

JUSTICE INITIATIVE

The 1969 Riots Against the Chinese in Malaysia *Beyond Vietnam*



May 13, 1969 Riots Against the Chinese in Malaysia

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[\(Link\) Justice Initiative International](#)

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"The past is never dead. It's not even past."

William Faulkner

Introduction

As PBS is now airing the Ken Burns documentary on the Vietnam War, Americans are yet again being informed and reminded about that dreadful and violent Cold War conflict. Yet, Americans are largely not informed of US interference and violence in other parts of southeast Asia around the same time. This was also part of the horrifying Cold War (communism vs. capitalism) mentality associated with excessive violence and western manipulation and control. But this interference of sovereign peoples and countries can also be coupled with the legacy of the 1493 Papal "Doctrine of Discovery" mentality that even today has essentially given a justification for imperialism - for "Christians" of European descent to take lands and control people almost anywhere in the world.

The Doctrine of Discovery was promulgated by European monarchies in order to

legitimize the colonization of lands outside of Europe. Between the mid-fifteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, this idea allowed European entities to seize lands inhabited by indigenous peoples under the guise of discovery. In 1494, the [Treaty of Tordesillas](#) declared that only non-Christian lands could be colonized under the Discovery Doctrine.

In 1792, U.S. Secretary of State [Thomas Jefferson](#) declared that the Doctrine of the Discovery would extend from Europe to the infant U.S. government. The Doctrine and its legacy continue to influence [American imperialism](#) and treatment of [indigenous peoples](#). ([Wikipedia](#))

The Cold War combined with the "Doctrine of Discovery" mentality is a deadly mixture. With these two excuses as a cover, invariably, the desire to control other countries more often also has to do with the desire for natural resources (oil, tin, bauxite, copper, etc.). There is almost always the need to "follow the money!" to find out what's really happening in war and orchestrated coups.

It's also as if, in the contemporary sense, the "doctrine" is translated into allowing interference and control of governments the "Christian" US does not care for as these targeted countries might undermine US power or capitalist money making ventures. While the US fought a Revolutionary War (1775-1783) to claim independence from British colonial rule, the US in turn does not seem to want to afford many other countries the same right of sovereignty to determine their own government and economic system.

During and prior to the Vietnam War these "other" countries where the US interfered and/or helped overturn the governments include: Malaysia (desire for tin, etc.) that I refer to below; Indonesia (desire for oil); the Philippines (desire for maintaining US bases and economic control throughout most of the 20th century and on). Then there was the Korean War (1950-1953), as well, which was a definitive product of the Cold War as both the Soviet Union and the United States coalitions claimed all of Korea.

Two other countries the US interfered with during the Vietnam War period and overturned their governments were Chile and Australia.

There was the 1973 [US "Cold War" inspired coup in Chile](#) resulting in the assassination of Salvador Allende and the installation of the US friendly Augusto Pinochet coupled with the US desire, for one, of more control over the Chilean copper industry.

This was followed by the CIA invoked [ousting of the Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam](#) (of the Labor Party) in 1975. President Richard Nixon's Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, and others in the Nixon administration, were furious that Whitlam was opposed to the Vietnam War and that he established an embassy in Hanoi. They were furious that he had questions about the "Pine Gap" US base in the Australian desert and the US refused to inform him about the base and its activities - and he was the Australian Prime Minister, no less. They were furious that Whitlam wanted the Australian secret service out of Chile in the 1970s!

During the Vietnam War, Cambodia and Laos were also destabilized and violently

impacted.

About the Malaysian Coup

In 2007, I wrote an article about the May 13, 1969 riots against the Chinese in Malaysia that was posted on [Counterpunch](#) and I heard later that my article was widely circulated in



Dr. Kua Kia Soong
(Credit: Free Malaysia Today)

Singapore. I understood why. The official explanation of the 1969 riots was rarely believed by anyone, with the assumption being, in the official telling of it all, that the riots were spontaneous due to the hostilities from the previous election. Nothing could be further from the truth, as reported by Dr. Kua Kia Soong in his 2007 book "[May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969](#)" based on declassified documents and referred to below. The riots were, according to Kua, planned in advance.

