

COMMENTARY

SOUTHEAST ASIA: JOURNEY OF FREEDOM STRUGGLE^{©Σ}

BALRAJ SINGH BRAR*

ABSTRACT

Southeast Asia refers to a cluster of countries located towards the southeast direction of the Asian peninsula. These nations share several similarities with India, having been adopted from India or brought over by Indians to various Southeast Asian countries. Additionally, both India and Southeast Asian nations share a history of struggling for independence from European powers. This brief commentary will focus on the decolonization struggle and its significance as a freedom movement for various Southeast Asian countries during the Cold War.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, independence, colonial, British, struggle

© The Author(s) 2023. Published by UKM Press on behalf of SPHEA, FSSH UKM and MAFDC. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Σ **Article Info:** Submission date: 21 December 2022; Acceptance date: 10 May 2023; Publication Date: 31 July 2023.

* **Corresponding Author:** Balraj Singh Brar, PhD (*Punjabi Patiala*), Assistant Professor, Department of History and Punjab Historical Studies, Punjabi University Patiala, Punjab, India. Email: balrajbrar@pbi.ac.in

KOMENTAR**ASIA TENGGARA: PERJALANAN MENUNJU KEBEBASAN****BALRAJ SINGH BRAR**

ABSTRAK

Asia Tenggara merujuk kepada sekumpulan negara yang terletak pada arah tenggara semenanjung Asia. Negara-negara ini berkongsi beberapa persamaan dengan India, setelah diambil dari India atau dibawa oleh orang India ke pelbagai negara Asia Tenggara. Selain itu, kedua-dua negara India dan Asia Tenggara berkongsi sejarah perjuangan untuk kemerdekaan daripada kuasa Eropah. Ulasan ringkas ini akan memberi tumpuan kepada perjuangan kebijaksanaan dunia dan kepentingannya sebagai gerakan pembebasan untuk pelbagai negara Asia Tenggara semasa Perang Dingin.

Kata kunci: Asia Tenggara, kemerdekaan, penjajahan, British, perjuangan

Introduction

Southeast Asia is a region that stretches from Burma's western frontier to the easternmost island of Indonesia. It consists of a peninsula on the Asian continent and an archipelago between Australia and the China coast (Osborne 2021). These geographic features make it a crossroads, with steppingstones for people migrating from the mainland and the main sea route to the east through the Straits of Malacca, known as "the gateway to the Pacific" (Rush 2018, 3)

Ancestrally, the people of Southeast Asia are believed to have come from more northern climates, with two significant migrations between 2000 and 1500 BC. Descendants of earlier inhabitants can still be found in tribes such as the Sakai in the jungles of Malaya. Later arrivals, like the Animates, the Thai, and the Burmese, also moved down from the north. Overseas Chinese have also come to the region, with a population of 12-13 million scattered throughout. These migrations have created a kaleidoscope of peoples, with each country facing the challenges of a plural or multiracial society (Guha 2014; Ganesan and Amer 2010).

Southeast Asia can be divided into two central regions: the Indochina peninsula on the mainland of Asia and the two island groups of Indonesia and the Philippines. The countries of North and South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Malaya, and Singapore are located on the Indochina peninsula, where most people are farmers who rely on human and animal labour rather than machines (Coedes 2015; Ahir 2011).

Southeast Asians consider rice, vegetables, and occasionally wheat their primary food. Wet rice cultivation creates long stretches of reflecting pools in rice paddies, resembling rural scenes throughout Asia. Like other Asians, most of the people of Southeast Asia live in villages (Acharya 2013, 2009).

Southeast Asians are accustomed to the joint or extensive family system, which is prevalent across Asia. Moreover, external influences have powerfully impacted their cultural pattern.

Southeast Asia has served as a zone of intersection between the Indian and Chinese spheres. In the initial phase, Indian influence was more significant. Indian merchants brought Brahmanism and Buddhism, which left impressions in various forms, from architecture styles to government systems. Indianized kingdoms emerged and declined during the first fifteen centuries after Christ. Some of these kingdoms occasionally paid tribute to the Emperor of China, but the Chinese cultural impact was mainly felt in the area adjacent to the empire, particularly in Annam (Linda 2013).

In the 14th and 15th centuries, Islam spread rapidly in southeast Asia, brought by Muslim traders from the Middle East and India. Due to its strategic position dominating the straits, Malacca became the main port for trade and the centre for the propagation of the faith (Wurfel and Burce 1990).

