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RESPONSE TO POH SOO KAI'S ALLEGATIONS

Introduction

Dr Poh Soo Kai's commentary ("Singapore's 'Battle for Merger' revisited") in *New Mandala* on 3 Dec 2014 is a misleading account of Operation Coldstore, Singapore's merger with Malaya, the *Barisan Sosialis Singapura* (Barisan) and his own role in that period.

Dr Poh and other revisionists like Dr Thum Ping Tjin have alleged that Operation Coldstore was a political exercise meant to suppress what they claim to be legitimate, presumably peaceful, democratic opponents of the PAP government. A full reading of the declassified documents from the British National Archives shows clearly that Operation Coldstore was a security operation meant to counter the serious security threat posed by the outlawed Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and their supporters in Singapore, working through the Barisan and associated communist united front (CUF) organisations. The revisionists conveniently omit mention of the incriminating information in these documents. For example, they quote selectively some of then UK Commissioner to Singapore Lord Selkirk's remarks to claim that Operation Coldstore was an act of political suppression with no security basis. But a holistic reading of all the documents debunks their accounts. The documents reveal that both Selkirk and his deputy Philip Moore were concerned about the extent to which the CPM had penetrated the Barisan and had concluded that security action was imperative. Indeed, about two months before Operation Coldstore was carried out, they had begun to urge strenuously that action be taken.

The Barisan was not an ordinary left-wing political party, and its leaders were not "unwitting dupes" of the Communists. It was the prime CUF body in Singapore in the 1960s, influenced, directed and led by CPM cadres, as the British officials then, as well as CPM leaders themselves since, have acknowledged.

CPM in Singapore

In 1948, the CPM launched an armed struggle to establish communist rule in Malaya and Singapore. This was part of the wave of communist revolutionary wars then taking place in Asia. When terrorist attacks, sabotage and assassinations did not work, the CPM decided to pursue mass struggle. It re-activated the CUF by infiltrating and subverting open and legal organisations, including political parties, trade unions and student organisations.

This CUF instigated student and labour unrest in Singapore. Consequently, the Labour Front government of Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock – with the full concurrence of the colonial authorities – arrested over 300 CPM and CUF elements in 1956 and 1957 alone. Operation Coldstore in 1963 was a continuation of security operations that had been mounted since 1948 to contain the CPM.

The People's Action Party (PAP) was elected to office in June 1959 on a platform that called for the merger of Singapore and Malaya. Both the non-communist faction of the PAP led by Lee Kuan Yew as well as the pro-communist faction led by Lim Chin Siong supported merger. In May 1961, then Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman proposed a "Greater Malaysia", including Malaya, Singapore, and the British territories in Borneo. Mr Lee's government welcomed the Tunku's proposal. However, the pro-communists in the PAP came out in opposition to merger. They tried to capture the PAP and the Singapore Government in July 1961. They and the CPM believed that merger at that point would have frustrated their aim: to capture Singapore and use it as a base to subvert the Federation, in order to establish communist rule over the whole of Malaya. They also opposed merger because it would have put internal security in the hands of the anti-communist Malaysian central government in Kuala Lumpur, which would have had no hesitation to suppress pro-communists in Singapore as it had in Malaya.

When the communists and their supporters narrowly failed in their bid to capture the PAP, they were expelled from the party. They formed their own political party, the Barisan Sosialis. The following year, in Sep 1962, they lost the merger referendum. The Barisan then began discussing the question of armed struggle, and also pinned their hopes on Sukarno's Indonesia opposing Malaysia.

The issue of armed struggle was discussed at length at a Barisan HQ meeting attended by about 40 cadres, including members of the Central Executive Committee as well as branch representatives, on 23 Sep 1962. Summing up the views expressed, Barisan Central Executive Committee member Chok Kok Thong urged his colleagues to "themselves determine the form their struggle should take: 'basically armed struggle is the highest form of struggle' but whether it should be adopted or not would depend on 'the entire international situation'...". Chok Kok Thong added: "...no one could say that the revolution was complete if it took the form of an armed struggle or

incomplete if the peaceful and constitutional methods were used. ...Experience elsewhere showed that there was no country in the world which had 'attained a thorough success in revolution through constitutional processes', and that throughout South East Asia, including Malaya, the 'ruling classes would not lightly hand over political power to the leftists'".¹

The Barisan's support for the armed Brunei revolt in Dec 1962, and their close association with the rebel leaders, showed that they were ready, when the opportunity arose, to use violent unconstitutional means to overthrow the government.

