailand, Malaya, Singapore, Indonesia, the entire island of Kalimantan and the Philippines⁹⁸. Influenced by the idea of "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" during the Japanese Occupation, *Melayu Raya* was re-organized and started to call on the great unity of Malay-speaking people in the whole region. However, this campaign was only constrained to the sphere of *Rumpun Melayu*.⁹⁹ To Chinese, this loosely demarcated area was still called *Nanyang* or South Sea; whereas

⁹⁶ Literally translated as "Great Land of Malays"

⁹⁷ Some sources also trace the origin of *Melayu Raya* to the proclamation of "*Sumpah Pemuda*" or the "*Youth Pledge*" made on 28 October 1928 by Indonesian nationalists at in the then-Dutch East Indies, in which the ideal of "motherland, one nation and one language" was first brought up. The pledge reads in Indonesian: "*Kami putera dan puteri Indonesia, mengaku bertumpah darah yang satu, tanah air Indonesia...mengaku berbangsa yang satu, bangsa Indonesia...menjunjung bahasa persatuan, bahasa Indonesia.*"

⁹⁸ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Malaixiya De Yiyi He Qiantu 马来西亚的意义和前途 (The Meaning and Prospect of Malaysia: Lim Kcan Siew's Speech in Johor)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 3, Issue 10, May, 1963

⁹⁹ Literally translated as "Malay Race", which can be either narrowly defined as the Malay ethnic group, or widely referred to anyone whose place of ancestral origin can be traced to the vast region of the Malay World or the Indonesian Archipelago, also known as *Rumpun Melayu*

the British and Dutch were still referring to this region as Southeast Asia or Dutch East Indies according to their respective colonial rule.

As I discussed briefly, the Alliance Government conducted a couple of investigations between 1956 and 1960 in North Borneo, through which the indigenous population was officially brought into its highly politicized categorization system of *bumiputera*. With this concept, the scope of *Suku Melayu*¹⁰⁰ was further enlarged: on one hand, not only the ethnic Malays were identified as the native population of Malaya/Malaysia, other ethnic minorities in North Borneo, even some of whom had never deemed themselves as sharing the same genesis with the Malays, were incorporated into this artificially-constructed group. This categorization was quite flexible in demarcating the boundaries of the indigenous group. For example, new immigrants could be recognized as *bumiputera* as long as they originally came from somewhere in the loosely defined Malay World. On the other hand, however, the categorization was nevertheless quite rigid for those Chinese and Indian descendants—no matter how long they had been residing in Malaya and the surrounding areas, these two ethnic groups were not considered part of *bumiputera*.

Consequently, the left-wing Socialist Front accused the Alliance of manipulating the idea of Malaysia. In their opinion, Tunku's Malaysia was quite distinct from the original concept of *Melayu Raya* proposed by the previous Malay-speaking nationalists, which included more than 130 million people from across the vast region. But rather, this plan would only incorporate a few territories with a total population of 10 million people,

¹⁰⁰ Same as *Rumpun Melayu*, *ibid*

which exactly overlapped with that of the former British colonies, and thus the leftists deemed this scheme as “imbued with the odor of colonialism”. The Socialist Front further pointed out that the misrepresented *Melayu Raya* would continue the pattern of Malayan politics, as the politicians from Malaya would still dominate the new country.¹⁰¹ The British would also maintain its control over the broad territories of the loosely organized federation through those pro-British leaders in Kuala Lumpur.

The Socialist Front believed that the essence of the Malaysian issue was not about the inter-racial conflicts at all. But rather, it was the conflicts between the suppressors and the suppressed that triggered all these problems. The Socialist Front suggested that if the equality of civil rights could be achieved and parliamentary representation was based on the actual ratio of population, none of the ethnic groups would be superior or inferior to others. Therefore, they condemned the Alliance and the PAP leaders who sought to simplify the Malaysian problem as a Malay-Chinese problem, and the Socialist Front considered that these “reactionists” were actually trying very hard to maintain their superiorities in the political competitions against the “progressionists”. By provoking “racism” between different ethnic groups, the Alliance was thus able to place the left-wing organizations onto very disadvantageous positions:

“The Dayak and Iban people were told that the Chinese-dominated Sarawak United Peoples' Party (left-wing) was attempting to seize their lands, but these indigenous people

¹⁰¹ Out of 10 million people in Malaysia, 7 million were living in Malaya, *ibid.*

barely knew that they had been enjoying political supremacy; ¹⁰² leftists advocate realizing equal rights through complete merger, but Singaporeans (largely Chinese) were told that these leftists were actually instigating inter-racial conflicts; leftists call for equal political rights (for non-Malays), but Malays were told that the leftists sought to destroy them; leftists oppose the current scheme of Malaysia because it is not fair, but Malayan Chinese were told that leftists were real communists who sought to demolish the country's solidarity, peace and prosperity.” ¹⁰³

In spite of various obstructions, the Socialist Front had been persistently denying Tunku's Malaysia plan, which alleged to bring greater solidarities into the plural society. To oppose the scheme, the Socialist Front sought to establish a more comprehensive cooperation with the left-wing parties from across the region. As mentioned earlier in the chapter on Singapore, seven parties ¹⁰⁴ from Malaya, Singapore, Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak attended the Malayan Socialist Conference in Kuala Lumpur in February 1962, at which a joint communiqué was announced—the seven parties reached a consensus that before the ideal of Malaysia was carried out for further implementation, the rights of self-determination must be granted to the three British colonies in North Borneo. ¹⁰⁵ Instead of

¹⁰² Referring to the favorable treatment enjoyed by *bumiputera*

¹⁰³ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Malaixiya de Yiyi he Qiantu 马来西亚的意义和前途 (The Meaning and Prospect of Malaysia: Lim Kcan Siew's Speech in Johor)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 3, Issue 10, May, 1963.

