

A debate on the history of the Left in Malaysia and today's PSM

Tuesday 18 September 2007, by [DEVARAJ \(Dr\) Michael Jeyakumar](#), [NETTO Terence](#), [Y Kohila](#) (Date first published: 5 September 2007).

On Merdeka Day, writer Terence Netto wrote an piece "The left-wing's vanishing dream" attacking PSM and its future in a Feature article in *Malaysiakini*. The Central Committee of PSM has decided not to officially respond to this article but several of our members as well as friends have responded to it. We produce Terence Netto's piece as well as 3 of the responses. (2 of it have appeared in *Malaysiakini*). [PSM introduction]

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The left-wing's vanishing dream

Terence Netto

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In the outpouring of encomia surrounding the country's 50th anniversary of Merdeka, it was easy to give a miss to a different take to the Alliance-centric view on how Malaya obtained its independence from Britain, provided by the Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) earlier this week.

After all, the PSM is a minuscule political party that is yet to gain recognition from the Registrar of Societies.

It leading lights, Dr Mohd Nasir Hashim and Dr M Jeyakumar, for all the valour of their decades-long struggle in behalf of assorted downtrodden ranging from squatters to retrenched workers, could not gain enough leverage from the upsurge in oppositionist sentiment from the late 1990s to win seats in Parliament, either in Sungai Siput or in Subang, in the last two general elections.

Theirs seemed destined to be a quixotic endeavour awaiting terminal expiry when the ageing Nasir, a former University Kebangsaan Malaysia deputy dean, and a tiring Jeyakumar, fade from the scene.

Predictions of PSM's demise following upon Nasir's and Jeyakumar's evanescence would doubtless be unfair to the much younger S Arutchelvam (photo), PSM's indefatigable secretary-general.

But Arutchelvam, for all his amiable rotundity, lacks the charisma and cachet of his senior comrades and would find it hard to sustain the improbable vision of Malaysian society's regeneration through socialism.

Still, the PSM are the closest legatees of the one brief but shining moment in pre-independent Malaya history's when a united nation appeared tantalizingly in prospect.

People's constitution

That was in 1947 when an informal coalition of Malay left-wing political parties, called by its acronym Putera, met up with a cluster of non-Malay parties, largely socialist in ideology, known as AMCJA (All-Malay Council of Joint Action).

The meeting, brokered and moderated by Ishak Haji Muhammad (Pak Sako), of Malay literary fame, was held in Kuala Lumpur and had on its agenda, the People's Constitutional Proposals for Malaya.

Such then well-known campaigners for Merdeka as Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy, Mustapha Hussain and Ahmad Boestamam, composed the Putera representation at the meeting.

The non-Malay AMCJA had John Eber and Lim Kean Chye of the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU), John Thivy of Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), and Tan Cheng Lock in attendance.

A representative from the biggest trade union, Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU) was also present, as part of the AMCJA delegation.

Three days of intensive negotiations issued in an agreement that came to be known as the People's Constitutional Proposals for Malaya.

Among the proposals were for Malaya and Singapore to be united, equal citizenship rights for all who considered Malaya their permanent home, special privileges for the Malays in all fields, and - critically this - 'Melayu' to be the nationality of all the citizens.

Underlying all these proposals was the demand for outright Merdeka by the Putera-AMCJA coalition.

The left wing power

The British overlords simply ignored the coalition's proposals and continued to deal with the Onn Jaafar-led Umno when talking about their Federation of Malaya Constitution proposals that raised the idea of self-government as a goal, saying nothing about independence.

It was not until 1951 that the redoubtable Onn realised that independence could only be a realistic goal if negotiated for by a combination of all the races' political representatives.

It led him to press his racial party to be opened to non-Malay membership. He failed in this campaign and left Umno in a pique.

Prior to 1951, the focus of the right-wing parties representing the Malays in negotiations with the British was on increased recruitment of Malays into the civil service and other social amelioration issues, none of which concerned outright independence for Malaya.

In reaction to the British attitude of studied indifference to them, Putera-AMCJA decided to flex its muscles by calling for a hartal (complete stoppage of work) in October 1947.

The hartal was an astonishing success and was further proof that the large crowds the coalition had

attracted to their rallies from Singapore to the north and the east coast of Malaya to drum up support for the People's Constitution was no mirage.

The proposals and the broad support for them the Putera-AMCJA coalition had garnered provides grist for the argument that the main protagonists and catalysts for Merdeka for Malaya were the left-wing political parties of the period from 1930 to 1948, including the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM).