The Internal Security Council of Singapore (ISC), comprising representatives of the governments of the United Kingdom, Singapore and the Federation of Malaya, therefore approved Operation Coldstore in Feb 1963, as a pre-emptive move against the communists and their supporters.

That the security operation was targeted against the communists and their supporters – not mere democratic opponents of the PAP – has been affirmed by no less an authority than the CPM Secretary-General Chin Peng. He acknowledged in his memoirs that he had expected such a crackdown and had advised his cadres and followers to take the necessary precautions. He expressed regret that they did not do so, as Operation Coldstore, in his words, "shattered our underground network throughout the island. Those who escaped the police net went into hiding. Many fled to Indonesia".² Clearly Operation Coldstore had not targeted innocent, non-communist "socialists".

Barisan and CPM

The Barisan Sosialis was formed in July 1961 on the explicit instructions of Fong Chong Pik – aka the "Plen", as Mr Lee Kuan Yew had named him in his *Battle for Merger* radio talks, "Plen" being short for the "Plenipotentiary" of the CPM who had first made contact with Mr Lee in 1957. Fong was the chief CPM representative and operative in Singapore. The Plen's superior in the CPM was Eu Chooi Yip, who was based in Jakarta and in overall charge of the CPM's operations in Singapore. Eu too confirmed in his memoirs that it was the Plen who instigated the formation of the Barisan.³ As the Barisan was the main CUF organisation, it was led by the top CPM open front leader in Singapore, Lim Chin Siong. Lim became Secretary-General of the party while Dr Poh Soo Kai was its Assistant Secretary-General.

¹ CO 1030/1160, Special Branch Source Report on BSS Meeting of 23 Sep 1962.

² Chin Peng, *alias Chin Peng: My Side of History* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003), p. 439.

³ Chen Jian 陈剑 (Chin Chong Cham, Lang Jian Zhu Meng – Yu Zhu Ye Kou Shu Li Shi Dang An 浪尖逐梦 – 余柱业口述历史档案 [Chasing Dreams on the Wave's Crest] (Malaysia, Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2006), p. 209.

Chin Peng has confirmed that the Barisan was under the CPM's influence. He cagily disagreed that the CPM "controlled" the Barisan, but admitted: "We certainly influenced them".⁴ He did not elaborate on how the CPM "influenced" the Barisan or who were the CPM's proxies in its Central Executive Committee, but he confirmed that communists were among those who joined the party.⁵

At least seven of the Barisan's 16 central committee members were known CPM or former Anti-British League (ABL) members. (The ABL was a CPM underground political organisation set up in 1948 and disbanded in 1957.) Two of the Barisan's Central Executive Committee members, Chan Sun Wing and Wong Soon Fong, who were also Legislative Assemblymen, fled after the 1963 general election and surfaced at the CPM guerrilla camp at the Thai-Malaysian border. At least 15 former Barisan leaders and activists are known to have lived in the CPM's 'Peace Villages' on the Thai-Malaysian border; many continue to do so.

The UK Deputy Commissioner in Singapore at that time, Philip Moore, made a perceptive observation that would apply to those who now feign ignorance or deny knowledge of communist control and influence over the Barisan and other CUF organisations. Reporting to London in Dec 1962, Moore noted: "knowing what we now do about the extent of Communist penetration within Barisan Sosialis, it will be more difficult to acquit many of the other leading members as unwitting dupes".⁶

Moore was referring to two reports of meetings at Barisan HQ that he described as "of considerable importance not only for what they reveal of the future intentions of Barisan Sosialis, but they provide more conclusive evidence than we have had hitherto for the belief that Barisan Sosialis are Communist-controlled."