¹⁰⁴ Including the Sarawak United Peoples' Party, the Worker's Party of Singapore, the Socialist Front of Singapore, the People's Party of Singapore, the Parti Rakyat, the People's Party of Brunei, and the Labor Party.

¹⁰⁵ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Wu Bang Shehuizhuyi Zhengdang Lianhegongbao 五邦社会主义政党联合公报 (the Communiqué of the Five-territory Socialist Conference)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 20, March, 1962.

“immediate incorporation”, “Self-determination” also became the fundamental stance that the Socialist Front held in tackling the North Borneo issues.

Left-wing organizations usually regarded the formation of Malaysia as a plot of “neo-colonialism” or “indirect colonialism”. While it was true that the administrative power had already been handed over to the Alliance leaders, the newly independent country was still highly reliant on the British. From this perspective, the pro-British Alliance was only a puppet, through which the British authority could remain powerful in controlling its previous colonies’ politics, economy, defense and many other aspects that were key to its interests. In contrast to its Southeast Asian neighbors that obtained their independence through the “imagining” and “self-awareness” of the colonized,¹⁰⁶ the formation of Malaysia was comparatively more crafted by the colonizers. By manipulating the idea of *Melayu Raya*, the previous demarcation of territories, which was largely based on the political sphere of influence between the colonial powers (the British and Dutch), was well preserved as it used to be. In this sense, the boundary was more of “British-Dutch” rather than “Malaysia-Indonesia”—from the Socialist Front’s view, this was also the most direct reason why North Borneo was included in the scheme of Malaysia that the Alliance proposed.

On 17 January 1962, the Cobbold Commission was established, consisting of five members, and deployed to North Borneo to collect people’s opinions about the Malaysia

¹⁰⁶ See Anderson, Benedict R. O’G. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

plan.¹⁰⁷ The commission concluded that the formation of Malaysia should be implemented, as the members reported that there was more than two thirds of the population agreed to the scheme proposed by the Alliance government.¹⁰⁸ It was commonly believed that the report of the Cobbold Commission subsequently became an important foundation in drafting the Constitution of Malaysia. The United Nation (UN) also sent two other missions later to investigate the Borneo issues, which had drawn the same conclusions to support the formation of Malaysia.¹⁰⁹ However, an armed protest broke out in North Borneo to oppose the continuous British rule.¹¹⁰ The Socialist Front

¹⁰⁷ The Commission was headed by Lord Cobbold, the former governor of the Bank of England and consisted of other four members: Wong Pow Nee, Chief Minister of Penang; Mohammed Ghazali Shafie, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Anthony Abell, former Governor of Sarawak; and David Watherston, former Chief Secretary of Malaya, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry, North Borneo and Sarawak, 1962*. Kuching, Sarawak: Government Printing Office.

¹⁰⁸ To be fair, Cobbold also emphasized that both Sabah and Sarawak should enter the federation as equal partners. The report reads: "About one-third of the population of each territory strongly favors early realization of Malaysia without too much concern about terms and conditions. Another third, many of them favorable to the Malaysia project, ask, with varying degrees of emphasis, for conditions and safeguards varying in nature and extent: the warmth of support among this category would be markedly influenced by a firm expression of opinion by Governments that the detailed arrangements eventually agreed upon are in the best interests of the territories. The remaining third is divided between those who insist on independence before Malaysia is considered and those who would strongly prefer to see British rule continue for some years to come. If the conditions and reservations, which they have put forward, could be substantially met, the second category referred to above would generally support the proposals. Moreover once a firm decision was taken quite a number of the third category would be likely to abandon their opposition and decide to make the best of a doubtful job. There will remain a hard core, vocal and politically active, which will oppose Malaysia on any terms unless it is preceded by independence and self-government: this hard core might amount to near 20 per cent of the population of Sarawak and somewhat less in North Borneo." *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ See UN General Assembly 15th Session - *The Trusteeship System and Non-Self-Governing Territories* (pages:509-510); UN General Assembly 18th Session - *the Question of Malaysia* (pages:41-44)

¹¹⁰ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Dangqian Jushi Zhinan 当前局势指南(A Guidance on Current Situation)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 4, Issue 4, March, 1963.

interpreted this protest as people's explicit reaction against the British colonialism and Malaysian neo-colonialism. Therefore, the Socialist Front started to question the credibility of the reports that the Cobbold Commission and the United Nation produced.

According to Socialist Front, the people of the three territories in North Borneo had never been given a real chance of self-determination. Although the United Nation had conducted investigations on this issue, a referendum was still much needed to ensure that the people in Sabah and Sarawak could have an opportunity to express their true wishes.¹¹¹ Additionally, the Socialist Front suggested that the voices of opposition parties, especially those left-wing organizations, were not heard. In fact, as early as six months prior to the investigation, both the Sarawak United Peoples' Party and Parti Rakyat Brunei were muzzled and forbidden to express their anti-Malaysia views to the public. Right before the arrival of the UN missions, there was also a large-scale arrest against the leftists. Under such circumstance, the Socialist Front cast doubt on the fairness and reliability of the UN report, which was based on a superficial investigation conducted by merely two batches of seven people in two weeks.¹¹²

Strong Indonesian opposition also further complicated the formation of Malaysia. Both the Sukarno-led central government and the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) explicitly expressed their objections to the Malaysia plan and accused it of “neo-