"The book challenges the Malaysian government's official position on the cause of the 13 May Incident. At the time, the government stated the cause was opposition parties' creating tensions after the 1969 elections. In contrast, Kua stated that the "ascendant state capitalist class" in the [United Malays National Organisation \(UMNO\)](#), the party in power, had intentionally started the riot as a coup d'état to topple the [Tunku](#), traditional [Malay Rulers](#). (Wikipedia)

Another excuse to overturn the Malaysian government appears to be, as well, the threat of the spread of communism by the Chinese. It was in many ways another Cold War violent assault. As Dr. Kua notes regarding his research on the truth of the riots:

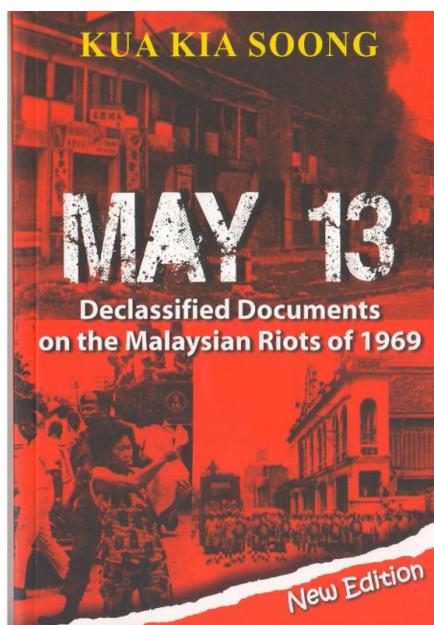
"I got it from the public records office in London as the (British's) 30-year secrecy rule was over. That is what the Malaysian government should do, declassify, especially special branch documents (on the May 13 incident).

"Unfortunately we don't have that rule which means the government can keep their secrets forever."

According to Kua, his extensive research led him to discover that May 13 was orchestrated, and not a spontaneous eruption of violence as the official narrative states. ([Malaysia Today - 2016](#))

Arriving in Singapore

It was in 1971 that I arrived in Singapore along with my one-year old son and Australian husband who was a



junior Australian diplomat. We had taken the maiden voyage of Qantas' first 747 Jumbo Jet from Darwin, Australia. In Singapore, we were soon witness to the legacy of European colonialism in the Asian context; Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew's total grip on the city-state; and the power struggles between the Southeast Asian religious, ethnic and political groups. Violence against the Chinese in neighboring Malaysia in 1969 had preceded our arrival.

In 1971, I had been out the United States for a few years after marrying and living in Australia. Once landing in Singapore and being rushed to a hotel, I awoke that first Asian morning to a song by American country singer Ray Stevens blaring from the clock radio. Stevens (whose real name was Ray Ragsdale) had been a classmate who had preceded me by a number of years at Druid Hills High School in Atlanta, Georgia. It seemed altogether ironic that my first encounter in Singapore would be with a former classmate from Georgia.

I soon learned, however, that Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew (1923-2015), while wanting western money and trade, was not enamored with western "youth"- it's overall culture or singers. Western bands coming to Singapore had to perform with hair nets (Lee did not like males wearing long hair) and once they had performed they were required to go immediately to their hotel rooms, as Lee did not want them mingling with Singaporeans. There were signs in government places, such as the post office, that displayed the appropriate hair length and any male with hair that hung over his collar would be served last or would have to go to the end of the line. Young Singaporean couples were not allowed to kiss or hold hands in public.



One of the Lee's rules that made absolute sense to me was that no one was allowed to have standing water around their residence. In this tropical zone, this was one of the ways malaria infected mosquitoes were controlled. Impromptu visits by authorities were made on occasion to ensure you had not violated the ruling and you were fined appropriately if you had! I was always a nervous wreck that there might be standing water somewhere! The

benefit of all this was that our apartment was open to the outside at all times, except during monsoons. I never saw a mosquito.

Another interesting fact about Lee is that while he was Prime Minister of Singapore (1959-1990) he never moved from his modest house and neighborhood as, in the Chinese folklore, it brought him good luck. Also having been born and living in the British colony of Singapore, Lee spoke English as his first language. In the 1950s he wisely chose to finally learn Mandarin - the standard Chinese language.

