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Kerala: Red Star Over China?

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Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers,

The sound we used to hear from New Age, the weekly newspaper of the Indian Communist Party, was a steady bleat, bemoaning all the capitalistic, imperialistic injustice in the world. Since the Communists were voted into office in the State of Kerala, New Age is producing a new sound, namely crowing, crowing about all that the Communist Government is doing for the workers and peasants down this way.

The front page of the June 16, for example, declaims:

KERALA BUDGET---GAIN FOR POOR, RICH TO PAY

While most of the States in India during the last few years have been framing budgets leaving huge deficits uncovered, drawing recently the comment from Prime Minister Nehru that they were being irresponsible, it has been left to the Communist-led Ministry of Kerala to produce a Budget which is not deficit, which has a nominal surplus of ₹ 7.33 lakhs. (\$153,930, at \$.21 to the rupee.)

A more important fact about the Kerala Budget is that a revenue deficit of ₹ 225.24 lakhs (\$4,730,040) has been covered and converted into a surplus by fresh taxation, the burdens of which fall mainly on those who can afford to pay, and not on the common man as has become the usual practice.

Equally important is the fact that the Communist-led Government in Kerala has not thrown up its hands and expressed inability to improve the conditions of the people because of financial difficulties. Pay increases and other benefits have already been announced for various sections of the people and employees...

How many lies and distortions per column-inch? Not so very many. Having surprised everybody including themselves by winning the election in February-March, the Communists in Kerala are now impressing many, and frustrating a few, by providing what looks so far like an energetic, moderate, progressive administration.

The Communist Chief Minister, Mr. E.M. Sankaran Namboodiripad, an amiable, well-to-do Party "theoretician and historian," has said that his Government is only doing what previous Governments said they would do but didn't. Mr. Nehru, en route to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, told the press in Helsinki that the Kerala Government has been functioning with the "utmost propriety."

The general impression I get of the public frame of mind, after spending ten days in Kerala, is that despite skepticism there is hope that this new Government will do something to alleviate the chronic problems of unemployment, food shortage and under-industrialization which previous Governments failed to grapple with. The public are waiting for things to change.

And they may. In the budget, in proposed legislation, in Government policy statements, there are allocations and schemes for fostering new industry, raising the pay of low-scale State employees, lowering agricultural rents and distributing excess State lands to landless peasants. These things will be done "for the people," and the cost will be met by increased taxes on tea- and rubber-planters, landlords and traders.

At the same time the Communists are doing something for themselves. Through patronage they are strengthening Party influence on all levels of the civil administration. More ominously, they are organizing a multitude of local "people's committees" to act as food-price "vigilance" teams, development-planning groups and land-distribution advisory councils. This campaign is being undertaken in the name of "greater participation of the people in their government," an ideal difficult to assail.

The political Opposition, the Congress and Praja Socialists, mostly, find themselves thwarted. However much they are opposed to Communism, they cannot find much to criticise in this Communist Government, whose announced program is scarcely incompatible with their own announced objectives. Patronage is politics, and Party infiltration, especially on lower levels, will be hard to document.

The beguiling thing about Kerala today is that no issue is being made of Communism. The Communists did not raise it in the election---the Congress did, and lost---and for the present they are content to be regarded as just another socialist party, but one providing "good, socialist government." The potential danger lies in the fact, I believe, that "good, socialist government" is not their goal, but their present tactic, and that once having gained widespread control and favor by the tactic, they would press on to their goal, which is total State power.

There seems to be no danger of this happening in India today. But India is a country with enormous economic problems, with deep social, regional and linguistic cleavages, with a unity dependent to a considerable extent on the momentum of the independence movement and the personal prestige of one man. If in the future there should be mass discontent or disintegration, Indian Communists, not only on the basis of their promises but of their performance in Kerala, might find themselves with room for expansion. But perhaps, it can't happen here.