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² *ibid.*

colonialism”¹¹³—exactly the same expression that the Socialist Front used to oppose the pro-British Alliance government. The UMNO-dominated Alliance thus started to fiercely criticize the Socialist Front for its “anti-Malaysia” and “pro-Indonesia” stance by labeling the leftists as the “followers of Indonesian communists”, even though the PKI’s opposition to the Malaysia scheme was raised some time later than that of the Socialist Front. To fight back, the Socialist Front indicated that the Alliance was the betrayer, who had sold out the interests of people by allowing foreign military forces being stationed in the country, depriving people’s rights of self-determination on Singapore and Borneo issues, and making Malaysia a major hub for western powers to invade other Southeast Asian countries.¹¹⁴

Although Indonesia suggested that it was not going to make any sovereignty claim over the north Borneo territories, the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation, or *Konfrontasi*, nevertheless broke out on 20 January 1963, when Indonesian Foreign Minister Subandrio declared that his country would adopt a policy of confrontation against Malaysia. On 27 July 1963, President Sukarno proclaimed that the Indonesian army would “crush” (*mengganyang*) Malaysia.¹¹⁵ It was not clear what Indonesia’s exact motive was to initiate this confrontation with Malaysia. Major discourses sometimes attribute the causes of this

¹¹³ Vasil, R. K., and Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1971, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Published for the Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press. P209

¹¹⁴ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Lun Xiaozhong he Guomin Fuwu Dengji 论效忠和国民服务登记(On Loyalty and National Service Registration)," *Huo Yan Bao = Nyala*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 4, Issue 4, 31 December, 1963

¹¹⁵ See Poulgrain, Greg, 1997, *The Genesis of Konfrontasi: Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, 1945-1965*, Bathurst [N.S.W.]: Crawford House Pub.

issue to the irrationality of Sukarno, who was over thrilled by the victory his military forces just gained in Dutch New Guinea.¹¹⁶ By comparison, the Socialist Front's interpretation seemed to be more convincing:

“Indonesia has repeatedly claimed that it has no intention to occupy the northern territories of Kalimantan, they are just showing their support to Bruneian and Sarawakian people's struggles for independence... Imperialists attempted to utilize Malaysia as their strongpoint to invade Southeast Asia, Indonesia would be the first to be affected... to uphold the sovereignty over its territories, and to defend the fruits of their anti-imperialist struggles, it is understandable they have pursued an anti-Malaysia policy.”¹¹⁷

Instead of attacking the Indonesians for their armed invasion, the Socialist Front accused the Alliance for diverting people's attention from the internal conflicts between different classes to a country-to-country territorial dispute.¹¹⁸ They further suggested that the essence of the *Konfrontasi* was to deal with the Bruneian and Sarawakian people's request for self-determination and independence. In order to mitigate the *konfrontasi*, the Socialist Front put forward a proposal that aimed to challenge the Alliance government, namely: 1) to evacuate all foreign military forces from Malaya and North Borneo territories; 2) to adopt independent foreign policies based on good-neighborly relations; and 3) to recognize people's rights of self-determination on the Singapore and

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, “Lun Xiaozhong he Guomin Fuwu Dengji 论效忠和国民服务登记 (On Loyalty and National Service Registration),” *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 4, Issue 4, 31 December, 1963.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

North Borneo issues.¹¹⁹ According to the Socialist Front, if all these three points could be implemented, the tension would be automatically eased. In the context of *Konfrontasi*, however, neither the Alliance government, nor the British who stood behind it was willing to accept these suggestions. On the contrary, there were pervasive fears of possible communist takeover greatly influenced the policy making of the pro-British government. As Tunku suggested, without the protection of the British armies, a small country like Malaya could hardly survive communist expansions, and only in this way, could the fruits of independence be safeguarded.¹²⁰ Consequently, such suggestions were actually used by the Alliance government to prove the leftists' lack of loyalty to the country.

The debate on the loyalty issues reached its climax when the Alliance launched a scheme to conscript soldiers in August 1964. Again, the leftists strongly opposed the plan by condemning the government for getting deeply involved in an unjust war. In their view, the purpose of conscription was to directly assist the British expansion targeted at suppressing people's anti-imperialist struggles in North Borneo territories, which severely violated people's basic rights and their desire for independence:

“The purpose of conscription was not to protect our motherland Malaya at all, but rather, it was carried out simply because of the increasingly intensified battles in Sabah and

¹¹⁹ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Dangqian Jushi Zhinan 当前局势指南(A Guidance on Current Situation)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 4, Issue 4, March, 1963

¹²⁰ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Yilianchuan de Wenti, Yiguan Yilai De Lichang 一连串的问题, 一贯以来的立场 (A Series of Problems, A Persistent Stance)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 4, Issue 4, December, 1963.

Sarawak that the British and their accomplice worried about. To see from historical and geographical perspectives, Sabah and Sarawak have never been part of our country; as regards to the opinions that the local people expressed, the general public has never confirmed that they are willing to accept the rule of the Alliance. ”¹²¹

As always, the more objections the Socialist Front articulated, the more likely they would be labeled as “traitors” or “trusted followers of Indonesia”.¹²² The leftists became aware that they were facing terrible crisis of mistrust and subject to large-scale arrests for spreading such kind of speeches. First, the Socialist Front was at a disadvantage in its political campaigns against the Alliance due to the lack of resources as an opposition party coalition. Secondly, influenced by the Alliance’s high-density propaganda, most people were afraid of Indonesia, regardless of which ethnic group they belonged to. Malays were frightened by the *konfrontasi* that Indonesia initiated, in which Indonesian armies “invaded” the land of *bumiputera*; whereas the non-Malay communities also worried about the recent anti-Chinese incidents masterminded by the Indonesian right-wing extremist organization Masyumi.¹²³ The Socialist Front started to realize that any attempts to justify Indonesia’s motives in *Konfrontasi* could jeopardize its own position within the complex political structure of Malaysia. Consequently, although strongly opposed the conscription, the leftists nevertheless suggested that they were not going to lead a boycott against it due to such unfavorable factors.

