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Dismissal of the first communist ministry in Kerala, and the role of extraneous agencies

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The Communist Party of India came into power in Kerala in 1957 during one of the tensest periods of the Cold War. Introducing landmark legislation on land, education and administration, the initiatives of the Communist ministry in Kerala provoked vested interests in countering Soviet influence in the region, thus making India a main theatre of the Cold War in South Asia. Efforts to counter the Communist ministry's political inroads in Kerala from within the country came to be known as the 'liberation struggle', which ultimately succeeded with the dismissal of the ministry. However, the ouster was part of a US-backed campaign of containment of communism in Asia. This paper explores how US-based agencies overthrew the democratically elected government in Kerala with the backing of Union Congress ministers and with the aid of the Indian Intelligence Bureau.

The cessation of the Second World War saw Soviet Russia and the United States of America follow two very different ideological paths. Soviet Russia embodied a world-vision shaped around socialism, and America clamoured for a democratic capitalist political economy. These two colossal states either drew into their fold, or forced alignments by other nation states, precipitating an ideological war on a global scale that came to be known as the Cold War. The new post-war world order soon determined much of international politics until the late 1980s. The establishment of the People's Republic of China by a Communist government with close political and military ties to the Soviet Union brought the Cold War into the Asiatic region. Consequently, fearing for its economic and strategic interests in the region, the US reacted by introducing a policy of containment of Communism similar to that which had already existed in Europe. Thus,

from 1949 onwards, East and Southeast Asia became the second most important battleground in the forty-four-year Cold War (1947-1991).

The anti-communist ministry operations of the US

In India, the unprecedented success of the Communist Party in elections held in 1952, both to the Lok Sabha and the state Legislative Assemblies, was especially alarming to the United States. The Communist Party emerged as the largest opposition party in the Lok Sabha by winning 3.3 percent of votes and sixteen seats¹. The position of the party in the Lok Sabha was further improved by the seats won by its electoral allies. These included the People's Democratic Front from Hyderabad with seven seats, and the independent Communists running on the ticket of the United Front of the Leftists with three seats from Travancore-Cochin. Thus, the Communist Party of India controlled twenty-six seats in the Lok Sabha opposing the Congress Party which controlled 364 seats². In the elections held to the State Legislative Assemblies across the country in 1952, the Communist Party won 4.38 percent of total votes³.

The anxiety of the US government over the growth of Communism in India was articulated by Dean Acheson, the Secretary of State, when speaking before the House of Representative's Foreign Affairs Committee, on 20 March 1952. He suggested that if this trend should continue they would have a growth of Communist strength in India and a very dangerous situation in Asia⁴. The US feared that if India turned toward Communism, and with it possibly a major part of Asia, the strategic balance of power between the East and the West would register an important shift.

The emergence of Communist Party as a majority party in the elections held to the Kerala State Legislative Assembly in 1957, and the doubling of the popular votes of the Communists from five percent in 1951-52 to ten percent in 1957 elections intensified the fear of the government of the USA.⁵ The US government observed that economic and political instability would make India vulnerable to Communism. It was because of this that the Congress Party in Kerala lost in 1957 and the Communists won the election.⁶ The Operations Coordinating Board of the US calculated that the Communists were able to form a government after the 1957 elections because the other political parties in the state had been divided and engaged in in-fighting amongst themselves. In addition,

¹ Election Commission of India, *Report on the First General Elections in India 1951-52*, Vol. II, p11.

² Victor M. Fic, *Peaceful Transition to Communism in India*, Bombay, 1969, p57.

³ Election Commission of India, *op. cit.*, p189.

⁴ Victor M. Fic, *Peaceful Transition to Communism in India*, *op. cit.*, p 60.

⁵ Memorandum from the director of the Office of South Asian Affairs (Bartlett) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs (Rountree), Document 175, *South Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1955-57*, Vol. VIII, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1987.