A lost opportunity?

A documentary produced by Fahmi Reza, called *Ten Years Before Merdeka*, was shown at the PSM gathering on Aug 29 at the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall.

Fahmi's film, a moving elegy to the popular, non-sectarian left-wing spirit of the era, conjured by interviews with octogenarian remnants of that period, left the evening's audience heartened in the belief that a united Malayan nation was once a real prospect, premised on Malay political primacy as distinct from Malay dominance.

What happened to the left-wing goal of a non-sectarian Malaya?

A violent interregnum occurred in the shape of the Emergency, declared in June 1948 by the British when militant elements of the CPM killed several British personnel in rubber states in Malaya, as part of a broader rebellion to expel the colonial power.

The left-wing of Malayan nationalism was decimated, in the immediate aftermath of the CPM uprising, by mass detentions under draconian laws whose baleful legacy continues to today, 47 years after the Emergency's lifting in 1960.

With their withering went the hope of unified, non-sectarian country.

If a political midget like PSM continues to exist merely to sustain this subversive - of the dominant - version of who were the main catalysts of Merdeka, it has reasons not merely quixotic to endure.

PSM not about leaders' 'charisma'

One needs to understand Marxism to understand PSM's survival

By Dr. Jeyakumar

Political commentators have been making dire predictions about the PSM's chances of "survival" ever since the time the idea of a new Socialist Party was mooted. Initially the commentators predicted that the party would be stillborn as the word "Socialism" is an anathema to the Malaysian public who would link it to violence and terrorism. However they have been proved wrong - time and again the PSM has mobilized hundreds of people to come out protest eviction, privatization and anti-worker laws. PSM organized cultural and social events are vibrant with many young participant. The people are not afraid when they know that its their own interests that they are upholding!

Then in 2004, when the PSM was forced to stand in 3 corner contests in the general elections, again

there were those who predicted that the PSM candidates would be swamped as the DAP was a much more established party. However the PSM candidate for the Sg Siput parliamentary seat obtained 3 times the votes of the DAP candidate, and for the first time in its umpteen contests for the Sg Siput seat, the DAP lost its deposit!

Why is it that a “miniscule” and as yet unregistered political party can sustain itself, draw in more and more supporters and continually develop its programme? The answer is really quite simple – but cannot be comprehended by political analysts such as Terence Netto, who do not understand Marxism.

The answer? – The collapse of the Socialist Block did not abolish the class struggle. In fact the absence of the Soviet bear has fed the arrogance and greed of the corporate class leading to dismantling of concessions granted to the workers and ordinary people all over the world and the intensifying of economic oppression of the majority of the world’s population. We can see it in our own country in the form of wages being kept low through the active importation of more than 2 million foreign workers; rising costs of living due to privatization of transport, education, water, health care and the like; attempts to shift the tax burden onto ordinary people through the GST; and recently the alteration of labour laws to the advantage of employers.

It is this intensification of class oppression that is attracting ordinary people to the PSM. The socialist analysis of current events makes sense to many – for they already dimly perceive the same through their experiences of the system. This is the root of PSM’s attraction and growing strength – not the “charisma” of its “aging” leaders!

Terence is however right in one aspect – the PSM is currently the torchbearer of a movement that stretches back over 70 years – the movement for an independent, equitable and non-communal society in Malaysia. We are awed and inspired by the dedication and sacrifices of the leaders of the PUTERA-AMCJA coalition of 1946-48 as well as those of the Labour Party – Parti Rakyat coalition that followed 10 years later. We must remember that it was not the Malayan public which rejected the vision of these left-wing coalitions but the powers that be. The British brutally crushed the PUTERA -AMCJA coalition and a decade later the Alliance did the same to the Socialist Front. Politics in Malaysia became increasingly communal with the crippling of the left – to the detriment of all of us!

Rosa Luxemburg once said that the choice facing us is either Socialism or Barbarism. Looking at the “race to the bottom” that many countries are embarked upon in their quest to attract FDI to their countries, it is becoming more and more clear that Luxemburg’s statement is not merely polemics!

The PSM will continue standing with ordinary people and help them understand the true nature of the forces oppressing them. The PSM will only cease to exist when it becomes part of the larger, broader based social movement that is required to build a better, more fair and non-communal society in Malaysia.

Jeyakumar

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PSM dare to dream

By Humble Activist

Either Mr. Terrence is very much concern about the future of PSM or he just couldn't wait for the party to die! That's how I perceive his first few paragraphs in his article "The Left-wings Vanishing Dream".

