

Vernon L. Porritt “*The Rise And Fall Of Communism In Sarawak 1940-1990*”*

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A Brief Remark

Sometime in April this year (2004), Mr. Peter Chong Chung Ping, a well-known engineer in Kuching contacted me through phone, conveying the message that Monash University would like me to review a book entitled “*The Rise And Fall of Communism in Sarawak 1940-1990*” by Dr. Vernon L. Porritt; in both Chinese and English. Mr. Chong, being a good friend of mine, also told me that Dr. Porritt knows me in person, so I agreed to take up the task. Unfortunately, Mr. Chong died suddenly during a scuba diving accident. His son requested me to complete the book review as it was his father’s wish.

At the end of May, I received a copy of the book from Monash University, and because I had prior literary commitments the writing of the book review was regretfully delayed until now.

Attitude of the Author

The content of this book, as suggested by its title, is a description of the rise, development, decline and fall of the Communism in Sarawak from 1940 to 1990.

* *The Rise And Fall Of Communism In Sarawak 1940-1990*” By Vernon L. Porritt. Victoria : Monash University Press, 2004.

** The author is currently a free-lance in Sarawak, who had held teaching as well as administrating posts in several teachers’ training colleges in Sarawak before his retirement.

The attitude of the author towards the writing of this book is fair, unbiased and objective. He terms the early anti-colonial people as members of the Sarawak Communist Organization (SCO), and later the armed personnel as the Sarawak Guerrillas. Apart from quoting the Government propaganda documents, the author did not use unsuitable terms for the anti-colonial people, thus giving a proper historical position to the various races that, filled with revolutionary zeal, were determined to overthrow the colonial rule, and fight for freedom and independence of Sarawak. As a historian, this kind of attitude is commendable.

Author's Analysis of the Communist Movement in Sarawak

The author maintains that the rise of communism in Sarawak was influenced by international communist movement, particularly the political change in China. As early as 1930s to 1940s, there were already a few communists in Sarawak who had come from China. The Anti-Fascist League formed at the early period of the Second World War was the first communist organization in Sarawak. After the Pearl Harbour Incident, the U.S.A. and Great Britain declared war against Japan. At about this point in time, the Anti-Fascist League also changed its name to Races Liberation League in order to urge the various races to rise and fight against the Japanese. But, the author did not mention an anti-Japanese armed organization called the Borneo (Kalimantan) Anti-Japanese League which was made up of the North Borneo Anti-Japanese and West Borneo Anti-Japanese League. Wu-Chan was its supreme leader, and he was

deported, by the Sarawak Colonial Government, to China in 1952 together with a few Chinese primary school headmasters who were all members of the Borneo Anti-Japanese League. The Overseas Chinese Youth Association formed in 1946, the Liberation League, together with its peripheral organization, the Advanced Youth Association, both formed in the early 1950s, were all called the Sarawak Communist Organization by the author.

The author opines that 1963 was the zenith of the Sarawak Communist Movement. There was military confrontation between Malaysia and Indonesia, and the anti-colonial government and anti-Malaysia members of the communist organization were supported by the Indonesian Government. However, the putsch of 30th September 1965 by the Indonesian Army soon ended the confrontation, and the governments of the two countries formed an alliance and carried out a campaign against the communist armed forces at the Sarawak/Indonesian border. From thence, the communist armed forces were facing attack from both sides, they suffered heavy losses, and declined ever since.

On 21st October 1973, Bong Kee Chok, the Director and Commissar of the North Kalimantan Peoples' Army signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Datuk Abdul Rahman Ya'kub, the then Chief Minister of Sarawak at the Government Rest House, Simmanggang. After this event, about 580 members of the North Kalimantan Peoples' Army and Sarawak Peoples' Guerrillas laid down their arms, came out of the jungle and returned to society. By 17th October 1990, Hung Chu Ting, the Commander and Commissar of the Second Bureau of the North Kalimantan Communist Party signed a Peace Agreement with the Sarawak Government and

brought the last group of 53 armed personnel out of the jungle, thus ending the 50 years of communist movement in Sarawak.

