

## **Looking back at the 'forgotten' communist insurgency in Sarawak**

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YESTERDAY marked the 30th anniversary of the Kuching Peace Agreement that ended the 28-year communist insurgency in Sarawak.

During the Cold War, Malaysia was faced with two parallel Communist insurgencies.

The better-known Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) insurgency in Peninsular Malaysia and that of the North Kalimantan Communist Party (NKCP), more commonly known as the Sarawak Communist Organisation (SCO) in Malaysian Borneo.

The end of the Malayan Emergency (1948-60) was declared in 1960, but the CPM insurgency was a 'forgotten long war' that endured as the so-called 'Second Emergency' until 1989. If the Second Emergency (1968-89) is a 'forgotten' insurgency, the armed struggle of the SCO (1962-90) in Malaysian Borneo is almost absent from public memory.

Unlike the localised guerrilla war of the Malayan Emergency, both the 'Second Emergency' and the SCO armed struggle were persistent slow burn

cross-border insurgencies that were difficult to defeat by security operations alone.

By the 1980s, both insurgencies were latent rather than existential threats to Malaysia. Ending both insurgencies strictly by military ways and means, however, proved difficult.

After the failure of Baling peace talks in 1955, a negotiated peace between the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and the government remained elusive until the Hat Yai Peace Accords in 1989.

Building on the success at Hat Yai, a negotiated peace between the SCO and Malaysian government was achieved in 1990.

The quick succession of the Hat Yai and Kuching peace agreements demonstrated how the willingness to negotiate can translate into an enduring and lasting peace.

The CPM and NKCP did not have the means to prevail militarily, but both insurgencies were costing Malaysian lives and treasure.

Despite the political necessity of adopting a tough public stance on communist insurgency, Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Home Affairs Minister and later Prime Minister supported the pursuit of negotiations to end the protracted jungle wars in Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak.

Crucial to the success of the negotiation process were the lessons learned from the failure of the Baling Talks and the success at Hat Yai.

This time, Malaysian negotiators avoided the imposition of terms that were unacceptable to the communist insurgents such as 'surrender' or 'surrender of weapons'.

In both the Hat Yai and Kuching Agreements, the insurgents were obliged to disarm and destroy their weapons, but by their own hands.

In both peace agreements, provisions were made for government assistance to support former members of the CPM and NKCP armed units to transit to peace and start their life anew.

There was however a key significant difference between Hat Yai and Kuching. The Hat Yai Accords did not call for the "dissolution of the party", but the Kuching Agreement mandated the dissolution of the NKCP and its subsidiary organisations.

Once the party was dissolved, former members of the NKCP, however, were 'accorded the same privileges as other citizens or residents' of Malaysia.

Both the CPM and NKCP were defeated as a political and military force, but the final agreements at Hat Yai and Kuching were generous in the spirit of national reconciliation.

It was a 'peace with honour' that allowed both the CPM and NKCP to end a protracted Jungle War without losing their dignity.

Can a peace process that happened 30 years ago hold any lessons for today? Just as 30 years ago, success in dealing with cross-border

insurgencies today is subject to the ebb and flow of 'good neighbourly' relations.

Expanding the cooperation space in Thai-Malaysian and Indonesian-Malaysian Intelligence sharing and joint operations were crucial in putting military and political pressure on the armed groups of the CPM and NKCP.

Growing the negotiation space amongst all parties is also crucial. Expanding the cooperation space and growing the negotiation space, however, is a sustained process that requires trust-based relationships that may take a long time to build.

The political and ideological context of the CPM and NKCP insurgencies is very different from the separatist insurgency in Thailand's deep South or attempts by ISIS-affiliates to exploit the porous grey zone of Borneo's borders.

Nonetheless, if there is an enduring lesson to be learned from the road to the Hat Yai and Kuching Peace Agreements, it is that a trust-based negotiation process remains key to building an enduring peace.

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