⁶ National Intelligence Estimate, Document 217, *South and Southeast Asia*, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60*, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

general apathy towards the election caused a relatively small voter turnout.⁷ In a memorandum sent by Henty Lodge Jr., Representative at the United Nations, to Dwight D. Eisenhower, then US President, on 21 February 1958, Lodge mentioned that the fundamental cause of the Communist success was because Kerala had the highest literacy of any state in India and that it therefore had a large number of educated people who had no jobs.⁸ But a telegram from the Delegation at the SEATO Council Meeting in Manila to the Department of State in Washington, dated 12 March 1958, stated that the growth of Communism in India was largely due to New Delhi's acceptance of Moscow propaganda, patronage of 'Commie' front organizations, and acceptance of some 270 million dollars of Soviet aid.⁹

The first official confirmation of the intervention of the US in Kerala affairs came from Daniel Patrick Moynihan, US Ambassador to India in the early seventies. Through his work 'A Dangerous Place' he mentioned that the US had twice, but only twice, interfered in Indian politics to the extent of providing money to a political party.¹⁰ He further stated that both times this was done in the face of a prospective Communist victory in a state election, once in Kerala and once in West Bengal where Calcutta was located, and both times the money was given to the Congress Party which had asked for it.¹¹ He added that it was given once to Indira Gandhi herself, who was then a party official.

While this revelation was made public, Ellsworth Bunker, US Ambassador to India during 1957-61, gave an interview to the Centre for Oral History at Columbia University on 18 June 1979, affirming that the US Government had given financial assistance to the Congress Party on the presumption that the Russians were putting money into the Communist Party of India, as they did elsewhere. However, he was not sure whether the assistance had gone through Indira Gandhi.¹² The principle of assistance had the approval of Washington, and Ambassador Bunker was given discretionary power as to how it might be used and in what amounts. Bunker recollected that S.K. Patil, the Union Minister, was the intermediary in that situation.¹³

⁷ Operations Coordinating Board, Special Report: Exploitation of Kerala Elections, Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs: Records 1952-61, White House Office, OCB Series, Box 3, Kerala Elections (India), Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, Abilene, Kansas, USA.

⁸ Memorandum from the Representative at the United Nations (Lodge) to US President Eisenhower, Document 216, Foreign Economic Policy, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. IV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1991.

⁹ Telegram from the Delegation at the SEATO Council Meeting to the Department of State, Document 4, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia and Laos, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XVI, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

¹⁰ Daniel P. Moynihan and Suzanna Weaver, *A Dangerous Place*, New York, 1978, p41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹² Interview with Ellsworth Bunker, US Ambassador to India 1957-61, by Ridney Jones on 18 June 1979, Centre for Oral History, Columbia University, New York, USA, pp 75-80.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Bunker testified that the Central Intelligence Agency (hereafter CIA) of the US very closely worked with the Intelligence Bureau in India. He revealed that the relations between CIA and IB were very good and very close, and the former was able to get through the Indian Intelligence people pretty good evidence as to what was being spent, on what, and in what amounts.¹⁴ He further mentioned that the anti-Communist operations of CIA in India were largely in collaboration with the authorities in India. The tactic was to attract the intervention of the government of India in Kerala affairs through large scale political propaganda and agitations.¹⁵

Dennis Kux, American Foreign Service Officer in US Embassy in India, through his autobiography 'Estranged Democracies, India and the United States 1941-1991', expressed that the lesson Washington drew from the Communist success in Kerala was that the economy failed to improve rapidly enough to satisfy the expectations of the people.¹⁶ He added that experts in the United States feared that if Jawaharlal Nehru's Indian Congress Party failed to achieve adequate economic growth in the country, the strength of the Communist alternative vision would continue to expand, presenting a real danger¹⁷. He recalled that the prevention of additional Keralas was an important argument for augmenting US assistance to India.