During the 16th century, Western powers began to dominate the world. The Portuguese and Spaniards were interested in finding Christians and spices and sought political dominance (Wint 1966).

In the 19th century, a wave of imperialism brought the British back into the picture. They conquered Burma, founded Singapore, and surpassed Malacca, acquired from the

Dutch. They protected the rest of the Malay Peninsula, including Sarawak, North Borneo, and Brunei. By 1900, almost the entire region had fallen under Western influence.

Burma

Myanmar, also known as Burma, can be found in Southeast Asia between the Indian and Pacific oceans. It is the second largest country in this region, following Indonesia. Myanmar shares borders with China, Thailand, Bangladesh, Laos, and India on three sides but is open to the sea on the south (Welty 2021).

The path to Independence for Burma was similar to that of neighbouring India. Liberation from Japanese invaders in the summer of 1945 marked the beginning of the fight for freedom against the old colonialists. The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), which led the popular uprising in March 1945, gained immense popularity in the country. Its leadership rightfully became Burma's provincial, national government.

The liberation struggle, led by Aung San and other AFPFL leaders, steadily grew in scope and scale from 1945 to 1947, involving broader sections of the population. In September 1946, a general political strike was organized in Burma (Pekkanen *et al.* 2014).

The British ruling circle gradually realized it would take more work to restore the old colonial system in Burma. During the Anglo-Burmese negotiations in London in January 1947, the British government was forced to acknowledge Burma's right to independent development and agreed to hold elections for a constituent assembly (McCloud 1986).

The British colonists made every effort to prevent Burma from gaining independence. Sadly, on July 19, 1947, Aung San, Burma's national hero and tireless fighter for his country's liberation, was assassinated. This dealt a heavy blow to the patriotic forces of Burma.

In September 1947, the constituent assembly adopted the constitution of the union of Burma, and on October 17, the Anglo-Burmese Treaty was signed in London. This treaty recognized the union of Burma as an independent sovereign state and accepted its secession from the British Empire. The state independence of the Union of Burma was formally proclaimed on January 4, 1948 (see Guha 2014).

Burma was annexed in 1886 as part of the British Indian Empire after deporting King Theebow to India. Therefore, Burma lost its independence and became a British colony. As a province of the British Indian Empire, Burma enjoyed specific administrative and constitutional reforms that formed the basis of the future administrative structure.

In 1922, the British gave a constitution to the Burmese, with about 70% of Burmese being able to exercise the franchise. This constitution provided a legislative council, but the British bureaucracy and representatives of the people shared the power. This created a diarchy where official influence hindered the elected representatives from carrying out their will, making the Constitution unpopular. The governor, the supreme executive head in the province, suppressed the elected representatives, much to the opposition of Burmese Nationalists, who forced the British to introduce further constitutional reforms.

In 1935, the British introduced a new constitution due to the circumstances. This constitution came into force in 1937 and gave Burma a new status. It was separated from the British Indian Empire and was recognized as a Dominance of the British Empire. The

new constitution included liberal provisions to realize self-government, with enhanced privileges for elected representatives. However, the Governor still enjoyed certain reservations.

On June 4, 1948, the British proclaimed the independence of Burma, which was hastened by the declaration of independence of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). A new constitution for the union of Burma was promulgated on September 24, 1947, to be headed by a president enjoying similar powers as the French President.

Malaya (Malaysia)

Malaya was once a collection of independent sultanates before the arrival of Europeans. Later, Malaya declared itself a self-governing nation and signed a defence treaty with Great Britain. By 1960, Independent Malaya was proud to have the highest per capita income among Asian states due to increasing Gross National Production (Acharya and Stubbs 2009).

The path to independence was much more difficult for the people of Malaya. In August 1945, after the Soviet armed forces defeated the Kwantung army and Japan surrendered, the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) fought against and disarmed Japanese troops, liberating a significant portion of the country's territory.

During the battles with the Japanese invaders, seven people from Malaya lost their lives. The British colonists arrived in Malaya on September 5, 1945, and established a military-colonial regime. The People's Committee was dissolved, and the Anti-Japanese Army was disbanded by the year's end. The establishment of the British military administration and the country's dire economic situation led to an increase in the national liberation and strike movement. In 1947, there were 291 strikes recorded in Malaya (Rush 2018).

The British imperialists' efforts to strengthen their grip on Malaya caused discontent and protests among the native people. The formation of the United Malaya national organization in March 1946 was a significant development.