Kerala, "The Land of Coconuts," literally, fits into the extreme southwest corner of India. Only 400 miles long and 80 miles wide, it is the smallest state in India. It is a beautiful land. The coconut trees with their great split-fan leaves stand in dense groves along the white sands bordering the Arabian Sea. The breeze from the sea comes in on the backwater creeks and canals and sets them a-shimmer, and then goes on inland to send ripples across the bright green rice shoots growing in the fields. On the plains there is more rice, and tapioca and pepper and cashews, and further inland, where the highlands run up into the mount-

ains, the Western Ghats, there are tea and coffee and rubber plantations, and forests of teak and ebony.

The people, the Malayalees, named after their culture and language, Malayalam, are brown and handsome, the men wiry, the women lithe. They make their homes, for the most part, in huts with walls of lattice or mud or stone, and roofs thatched with the leaves of palms. The huts are close together, and the villages are close together. The people crowd around the huts and in the villages, and in the towns and the few cities, and lush as the land is, there are too many people for it. With 15 million people on 15,000 square miles, there is not enough rice: 750,000 tons is but half enough in a year. There are not nearly enough jobs for the 100,000 people, many of them finishing high school or college, who seek them each year. With a high rate of literacy---40%, more than twice the all-India average---and wide newspaper circulation---22 dailies---the people of Kerala are aware of the nature of the pressures upon them.

The competitions that arise are compounded by divisions within the Kerala society. The three chief communities are the Hindus, who number more than half the total population, and the Christians and Muslims, with perhaps three million each. There are special loyalties and discriminations that pertain not only to these communities but to the sub-divisions within them as well. The Namboodiri Brahmins land-lord it over Hindu "inferiors," and the middle-rung Nairs are faced with new competition from the lower-caste Ezhavas, who are eager to bring themselves to a higher social level. The Christians, predominantly Catholic, are split into a host of sects, and caste survives among them, as it does among the Muslims too. Furthermore, the State, having been formed only last November, seems still tri-compartmentalized, psychologically, into Malabar, formerly a part of Madras State, in the north, and Cochin and Travancore, former princely States which merged in 1949, in the center and south.

With all of these disadvantages and divisions, Kerala has had a great deal of political instability in recent years. From the days of the Independence movement, the Congress enjoyed wide popular support in Kerala, although by the late 1930's a group of radicals---including some of the leaders of the present Government---veered left and in 1940 formed a branch of the Communist Party of India.

The first Government after Independence was a Congress Government, but in the past five years Congress popularity, in Travancore-Cochin, has declined, largely because of its own doing, and not-doing. Bickering, intrigue, nepotism and corruption lowered public confidence. Two Congress ministries fell, and so did a Praja Socialist minority ministry backed by Congress. In early 1956 political instability in the State led the Government of India to impose "President's Rule," that is, rule from New Delhi. Meanwhile in Malabar there was the growing feeling that people in that Malayalam-speaking part of Madras, a basically Tamil-speaking State, were being neglected by the Madras Government, which was under Congress control.

This was the setting when this year's elections came around.

In the campaign the Congress attacked Communism on ideological grounds and praised Nehru and the Five Year Plans. Congress workers maintained that only the Congress could gain a majority and hence give Kerala stable government again.

The Communists carefully selected their candidates (young Party

workers and union organizers) by matching caste and community with constituency. They issued a special State manifesto, and sent their 30,000-member organization into action. They preached no Communism to speak of. The brunt of their campaign bore against Congress corruption and the Congress' "failure" to improve economic conditions in the State. In the manifesto peasants were promised immediate redistribution of land in conformity with a fixed ceiling, lowering of land rents to one-sixth of the produce. All workers were promised a 25% increase in basic wages, plus unemployment insurance and a voice in industrial management. There would be more polytechnic schools, higher pay for teachers, and more medical facilities.

The results of the election have been adequately publicized. It was the first State-wide Communist victory in any democratic election. The Communists won 60 seats in the State Legislature, and five Communist-backed Independents provided the margin for a bare majority in the 126-member house. The Congress came in a poor second with 43 seats, the PSP won nine, and the Muslim League eight. One real Independent and one Anglo-Indian member nominated by the Governor have not lined up on either side.