The United States government thus feared the successful working of the Communist government in Kerala because it would give the Communists an important foothold for further expanding in India, and would also enhance their respectability and prestige as a parliamentary political party. This, in-turn, had far-reaching implications for the rest of Asia, and certainly signalled advantage to proponents of international Communism¹⁸. It thus, in a sense, forced the hand of the US government in expanding anti-communist activities in Kerala. The operations of the US government in Kerala were on a modest scale consisting of a United States Information Services Library at Trivandrum, and two International Cooperation Administration employees engaged in agricultural education and research work¹⁹. The job of USIS was to avoid the charges in Kerala, and elsewhere, that US anti-communist propaganda had been increased to a marked degree. In addition, ICA activities were directed to avoid any action or situation which would benefit the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Howard B. Schaffer, Ellsworth Bunker: Global Troubleshooter Vietnam Hawk, Chapel Hill, 2003, pp 67-68.

¹⁶ Dennis Kux, Estranged Democracies-India and the United States 1941-91, New Delhi, 1993, p145.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Operations Coordinating Board Report, Document 168, South Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1955-57, Vol. VIII, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1987.

¹⁹ Ibid.

communists in Kerala²⁰. The US instructed ICA and USIS to continue its anti-communist operations in Kerala until it was opposed by the Communist government in Kerala²¹.

On 1 August 1957 the Department of State of the US sent an instruction to diplomatic missions in Madras, Calcutta, Bombay and New Delhi to obtain as complete information as possible on, and ensure continuing coverage of, events in Kerala, with particular reference to economic, political and administrative programs and tactics of the Communist government, an assessment of opposition parties and their future capabilities, especially the Congress Party and detailed information on key political figures in the state²². The Embassy at New Delhi was made responsible for reporting on the attitude of Central government and of Congress Party headquarters towards Kerala. The Consulate General at Madras was invested with the primary responsibility of reporting all developments within Kerala. The Consulate General was asked to report on following matters²³:

1. Selective dispatch or telegraphic reporting only on most significant developments.
2. Preparation of a weekly or bi-weekly classified roundup dispatch, including analytical comment on Kerala government.
3. Continuing contribution to the Embassy on any important developments which should also be covered in greater detail under 2 above.
4. Submission of a bi-weekly, unclassified dispatch reporting appropriate coverage of the press with respect to Kerala.

The Department of State further instructed the diplomatic missions in Madras, Calcutta, Bombay and New Delhi to observe the following measures²⁴.

1. The visit of American tourists in Kerala was to be demoted
2. On courtesy calls, the US officials visiting or stationed in Kerala were to deal all matters with the civil servants and to keep absolute minimum dealings with the Chief Minister, Communist Ministers or local level Communist officials.
3. The diplomatic missions were to keep technical assistance, economic aid and other associated projects for Kerala under constant review.

²⁰ Instruction from the Department of State to the Diplomatic Missions in India, Document 171, South Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1955-57, Vol. VIII, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1987.

²¹ Operations Coordinating Board Report, Document 168, South Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1955-57, Vol. VIII, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1987.

²² Instruction from the Department of State to the Diplomatic Missions in India, Document 171, South Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1955-57, Vol. VIII, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1987.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

4. The US economic aid, development of new projects, technical assistance and other related programmes in neighbouring Indian states were to be increased and fully publicized.
5. The ICA and USIS personal in Kerala at present levels were to be maintained, seeking to replace departing personal.
6. The American business men and other private interests planning to invest and expand business operations in Kerala were to be urged to proceed with caution in spite of Communist promises given to them. In the United States, appropriate US officials would take the initiative to ensure that US citizens with business interests in Kerala had the fullest information on conditions in Kerala and on problems faced by foreign business interests operating under Communist regimes in other parts of the world.

