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## A Quick Glimpse into Communism and Anti-Nationalism in Kedah Before the World War Two

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is a brief review on social situation in Tanah Melayu (Malaysia), specifically in the state of Kedah, prior to World War Two. Generally, the situation and social understanding in Kedah was influenced by the influx of immigrants especially the Chinese who came for economic reasons. These immigrants brought with them the culture and the way of life in the Mainland China. This, in a way, affected people's lives in Kedah. With the strong support from the Chinese, communism began to make its mark among other ethnic groups in the society. The Triads culture became strong and it led to other anti-national activities. This, in turn, affected the economic, political, and social influence. All these aspects seemed to have become the foundation of a bigger influence after the surrender of Japan. They have also become the foundation for social equality and differences during the Emergency period from 1948-1960.

**Keywords:** *tanah melayu, kedah, chinese, society, japan*

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### INTRODUCTION

Tanah Melayu gained invaluable experience during the 12 years of the state of emergency caused by the intimidation of the Communist. From 1948 to 1960, the Malayan Communist Party became the cause of the rising atmosphere of tension in the country. However, the rise of communism in the country did not come abruptly; it rather subtly seeped through the society since the era before the second World War through its unaggressive approach. At that time, the influence of the Chinese immigrants' culture had slowly made its mark in the Malay culture. This has given rise to some negative social elements with one culture influencing the other; hence the emergence of various elements in the ethnic groups, economic and anti-nationalism activities. It seemed that some negative social elements from each culture managed to make their marks into other cultures and this resulted in various social environment, economy and some elements of anti-nationals. Like other states in the country, Kedah also experienced the same situation.

### PURPOSE

This paper provides a brief review of the situation in Kedah prior to the War World 2. The review focuses on two main elements namely, communism and anti-nationals. This review can be used as the basis for an empirical study on the situation in Kedah before the era of the War World 2. An extended research can also be carried out on how the influence and the way of life of the communist were practiced in Kedah by its followers.

### METHOD

The findings from this research were gathered from written references from local and foreign academicians and non-academicians. Their writings were based on studies, experiences and discussions on the topic of this paper.

## Knowing the Basis of the Ideology of Communism

The communist ideology began to make its mark in Tanah Melayu before the World War 2. It was part of the plan by the Soviet Union to expand the communist ideology to all countries under the British colonies. The defeat of the Bolsheviks in the Germany and Hungary in 1919 reflected the failure of the movement in the western countries. In March 1919, Third International or Comintern which was the main body of communism at the international level was founded.

Lenin, the Soviet leader and the most influential communist personality in Europe had urged all his followers to make Asia as the ground of their movement. The followers were urged to pledge their support in the forms of morale, monetary and weaponry. These aspects were key to start a revolution in the imperialist colonies in the east. To realize the target outlined in the 6th International Communism Congress, three basic principles were established by creating close ties with worker unions and revolutionary organizations in the colonialized world. Early revolutions must be carried out through demonstrations, intensive propagandas and political agitation. Armed movement was only introduced after the people gave their full support and it was then followed by intensive movement against the British colonialism.

These three basics principles eventually paved the way to the foundation of the Comintern which specifically focused on Asia which was then swept by revolution crisis. Lenin drafted a few conditions including making it mandatory for all the Communist Parties to give their support to revolution movements in the colonies especially in countries with strong economy. He also advocated movements against religious influence. The Communist would fight against Pan Islam and Pan Asia movements which established an alliance with Turkey and Japan. The Communist would extend its support to the labour movement against the capitalists and feudalists as well as uniting all anti colonials under one umbrella.

