SIR CECIL CLEMENTI AND THE KUOMINTANG IN MALAYA

by

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When Sir Cecil Clementi arrived in Singapore as Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the Federated Malay States, on 4th February, 1930, Malaya was in the throes of an unprecedented economic depression. The country’s dual economy of tin and rubber found itself subjected to the whims and fancies of a most unstable world market and her export trade which had totalled $1,290,000,000 in 1925 had declined by 1931 to $430,000,000. But this did not constitute all of Malaya’s or Clementi’s problems.

One other burning problem of the time concerned the Chinese. The territories of the Straits Settlements were faced with the problem of large scale Chinese immigration and the necessity to settle them adequately, imposing a government in harmony with their requirements, creating a form of justice between the new arrivals and the original settlers, and harnessing their abilities and generosity to the furtherance of the common good. The swift transition from the unbounded prosperity of the post World War I years to the drab poverty of the depression gave rise to criticism of the Government and its officials and “worked” to arouse latent race hostilities and suspicions. This was especially true of the Chinese section of the population and their political organisation known as the Kuomintang.

The organisation had originated in China on 13th August, 1912, and had been the direct result of the 1911 Revolution. The first branch in

Sir Cecil Clementi.
National Archives photograph.

Singapore was registered on 18th December, 1912 as the “Singapore Communication Lodge of the Kuomintang of Peking.” In 1913 of the eight principal office-bearers, seven were British subjects, and they included Dr. Lim Boon Keng. But the organisation was closed in 1914 due to “the discovery of a scheme by which the Lodge was ostensibly to be dissolved and to be replaced by a

2. Emerson, pg.
company, the Southseas Industries Company Limited, and in part to pressure by the Registrar of Societies on the Lodge, to furnish him with names and addresses of the members.”

This, however, did not mean the end of the Party in the Straits Settlements, because secret branches continued to operate in Singapore and Penang. A few were registered in the Federated Malay States but all those that were in the open were declared null and void by a Gazette Notification in 1922.4

In March, 1925, the Government outlawed the Kuomintang for having indulged in subversion, but despite this measure the organisation continued as an agent for Chinese Nationalist propaganda which was distinctly anti-British in flavour. The Government also felt that “recognition would legalise a rule of the Kuomintang which provided that in any secret, official or semi-official, non-foreign institutions, such as labour unions, clubs, chambers of commerce, schools, city councils, district councils, etc., the members must conform to the Kuomintang organisation in order to strengthen the power of the Kuomintang which would give directions to them.”5

By 1927, however, the Kuomintang became the most dominant organisation in China and the realization of this fact put the Malayan Government in a dilemma. To the British Foreign Office which had already accorded formal recognition to the Nationalist Government, the situation in Malaya was an anomaly but in spite of widespread agitation for recognition the Malayan Government stood firm.6

In the first half of 1927, the position was reviewed by the Governor Sir Hugh Clifford, who wished to distinguish between the moderate and the extremist factions of the organisation. He concluded that the moderates, in spite of their strong Nationalist sentiments, welcomed the ban on the Kuomintang. He further maintained that the Straits Settlement Government was not against Chinese Nationalism but was definitely opposed to any foreign institution which conflicted with the interests and ideals of Malaya.7 Although Clifford was against any form of registration of the Party he felt it would be a pity to interfere with its activities in Malaya as long as these remained legal and peaceful.8

In his opening speech on arrival in Singapore in February, 1930, Clementi pledged to work for the public good, whose loyal co-operation he looked forward to receiving.9 His first act, however, was most unexpected and resulted in widespread outbursts both in Malaya and in London. The measure was directed towards the Kuomintang and resulted in the closure of all its branches. Publication of propaganda leaflets was stopped, and the collection of subscriptions and the enrolling of members, outlawed.10

It would be interesting, at this juncture, to consider the immediate causes that led to this suppression. It began with a conference of the Malayan branch of the Kuomintang Party which took place in Singapore from 5th till 7th February. This in itself was against the law, and to aggravate matters the Kuomintang flag was flown openly outside the Conference building. In all, about 40 members from various parts of

5. Purcell, V.: p. 213.
8. Letter from Dr. Wu Lien-Teh to The Straits Times, March 1930.
10. The Straits Times, 21st February, 1930.
Malaya attended, and the event was accorded wide publicity by local Chinese newspapers. The press even published a photograph of the Committee members and described its sessions as “intensely revolutionary.” On 20th February, thus, Sir Cecil summoned the whole Committee to Government House and promptly acquainted them with his decision. The High Commissioner’s reason for this step was his conviction that the Kuomintang Party in Malaya posed a real threat to the existing British administration. It was engaged in a programme aimed at the political organisation of the Chinese and their indoctrination with anti-British propaganda.