The working people's anti-colonial struggle and strike movement became increasingly militant and widespread. In response, the colonialists launched a wave of reprisals and terror. Their primary target was the communist party of Malaya. However, even the most significant mass organization of workers, the All-Malaya Federation of trade unions, failed to suppress the national liberation movement (Coedes 2015).

In this context, the British authorities continued their political manoeuvring and made new concessions. From 1952 to 1953, the first municipal elections were held in Kuala Lumpur, and several communal parties in the Federation united to form the Malaya Alliance Party.

In July 1955, the first elections for the Legislative Council of the Federation were held, resulting in the Malaya Alliance party winning 51 out of 52 seats. They called for immediate independence for Malaya, and after the elections, the Federation of Malaya was granted limited self-government. However, matters such as internal security, finance, trade, and industry remained under the control of the British authorities. Despite this, the alliance party continued to advocate for political independence, which was officially granted on August 31, 1957.

The Geneva Conference of 1954 led to the independence of Laos. However, in 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) established the Fourteen Nations Declaration, which promoted independence, neutrality, and peace for Laos. An International Central Commission was formed to ensure the establishment of the Royal Laotian Government. Nonetheless, Laos was still dragged into war during this time (Guha 2014).

Cambodia

Cambodia is situated between Thailand and Vietnam. During his reign, Prince Sihanouk successfully established political stability in the country. In 1965, he chose to sever diplomatic ties with the United States of America (USA) and, instead, fostered friendships with Hanoi and Peking for aid and support.

Indochina comprised five political divisions: Cochin China (a French possession), Tonkin, Annam, Laos, and Cambodia (which formed a French protectorate in the twentieth century).

Philippines

The Philippines was first discovered through geographical navigation in 1521. 1569 Spain annexed the country, but their rule was met with opposition from the Filipino revolt. After the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States gained control of the islands.

On December 8, 1941, Japan invaded the Philippines and, by May 1942, had successfully occupied the country. The United States was dramatically dislodged from the Philippines during this time. However, on July 4, 1946, the Philippines became a sovereign state, as symbolized by replacing the American flag with the tricolour flag of the Philippines.

Indonesia

Despite being the first country in Southeast Asia to gain independence, Indonesia had to fight a long battle to defend its freedom. In August 1945, the Indonesians declared the establishment of a republic, but their victory took time to realize. The Indonesian liberation revolution faced numerous challenges due to military intervention from imperialists.

In September 1945, Anglo-Indian forces arrived in Jakarta, claiming the need to disarm Japanese troops. However, the British command brutally punished progressive elements, dissolved the organs of power of the young republic, and facilitated the restoration of Dutch colonial administrations and military units on Indonesian islands.

The British command deployed regular troops, naval and field artillery, air forces, and tanks against poorly armed Indonesian volunteer units. Despite this, the heroic defence of Surabaya town (Oct-Nov 1945) continued for three weeks. As a result, Indonesians annually commemorate "Hari Pahlawan" (Hero's Day) in honour of Surabaya's defenders.

The global community showed great sympathy and understanding for the selfless struggle of the Indonesian people. In India, mass meetings were held to protest the British government's decision to employ the Anglo-Indian army to aid the Dutch imperialists.

Indonesia Day was widely observed throughout India on October 25, and Indian Dockers refused to load ships with military cargoes bound for Indonesia.

The Soviet Union was the first to support Indonesia in internal affairs, condemning Britain's actions and demanding the creation of average conditions for the Indonesian people to build a new life. By mid-1947, British troops were forced to withdraw from Indonesia.

During the "Round Table Conference" held in the Hague from August to November 1949, the Dutch government agreed to relinquish all Indonesian territories except West Irian.

For an extended period, the Europeans were attracted to the East Indies by the spice trade. The earliest merchants were the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch. After the Dutch East India Company's fortunes suffered a severe setback, the Netherlands government took control of its possessions in 1798, and the island became known as the Netherlands Indies. Although the British briefly held the islands during the Napoleonic wars, they were returned to the Dutch after the Congress of Vienna.

In the 19th century, the Dutch exploited the islands' resources. They established a centralized administration under a governor-general, with Batavia (now Jakarta) as the seat of the imperial government. The governor general answered directly to the government of the Netherlands (Quayle 2013).