¹²¹ Barisan Socialis Malaysia, “Lun Xiaozhong he Guomin Fuwu Dengji 论效忠和国民服务登记 (On Loyalty and National Service Registration),” *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 4, Issue 4, 31 December, 1963.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ “*Partai Majelis Syuro Muslimin Indonesia*” or “Council of Indonesian Muslim Associations”, *ibid.*

More importantly, the Alliance could easily detain any opposition leaders without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA). The British colonial authority first introduced the *Emergency Regulations Ordinance* in 1948 to combat the armed insurgency of the MCP. Throughout the whole period of Emergency, this ordinance was used to conduct preventive detentions of communist suspects. Although the Malayan Emergency ended in 1960, the Alliance government passed the ISA, through which preventive detentions was legally retained. As I mentioned earlier, the Malayan leftists were always subject to large-scale arrests and detentions. This was not only due to the fact that the Socialist Front was ideologically linked to the communists in a number of ways, but also its status as an opposition party coalition that posed constant threats to the rule of the Alliance government. The leaders of the Socialist Front had been repeatedly calling for the termination of the ISA so that the parliamentary election could be conducted smoothly, but their attempts produced very little effect.¹²⁴ On the contrary, the Alliance government had been increasingly using the ISA to suppress the leftists, the so-called “Outer Organizations of the Communists.”¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Ahamad Boestamam called for the termination of the ISA in his speech, which was published in the Parti Rakyat’s official newspaper *Suara Rakyat* on 1 May 1960: “From the current moment until the upcoming parliamentary elections, there should not be any attempt to use the ISA (also known as Laws against Subversive Elements), which allows arbitrary arrests and detentions. (*Dari saat ini sampai berlangsungnya pilihanraya parlimen yang akan datang tidak akan mencari perlindungan disebalik Undang-2 Mengchegah Anasir Sebersip yang meluluskan penangkapan dan penahanan yang sewenang-wenang.*)” Partai Rakyat Malaya. 1960. *Suara Rakyat*, 1 May 1960.

¹²⁵ “共产党外围组织”, Barisan Socialis Malaysia, "Gongren Yundong zai Malayxiya de Douzhen Renwu 工人运动在马来西亚的斗争任务(the Missions of Workers’ Movements in Malaysia)," *Huo Yan Bao (Nyala)*, Kuala Lumpur: She Zhen, Vol. 4, Issue 1, August, 1963

On 8 December 1962, the left leaning Parti Rakyat Brunei (PRB) initiated an armed insurrection, through which the PRB leader A.M. Azahari advocated establishing an independent state named the North Borneo Federation by incorporating Sabah and Sarawak into Brunei. Rejected by Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III, the insurrection encountered tenacious resistance of the police forces that were still loyal to the Sultan. A few days later, the rebellion was put down by nearby British troops. Sharing close ties with the left-wing PRB, the Socialist Front in Malaya deemed this rebellion as a just anti-colonial struggle and overtly supported the PRB by accusing the British of “invading” North Borneo territories.¹²⁶ In response to the PRB rebellion, the governments in Malaya and Singapore made a statement to censure the communists for threatening public security by initiating this insurrection. On 2 February 1963, hundreds of left-wing leaders were arrested in Malaya and Singapore, included Ahmad Boestamam, the chairman of the Socialist Front and the Parti Rakyat.¹²⁷ Without a doubt, the defeat of the Brunei Rebellion and the subsequent large-scale arrests of left-wing leaders in Malaya and Singapore was a bitter loss that significantly paralyzed the Socialist Front.

From 7 to 11 June 1963, a summit meeting was held in Manila, at which the representatives from Malaya, Indonesia, and the Philippines have agreed to solve the North Borneo disputes within the context of the UN General Assembly Resolution.¹²⁸ The three countries reached a consensus that the North Borneo issues would be tackled

¹²⁶ Guo, Rende. 1991. *Laogongdang Xuelei Ershi Nian 劳工党血泪二十年 (The Labor Party's History of Tears of Bloods)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaixiya Huaren Wenhua Xiehui. P76

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV)

based on the principle of self-determination. In accordance with the consensus, the three countries signed the Manila Accord on 31 July 1963. Meanwhile, President Diosdado Macapagal of the Philippines proposed to establish a non-political confederation named MAPHILINDO, which was inspired by the *Malaya Irredenta* ideal that the previous Filipino nationalist leader Wenceslao Vinzons envisioned.¹²⁹ By approaching issues of common concern in the spirit of consensus, this proposal aimed to ultimately bring together all Malay peoples of the three countries. Although this preliminary plan did not include concrete details, the leaders who attended the meeting have approved it in principle.