This principle was fully adhered to and in 1922 the Kuomintang Party (KMT) was established in China under the leadership of Dr. Sun Yat Sen. The communist ideology spread in Tanah Melayu in 1920-1921. It spread through reading publications from China and Russia. Most of the publications were on the struggle of labours and women. There were also publications on communism as found in the book entitled Communism and China by Tsz-Yan which provided analysis on communism in the context of China. In addition, publications from Russia such as Parintis which contained articles against the exploitation of the Asian by the colonials. Two Indonesian Communist Party leaders, Alimin dan Tan Malaka, came to Tanah Melayu and then urged the Communist Party of China to expand its wing to Singapore. Tan Malaka failed to gain enough support from the Malays but he immediately saw the potentials of supports from the Chinese who had deeper understanding of the economy, politics, and the ideology of communism. The Chinese, who were constantly influenced by the socio-political situation in the mainland China, were seen to be fully supportive of the ideology. Nanyang General Labour Union and the Communist Youth League were established in 1926 in Singapore as a result of the Chinese patriotism and the effectiveness of the communism doctrine. Lenin's idea, which was the basis of the communist ideology, was implemented in the labour strike in 1928.

The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was founded in 1930 in Negeri Sembilan where it had a big number of followers among farm labours and miners. Initially, the Chinese were the dominant group of its leaders and followers. There were also a small number of followers among the Malays including Ali Majid, Salleh Sapid and Hj Mohamad Hashim who were the nucleus of the foundation of Malay branches of MCP. However, they were arrested by the British and it put a temporary stop to the involvement of the Malays in MCP for a while.

## The Communist Movement in Kedah

MCP carried out a meeting with all its cadres in Tanah Melayu (Pan Malayan Cadres) in 1931 where it was decided that military approach would be used to fight colonialism and feudalism. The aim was to establish a Malayan Soviet Republic which would be made possible through the unity of the labours and the peasants. The Japanese attack on the Manchuria in the same year had resulted in increased Chinese patriotism and support for MCP. The ideology began to make its mark in Kedah through branches of MCP which had close ties with the Communist Party of China. In 1924, MCP's branches were created in several states; in Kedah, branches of MCP were established in Sungai Petani, Bedong, Baling and Sungai Lalang.

The establishment of communist-linked parties started in Singapore when Nanyang Communist Party and Nanyang General Labour Union were founded in 1926. Later, in 1930, it was localized with the establishment of MCP. Initially, the ideology spread among labour unions, Chinese unions, and triads. In the 1930s, MCP made its moves by using economic provocations in Tanah Melayu. The strategy was used as the world was experiencing an economic downturn during the same period. MCP Central Committee outlined four principles in its tactical plans including strikes, boycotts, sabotage, and demonstrations. The crisis between China and Japan which resulted in the China-Japan War in 1937 further fanned the anti-Japanese sentiments and Chinese nationalism in Tanah Melayu. MCP was not merely functioning as a supporter of the sentiments, but it played a bigger role in organizing anti-Japanese campaigns all over the country. For example, on 20th of July 1938 all traders rejected the supply of soybeans from Penang because it was believed to have originated in Japan. Although the action seemed trivial, it was one example of the starting of anti-Japanese movement in Kedah. Although the action was at small, but it shot a kind of resistance and motivation of anti-Japanese movement in Kedah. However, the situation was more serious in other states where there were instances of bomb explosions.

In Kedah, communism failed to flourish due to several key factors. The ideology only thrived among the Chinese immigrants who dwelled the mines, rubber estates, trading areas, and a small number in the fisheries industry. The Chinese in Kedah were not the majority and they resided in centralised residences. Examples of centralized residences were Kulim and Kuala Muda Districts. In addition, majority of them can be found in Sungai Petani. A small number of them stayed in Sintok, a mining and logging area. However, this group was separated from the majority who were very influential in the southern areas.

The influence of communism did not flourish in the mainstream community in Kedah which was mainly dominated by the Malays. In Kedah, anti-colonialism was not apparent prior to the World war 2. This was not an indication that people in Kedah did not show resistance against the colonials. History of Kedah showed that Kedah had a series of resistance and struggles against the invasions of the Siamese, Bugis and British. However, as mentioned earlier, the people of Kedah put their faith on the local elites for decisions on any actions, and in the context of British colonialism, these local elites showed that they were able to work together to manage the situation.