Mr. Namboodiripad has said that his Party won the election "by dint of hard work and devoted service to the people..." Mr. U.N. Dhebar, the all-India Congress president, has admitted to his Party's "unpopularity" in Kerala. It does seem that the decisive votes in the election were the anti-Congress protest votes that went to the Communists, and that the election really was not so much a victory for Communism as it was a defeat for Congressmen.

Nevertheless, winning the election---and the Communists did---is no discredit, and it is true that there is strong support for the Party among workers, peasants, low-paid State employees and the "educated unemployed."

Having the election victory, surprisingly, in their hands, the Communists promptly announced that they would "abide by," or "work within the framework of" the Indian Constitution. The Union Government declared that it would present the Communist Government with no unique obstacles.

And the Communists were off. As a "joyful gesture" at the advent of Communist rule in Kerala, the Ministry announced it would commute the death sentences of ten men under conviction in the State and the jail sentences of all "political prisoners," defined as those involved in "trade or agrarian disputes." Many of the convicts were Communists. The Congress High Command and some quarters of the press charged "recklessness," and the Union Government took exception to the blanket commutations. The new Communist Government quickly hauled in its sails and got down to more businesslike affairs.

Named to assist Mr. Namboodiripad, the Chief Minister, were ten others including one woman and two of their five Independents. The Cabinet turned out to be nicely balanced communally, with two Brahmins, two Nairs, two Ezhavas, three Christians, one "Harijan" (erstwhile "outcaste"), and one Muslim. There is a neat geographic division to boot: four each from Travancore and Cochin, and three from Malabar. Five of the Ministers are law graduates and the others are trade unionists, a journalist, a doctor, a writer, and I don't know what else.

The Government's omnibus policy statement, presented by the Chief Minister at the swearing-in ceremony at the Governor's mansion on April 5, was notably moderate. Mr. Namboodiripad said he adhered to the Party program as outlined in the election manifesto, but he hoped that the people realised that it could not be implemented "one fine morning" by Government order. It could be accomplished, though, "if we get the support and co-operation of the other parties and sections in Kerala, as well as of the Central Government, in doing so."

The first concern of his Government, he said, was development, and he would go to the Central Planning Commission to try to raise the State's share in the Second Five Year Plan from Rs 87 crore (\$182.7 million) to Rs 200 crore (\$420 million---a crore is ten million). The Center, he said, was balking on his Government's desire to nationalise foreign-owned Plantations in the State, but he promised "our utmost" to modify the Center's policy.

Successful development, he continued, depends on industrial peace, and he expected that employers and employees would henceforth enjoy amiable relations. The "main obstacles" were raised by employers, however, for they are "reluctant to recognise the organisations of employees...and to concede (their) legitimate demands..."

Agrarian reforms, namely laws fixing "fair" rent, giving fixity of tenure to tenants, setting a ceiling on land holdings, and distributing surplus land above the ceiling, would be forthcoming "within a short and definitely-fixed time-limit."

Although the Party had its "own distinct view" on development, the Chief Minister said, "we require" full and detailed consultation with "the organisations of the people," which he defined as "all political parties, mass organizations and individuals or groups of experts." This, in fact, would be the approach to development programs, industrial problems, educational, medical and cultural matters, the unemployment problem and local self-government. The Government, he said, should give "all help and encouragement" to present "people's organisations," and should "help the emergence" of organizations in fields where they do not exist.

In conclusion he pledged a "decent and incorruptible" administration and appealed to "all men of good-will" to help us carry out our program toward "building a democratic and prosperous new Kerala."

Since then a series of announcements from Cabinet Ministers has come forth expanding on the main theme. The Minister for Industries guaranteed any investors who would come to the State would be assured "reasonable profits" and "no nationalization," so long as they treated their employees fairly. An education bill proposed the reorganization of the State university to make it more "autonomous," and an investigation of the "service conditions" of private-school teachers that implies they will be brought under tighter State control.