"It has never been disputed," he notes, "that the Communists in Singapore are following United Front tactics and that Barisan Sosialis is their principal instrument on the political front. ...The report on the first of the two [Barisan] meetings shows that those engaging in the discussion were Communists examining quite frankly how best to achieve their ends. Furthermore, we can see that the Communist influence within Barisan Sosialis is not confined to the Central Executive Committee but extends to Branch Committee level...".⁷

Moore's superior, Lord Selkirk, concurred with this judgement. A week later, on 14 Dec 1962, after the Brunei rebellion, Lord Selkirk sent a dispatch stating: "I said I had recognised all along that a threat was presented by the communists in

⁴ Chin Peng, *alias Chin Peng: My Side of History* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003), p. 438.

⁵ C.C. Chin and Karl Hack (eds.), *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Communist Party* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), p. 190.

⁶ CO 1030/1160, P B C Moore to W I J Wallace, 7 Dec 1962.

⁷ CO 1030/1160, P B C Moore to W I J Wallace, 7 Dec 1962.

Singapore. I had not however previously been convinced that a large number of arrests were necessary to counter this threat. Recently, however, new evidence had been produced about the extent of the communist control of the Barisan Sosialis and also there had been indications that the communists might resort to violence if the opportunity occurred. Recent statements by the Barisan Sosialis and Party Rakyat supporting the revolt in Brunei confirmed this.”⁸

Two weeks later, Selkirk sent another dispatch stating: “it would be wise to make arrests of communists in Singapore as soon as possible.”⁹

Merger

Independence through merger with the Federation had been the PAP’s platform ever since its founding in 1954. Merger was supported both by the non-communists and the communists in the PAP. So when the PAP won a strong endorsement in the 1959 General Election, winning 43 out of 51 seats, it pursued merger vigorously. Merger was not “foisted” on an unenthusiastic electorate.

But when the Tunku offered merger through Malaysia in May 1961, the communists made a startling about-turn. They determined to derail merger, even though they had all along insisted that Malaya and Singapore were one entity. Chin Peng later made it clear that the CPM wished to sabotage merger or delay its implementation at that stage. He disclosed that “[the] three of us [Chin Peng, Siao Chang and Eu Chooi Yip] came to the conclusion that it would be in the best interest of *our Party* [italics inserted for emphasis] if we plotted to sabotage [merger]. If we couldn’t derail it, at least we might substantially delay its implementation”.¹⁰ The Barisan conformed to the CPM line and mounted a strong challenge to the PAP on merger.

On his part, the Plen frankly revealed that he had used the Chinese press to try to delay merger. He wrote: “A lot of the opinions expressed in the newspapers originated from me. These included slowing down the process of merger, and adopting the form of a confederation.”¹¹ He was also behind the agitation against educational reform in the Chinese middle schools, resulting in the examination boycott of Nov 1961. His aim was to arouse public dissatisfaction with the Government in the run-up to the merger referendum.

⁸ CO 1030/1160, Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, Tel. 582, 14 Dec 1962.

⁹ CO 1030/1160, Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, Tel. 603, 28 Dec 1962.

¹⁰ Chin Peng, *alias Chin Peng: My Side of History* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003), p. 437.

¹¹ Fong Chong Pik, *Fong Chong Pik: The Memoirs of a Malayan Communist Revolutionary* (Petaling Jaya: SIRDC, 2008), p. 161.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew, in his *Battle for Merger* radio broadcasts in 1961, exposed the communists' objective and strategy. He explained that the communists and the Barisan opposed merger because they wanted to establish control over Singapore so they could subsequently subvert and take over Malaya. The radio talks won over public opinion in favour of merger on the terms proposed by the Government.

In the referendum in Sep 1962, the specific merger terms were put to the electorate. 71% of the voters opted for the PAP's merger proposal while the Barisan, which called for blank votes to be cast in protest, got only 25%. There were trade-offs in the negotiations with Malaya for merger, as in any negotiation between states and territories. The terms and conditions settled upon were the best that the Singapore government could obtain under the circumstances. They allowed Singapore to retain control over areas that were key to Singaporeans such as education and labour.