The earliest national organizations in Indonesia were the Budi Utomo, or Glorious Endeavor, followed by the Sarekat Islam, consisting of Muslim members. In 1941, Japan invaded Indonesia and completed the occupation of the islands by 1942, marking the end of Dutch colonialism. The Japanese occupation allowed Indonesians to declare their independence, and on August 17, 1945, Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta declared the independence of Indonesia while Japan was still in power. British troops arrived on September 29, 1945, and the Indonesian Republic was established. However, the Dutch also arrived and caused suffering, eventually leading to a political settlement with the Indonesian Republic through the Linggadjati Agreement on November 15, 1946 (Weatherbee 2009).

Initially, the Republic of Indonesia had no permanent constitution, and the structure was simple, with a single-chambered parliament. Parliament elected Sukarno as the president with Mohammad Hatta as the vice president, and the president held broad powers. Sukarno proclaimed martial law in February 1957 to avoid political instability and introduced a new political system called "Guided Democracy." He suspended the parliament and dissolved the constituent assembly in July 1959, reviving the 1945 constitution.

Although Sukarno was initially influenced by Western democracy, he later transferred democratic concepts to a national ideology. He explained his moral code through the famous "Pancasila," or the five ethical principles (Yefimav 1975).

Critics of President Sukarno felt that his regime was tending towards his dictatorship, which led to a military coup overthrowing him. After the successful military coup, Suharto succeeded him in 1967. He emphasized the need for Indonesian identity, human values, economic democracy, and the eradication of exploitation. Suharto practically altered the policy of Sukarno and gradually inclined to encourage Western capital

investments in Indonesia (Rush 2018; Osborne 2021).

Thailand

Thailand, also known as Siam, is located on the Indo-China Peninsula and shares borders with Myanmar to the west and north, Laos to the north and northeast, Cambodia to the east, and Malaysia to the south.

Despite being surrounded by Western colonial settlements, Thailand maintained its independence in Southeast Asia through timely treaties and agreements. This was due to enlightened kings who could keep foreign political dominance at bay while granting economic concessions to European merchants. Thailand also played the Anglo-French contest for commercial and political supremacy to its advantage by pitting them against each other (Welty 2021).

Thailand's ability to maintain independence can be attributed to the wise rulers who carefully balanced foreign influence with their interests. Thailand was under an absolute monarchy at the beginning of the 20th century. The monarch's reforms were delegated to chiefs who successfully upheld peace and order throughout the country. Buddhism was the dominant religion, and Bangkok served as the political centre while the rest of the kingdom was dedicated to rice production. Trading and commerce were not of interest to the Thai people, allowing foreign minorities such as the Chinese, Burmese, and Indians to dominate in those areas (Wurfel and Bruce 1990).

Thailand's first European contact was with the Portuguese, who provided arms to aid in the country's constant wars with neighbouring nations. Commercial treaties were later established with the British, United States, and French in 1822, granting Thailand extra-territoriality rights and implementing a conventional tariff system. The threat of European imperialism became apparent when the French colonized Cambodia, but the British and French agreed to settle their commercial zones in Thailand without pursuing territorial possession. This benefitted Thailand as industry and commerce began to flourish rapidly. British and French subjects in Thailand were subject to the Thai government and court jurisdiction (McCloud 1986).

In modern times, Thailand underwent significant changes in its political and social spheres. The absolute monarchy was transformed into a limited monarchy, while educated individuals formed a revolutionary political party. Slavery was abolished, and in 1932, this party, also known as the "Promoters," created a constitution that granted it absolute power concerning the state. Throughout Thailand's history, the military has held a significant role, and in 1932, they set aside the civil element to establish a stable administration. Luang Pradist Monoudharm became the Prime Minister, followed by Phibun in December 1938, who led the extreme nationalist faction of the People's Party and developed a military dictatorship (Ahir 2011; Coedes 2015).

During and after World War II, Thailand recognized the significance of Japanese expansion after the First World War. As a result, when Japan invaded Manchuria, Thailand did not oppose it. Instead, in June 1940, Thailand and Japan signed a treaty of peace and friendship, pledging to respect each other's territorial integrity and not to assist a third power that might attack either party. This treaty also aided Thailand in gaining substantial territory in a border dispute with Indochina in 1941.

The Bandung Conference

In the mid-20th century, a movement among Asian peoples aimed to unite and secure their region for themselves. However, distrust among different nations and competing global power blocs could have improved this goal.

Following World War II, the Indian Council of World Affairs held a conference in New Delhi in March and April 1947. Attendees included representatives from various Asian nations, though Japan was not present. Topics discussed included freedom movements, racial issues, colonial economies, industrial development, migration within Asia, women's rights, and cultural cooperation.