It was ironic that the Socialist Front which had initially supported the similar ideal of *Melayu Raya* did not welcome the MAPHILINDO proposal. Specifically, the Chinese-dominated Labor Party reacted aggressively against the establishment of the confederation. In their view, the concept of MAPHILINDO was very racist, which targeted at forming a unity to protect the Malay communities in Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines against China and the Chinese communities in these countries.¹³⁰ Tan Chee Khoo, a prominent leader of the Socialist Front, argued in his speech in parliament that the establishment of MAPHILINDO would pave a way for Indonesian absorption, as he warned that Indonesia was a regional dominant power with a population of more than

¹²⁹ Perez, Jose, "More on Vinzons," *Bicol Mail*, 13 December 2007, <http://www.bicolmail.com/issue/2007/dec13/selda.html> (accessed 16 April 2012)

¹³⁰ Vasil, R. K., and Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1971, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Published for the Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press. P215

a hundred million people.¹³¹ This also became a great opportunity for the Socialist Front to fight back, as Tan Chee Khoon asserted:

“Both the Alliance Party and the PAP in particular and other as well have called us communists, toeing the PKI line. They pretend to see a communist behind every bush, in every nook and corner, under every bed and in every bathroom—and all these communists are from the Socialist Front...Let me lay low this communist bogey once and for all. We (Socialist Front) are not communist party; nor are we infiltrated by communists; and we do not toe the PKI line, nor are we aligned to any foreign political party.”¹³²

However, this did not reverse the Socialist Front’s passive situation in political struggles, as they found it increasingly difficult to fight back. Subsequently, the left-wing coalition was also placed into an even more disadvantageous position in pre-election campaigns. While coping with a number of increasingly complicated issues caused by its internal frictions, the on-going *Konfrontasi* also further escalated the disintegration of the Socialist Front. As Vasil noted, “the entire Alliance campaign was geared to prove that the Socialist Front was anti-national and pro-Indonesian.” In 1964, while still insisting on

¹³¹ Chen, Jianhong. 2000. *Malaiya Laogongdang Wenxian Huibian* 马来亚劳工党文献汇编 (*The Labor Party of Malaya: Selected Documents*), Kuala Lumpur: Malaiya Laogongdang Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui. P388

¹³² *Ibid.*

enunciating its own position on Malaysia, the Socialist Front finally accepted Malaysia as a *fait accompli*.¹³³

¹³³ Vasil, R. K., and Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1971, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Published for the Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press, P217.

IV. INTRINSIC DIFFERENCES

While encountering various challenges from the inter-partisan competitions, the Socialist Front also suffered from divergences within itself: the Chinese-dominated Labor Party and the Malay-dominated Parti Rakyat, although both took non-communal concepts as their founding fundamentals, they tended to become more and more ethnic-based in terms of their respective composition of party members as well as the differing perceptions regarding the Malayan issues. It was undeniable that both parties had made tremendous efforts to diversify their membership by absorbing people from various ethnic groups and promoting ethnic minorities to executive positions, but nevertheless these attempts had produced very little effect due to the mono-ethnic nature of each party and the fact that the racial estrangement was exceptionally severe during the Emergency period.

Without a doubt, it was during the Emergency period that the separation between races that had existed throughout the colonial era was further exacerbated. Under colonial rule, most of the non-Malay people in Malaya were laborers working in tin mines and rubber plantations or small business owners in towns, whereas most of the Malays were peasants or fishermen settled in rural areas. The non-Malays were prohibited from owning lands and were never hired by the colonial government. As a result, people from one ethnic group were prevented from entering the others' industry, and thus, there was very limited contact between different communities, especially within the lower level of the society. During the Emergency period, Chinese laborers became the chief targets of suspicion, as

the British Administration regarded them as potential communist sympathizers from whom the outlawed MCP obtained its battle supplies and other necessities. Therefore, the British initiated a large-scale resettlement project in Chinese communities in order to cut off their connections with the MCP members in the jungle. The resettlement areas were called Chinese New Villages, in which people lived with limited freedom under the supervision of the police. In the meantime, in order to conduct a strict control over the perceived pro-communist Chinese, the army and police forces recruited a large number of Malays from rural areas. Under such circumstance, the tension between different ethnic groups became further intensified.

As I mentioned above, the Labor Party was largely comprised of English-educated Chinese moderates in the upper level and the Chinese educated supporters, whereas the Parti Rakyat, known as the foremost radical left-wing organization, was led by extreme left-wing Malays. Despite the fact that the two parties shared similar political ideals of making Malaya a socialist country, the first and the foremost disagreement between the two parties emerged even before the Socialist Front was officially formed. The Parti Rakyat, which claimed to be representing the interests of Malays, demanded the Labor Party to recognize the legal status held by the nine Malay Sultans once the country declares its independence. In addition, the Labor Party was also asked to accept *Ketuanan Melayu*¹³⁴ that was specified in the Constitution of Malaya.¹³⁵ But the Labor Party

¹³⁴ Usually translated as Malay special rights or Malay privileges

¹³⁵ Leaders from all ethnic groups reached a consensus to promote economic equality for Malays by conditionally confining the political rights of non-Malays. In exchange, non-Malays were granted permanent citizenship of Malaya/Malaysia. Therefore, the “special position” or “special right” enjoyed by Malays was later legally acknowledged in the

actually held a quite different view. In its memorandum to the Reid Constitutional Commission,¹³⁶ the Labor Party noted: “all Malayan nationals shall enjoy equal rights and share equal responsibilities.”¹³⁷ Therefore the Labor Party problematized the continuation of the Sultans’ positions, as they believed that the system was outdated and inappropriate to be carried on if the independence has been proclaimed. However, so eager was the Labor Party to form a united front with the Parti Rakyat, they eventually compromised on both issues, despite the strong oppositional voices within the party.

According to the *Policy Statement*, the Socialist Front aimed to help Malaya realize its complete economic independence through a centrally planned economic system and sound national controls for commodities.¹³⁸ In doing so, Malaya should not only “break away from the economic and monopolistic pattern set up by the colonial system,”¹³⁹ but also get rid of the speculative controls of the international market and stabilize the national economy by a planned utilization of national resources.¹⁴⁰ In order to push forward the industrialization of Malaya, the Socialist Front emphasized the significance of organizing the “national capitalists” to work under the planned system, while taking

Constitution that: “It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (the head of Malaysia) to safeguard the special position of the Malays and the natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article.”