The author further pointed out that after the 1950s, the communist movement sprang up, thrived vigorously and the Chinese schools were the base for this sudden development. The members of the board of managements, the teachers and the students in general were zealous in reading communist books, and studying Marxism-Leninism and Mao Tze Tung's thoughts. The Liberation League and the Advanced Youth Association, whose members comprised mainly of students, had a very strict organisational structure, a sound system from the central down to the division and district level.

On 8th December 1962, the People's Party of Brunei started an uprising, and the Sarawak Colonial Government immediately carried out massive arrests, many students and youths went underground, and slipped across the border to Indonesia, to carry out armed struggle.

The author's description and analysis of the communist movement in Sarawak are in general correct.

References Used by the Author

In the bibliography, the author lists down a lot of reference materials including archival materials in Great Britain and Sarawak, newspapers, journals, unpublished papers and documents, and publications.

The materials that the author quoted most are from the daily Sarawak Tribune, Government documents and articles written by Tim Hardy and Hara Fujio, as well as

books on the history of SUPP authored by Dr. James Chin Ung Ho, David Teng and Daniel Ngieng, and the memoirs of Ong Kee Hui and Stephen Yong.

Up till now, documents about the communist movement in Sarawak are rare, particularly such documents written in English. The author seems to have tried his best to collect the relevant data.

The Author's Style of Writing

As the author made use of a large quantity of news reports, the main content of the book was written in the form of incident by incident and year by year to narrate the development of the historical events. This chronological style could also present a clear concept of the development of communism in Sarawak.

The Introduction, Chapter One and the last two paragraphs of the Conclusion present a very profound analysis and correct judgement of the author, and they are the most attractive sections of the book.

Shortcomings

Unsuitable Appellations

The author, following the rhetoric of the Sarawak Colonial Government, names all the anti-colonial government organizations as Clandestine Communist Organisation (CCO) and Sarawak Communist Organisation (SCO), and the members of the anti-colonial government organisations and the leftists as communists. The appellations used are not suitable. The Pontianak Conference of 17th -19th September

1965 was the foundation stone of the Sarawak Communist Movement. However, none of the attendees was communist; they were only the members of the Liberation League and the “O Members” of the Advanced Youths Association. Although they had discussed about forming a communist party, they had no time to do so, because the situation was very tense and the rumour of a putsch was spreading wild, and so they dispersed hastily. The formation of the North Kalimantan Communist Party was announced on 30th March 1970 by the Head of the Sarawak Peoples’ Guerrillas at the coastal area of the First Division in Sarawak, and the communist party constitutions and regulations of 9 chapters and 27 sections were announced at the same time. Later on, they selected 19th September 1971 as the official date of the formation of the North Kalimantan Communist Party, obviously, that date was chosen in order to commemorate the Pontianak Conference which was the most important conference in the history of the Party.

Inaccurate Facts

As mentioned above, the Pontianak Conference was the only important conference in the history of the communist movement in Sarawak, and this is the historical fact that any scholar who studies the history of communism in Sarawak should know. But the author made mistakes in both the number of the attendees and their names. According to a few of those who had actually attended the Pontianak Conference, there were only 12 of them, not 21. The author mentioned the name of Hung Chu Ting as one of those who attended the Conference; in fact, Hung said he did not attend. The author listed another 3 names as the 3 participants at the Pontianak

Conference: Bong Kee Siaw, Huang Han (Bong Han) and Wong Kee Hiu, in fact, these are the names of the same person, that is, Bong Kee Siaw (P.133).

When Bong Kee Chok formed the North Kalimantan People's Army (PARAKU), he himself was the Commander, and Pui Boon Tui was the Commissar, but the author mentioned that Hung Chu Ting and Bong Kee Siaw were helping Bong Kee Chok to set up the PARAKU. This was also not true; neither of them was with Bong Kee Chok at that time (P.134).

In the same page, the author says that when the Sarawak Peoples' Guerrillas was divided into 3 Brigades, the First Brigade was under the command of Yang Chu Chung and Bong Kee Siaw. The Second Brigade was under the command of Lim Ho Kui and Huang Han (Bong Han). The Third Brigade was under the control of Yap Choon Ho and Yang Chu Chung. The author's mistake is very obvious in that the same person appeared as leaders in two different Brigades.

On page 181, the author misunderstood the meaning of the Malay term "Jala Raya" as "Royal Net".