Singapore is located at the tip of the Malaysian peninsula and historically the fate of Singapore and Malaysia has been closely related. Primarily ethnic Malays, Chinese and Indians populate both Singapore and Malaysia. The Chinese represent the majority of Singaporeans.

In addition to the ongoing violence of the Vietnam War, it seemed as if all of Southeast Asia was a caldron in 1971.

Some of the Historical Context

- * Malaysia had been occupied by European powers since 1511 (first Portugal, then the Dutch, then Britain) and Singapore had been occupied since the 1600's by the same three European powers.
- * After WWII the anti-colonial movement resulted in Malaysia winning its independence from Britain in 1957 and by 1959 Singapore was independent as well. By 1963 a Malaysian Federation was created of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak.
- * After independence, a struggle for power increased between the groups, particularly between the ethnic Malays who were largely Muslim, and the Chinese who were mostly Buddhists.
- * Much to Lee Kwan Yew's disappointment, by 1965 Singapore was essentially asked to leave the Malaysian Federation. Apparently, Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, otherwise known as the Tunku (Prince), and other Malay leaders were not thrilled with Lee Kwan Yew's political activities on mainland Malaysia.
- * Chinese leader Mao Tse Tung had launched the Cultural Revolution throughout China in 1966 and he declared it completed in 1969.
- * In Indonesia in 1965-66, thousands of Indonesian Chinese were among those specially targeted in the riots to overthrow President Sukarno who had strengthened his ties with Chinese communists and had admitted communists into his government. The CIA tried, unsuccessfully, to hide its involvement in this "Year of Living Dangerously." I had an Indonesian Chinese friend in Singapore who was married to an Australian. Her "physician" father in Indonesia changed his name so it didn't sound so Chinese.
- * At the time, Singapore was a haven for many Hong Kong Chinese who were concerned about the end of the British 99 year lease of Hong Kong that began in 1898. In 1997, with the end of the lease, Hong Kong would come under the authority of China. Many Hong

Kong Chinese held both Singaporean and Hong Kong passports, with residences in both cities.

* The legacy of WWII was still a reality in 1971. While some in Southeast Asia welcomed the Japanese occupation during WWII as a way of ending western occupation, the ruthlessness of the Japanese occupiers definitely dampened this enthusiasm. However, the Japanese defeat of the British controlled Singapore in but 6 days radically altered the Asian view of European invincibility. Lee Kwan Yew admitted that while he was appalled at the Japanese cruelty, still he was impressed with Japanese efficiency and the systems they put in place.

But in 1971, however, we were told that the Japanese who had occupied Singapore and their descendants were not allowed into the Singapore.

* In 1971, Ferdinand Marcos was President of the Philippines with close ties to the Nixon Administration. That year "a group calling themselves the People's Revolutionary Front (PRF) claimed responsibility for two bombings at the headquarters of U.S. oil companies in Manila, Philippines. The bombs killed one and caused extensive damage. A note at the site of the bombings claimed responsibility for the attacks in the name of the group and said, *"this is the anger of the Filipino people against American imperialism."* ([MIPT Terrorism: Knowledge Base](#)). But to partly understand this it's also important to harken back to, for one, the 1950's and the CIA operative Edward Lansdale (notwithstanding, also, the excessively violent Philippine/American War from 1899-1902).

As the Filipinos sought some kind of control over their government after WWII, the CIA, of course, became involved and Lansdale was most important in orchestrating the removal of Philippine president Elpidio Quirino, who wanted more independence from the US. Lansdale was outwardly in the US Air Force, but was, in fact, working for the CIA and, in 1953, helped to oust Quirino to install the more US friendly [Ramon Magsaysay](#) as president. Lansdale was famous for destabilizing communities to sway them politically, as he did in this instance. He studied the culture, he knew what was persuasive through use of psywar operations. It was also largely a ploy against the Filipino resistance movement known as the Hukbalahap, considered to have communist leanings.