Dr Poh now says that Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965 proved that Barisan's position on merger in 1961-62 was correct. This is yet another reversal of position. In 1965, following separation, the Barisan had condemned Singapore's independence, characterising it as "phony". It also withdrew from the Parliament of independent Singapore, declaring its preference to carry out "extra-parliamentary struggle". The Barisan in effect reverted to the CPM's original and real position: that Malaya and Singapore should be one entity (albeit under communist control) and that "extra-parliamentary struggle" was superior to constitutional politics. The reality is that the CPM and the Barisan had all along acted, in Chin Peng's words, "in the best interests of our Party". They never believed that Singapore should be independent of Malaysia and had opposed merger in 1963 merely for tactical reasons. And they never believed that they should restrict themselves to constitutional means to attain their political ends.

Lim Chin Siong

There is ample evidence in the British archives to show that Lim Chin Siong was a CPM member. Indeed, the British authorities were quite certain that Lim was a CPM member. One British document noted: "For tactical reasons, the Communist Party is in favour of legal activity through the extreme left-wing of the PAP led by Lim [Chin Siong], who is almost certainly a secret party member".¹² In another, a dispatch in July 1962, Deputy UK Commissioner Philip Moore wrote: "we accept that Lim Chin Siong is a communist".¹³ In an earlier dispatch, in Oct 1961, Moore reported:

¹² CO 1030/656, "The outlook in Singapore up to the end of 1960", Note from Humphrys, 22 Sep 1959, Appendix p. 9.

¹³ CO 1030/1160, Moore to Wallace, Tel. 363, 18 Jul 1962.

“Once Lim Chin Siong becomes convinced that the people of Singapore are going to support Merger, then I suspect he may well revert to the original long-term policy of the MCP [Malayan Communist Party] – a Socialist Government throughout Malaya. The opportunity of overthrowing Lee Kuan Yew and achieving a Communist-manipulated government in Singapore seemed, in July [1961], to be so golden that Lim Chin Siong could not resist it.”¹⁴

Lim Chin Siong himself publicly admitted that he was a member of the ABL, a CPM underground organisation whose members included many key communist leaders in Singapore then, namely Eu Chooi Yip, the Plen, PV Sarma (who together with Eu and others later operated the CPM broadcasting station in South China), Samad Ismail, John Eber and others. According to a book on the ABL published in 2013 by six former ABL/CPM members now residing in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, the ABL’s objectives included to safeguard the “core leadership of the party [CPM]”, build it up and expand its influence,¹⁵ “learn revolutionary theory” and carry out “various clandestine activities”.¹⁶ Before 1951, “it even carried out some extreme acts like confiscating identity cards and burning vehicles”.¹⁷ ABL members also purchased medicine and supplies to support the CPM’s armed struggle.

One writer in the collection, CPM member Zhang Taiyong, described how Lim Chin Siong was transferred from underground activities in the ABL to open front activities. He revealed that Lim Chin Siong, after being expelled from the Chinese High School for his role in an examination boycott, “continued his studies at an English-stream school but later accepted the organisation’s decision and devoted himself to trade union movement and constitutional struggle”.¹⁸

Lim Chin Siong’s involvement in the CPM has also been confirmed by CPM leaders Siu Cheong and Ah Hoi. They cited Lim as an example of a CPM member who was deployed in open front activities in political parties: “Lim Chin Siong was chosen because he was considered a very important CPM member, who had excellent qualities as a Communist United Front (CUF) cadre, namely, dedication, trustworthiness and moreover, he had been involved in CPM activities since his schooldays.”¹⁹

¹⁴ CO 1030/986, No. 959, PBC Moore to WIJ Wallace, 18 Oct 1961.

¹⁵ Translation of Zhou Guang, “First Anti-British League group in Singapore Chinese High School” in *Mainstays of the Anti-Colonial Movement: The Legendary Figures of the Singapore People’s Anti-British League*, p. 31). (Hong Kong: Footprints Publishing Company, 2013) (hereinafter cited as *Mainstays*).

¹⁶ Translation of Zhong Hua, “A Preliminary Study of the History of Singapore People’s Anti-British League”, p. 7, in *Mainstays*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Zhang Taiyong, ‘Our cohort’s commander – Lu Yexun’, p. 61, in *Mainstays*.

¹⁹ Aloysius Chin, *The Communist Party of Malaya: The Inside Story* (Kuala Lumpur: Vinpress, 1995), p. 67.