On page 187, the author mistook St. Elizabeth's Girl School in Sibu as a Borneo Evangelical Mission School. In fact, it is a well-known Catholic school.

On page 209, the author said that the government's offer of peace talk to Bong Kee Chok was passed through Hung Chu Ting in Sibu. But, Hung Chu Ting categorically refuted that there was no such thing.

On page 234 and 235, the author misunderstood the name of the military zone divided by the North Kalimantan Peoples' Army in the Rajang area. The acronym

OMT was Oya-Mukah-Tatau, and not Oya-Mukah-Tawau as mentioned by the author. Tawau is in Sabah (North Borneo).

There are many inaccuracies in dates and names. To mention a few, Lai Chun (Lin Guang Ming) and Lim Kwong Ming were the same person, so were Yang Chu Chung and Yeung Chu Cheong, and Libong was the wrongly spelt name for Ubong.

The more serious mistakes appear on the photograph of the signing of Memorandum of Understanding by Bong Kee Chok and Datuk Abdul Rahman Ya'kub, the Chief Minister of Sarawak. The caption of this historical photograph has many mistakes. The author mistook Bong Kee Lin (youngest brother of Bong Kee Chok), Chong Jun Foh, Chai Oi Yu, and Bong Kee Keun (one of Bong Kee Chok's younger brothers) as Bong Kee Siaw (another younger brother of Bong Kee Chok), Pui Boon Tui, Lee Thien Yong and Chung Soon Chong. The latter four high-ranking commanders were not in the picture. The name of the Chief Minister was also wrongly written.

In the Conclusion of the book, the author mentions that, in the early period after the Second World War, many teachers in the Chinese schools were recruited from Hong Kong, and they imparted communism to the students in the 1950s (P.248). This was inaccurate. The majority of these Hong Kong teachers were anti-communist. The students in Kuching staged the major strikes in order to oust the three pro-Kuomintang principals, one after the other, because these principals recruited from Hong Kong were anti-communist.

Incomplete Data

At the end of the book, the author included 37 pages of the names of the Leftists and the Communists who were involved with the Sarawak Communist Organization, and gives an introduction to each and everyone of them. This could, undoubtedly, help the reader to understand better about the history of the Sarawak Communist Movement. It is a pity that the data given were incomplete and with errors, and in many cases, the write-up only ended by the phrase “missing in 1963”. In fact, many of them after laying down arms and coming out of the jungle, or after being released from the Detention Camp at 6th mile Kuching-Serian Road, and returning to society, there was a lot more about their lives to talk about.

First Hand Materials Not Referred To

After returning to society, the leftists and the ex-communists formed the Friendship Clubs and Friendship Associations in Kuching, Sibü and Miri, which provide the venue for their gathering and social activities. The Friendship Association in Sibü has already published 5 issues of their Journal, and about 10 titles of their memoirs. They hold massive gatherings on festive occasions and also historical dialogues by inviting leaders and scholars to come to talk at the gatherings of old friends. Apart from social and recreational activities, they also collect documents and articles on the past for exhibition at their premises. These are the valuable first hand materials for the study of the history of the Sarawak Communist Movement; it is regrettable that the author did not make use of them.

Conclusion

The Sarawak Communist Movement from 1940-1990 is a great event in the modern history of Sarawak. The enormous impact it has exerted on Sarawak politics, economy and society as a whole is unprecedented.

At that time, thousands of people of various races took part in the struggle for freedom and the independence of Sarawak. Many of them sacrificed their lives, and many families were ruined in the course of the struggle.

Today, the passionate revolutionary age is over, the heated armed struggle has ended, and people seem to have forgotten the history of this period. The younger generations know nothing about it.

Dr. Venon L. Porritt, a historian living in Australia, had lived and worked in Sarawak for a number of years, towards the end of colonial rule. He has written quite a number of articles about Sarawak. His recent work "*The Rise and Fall of Communists in Sarawak 1940 - 1990*" reflects the history of this period of time. This book, with an objective approach, gives the Sarawak Communist Movement a thorough analysis, and to the general readers, it is informative and readable.

Of course, if the contents of the book were to be more complete and improved, the author would have to correct the mistakes and inaccuracies in the book, and he would need to refer to the memoirs and the documents of the communists so as to write the other side of a true story.