



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXXVIII No. 99

December 2017



ISSN: 0375-3050
E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: David Phillips (2017). "Konfrontasi" in Retrospect. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXXVIII (99) : 157-176

'KONFRONTASI' IN RETROSPECT

David Phillips

ABSTRACT

The 'Konfrontasi' conflict that took place largely in the jungles of Borneo during the mid-1960s risks fading from historical consciousness. Much recent academic work on the critically important Cold War period either misunderstands its significance or ignores it completely. There continues to be an exorcism of populist literature, invariably representing the conflict in superficial and partisan terms. Most has been of dubious quality. The release of official British records in the 1990's and recently the 'migrated archives' prompted more serious study but focused on British, American and Australian government strategy and policy-making. Consequently western historians have remained largely embedded in traditional colonial records history. Malaysian historical accounts have tended to elide this crucial episode in nation-building. Indonesian scholars are only now exploring this previously sensitive residue of the Sukarno era. A reappraisal of 'Konfrontasi' and the associated communist insurgency in Borneo is long overdue. There is a wealth of anthropological, sociological, environmental and cultural studies on Borneo to underpin such a reappraisal.

This paper argues that (i) insurgency and conflict in Borneo during the Cold War period, invariably attributed to communist, Indonesian or even British conspiracy, had deep economic and social roots; (ii) these underlying causes were exacerbated by the developmental and political failure of colonialism in Borneo; (iii) the clash of 'Konfrontasi', commonly claimed as a British and Commonwealth military victory, was an attritional impasse that in its culminating stages threatened the break-up of Malaysia; (iv) the signally successful resolution of the draining insurgency bequeathed by British colonial rule, usually ignored in conventional accounts of global terrorism, depended on political foresight and initiative within the Borneo states. The longer term significance of 'Konfrontasi' also needs to be reviewed. On the one hand it marked the effective end of European colonialism in Southeast Asia. On the other hand its outcome determined the political and economic configuration of the region over the next fifty years. It may well be argued that this epoch in its turn has now come to an end as new strategic uncertainties come to the fore.

Keywords: Confrontation, Malaysia, Indonesia, colonialism, insurgency

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JABATAN MUZIUM SARAWAK

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Abstract

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The background

In January 1963 Indonesia's President Sukarno proclaimed a campaign of '*Konfrontasi*', intended to prevent the formation of the new federation of Malaysia.

The policy of 'Confrontation', already successfully deployed to oust the remnants of Dutch colonialism from West Irian, embodied many different forms of pressure: economic, diplomatic, media and military. In the Borneo states its most apparent form was a running conflict along the Kalimantan border involving British, Gurkha, ANZAC, Malaysian and Indonesian regular security forces with a polyglot variety of guerrilla volunteers.

At the same time a growing insurgency centred on the Chinese communities on both sides of the border added a further dimension to opposition to the British colonial presence and subsequently the incorporation of the British Borneo territories within Malaysia. Despite cessation of hostilities between Indonesia and Malaysia in 1966 and the withdrawal of foreign troops from Borneo it was more than two decades later that the communist-led armed uprising was concluded when the last guerrilla remnants emerged from the jungle and "returned to society".

The historical record

Confrontation and the accompanying insurgency were dramatic and notable events. They had as profound an influence on the formation of Malaysia as the Malayan Emergency on the birth of an independent Malaya only six years earlier. Yet accounts of this crucial episode in the histories of Malaysia, Indonesia and South-east Asia have been limited and often superficial.

Much of the literature has been shallow, jingoistic and lacking any sense of context.¹ More nuanced scholarly accounts prompted by the release of previously classified official documents during the 1990s have contributed to a more objective understanding of the strategic context of Confrontation but focused solely on the policy-making of the Western powers.² Yet even when supplemented by rare innovative analysis of the campaign³ they have

not moderated the triumphalist outflow. It is only recently that Indonesian scholars have felt able to attempt any searching study of the conflict⁴ while there are some indications of an overdue academic willingness to question conventional interpretations of the Cold War in the region.⁵ Nevertheless, most contemporary publications demonstrate a profound ignorance of this crucial struggle.⁶