* In 1971 when we arrived in Singapore, the Vietnam War was raging, the anti-communist sentiment was strong and the [domino theory](#) predominated in western government thought and policies.



Ferdinand Marcos

Impact of Colonialism and Concerns of Chinese Influence

Britain's occupation in Southeast Asia incorporated its usual arrogance of white supremacy, which played out socially and economically. The British are, of course, excellent at dividing and ruling their colonies. In fact, the hierarchical British seem proficient at increasing the gaps in social divisions that were already at play or creating them for their own benefit to decrease the potential power of the existing indigenous population. In Singapore, while I was there, the British, for example, had clubs of which only the British could be members. A Jim Crow or apartheid like mentality? Absolutely!

During its occupation, the British encouraged migration from India and China to the Malaysian peninsula and the subsequent independent nations were forced to adjust to it all. Regarding Malaysia, this was probably a British tactic to dilute the indigenous Malaysian power. Also, as mentioned, the lucrative Malaysian tin mining, for one, was a major incentive for the British in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In Singapore and Malaysia, the ethnic Malays were at the lower end of the scale and were generally considered the laborers and farmers in the rural areas; Indians were the drivers and guards; and the Chinese were the middle/upper class entrepreneurs in the urban areas. All of this is stereotypical and, of course, was not always played out in reality but was usually the scheme in the social and economic strata and the gaps in income and social/economic power were profound. From the religious hierarchy, then, it was the Malay Muslims and the Indian Hindus at the lower rank, and the Chinese Buddhists at the higher end, with the occupying British Christians at the top of it all.

But after WWII and the western concern about communist China, the Chinese population throughout Southeast Asia became suspect by Britain, the U.S. and Australia. It was thought by some that the Southeast Asian Chinese would side with China regardless of their links with western capitalism. This was not the beginning of negative attitudes about the Chinese, however, as the Southeast Asian complexities and power struggles have long been a reality. Also, many Southeast Asian countries have always worried about the long-arm of a powerful China.

In this period and up to the present, there was speculation that China was supporting and fostering Southeast Asian Chinese in the creation of communist groups throughout the region to challenge western influence. To counter this, in the Cold War period (and up to the present I might add), there was significant secret service activity throughout the region by the [CIA](#), [British MI5](#) and [ASIS from Australia](#).

Since independence from Britain in the 1950s, however, the jockeying for power has never been simply about ethnic rivalry. It has always included the questions of who will control and benefit from the natural resources in Southeast Asia. Again, it is again called "follow the money!"

As mentioned, control of tin mining in Malaysia was of British interest. Finally, in Malaysia, the tin mining was exhausted in the late 1980s due to an "*exhaustion of tin and a fall in tin prices...*" The last copper mine ceased operation in 1999. Yet, at the time "*(as) much as 70 per cent of the industry remained under foreign control. This was a legacy of the British colonial era; many British firms, which had arrived in the 19th century to exploit Malaysian mineral resources, had not departed yet.*" ([Malaysian Minerals](#))

American desire for resources? On a clear day from my apartment in Singapore I could see the Indonesian island of Sumatra. In our apartment building, in fact, there were Americans who were gone for months at a time into the neighboring Indonesia on oil exploration activities for the Texas based Huffco and Mobile Oil, apparently at the invitation of the Indonesian government. I was never sure about this, however, as they always seemed so secretive. Occasionally, these American oil fellows would illegally sneak out of Indonesia Dutch antiques, such as the famous Dutch oil lamps, the traffic of which the Indonesian President Suharto was wisely trying to control. Yes, these oil fellows were thieves. In fact, I was even asked once if I wanted something and said, emphatically, "no way!" Mind you, I adored those beautiful oil lamps but knowing the Indonesian countryside was being pillaged, or raped we could say, of its valuable, albeit colonial, heritage, the situation seemed intolerable.

Learning about the 1969 Riots in Malaysia

On May 13, 1969, riots against the Chinese began in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was considered the worst racial riot in Malaysian history. Many Malaysian Chinese fled to Singapore for protection. We were told the Malaysian rivers ran red with Chinese blood. One of my European friends, married to a Chinese, described how she and others hid in a hospital for protection and how the Malay Chinese were running everywhere from the hordes of attacking Malays. My husband ultimately moved to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in the mid-1970's and his secretary, of Chinese descent, described how she came home during the riots to find her husband's head in her refrigerator.