On December 28-29, 1954, a conference was held in Bandung, Indonesia, to promote goodwill and cooperation between Asia and Africa. Indonesia hosted the conference, while the Colombo powers were sponsors and participants. The primary objectives of the conference were to explore and advance mutual interests, establish friendly relations, and exchange technical know-how, trade, and commerce. The conference was inaugurated on April 18, 1955, by Dr Sukarno, the President of Indonesia. As a result of the conference, important decisions were made, including the collective action to stabilize international prices and the recommendation to establish a special United Nations fund for economic development and an international financial corporation for equity investment.

The conference expressed wholehearted cooperation on all other matters, including reaffirming the determination of Asian-African peoples to eradicate racialism and condemn any form of colonialism. The right of peoples to self-determination was upheld, and universal disarmament was supported under effective international control. Prohibition of the experimentation, production, or use of nuclear weapons was also supported to promote international peace and security. The Bandung conference was a landmark in the history of modern Asia.

The Indonesian people's drive to establish a single independent country led to the voluntary merging of states with the republic. The USI was abolished in August 1950, and Indonesia became a unitary republic again.

The struggle of the Indonesian people to regain control of West Irian lasted for more than ten years. In 1960, Indonesia severed diplomatic relations with the Netherlands. In 1962, an agreement was reached for the gradual transition of West Irian under the republic's jurisdiction, completed in 1963.

The history of Soviet-Indonesian relations is marked by vivid examples of the outstanding and selfless assistance of the USSR, which the Indonesian people will never forget (Acharya 2009).

Politics in Southeast Asia: Independence in Democracy

Southeast Asian nations have a history of authoritarian rule at the national level but a short tenure of Western-style constitutional government. Throughout history, people have grown accustomed to a leader who demanded obedience and support without seeking or wanting their advice.

In recent times, this region's educated and idealistic elite have presented constitutional democracies to the people. They proclaimed a new era where the citizens were the true rulers of the land, and their elected representatives would work on their behalf at national and local levels. Political parties were formed, and candidates were proposed for the people to consider. However, in most cases, the people returned to power to those who had previously ruled them instead of the revolutionary leaders who had secured national independence.

As the Japanese war drew close, the Western powers returned to Southeast Asia with a policy in mind. In addition to addressing the issue of insecurity, they also pondered whether the countries in the region could achieve political and economic sustainability. Many of these nations chose Western-style democracy as their blueprint, as it was familiar and rooted in democratic principles (Osborne 2021).

However, some Southeast Asian states, like those with ports, opted for a non-aligned policy and refused to commit. Likewise, when faced with the choice between communist and Western models for their internal affairs, they declined both options and attempted to develop their methods.

Acknowledgement and Declaration

We would also like to express our gratitude to SINERGI's anonymous reviewers and their constructive feedback in improving the quality of the manuscript.

References

- Acharya, Amitav., and Richard Stubbs. eds. 2009. *Theorising Southeast Asia Relations: Emerging Debates*. London: Routledge.
- Acharya, Amitav. 2009. *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- Acharya, Amitav. 2013. *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Ahir, D. C. 2011. *The Great Buddhist Kings of Asia*. New Delhi: Buddhist World Press.
- Coedes, G. 2015. *The Making of South East Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Ganesan, M., and Ramses Amer. eds. 2010. *International Relations in Southeast Asia: Between Bilateralism and Multilateralism*. Singapore: Yusof Ishak-ISEAS.
- Guha, Ramachandra. ed. 2014. *Makers of Modern Asia*. New York: Belknap Press.
- McCloud, D. G. 1986. *System and Process in Southeast Asia: The Evolution of a Region*. London: Routledge
- Osborne, Milton. 2021. *Southeast Asia: An Introductory History* (13th edition). Melbourne: Allen & Unwin.

Pekkanen, Saadia M., John Ravenhill, and Foot, Rosemary eds. 2010. *Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Quayle, Linda. 2013. *Southeast Asia and the English School of International Relations: A Region-Theory Dialogue*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rush, James R. 2018. *Southeast Asia: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weatherbee, Donald E. 2009. *International Relations of Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy* (2nd edition). New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Welty, Paul Thomas. 2021. *The Asians: Their Heritage and Their Destiny*. London: Hassell Street Press.

Wint, Guy. ed. 1966. *Asia Handbook*. London: Penguin.

Wurfel, David and Burton Bruce. eds. 1990. *The Political Economy of Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yefimav, D. 1975. *World War Two and Asia's Struggle for Independence*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.