Well, as a member of JERIT, we work closely with PSM because it is the only party that fight for fundamental issues affecting the people and workers in Malaysia and they are perhaps the only party able to mobilize people for such cause. Such capacity to mobilize and create awareness among the people is not the doing of 'tiring' Jeyakumar and 'ageing' Nasir alone. It is the work of the entire party and front members. My salute to these people who strongly believe in socialism and for such courage and commitment in fighting for the downtrodden and the oppressed!

I find that Terrence's comments that the party will demise once Nasir and Kumar die is meant to slander the party rather than being constructive.

I find PSM is growing in it's membership (though very strict membership!), in it's activity (with solid Party Program) and in it's mobilizing capacity, in it's popularity among the workers, settlers and the young people and that is a prove that socialism is growing.....and all these work continues though the party is not registered. That is the prove that they don't need a license to fight for justice and truth! Can you name any other party who does that?

Never mind if they lost election....at least they dare to put their candidate though not registered as a party....at least they did not lose their deposit in election....and most importantly they were the only principle party to declare candidate's asset which no other party dare to do till today, to challenge racial politics principally without an inch of opportunism which even the other political party find it tough!

I suppose Terrance perception that only 'high-profile' figures can promote the party is very typical "mainstream perception" thinking. His comments would have had more substance if only he had done some real research work on the ground like the 2 doctors in PSM, who have chosen to struggle till death and fight for the downtrodden. I wonder if his slanderous comments are because these 2 doctors dare to dream instead of just making money while the writer has just given up hope and dance to the tone of the day.

I only see committed activists (ranging from all age group) full of courage and charisma in PSM building the party because they believe the workers and people can be liberated one day. They dare to dream.

Long Live People's Struggle!

Humble activist

“PSM is no political midget”

By Kohila Y

With reference to the article “The left wing’s vanishing dream”, I would like to comment on the writer’s point of view about PSM

For the writer’s kind information, PSM’s goal to build a socialist society in Malaysia is not a vanishing dream, and it would not demise with Dr Jayakumar and Dr Nasir who’s contribution is so very significant in the party. This is because, the party is not made of only this 2 leaders but also hundred other members and young comrades which have been trained by the party to take the leadership of the party and bring the socialist struggle forward. Only last January we had a youth conference attended by more than 100 youths. Many old Labour party members or Parti Rakyat members who come to PSM’s programmes are always impressed with the number of young committed members in the party who are handling the programmes and leading protests and so on .So I don’t know how the writer got an idea that PSM’s life span is short.

Secondly, I find it amusing and also very incorrect when the writer mentioned that PSM did not make an impact in the last 2 elections. How ignorant can the writer be. For your kind information, Dato’ Samy Velu had to work extra hard in Sungai Siput and also Dato’ Nijhar in Subang to win in the elections as our candidates are credible candidates and had the support of the people. PSM candidates made an impact in the Malaysian political scene, by signing a pledge with the people and also declaring their assets in order to show they are sincere in their struggle for the people. These actions actually put the Barisan National candidates in a difficult situation. If the writer realized, the mainstream papers during election actually categorized PSM candidates Dr Nasir and Dr. Jayakumar as giants in the election scene. Though they did not win any seats, but PSM made a very strong impact on the people during the elections.

Thirdly , saying that PSM is a political midget is uncalled for after all its achievements in the Malaysian political scene. Does the writer knows that in most of the people’s struggle PSM is in the forefront such at the Stop Hospital Privatisation Campaign, STOP US-Malaysia FTA, Stop GST , Stop Water Privatisation in Perak , and also in the Anti Neo Liberal campaign where PSM is the leading member giving leadership in the campaign and mobilizing people to the street to protest against injustice. PSM has actually managed to shake the government on many issues and are very consistent in their struggle. Does the writer know that in most of the people’s struggle in plantations, factories and also urban settlers, PSM is in the forefront and have had many victories?

So, PSM does not exist for the mere reason of existing but plays an important role in the people’s movement and also to bring the socialist struggle forward just as our forefathers did in the 1940’s .

Lastly, PSM is not a minuscule party, but a giant with the support of the people. That is why until today registration have been denied to it as the government does not want the party registered as even without registration it is getting stronger and is able to threaten the government of the day. So , I suggest the writer does more research on PSM and its’ work for a better understanding before he writes about the party.

Kohila

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