The Finance Minister, in his budget message, ticked off a list of proposed taxes as follows: a tax on agricultural income and one on agricultural wealth, a supertax on the income of agricultural companies, and a surcharge (for education) on the agricultural income tax and surtax. This would weigh heavily against big landowners and planters. Middle and big

businessmen and professionals would also pay an education surcharge, and there would be a tax on passengers and goods carried by motor vehicles. All landowners, including the small ones, would pay a basic land tax of Rs 2 per acre instead of the present Rs 1.56. True enough: "RICH TO PAY."

The Kerala Secretariat in Trivandrum is a sprawling white Georgian building. Into the Assembly wing the MLAs come, clad in long-tailed shirts and dhotis. Many of them patter barefoot---the monsoon is on now and sandals only get wet. Above and behind the Speaker is a painting of Gandhi, walking, smiling. The ceilingful of whirring fans keeps the hall a little cooler.

Mr. Nampoodiripad sits silent, solemn. His eyes watch every speaker as if he wants to miss nothing. The MLAs sitting on his side are a remarkably young-looking group. Across the center aisle sits the Opposition, nominally led by Mr. P.T. Chacko, a hefty, dignified Congress leader, but getting its life, it seems, from Mr. Pattom Thanu Pillai, a loud-voiced scrapper now in his 60's, a former Congress Chief Minister who now heads the PSP.

All along, the Opposition has cooperated informally among themselves to attack the Government, charging them with using office to strengthen the Party, chiding them for their "class war" outlook. The Opposition has "demanded," "challenged," "doubted" and "feared" in good rhetorical form. They have taken delight---as they were doing now---in confounding inexperienced Ministers and the Speaker in their parliamentary mistakes, and they have gotten lots of laughs.

Privately, some Opposition members concede that there is nothing basically wrong with the Communist legislation offered. Sometime the Opposition speeches take on a rather hollow sound. Here is the Congress Deputy Leader now, shrugging that the Communist budget offers "nothing new," but "simply puts the seal of approval on the policies of the Centre."

The bill is argued back on the Communist side of the hall. Those 64 hands are raised in unison. The bill passes.

Phil Talbot and Willard Hertz, a Ford Fellow, and I filed in together to see Mr. Namboodiripad. He greeted us with a broad smile and an outstretched hand and sat down only after we were seated. He is in his mid-40's, I guess, a short, stocky man with straight gray hair falling slightly over his forehead. The eyes behind the shell-rimmed glasses were bright. The cuffs of his shirt were frayed. He was most amiable. When he spoke, it was with a gasping stutter, and I felt a little sorry for him.

He spoke first of his Government's "first priority," land reform. The recommendations of the Land Reforms Panel of the Central Planning Commission (which have been largely ignored in India) would be the guide. In addition to adjustments in ownership and tenancy and rents there would be "new methods." "Cooperative farming will have to be organized," although the precise steps were uncertain. "Even the Government of India policy is vague on that point," he said.

"What is your policy?" Phil asked. Mr. Namboodiripad shrugged. "We don't start with any fixed ideas. Our first concern is that the cultivator should secure ownership rights, that the burden on his shoulder should be reduced. This is our concern, and then we see how we can help."

Phil persisted: "Nothing more concrete than that?" He smiled broadly. "Don't proceed with the idea that we have something fixed in our head. We work with the people and do what we can for them..."

"Well, what kind of Communist are you?" He suddenly half stood up, flung out his arms, and smiled another great smile. "I don't know!"

Phil tried again: "You must have some theoretical framework..." Now he appeared on the verge of getting huffy. He lectured: "I think we are speaking different languages. Get off your head, the idea that we are working on anything that exists in our head. We don't want to get derailed in an argument. Your understanding of what is Marxism is different from mine!"

Phil quoted the Communist leader in the national Lok Sabha to the effect that "We are all Communists, and don't forget it!"