Before Sultan Abdul Hamid ascended the throne, local elites in Kedah comprised the royalties, Muslim scholars, the descendants of Syed and Syeikh, Kedah and district administrators appointed by the Sultan. When Sultan Abdul Hamid adapted the modernization from the west, more Kedahans were able to receive higher education, putting them in the administrators group who were also considered as local elites. During the occupation of the Japanese and Siamese, local elites who used to have wide influence in the government and political system were slightly marginalized. They no longer dominated the important ranks in the state administration. To make matters worse, the Sultan lost his executive power to the Governor and was only seen as a symbol of Malay identity, while the State Executive Committee was stripped of their previous role.

Under the Siamese colonialism (1943 – 1945), the British administration model was used, and this had made it possible for local elites to once again claim their ranks in the hierarchy. Administration was headed by a Commissioner who represented the Bangkok administration. The State Executive Committee comprising the local elites were given back their power in the state administration, despite being under the Siamese colonialism. However, from the point of view of the social aspect, these local elites still had wide and strong influence among their community and were revered by the people. Despite being colonized a few times by outsiders, the influence of feudalism was strong amongst the people of Kedah. According to Abdul Latif Abu Bakar, this influence was so strong that the people of Kedah would rely on the involvement of their King or state officials even for the establishment of a Malay Society.

“The people of Kedah were very loyal to their Kings and state officials that they believed that the King and State Officials must be involved if they want to establish a Malay Society”.

This is the main obstacle in the effort to widen the communism doctrine in Kedah. Selective thoughts which applied to only the Chinese and triads were seen as contradictory to the social values of the Malays in

Kedah. Anything done without the involvement of the local elites were not considered as normal by the Malays. In addition, communist ideology was introduced by the Chinese who believed in a different religion and came from a different cultural background from the Malays. However, before the Japanese Occupation, there were several political societies in Kedah such as "Sahabat Pena' which was founded by Tunku Abdul Rahman, but they did not adopt an aggressive approach. The idea of Kesatuan Melayu Muda lead by Ibrahim Yaakop at the national level and Muhamad Arif at the state level in Kedah did not garner enough support from the people in Kedah. Furthermore, the idea adopted by KMM was seen as contradicting to the locals' way of thinking where the royalties and Muslim scholars were considered as very important figures in the community.

### Chinese Triads

The basis of communist ideology emerged in the early years of the 20th century among the triads members. Initially, the pact was established to look after the welfare of the Chinese immigrants who came to Tanah Melayu. It was a tradition brought over from the mainland China which came together with some elements of politics from the country. These triads then got themselves heavily involved in the local economy and politics. In their endeavour to strengthen their hold on the society, they were involved in criminal activities in the country. In 1872, the Ghee Hin and Haii San triads were involved in an armed conflict in Perak originated from their struggle of power over the economy and politics; this eventually lead to Perang Larut. Prior to the clash, in 1867, Ghee Hin had an armed conflict with the Toh Peh Kong triad in Penang over territorial disputes between them.

In Kedah, the triads managed to widen its influence among local Chinese and newly arrived immigrants. The Chinese community was concentrated in towns and cities where the economy flourished, especially in southern Kedah. In Kulim, there were two very influential triads namely, Ngee Hin or Ghee Hin (Hakka Secret Society) and Ho Seng (Hai Lo Hong Grouping).

Among the activities known to be attached to the triads were prostitution, gambling, liquor, and drugs. The area near Belakang Tebok was identified as the headquarters of these triads. Just like the triads in Perak, these groups were notorious for crimes and in 1888 they were responsible to instigate a major chaos in Kedah known as 'Perang Kulim' or 'Nyonya Cantik'. During that time, communism was non-existence and it only started with the establishment of MCP in Tanah Melayu. The communist ideology had succeeded to widen its grip among the Chinese who were also involved in the triads. The communist ideology began to flourish in the end of 1930's when Japan - China war was declared. The war, together with aggressive approach by Komintang, fanned the Chinese nationalism among these people and eventually nationalism was replaced by the communist ideology. At the end of the Japanese occupation period in August 1945, a strong pact among the triads were reached in Perak and the society was known as Ang Bin Hoey. The existence of this pact and the role played by MPAJA created a huge impact on the support for communist ideology. Subsequently, it began to take root and became stronger after the Japanese occupation period was over.