¹³⁶ A special commission formed to draft the Constitution of the Federation of Malaya

¹³⁷ *Memorandum to the Reid Constitutional Commission submitted by the Labor Party of Malaya*, 25 September 1956, p4

¹³⁸ Chen, Jianhong. 2000, *Malaiya Laogongdang Wenxian Huibian 马来亚劳工党文献汇编 (The Labor Party of Malaya: Selected Documents)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaiya Laogongdang Dangshi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui. p75

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ The Malayan Peoples' Socialist Front. 1960. *Towards A New Malaya: Policy Statement*.

whatever possible actions to take over the industries controlled by foreign powers. Based on this foundation, state-own enterprises should be established in order to “absorb” the national capitalists under the direction of the socialist government.¹⁴¹ Finally, the states would take full control of these businesses. The divergence between the two parties in the Socialist Front mainly concentrated on debates such as how nationalization should be put forward, and what role the state should play in the process. The Parti Rakyat, being the representative and rural Malays who had very little involvement in commerce, insisted on initiating a radical nationalization, in which the state must play a larger role in the highly centralized economy. On the contrary, the Labor Party only accepted a thorough nationalization of the foreign enterprises, since the party’s donors were usually Chinese “national capitalists” who owned tin mines and rubber plantations. Among many industrial sectors, the Labor Party only agreed to take over the transport industry, which was initially owned by the colonial government. The Labor Party was particularly cautious in mentioning the tin mines and rubber plantations that may harm the interests of the Chinese. The Parti Rakyat, by contrast, aggressively advocated all-round centralized control over the production and the distribution.

With regards to elections, the divergence between the two parties of the Socialist Front illustrated more communal characteristics than their non-communal ones. Compared to the Alliance parties that cooperated with each other quite effectively in elections through joint campaigns in ethnic-based communal areas, the Socialist Front only functioned as a

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

loosely organized liaison body, and the roles played by the Front was not specified.¹⁴² Given the fact that the two parties had a number of mutually exclusive areas of support, the Socialist Front had no other choice but to split its electoral campaigns on an ethnic basis: to let the Parti Rakyat work among the Malays and attract their support and the Labor Party woo the Chinese.¹⁴³ Moreover, the Socialist Front encountered a number of difficulties in implementing its joint decisions, since it had limited power to impose discipline on its constituent parties and their respective members.¹⁴⁴ Constituent parties were even reluctant to contest the elections under the name of the Front. As indicated in the *Annual Report of the Socialist Front for 1958-59*, the Labor Party insisted on using the banner of its own rather than campaigning for the Front in certain areas.

Funding-wise, the Parti Rakyat faced a far worse situation compared to its partner. Highly dependent on the support of the Malay peasantry, who could barely make substantial contributions to the funds of the party due to their straitened economic strength. By contrast, the Labor Party was better financed, since their supporters had relatively higher income. As Vasil noted, either at the state or national level, the leaders of the Parti Rakyat were basically professional politicians who had no choice but to earn their livelihoods through the party. On the contrary, besides being politicians, the

¹⁴² Vasil, R. K., and Australian Institute of International Affairs. 1971. *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Published for the Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press. P187

¹⁴³ *Annual Report of Socialist Front, 1958-1959*. (mimeographed), p4

¹⁴⁴ Vasil, R. K., and Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1971, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Published for the Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press. p188

English-educated leaders of the Labor Party usually had extra income from their well-paid professions such as doctors, lawyers, trade unionists, etc.—instead of relying on the politics for livelihood, the leader could even contribute considerably to fund the activities of the party.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, in spite of various divergences, the Parti Rakyat was financially dependent on the Labor Party in order to maintain its presence in the Malayan political arena. In fact, as distrust repeatedly emerged due to the unsatisfactory outcomes of elections, that dependent relationship also further escalated the disintegration of Socialist Front.

The Socialist Front deemed the 1959 general election as its “chief interest”, as both parties showed their “overriding desire to secure a significant number of seats in both the national and state legislature with the help of the other.”¹⁴⁶ Ahmad Boestamam, the chairman of the Parti Rakyat, ambitiously announced that the Front would field candidates in all 104 Parliamentary constituencies,¹⁴⁷ which was far beyond the number that the constituent parties could possibly imagine before the Socialist Front was formed. But ironically, due to sharp divergence within the Front in terms of their differing political orientations, both parties had prepared their own versions of policy statement. Without the compromise made by the moderate leaders of the Labor Party, the Socialist Front failed to reach the final consensus to accept the Parti Rakyat’s draft.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.* p203

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.* p191

¹⁴⁷ *The Malay Mail*, 14 May 1958

Furthermore, the English-educated moderates also decided to allow the lower level Chinese-educated party members to campaign in the 1959 general election, as they considered that those pro-Chinese images had better chances to win Chinese votes—this shift signified that the Labor Party actually “started moving rapidly towards a strongly Chinese chauvinist position”¹⁴⁸ and became more and more communal not only for the purpose of electoral campaigns, but also with regards to its general political inclination. The 1959 general election turned out to be a one-sided victory (or failure, depending on different interpretations) for the Socialist Front, as it gained significant support of the Chinese community because of the Labor Party’s pro-Chinese stance, while the Parti Rakyat failed to secure almost any Malay votes, as a result of being “unable to attract Malay support on the basis of its ideological appeal or the personal appeal of its leaders.”¹⁴⁹

It is fair to say that the cooperation between the two constituent parties of the Socialist Front stemmed from the non-communal ideology that they had initially held. Ironically, however, it was also the self-claimed ethnic-blind coalition that ultimately pushed the two parties further into the abyss of the communal politics. At both the state and national level, the Socialist Front gained most of its votes from non-Malay communities, particularly in Penang, Perak and Selangor, where a large proportion of Chinese population resided. In Malay-dominated states such as Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu,

¹⁴⁸ Vasil, R. K., and Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1971, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Published for the Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press. p180

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.* p197

Kedah and Pahang, the Socialist Front not only failed to contest the UMNO-headed Alliance, but was also defeated by the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party. The latter attracted a lot of Malay electorates by its political ideal of transforming Malaya into an Islamic state. Compared to the Socialist Front that was usually labeled as either pro-communist or anti-religion,¹⁵⁰ apparently the right-wing parties had grasped Malay people's hearts more effectively. While promising *Ketuanan Melayu* and taking good care of Islam, the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party also advocated conducting political and economic reforms without changing much of the status quo¹⁵¹ that most Malays had enjoyed.