The Plen himself admitted that Lim Chin Siong was “a person with whom I have had a special acquaintance” and that they had shared “a relationship as fellow workers”.²⁰ The two met several times – including, crucially, on 16 July 1961, a few days before the communists tried unsuccessfully to take over the PAP and the Government.

Documents written in Lim Chin Siong’s own hand which clearly show his links to the CPM were cited and published in Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s *Battle for Merger* in 1961.²¹

Lim Chin Siong was no mere leftist engaged in anti-colonial, constitutional activities. Lim and his fellow communist and pro-communist cadres in the Barisan, including Poh Soo Kai, played key roles to advance the CPM’s cause. They did so while concealing their communist hand from the Singapore public, whose support they needed for their covert long-term goals. Most senior united front leaders and operatives operated under instructions from communist “backseat drivers” like the Plen and Eu Chooi Yip.

Abundant Evidence of Communist Conspiracy

I have set out just some of the ample evidence of communist activity in Singapore that is available in the public domain. What is missing is an explanation from the revisionists as to why they have systematically ignored revelations by CPM leaders (including Chin Peng and the Plen) as well as the many British documents that demolish their claims.

As for Dr Poh Soo Kai, he has failed to explain his own role in this history. In Dec 1974, he helped CPM/CUF elements by providing medical aid to an injured CPM bomber, and then failed to report the matter to the authorities despite public appeals by the police for information. The bomber was part of a 3-man CPM team who were on the way to plant a homemade bomb at the home of a factory owner when the bomb exploded prematurely at Katong, injuring the bomber and killing his two accomplices. Dr Poh was also implicated in supplying medicine through an ex-detainee to the 6th Assault Unit of the Malayan National Liberation Army, the militant wing of the CPM, between 1974 and 1976. A mere “left wing” anti-colonialist, as Dr Poh describes himself now, would not have given material aid surreptitiously to the CPM’s violent armed struggle as late as 1976, years after both Singapore and Malaysia had become independent of Britain.

²⁰ Fong Chong Pik, *Fong Chong Pik: The Memoirs of a Malayan Communist Revolutionary* (Petaling Jaya: SIRDC, 2008), pp. 176-177.

²¹ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Battle for Merger* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 85.

Dr Poh's claim that Mr Lee's account of events in the *Battle for Merger* radio talks and the government's justification of Operation Coldstore "[have] been seriously questioned" by the public, is an exaggeration. There were no riots or clashes with the police after the security operation in Feb 1963, unlike what happened after the arrests and expulsions undertaken by the Lim Yew Hock government in 1956. Instead, seven months after Operation Coldstore, the Singapore electorate endorsed Mr Lee Kuan Yew's leadership and returned the PAP to power with 37 out of 51 seats in the General Elections of Sep 1963. The Barisan, on the other hand, won just 13 seats. In subsequent elections in the 1970s and 1980s, the Barisan failed to win a single seat, eventually dissolving itself in 1988 and merging with another party. The electorate's rejection of the Barisan and communism was thorough and total. Otherwise, Singapore would have laboured under the yoke of communism, and not have developed into a modern, non-communist nation.

The crux of the battle between the pro-communists and the non-communists in the early 1960s was two contrasting visions for the future of Singapore, how we should govern ourselves, and how society should be structured. Merger was the occasion, not the cause, of the struggle. It was a struggle between people on both sides of the ideological divide who were prepared to die for their cause. As Mr Lee said in his *Battle for Merger* talks, his opponents were men of courage and determination. Fortunately, so were Mr Lee and his non-communist colleagues. And fortunately for Singapore, the latter won.

We must not recast the struggle between the communists and the non-communists as just an ordinary political fight between factions, with one side out to suppress the other for mere political advantage. It was nothing of the sort. Rather, it was a ferocious struggle between people with strong convictions about how Singapore should be run. Singaporeans who lived in those tumultuous times will not forget what was at stake. Attempts by Dr Poh and revisionists to recast the struggle and deny its roots in the communist strategy for domination including the use of violence, are misleading and disingenuous. Their disregard of the facts is disrespectful to the many Singaporeans who chose a non-communist path at great risk to themselves, and contributed to the success of modern Singapore.



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