The party, he said, was attempting to register the Chinese population in Malaya and was urging them to seek out harsh anti-Chinese laws. Chinese schools had been registered and an endeavour made to control their management and even their curricula. Text books, whose main theme was anti-British, were circulated widely and local Chinese were urged to look for inspiration to Gandhi and his non-co-operation movement which had been launched in India. The Kuomintang was also charged with applying pressure on Chinese newspaper proprietors and employers of labour. The newspapers were particularly important because they constituted a very important propaganda medium.

News of the Kuomintang suppression hit London like a bombshell. This was because during the tenure of office of Sir Hugh Clifford, the activities of the organisation had been investigated quite thoroughly and an endeavour had been made to lessen the persecution that had existed previously. The early 1920’s, it is true, saw a number of Kuomintang arrests but not many people had anticipated its complete shutdown.

It was generally agreed that Clementi had landed himself into a hornet’s nest. Although trouble with the Kuomintang was not a new phenomenon, the consensus of opinion was that some measure of understanding had been arrived at by Clifford. “In any case the Kuomintang backs the Chinese government and it ought to be perfectly obvious to anyone that if you tickle this organisation you have the Chinese government up against you at once. As a matter of fact, even over here, some of the leading members of the Chinese colony—if not most of them—are members of the Kuomintang.”

In the House of Commons, Lieutenant-Commander J. M. Kenworthy, Labour Member for Hull, constantly harassed the Government on this issue. He deemed it utterly stupid for the British Government to endorse a step which would surely serve only to antagonise the Chinese Government at Peking. The truth of the matter was that although both the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office were in favour of reversing Clementi’s decision, they realised that such a move would put the High Commissioner in an extremely awkward situation. Thus, a situation developed where the Colonial Office was embarrassed, and the Foreign Office found itself unable to provide an official answer to the Chinese Government’s pressing requests for a more specific statement.

12. SIR CECIL’S Address at the Association of British Malaya dinner in London on 5th June, 1934. *The Straits Times*, 14th June, 1934.
In Malaya, too, the closing down of the Kuomintang Party was difficult to justify. Many people viewed the party, which had been in existence for almost thirty years, as an organisation which had been untiring in its efforts to foster education in all directions, co-operated with the Government in many constructive undertakings, and which had even helped to maintain the peace. Its leaders, people like Mr. Teh Lay Seng and Mr. Teo Eng Hock, were considered to be men of good standing and excellent character, who had for years dedicated themselves to the improvement of Sino-British business. Moreover, nothing untoward had occurred since Clifford's departure to necessitate such a serious action. To most people it was a bolt from the blue, especially so because Sir Cecil had come to Malaya with the reputation of being a man who understood the Chinese perfectly.

All these protests, however, had little effect on either Sir Cecil or his policy. But in 1931 notes were exchanged between Mr. C. T. Wang, the Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Sir Miles Lampson, British Minister to China, and it was subsequently announced by the Chinese Government that "it had never been the intention of the Kuomintang to interfere in the domestic affairs of a foreign Government and that, the Chinese Government did not countenance any such interference." This was somewhat unexpected and a possible explanation might be that during this time relations between China and Japan were tense, and Peking was most anxious to enlist British support. Thus the Chinese Government might have decided to give way on the Kuomintang issue if it could help her secure Britain's valuable support.

On 2nd October, 1931, a law was passed in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council which clarified the position of societies in that territory. No society was illegal as long as it was organised wholly outside Malaya, had no branch or register of members in the colony, and as long as no subscriptions were collected. Similar laws were enacted in the Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States.

The whole Kuomintang affair, thus, caused quite a commotion amongst the Chinese faction of the population, and one begins to wonder why such a serious measure was ushered in so soon after the arrival of a new High Commissioner here. Was he acting on instruction from Whitehall, or was it a product of his personal initiative? Reactions at the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office seem to suggest the latter assumption, and this consequently engendered a feeling that the administration was guilty of acute short-sightedness. On the other hand it is difficult to imagine that Clementi should have taken such a far reaching decision without consulting the Home Government in London.

But whatever reasons lay behind the decision, the act alienated a good proportion of the Chinese population and strengthened opposition to the Government. The natural distrust of the Chinese had been aroused, and any future actions were bound to be viewed with intense suspicion.

17. Letter from Dr. Wu Lien-Teh, March 1930.
18. He had spent four years as Governor of Hong Kong just before coming to Malaya.
19. Extract from Sir Cecil's speech at the Association of British Malaya dinner in London on 5th June, 1934, Straits Times, 13th June, 1934.
20. Sir Cecil's speech of 5th June, 1934.