

## Opposition to Tunku's pro-West foreign policies

Malaysiakini – 23 September 2002

As the facts in the real history of Malaya/Malaysia stand, the first prime minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj adopted very pro-West foreign policies during his leadership from 1957 to 1970.

Some argue that it was due to his personal education, lifestyle and 'friendly' connections in Britain; others think suggest that, as the top leader at that period in time, he did not have a choice personally.

Given the then prevailing domestic situations and external circumstances, he had to do what he did in 'the best interest' of the country because while Malaya was born in the midst of an internal insurgency with the uprising of the Malayan communists, the external environment was also defined by the Cold War that witnessed an almost uninterrupted series of communist gains in China, the Korean peninsula, Indochina and Indonesia, from the late 1949 onwards.

Whether the fear of the Domino Theory was justified or not depended to a large extent on which side of the political and ideological divide one was positioned. Also, to a large extent, the fear on one side was hope on the other.

However, given that overall scenario, there was still rather vocal opposition to Tunku's pro-Western foreign policies. The opposition, as historical records now clearly show, came from different quarters. It is only fair not to gloss over another side of the true story.

### **Still a 'neo-colony'**

According to academician, J Saravanamuttu, Tunku's decision to sign the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (Amda) was first opposed, among others, by an Umno member, Tajuddin Ali, who attacked the bilateral defence treaty as being "harmful to independent Malaya". Tajuddin was supported by the Johor Umno Youth. He galvanised some Kedah Umno leaders and members to call for an emergency meeting to discuss the implications of Amda, and its relations to South East Asian Treaty Organisation (Seato).

Other sources of records show that the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP), or what is now known as PAS, and other leftist opposition parties also opposed the treaty and military bases. The Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), regarded Amda and Seato as 'proof' of its arguments that after Aug 31, 1957, Malaya was still a "neo-colony".

Tunku stood firm. He was quoted as saying: "... let us face facts, and the facts are that we have at our command an army of less than one division in strength; we have no air force, not even a single plane or a single man; we have no navy, not even a single sailor and we have not even a sea-going craft..."

Tunku added: "With the revenue at our command we can never be able to build our forces to the strength which we would require for the defence of our country". (see J Saravanamuttu, *The dilemma of independence: Two decades of Malaysia's foreign policy, 1957-1977*, Penang, USM, 1983; pp 23-24)

Finally, while Tunku decided not to join the US-led Seato, he succeeded to obtain legislative approval for Amda which tied the defence of independent Malaya to its former colonial master, Britain, until November 1971. Through Article VIII of Amda, the US-led Seato still indirectly but ultimately covered the defence of Malaya/Malaysia.

When Sukarno's Indonesia launched Confrontation (a form of low-intensity warfare and special operations) against the newly formed Federation of Malaysia, Tunku's government sought security support from the United States.

### **US support**

Earlier, President John F Kennedy had already publicly and unreservedly given political and diplomatic support to the formation of Malaysia. The US, however, still regarded the defence of Malaya/Malaysia as a "British responsibility" under the Amda.

From July 22 to 23, 1964, Tunku officially visited the US and met President Lyndon B Johnson, successor to Kennedy. After the meeting and talk, Tunku and Johnson issued a joint communique which read, among others, that "the President agreed to provide military training in the United States for Malaysian personnel, and to consider promptly and systematically credit sales under existing arrangements of appropriate military equipment for the defence of Malaysia".

Tunku also requested the US to park a flagship from the 7th Fleet of the United States Pacific Command, at what was then named Port Swettenham (now Port Klang), to serve as a signal of American security support for Malaysia and a warning to Indonesia.

However, Tunku's support for the military involvement of the US in Vietnam, including the massive and intensive bombing of North Vietnam beginning in March 2, 1965, was also critically assessed by some members of parliament, from the ruling parties like Umno as well as the opposition.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad, a young and 'radical' Umno member of parliament from Kedah, elected for the first time in the 1964 general elections at the age of 39, was also critical of Tunku who was then 61 years of age.

In May 1965, he led an unofficial Malaysian delegation to attend the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation held at Winneba in Ghana to promote non-alignment, an alternative to Tunku's pro-Western and pro-US foreign policy.

### **'Communist setup'**

According to Saravanamuttu, the delegation led by Mahathir included Lee San Choon (an MCA MP who later became a president of the party), Abdullah Ahmad (political secretary to then deputy prime minister Abdul Razak Hussein and now the editor-in-chief of the *New Straits Times*), Musa Hitam (political secretary to the minister of transport,

who later became a deputy prime minister) and journalist A Samad Ismail (now popularly known as Pak Samad).

Tunku was said to be furious. He reportedly attacked the organisation as a “communist setup... financed by Russia and China”. (*ibid*: pp72-73)

In the streets, there were demonstrations to oppose the foreign policies of Tunku and the defence policies of the US in Southeast Asia. When President Johnson visited Malaysia from Oct 30-31, 1966, an anti-American demonstration broke out in Kuala Lumpur, and protestors fought with the police, causing one death and 127 arrests.

Earlier in late 1964, an organisation called Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee sponsored an anti-American protest in Kuala Lumpur, and it turned violent when the US Information Service (USIS) library was attacked.

Despite the official condemnations of “radicalism”, Tunku gradually yielded to popular pressure. After his deputy, Abdul Razak took over as the new prime minister in September 1970, the foreign policies of Malaysia began to become, for better or worse, more ‘neutralist’ and less pro-Western.

Again, while some argue that the shift was due to the departure of Tunku, another school of thought attribute the change to the strategic re-balancing in the region, such as the decision of Britain to withdraw militarily from east of Suez by early 1970s, and the Nixon Doctrine of 1969 which scaled down the American military commitments in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

According to that school of thought, after the British withdrawal from east of Suez and the scaling down of American military involvement in Southeast Asia, Malaysia could not afford to depend on Anglo-American political and security support anymore. It had to befriend with immediate neighbours within the region, even though they were (and still are) communist.

So even though there was a policy shift in the early 1970s, there is no denying that British, Australian, New Zealand and other Commonwealth troops did operate within Malaya/Malaysia even after our independence, and that the US fully supported Malaya/Malaysia as a new state politically and diplomatically, as events from 1957 to 1969 show factually.