In response to the unsatisfactory outcome of the 1959 general election, the Socialist Front decided to get rid of the increasing tendency of gearing towards communalism by making certain changes to its own membership composition as well as other relevant policies, as they noticed that the Chinese-and-Indian-dominated party was rarely supported by the Malay communities. The Labor Party thus planned to absorb more Malays into its higher leadership positions, form a strong nationalist line, and persist with anti-communalism both inside and outside the Front.¹⁵² For instance, Ishak Haji Muhammad, a prominent left-wing Malay writer was elected to lead the politic struggles of the Labor Party.¹⁵³ However, what happened next was completely distinct from the policies they had been planned—both parties geared towards communalism so much more than before. On one

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.* p172

¹⁵¹ Kahn, Joel S., and Francis Kok-Wah Loh, 1992, *Fragmented vision: culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*. Honolulu, Hi: University of Hawaii Press. P272

¹⁵² *Annual Report of Socialist Front, 1958-1959*. p1-3

¹⁵³ Ishak Haji Muhammad had been quite active in politics since 1937. After World War II, he chaired the left-wing Malay Nationalist Party. Guo, Rende, 1991, *Laogongdang Xuelei Ershi Nian 劳工党血泪二十年 (The Labor Party's History of Tears of Bloods)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaixiya Huaren Wenhua Xiehui. P56

hand, the Labor Party, whose leadership was gradually taken over by the Chinese-educated, became "an essentially Chinese communal and pro-Communist (pro-Peking) party.¹⁵⁴ "Imbued with strong "Chinese chauvinism",¹⁵⁵ the Labor Party started to relentlessly demand the recognition of the MCP and liberal citizenship provisions, which aimed to completely abolish Sultans and *Ketuanan Melayu*.¹⁵⁶ The Parti Rakyat, on the other hand, rejected a large number of applications from the previous members of Chinese National Union of Factory and General Workers, as they believed that the participation of these Chinese workers would challenge the Malay domination in the party.¹⁵⁷

Due to the irreconcilable divergence in various issues, the two parties ultimately rejected the merger proposal, which aimed to unify the Socialist Front under one constitution. After all of its candidates were defeated in the 1964 election, the Parti Rakyat finally realized that it could neither secure the support from the non-Malays because of its pro-Malay fundamentals, nor could they gain solid support from the Malays, as the left-wing ideas had been accused of being related to communism and it had close ties with radical Chinese groups during the Emergency. It seemed that the Parti Rakyat could never win over the Malay electorates as long as its coalition with the Chinese-dominated Labor Party still exists. Therefore, the Parti Rakyat unilaterally withdrew from the Socialist

¹⁵⁴ Vasil, R. K., and Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1971, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Published for the Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press. P158

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.* P269

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.* P114

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.* P124

Front in 1965, as they saw no point to continue the cooperation on the basis of unachievable non-communal ideals—it also officially marked the disbandment of the short-lived left-wing association.

V. CONCLUSION

The Socialist Front attempted to provide a non-communal alternative to the ingrained ethnic-based politics in Malaysia within the framework of the new country's Constitution. This was quite different from the previous left-wing parties (MCP, API and MNP) that sought for the realization of similar political ideals by launching armed revolutions. While trying hard to insert itself into the Malayan political structure by bringing in non-communal ideas, the Socialist Front was also drastically re-shaped by the system, as it became more and more ethnic-oriented in order to secure more communal support in elections. The intrinsic divergence within the Socialist Front determined that the organization could only function as a liaison body, and further consensus could be hardly reached due to the huge differences between the Malay leftists and their non-Malay counterparts. It is fair to say that the left-wing ideology of democratic socialism was seriously manipulated and mistakenly labeled as "communism" (although there were connections between the two) during the very period of the Malayan Emergency and the few years after it, and therefore, the Socialist Front could not extricate itself from the fate of suffering ultimate failure. Objectively, the left-wing thought did make considerable ideological contributions to the formation of the new state and the integration between ethnic groups. As a matter of fact, however, it still failed to pose substantial challenges to the communal parties that played more significant roles in Malaysian politics.

Being described as “a plural society *par excellence*”, Malaysia’s communal struggles are irrefutably the most salient part of the country’s racial politics. Although the purpose to establish the Socialist Front was to break ethnic boundaries by pursuing shared ideological goals, the party coalition ended up proving very communalistic in a number of ways. In response to Vasil’s argument (that Malaysian politics is always more “communal” than “ideological”), Tilman also remarked that “‘non-communal political parties’ actually do not exist in West Malaysia.”¹⁵⁸ In this context, both arguments had wonderfully reflected the very nature of Malaysian politics, namely, non-communal struggles were always superseded by fundamental yet indeterminate factors such as race, religion and cultural resentment.