### Religion and Culture

The involvement of the Chinese and the triads with communism was against the culture and religion of the Malays in Kedah. The Chinese were not the majority in Kedah and their population was concentrated in the towns and cities where the mines and trading activities took place, whereas the Malays were concentrated in rural areas where farming activities were found. The existence of population pattern based on economic activities has caused social frictions among the Chinese immigrants and the locals. These two groups only met for economic purposes and social meetings among people from different groups were highly rare. The situation worsened as the younger generation from these groups were separated by different vernacular education.

Both groups were seen as separate entities with separate agendas. The Malays adopted the idea that they should never meddle in the affairs related to the Chinese because they have nothing to do with the Malays, and they were normally related to economic issues which did not concern the local Malays. Meanwhile, local political frictions were more focused on the Malays and did not involve the Chinese

economy. The Chinese life and way of thinking were totally separated from the Malays; their relationship was only limited to economic purposes such as trading, farming industry and mining. The religion of the Chinese and Marx-Lenin ideology was very much contradicting with Islam, the religion of the majority of the people in Kedah. Communism regarded religions as hampering the effort to spread the ideology. Communism totally rejected Islam as the thrust of life because it believed that the followers would be distracted from their communism principles by religion.

Kedah was one of the earliest kingdom in Tanah Melayu which accepted Islam. The spread of Islam was strengthened by the existence of the pondok institution and the interest of the people and the rulers on Islam. The influence of religion had become a strong barrier between outside influence and the sanctity of Islam. In the era of the arrival of the communist ideology to Tanah Melayu, the scholars in Kedah were more focused on the local politics affairs and on the clash of opinions between Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda. Both aspects were considered to be more closely related to the socio-cultural context of Kedah where religious issues were the thrust of people's lives. Marxist theory which originated from communism was too radical for local politics. On the contrary, the Chinese were closely related to the triads and political affairs in the mainland China. The pioneer of the communist ideology, Tan Malaka, was dejected when the ideology he tried to spread was not well-received by the Malays. His frustrations with the rejections he received caused him to label the Malays as stupid and he admitted that Tanah Melayu was not a fertile soil for the communist ideology. The Malays were seen as very conservative and bourgeois, whereas the Chinese were considered to be more receptive to communism and politics.

During the arrival of communism, the social system in Kedah was still strong with the people revering the traditional elites in the community. These elites were very influential in the lives of the locals. From the economy point of view, these elites had a lot of opportunities and power in the distributions of lands and in giving orders to the public. The people would not try to create any changes without the consent from these elites.

However, this does not mean that the people in Kedah were too fanatical to the extent of meddling in the affairs of the religion of the Chinese or having a confrontation with them. Prior to the second World War, when Kedah was under Islam's rule, Chinese were allowed to practice their religion. In fact, Chinese leaders were considered as respected individuals who were bestowed awards from the Sultan. In Kulim, Chin Ah Cheoh was appointed the Kapitan Cina, and he worked closely with the Kedah state administration during the chaos in Kulim. Another Chinese leader was Lim Lean Chak who was very influential during the ruling of Sultan Abdul Hamid. Before the Japanese occupation in Tanah Melayu, communism was always shadowed by the influence of Koumintang and the secret societies, giving it a very negative image in the eyes of the locals. Koumintang was very aggressive and was in confrontation with MPAJA before and after the Japanese occupation. For the Malays, the incident in Kulim and negative social issues caused by this group were the reasons they rejected the communist ideology.

### Economy

One of the communist agenda in Tanah Melayu concerned about the struggle of labours against the land lords. In other words, communism was concerned about the clashes between proletariat and bourgeoisie who were labelled as capitalists as they had strong economic power and they were accused of repressing the labours causing them to suffer. This Marxist idea was popular in the Eastern European countries and the success of this movement were evident in the triumph of communism in China.

Communism promoted the idea effectively to the worker unions in the cities, harbours, factories and plantations. This is because the idea was suitable for the Chinese who had a strong history with the mainland China. However, the idea was not widely accepted by the locals in Kedah prior to the second World War. As mentioned before, the idea was on.