Accounts of the accompanying communist insurgency have been equally unconvincing.⁷ Most Malaysian narrative accounts add the colour of personal recollection in a populist style circumscribed by conventions of official acceptability; some Indonesian commentators are useful if discounted for partial embellishment.⁸ Rare but relatively trustworthy information on the composition and organisation of the insurgent movement such as the report by experienced counterinsurgency expert C.C. Too on the communist threat in Sarawak⁹ and other less accessible material based on 'debriefing' of surrendered guerrillas and supporters has been largely overlooked. Chinese language memoirs by surviving cadres of the *Partai Komunis Kalimantan Utara*, even while making full allowance for the desire to present their experience in a favourable light, have been equally untouched.

It has to be admitted that there are difficulties in the way of any forensic appraisal of '*Konfrontasi*' and the period around the formation of Malaysia, especially at a time when even academic scholars can be impelled by the political concerns of the moment. In the British Borneo territories of Brunei, North Borneo and Sarawak the orthodox portrayal of colonial rule, one of paternalistic autocratic government delivering development and self-government at a speed commensurate with the capabilities of the indigenous population, was purposefully crafted throughout the period of British dominance. This benign progression was supposedly disturbed only by a few 'bad hats' and noxious external influences. Successor administrations following independence have found the same theme ready-made for their own purposes. Nation-building narratives in both Malaysia and Indonesia have tended to block out alternative perspectives of the development of the Borneo states. Consequently, as in many other former colonies, serious historical research that might challenge established orthodoxy has not been encouraged. Access to sources has often been difficult. The sources themselves, particularly within Malaysia and Indonesia, have been sparse. There has been a corresponding reliance on 'colonial records history'. In such circumstances it is unsurprising that, by and large, academic specialists have shown themselves myopic, complacent and territorially possessive. Although release of the previously

concealed 'migrated archives'¹⁰ has helped to provide new insights into the nature of anti-colonialism and insurgency in the Borneo territories and there is much impressive sociological work yet to be fully utilised, the essential historical backdrop has been lacking.

This has stymied the study and presentation of Confrontation in many key aspects. In particular, neglect of the accompanying anti-colonial insurgency or its reduction to a mere adjunct of conventional military operations risk misunderstanding the nature of the strategic and political issues facing the British and Malaysian authorities of the time. Confrontation and its precursor, the Brunei Rebellion, were not vagrant eruptions. Their causes lay in the failings of British colonial policy that provoked insurgency. Easy assumptions of communist, Indonesian or even British conspiracy have as little validity as the now discredited thesis that the Malayan Emergency was triggered by Moscow's orders at the 1948 Calcutta Conference. The underlying economic and social problems that bedevilled the Borneo states remained unresolved with the withdrawal of British and Commonwealth troops in 1966. Indeed, it can be argued that they were exacerbated by Confrontation, resulting in the prolongation of a draining armed rebellion that lasted for the best part of another decade. In the global history of counterinsurgency and civil strife it is equally inexcusable that so little attention has been given to the successful termination of communist insurgency in Malaysian Borneo, especially when contrasted with its bloody outcome in neighbouring Indonesia. The vital contributions of economic, social, cultural and gender studies have been equally neglected. Finally, it must be said that the peoples of the Borneo states themselves are dismayingly absent from accounts too evidently compiled in the seclusion of academic libraries and archives.

It would, of course, be impracticable to attempt a comprehensive reappraisal within the limitations of a brief conference paper. Nevertheless, some markers can be laid down. In particular this paper aims to give greater attention than customary to the economic, social and cultural facets of Confrontation and the Borneo insurgency. In so doing it hints at the potentially rich resources of oral and subaltern history. It also draws on the rich but as yet unexploited vein of 'demi-official' material that lies below the surface of official records in the 'migrated archives'. It relies on the equally neglected resource of British military operational reports that contain previously uninterrogated intelligence, especially on Indonesian and insurgent dispositions and counter-insurgency measures. In consequence it is to be hoped that hitherto maligned Indonesian perspectives can be perceived with greater sensitivity.