Hassan Muthalib (left) by the wreckage of a car in the Chinese/Malay Malaysian kampung, 14 May 1969 (Pic by Hassan Muthalib)

Some police figures are that 196 people died in the riot, many more were wounded. There

were numerous cases of arson and approximately 6,000 Kuala Lumpur residents (of which 90% were Chinese) became homeless. Some have said the actual tragedy far exceeded the official figures.

It has been suggested that the following is the official position: that the riots resulted from the tallies of the 1969 elections in which the largely Chinese dominated Democratic Action Party and the Gerakan Party made significant gains in opposition to the Malay controlled United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Members of the winning party marched through Kuala Lumpur through some largely Malay areas. It is said the demonstrators carried brooms that symbolized "sweeping" the Malays out of Kuala Lumpur. The official policy was that the Malays resented all of this and the riots ensued and basically that the Chinese had themselves to blame. It is the classic "blaming the victim" explanation.

In his book, Dr. Kua Kia Soong, however, reported from recently released British files and reports from foreign correspondents, that there were suspicious activities prior to and during the riots that suggest the riots were not spontaneous but rather planned in advance.

Dr. Kua shares many examples, but for one he reports a foreign correspondent's notes that on May 13 "*In the side streets off Jalan Hale, I could see bands of Malay youths armed with parangs and sharpened bamboo spears assembled in full view of troops posted at road junctions. Meanwhile, at Batu Road, a number of foreign correspondents saw members of the Royal Malay Regiment firing into Chinese shophouses for no apparent reason.*"

Other examples include observations that there were unfair curfew policies that discriminated against the Chinese.

Dr. Kua revealed that "*the National Cultural Policy (announced in 1971) burst in the 80s, was already thought of one week after (the May 13 incident)*" ("[Unveiling the May 13 riots](#)" by Beh Lih Yi).

Dr. Kua suggests there was, in fact, a "coup d'etat" backed by the army and police to, as mentioned, place the "ascendant capitalist class" in power - or those elements in the Malaysian Alliance that were more favorable to the western economies.

This is what ultimately happened. The Tunku soon lost power after the riots and Tun Abdul Razak, more aligned with the west, became Prime Minister not long after. Dr. Kua had said those orchestrating the coup wanted to oust the old aristocracy and replace it with one that would aspire toward a new western favored economic agenda and that was precisely what happened. I even met some American Peace Corps members who worked in Malaysia in the 1970s and who told me that one of their missions was to discourage the young Malaysians (whether of Malay, Chinese or Indian descent) to no longer listen to or seek advice from their elders, as has always been the tradition, and rather look to new trends in culture and economic issues. I admit I was appalled at this attempt to completely undermine ancient traditions and culture basically without reflection or respect.

It was difficult for Dr. Kua to publish his book and as its thesis was contrary to the official explanation for the riot, many Malaysian politicians had asked that it be banned. It's unlikely his book will radically alter the history of Malaysia, but at least finally there are documents that reveal some alternative to the official explanation.

The 1969 riots have continued to plague the relations between the various Malaysian ethnic groups. For one, there was the controversial "Malaysianization" ([National Cultural Policy](#)) policies of Malaysia created in the 1970's, as Dr. Kua states, but one week after the coup, that were thought primarily to be about the perceived need to replace the Chinese control of the banking, business and academic institutions with ethnic Malays. In all fairness, some of this redistribution was likely needed but its always a question as to who has sold out and where is the allegiance. Yet, to this day, the cultural, religious conflicts as well as power struggles continue between the many ethnic groups and there is still unease about the potential of violence. The Cold War then helped to intensify these hostilities that were often used as a tool for control of money and resources.

Much more needs to be written about western government involvement in the May 13, 1969 Malaysian sordid affair. Unfortunately, there are always innocent victims from the machinations of greed and power mongering and never enough accountability.

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