The status of the locals' economy in Kedah where the Malays concentrated on plantation sector and the Chinese on the manufacturing sector made it difficult for the economic elements to be included in the

ideology in the attempt to spread it among the locals in Kedah. The Chinese practiced a more open trading and it was focused on the development of the outside world. Usually, the events that took place outside the country would have an impact on the country's current situations. For instance, the recession in the 1930's adversely affected the economy of the traders. Besides, Chinese nationalism which was on the rise among the Chinese from the Japanese attack on China had caused a different political understanding amongst the Chinese immigrants in Tanah Melayu.

This is in contrast with the agricultural sector practiced by the Malays. The Malay peasants were focused more planting, and the Chinese would take care of the selling and processing. The involvement of the Malays was limited to selling their produce to the Chinese traders who were the ones who controlled the price based on current market value. The subsequent trading's were then carried out by the Chinese and this exposed them to outside policy and different political environments.

#### Early Communism Movement in Kedah

The above-mentioned obstacles were the reasons why the communist ideology did not manage to make a big impact in Kedah prior to the second World War. Its followers were only found among Koumintang members, secret societies and a few individuals who were prone to the ideology. However, based on the memoir written by Abdullah C.D., there were a small group of Malays who were involved with communist movements in Kedah and Perlis. Among the active members in Kedah were Mansur, Pilus and Saat. They worked under the co-ordination of an MCP Central Committee member named Ah Ho, whose nick name was 'Karim'. This Malay movement was closely related to the agents from Pauh, Perlis including Mak Tijah, Pak Saud, Embun, Sulaiman dan Hamid. During the Japanese occupation, the communist movement in Kedah joined with their counterparts in Perlis under one administration. They also worked closely with the mass movement in Jawi, Seberang Prai. The movement was more focused on uniting with MPAJA under the name Kedah Anti-Japanese Army. The name was later changed to Liberation Army but was not approved by the British who retained the name the 8th Regiment for the movement.

In Kedah and Perlis, they had a slightly better freedom to move as the states were located near the Siamese border, and power transfer from the Japanese and to the Siamese made it easier for them to execute their activities. In 1944, there was a change in the Siamese administration policy which gave the pro-communist groups some leverages. The change of policy that took place between the Phibun administration which was pro the Japanese and Nai Pridi which was friendlier towards the British administration. At the same time, the Japanese were at the brink of defeat. The opportunity was used by the group to execute sabotage plans and ambushes. According to notes by Abdullah C.D., several attacks were carried out at the borders of Kedah, Perlis, and Siam. MCP were also working together with The Communist Party of Thailand (TCP) in Kedah and Perlis. In fact, according to Abdullah C.D. who was once the senior leader of MCP, both parties built a joined-tactical headquarters and worked closely in spreading the communist ideology. In Arau, they confiscated hundreds of cows from the Japanese. The involvement of TCP was evident with the death of one of its members, Ah Chou, a battle with the Japanese in Pauh, Perlis. MCP was also involved in the attack of police stations where they looted all the magazines and weaponry in the Siam-Tanah Melayu. Their strength was increased with their collaboration with the British through Force 136 and this was further strengthened with the arrival of the Russian warships in the Siamese waters to assist the anti-Japanese movements.

In the 1930's, a meeting was held in Tanah Melayu and Kedah was represented by a member by the name of Mokhtar. Communism amongst the Malay community began to pick up where it left after the Japanese was defeated and after the involvement of several political groups including Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM) and Barisan Tani Malaya (BATAS) before MCP was banned in 1948. The basic principles in the aspects of ideology, weaponry and support available since the era of the Japanese occupation were then moulded into the 8th Regiment. This military unit focused their movements in Kedah and Perlis.

## CONCLUSION

Like other states in Tanah Melayu, Kedah was one of the states which received an influx of the Chinese immigrants who came for economic reasons. The immigration which was intended temporarily turned out to be permanent and these immigrants asserted themselves into the mainstream society. However, they also brought with them the culture of secret societies or triads. The communist ideology which began to take its place in the world at that time brought its influence to their lives and these immigrants were involved in the communist movements, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Communism strengthened its ideology after the Japanese ended its occupation and when the British reclaimed Tanah Melayu. The basis of the ideology was first developed before the War World 2.

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