Mr. Namboodiripad relented slightly. "Of course every rational being has a philosophical outlook, but he adjusts himself to realities, he makes modifications." Plainly, we wanted no more talk of Communism.

He talked of the elections and the "confidence the people have in the Communist Party." Perhaps there would be popular dissatisfactions against his Government, as there had been against past Governments, but "History will decide." He talked also of administrative reform and of the "people's committees," which he described as "advisory but authoritative." It came time to leave. There was an amiable goodbye.

Mr. Namboodiripad's answer to the question, "What kind of Communist are you?" continued to intrigue me, and I went down to the Communist bookshop to look up some of his writings.

His book, The National Question in Kerala, is a straight-down-the-party-line Marxist "history" of the area: in prehistoric times there was "primitive communism," followed in correct sequence by "militarist-feudal" then "colonial-feudal" society, a "national upsurge and betrayal," and an "anti-imperialist movement of peasants and [later] the working class;" the final step, not yet taken but "irresistable," is a "united people's democratic Kerala."

That was written in 1952. Last year, as head of the Indian Communist delegation to the Eighth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in Peking, Mr. Namboodiripad reported to the comrades that:

"...The progressive circle in India are coming to realize, more and more, that the grand victory of the Chinese people was rendered possible because of the successful application, by the Chinese Communists, of the scientific principles of Marxism-Leninism to Chinese reality, and it is this that enabled the Chinese people to win national victory against the mightiest imperialist power of the day, establish a great Asian People's

Democratic State, and achieve socialist transformation within less than a decade...

The great Lenin had forecast that the unity of U.S.S.R., China and India will be a decisive blow against world imperialism and for world socialism.

From this august platform, before the fraternal delegates from 56 brother Parties, we, Indian Communists, pledge to work our hardest to carry out Lenin's behest...

Long Live the World-Wide Communist Fraternity!

By coincidence, what seems to be going on among the Kerala Communists today bears a remarkable resemblance to what went on among the Chinese Communists in their Yen-an base during the Sino-Japanese War.

When the violence of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai in the late 1920's was crushed by Chiang Kai-shek, they organized a territorial base in the mountains of Southeast China, which they held by force of arms. Driven forth by Chiang, the Communists made the long trek to Northwest China, set up headquarters in Yen-an, and took a new line. They abandoned violence---except against the Japanese---and became, to all appearances, temperate "agrarian reformers." They reduced large landed estates to provide land to working peasants. They conducted a model administration, complete with "people's councils" to act, with the direction of the Party cadre, as local "self-governments" in the countryside. Communism was played down, socialism was played up. The Party and the Red Army was eminently patriotic. Through those years the Communists spread their influence and control across North China and into the South. By the time the war ended they had gained a momentum that Chiang's Government was not able to withstand.

There is no Red Army in India, and there is a strong Central Government, but there are points of similarity to the Chinese case. Since Communist attempts at violence---in Bengal, Hyderabad and Andhra---as recently as five years ago, were quashed, the Party has presented itself as a "real" socialist party, as distinguished from the Congress as a "nominal" social party "controlled by big business and landlords." Since coming to power in Kerala, the Party has talked in terms of moderation, adjustment, agrarian reforms, consultation with the people, loyalty to the people of the area, of socialism rather than Communism. It seems to be acting like a "good, socialist government." I'm sure Mr. Namboodiripad has met Chairman Mao.

In the short run, will the Communist Government in Kerala be a success? I do not think they will have to do much to get by. Efficient administration and a little easing of the pinch---a raise in pay here, a quarter-acre of land here, a perk-up in industry---may be enough. If they stick together on the path and at the pace they have chosen, they may have five years of life in office. Who can "pull them down," to use the local phrase? The Congress, groping to reorganize itself, does not seem heedful of what the Communists are doing. The PSP seems alert, but woefully weak in organization.

A college principal up the coast in Ernakulam told me that "There are six wrinkles on Nehru's forehead---three for Kashmir, two for Kerala, and one for the rest of India." There should be a couple more wrinkles for Kerala.