However, while recognizing this reality, it was also important to pay attention to the subtle relationship between communal politics that sought to take care of the interests of individual ethnic group, and the left-wing ideology that encouraged egalitarianism. In fact, these two competing forces were not always mutually exclusive. There were as many overlaps as contradictions: communal struggles were usually driven by the realization of inter-racial equality; likewise, the cries for equality were also regarded as an indispensable part of communal struggles. In this sense, the left-wing ideology was actually deeply embedded in Malaysian communal politics.

¹⁵⁸ Tilman, Robert O., and R. K. Vasil, 1972, "Review of Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia", *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 32 (1): 212-213.

Of course, the idea of “equality” was so dimly discernible that it could be manipulated very easily. The relative equality that the ethnic-based Alliance called for was communalistic but quite pragmatic. Each communal party was thus able to make straightforward requests on behalf its own ethnic group in its negotiations with others. Despite the fact that there were many compromises being made within the process of such negotiations, the public was convinced that their *own* parties were speaking for them. By contrast, the absolute equality that the Socialist Front advocated was radical and somehow too idealistic—it asked people to give up their existing rights (privilege or superiority) to exchange unguaranteed equality. At the risk of being simplistic, we can see that Malay communities were unwilling to give up *ketuanan Melayu* (their political privilege); whereas non-Malays strongly opposed comprehensive nationalization of their businesses (their economic superiority). While the promotion of communal interests was usually conducted under the banner of realizing “equality”, the genuine efforts to pursue equality through the elimination of inter-racial discrepancies were often seen as a sort of betrayal. Here, the realization of equality was indeed very racist.

The left-wing organizations did have very close ties with their Chinese and Indonesian counterparts, but this does not necessarily mean that left-wing ideology in Malaya was something completely “imported” from outside. Rather, the left-wing ideology had its own local roots in the plural society of Malaya—not only stemmed from pervasive inequalities among different ethnic groups, but also influenced by deep-rooted hierarchies within each of them. Although the Socialist Front successfully identified this problem by indicating that the people of Malaya should be re-categorized as oppressors and the

oppressed, the public's attention was diverted to more salient racial conflicts. To a great extent, the inequalities between classes were either consciously blurred or unconsciously ignored, largely because of the overheated communal struggles and the ambiguous identity making within the process of unfinished nation building.

In the formation of Malaysia, the inclusion of North Borneo territories and the exclusion of Singapore were both good manifestations of highly politicized boundary making, in which nationalism and ethnicity played intricate roles in forming distinctive national and ethnic identities. Generally speaking, as we can tell from examples of other countries, nationalism drew boundaries to exclude "others" from artificially constructed "selves"; whereas ethnicity helped to make concrete distinctions among heterogeneous "selves" within the framework of a nation. In the Malaysian case, however, the process was far more complicated. Through the construction of *bumiputera*, the distant "selves" in Borneo were incorporated into the Malay-dominated Malaysia; whereas the close "others" in Singapore were rejected due to the city-state's large Chinese population. By contrast, the Socialist Front called for the independence of North Borneo territories and a complete merger with Singapore. Although it claimed that these policies were made based on people's wishes of self-determination and their desires for equality, the result could be equivalently interpreted as communal-interests-oriented, which was to prevent certain ethnic groups from being unwillingly ruled by the others.

The distinct attitudes towards the similar ideals of *Melayu Raya* and MAPHILINDO were also quite problematic. In the regional scale, although the country was still experiencing

severe confrontation with Indonesia and the Philippines, the UMNO-dominated government nevertheless agreed to join MAPHILINDO which aimed to establish an integrated Malay-race confederation across the region. Ironically, while the Socialist Front regarded MAPHILINDO as a racist plot, it tacitly approved the ideal of *Melayu Raya*, which had served as a guideline of its early struggles. In this sense, the interpretation of political ideals was highly contextual. Rather than these parties' general ideological orientations, it was the specific moments that determined the positions they took on various issues. Again, this contradiction reflected the fact that the left-wing parties could be equally racist as those communal ones.

It has been more than forty years since the Socialist Front eventually came to an end, but a number of issues that the leftists had been fighting for remained unsolved and some of them are still visible in today's plural society of Malaysia. *Bumiputera* are still enjoying favorable treatment from the UMNO-dominated government: better education, better employment, and 30 percent share of corporate equity in all Malaysia-based companies. The minority of the society still controls the overwhelming majority of the country's wealth and power. A sophisticated patronage system has been firmly established, in which wealthy Chinese business tycoons and politically powerful Malay elites benefited greatly from helping each other, and the country is constantly operated in accordance with their will. The notorious Internal Security Act (ISA), which allowed the government to detain suspects without trial or criminal charges, was not repealed until March 2012 as

part of the UMNO's strategy to gain public support for the next general election.¹⁵⁹ The Chinese and Indian independent school system, although has survived after decades of tenacious struggles, remains unrecognized by the government. Students who attended these schools have no chance to be admitted by Malaysia's public universities. The tensions between different ethnic groups have been significantly loosened in the public sphere, but no one can ignore the fact that cultural resentment is still playing subtle roles in many respects of people's daily life.

¹⁵⁹ The new Security Offences Bill was presented to the Parliament on 10 April 2012, but the activists were still worried about the details of the new security law. Although it has explicit provisions that no person will be arrested under the bill "solely for his political belief or political activities", the detention without trial is still allowed. The new Security Offences Bill was presented to the Parliament on 10 April 2012, but the activists were still worried about the details of the new security law. Although it has explicit provisions that no person will be arrested under the bill "solely for his political belief or political activities", the detention without trial is still allowed. Shibani Mahtani, "Malaysian Activists Still Worry Over Country's Security Laws," *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 April 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/searealtime/2012/04/10/malaysian-activists-still-worry-over-countrys-security-laws/?mod=WSJBlog> (accessed 18 April 2012)

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