The US Department of State calculated on 25 January 1958 that the future of moderate government in India might depend on economic progress in next few years and, failing such progress, the Communists might be able to follow up electoral victory in Kerala with gains in more populous and strategic provinces in 1962 elections²⁵. The Department of State further believed that this might set in motion trend towards political extremism and regional separatism whose end results could be gradual Communist take-over²⁶. So, the economic empowerment of India was found as a panacea to combat the menace of Communism in India²⁷. The US provided India with loans of 225 million dollars: 150 million from Exim Bank and 75 million from the new Development Loan Fund. It also granted additional wheat to meet drought emergency in addition to shipments under current PL 480 agreement. But the President of the US recognised that these alone would not meet all of India's needs²⁸. So, the US government requested the countries of the 'free world', particularly Germany and Japan, to extend financial help to India to prevent the spread of Communism²⁹.

On 9 April 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, sent a note to Andrew J. Goodpaster, the Staff Secretary to the President, to personally deliver to Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA. The most important part of this note dealt with Kerala in India. The

²⁵ Telegram from the Department of the State to the Embassy in Germany, Document 202, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Telegram from the Ambassador in India (Bunker) to the Department of State, Document 173, South Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1955-57, Vol. VIII, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1987.

²⁸ Telegram from the Department of the State to the Embassy in Germany, Document 202, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

²⁹ Ibid.

President required the Embassy officials of the Department of State to prepare a operational plan of action in Kerala³⁰.

A dispatch from the US Embassy in India to the Department of State in Washington on 27 June 1958 stated that it had become clear over the previous year that the removal of the Communists from power in Kerala was related to the problem of combating Communism in India as a whole. It further stated that as the Department of State recognised, the key factors in the struggle were the government of India and the Congress Party³¹. It added that the government of India was more alert and exploiting more opportunities to discredit the Communists than the Congress Party, and it had been evinced in the action of four cabinet ministers, namely Pandit Pant, the Home Minister; Morarji Desai, the Finance Minister; A.K. Sen; the Law Minister and S.K. Patil, Transport and Communication Minister³². These leaders of the government of India convinced the US Embassy in India that the chief deterrent to Communism in India was satisfactory progress in economic development, and failure on this front would overshadow and render useless efforts in all other directions.

The US Embassy in India believed that under prevailing circumstances it was desirable for the US to have more direct access to and contact with developments in Kerala. For this, the Embassy considered the possibility of establishing a consulate-cum-reading room at Cochin. But the Embassy arrived at that their immediate interest could best be served by augmenting the staff of the Madras consulate by one officer with political and economic reporting experiences plus secretary and by providing him with sufficient travel funds to enable him to spend a portion of every month in the various parts of Kerala. The reasons for this recommendation were³³.

1. It could be implemented with minimum delay. Any negotiations with the government of India over the establishment of a consulate would have to be carefully timed and might be protracted.
2. The establishment of a consulate in a Communist state would arise undue suspicion and especially in Congress-controlled Cochin.
3. The location of consulate in Cochin would not serve the purpose of US government as Cochin was not an important listening post, politically, and travel to other parts of the state would be necessary.
4. There was no ground to maintain a consulate in the event of the overthrow of the Communist regime in Kerala.

³⁰ Letter of Dwight D. Eisenhower, President of the USA, dated 9 April 1958, Papers as President (Ann Whitman File), Box 16, Col. Andrew J. Goodpaster, Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, Abilene, Kansas, USA.

³¹ Dispatch from the Embassy in India to the Department of State, Document 211, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

5. The establishment of a US consulate was likely to lead the establishment of Iron Curtain country consulates.
6. The establishment of a consulate under a Communist regime was likely to pose the dilemma of increased trade requests threatening the basic policy of the US in Kerala.

The embassy was also decided to provide Congress officials at national, state and local levels with first-hand experience in the working of the US political system and particularly the political parties. The Embassy further informed the Department of State that it would seize every opportunity to suggest specific measures serving the purpose of denying aid and comfort to the Communists in general and in Kerala in particular. The Embassy took the following steps for this purpose³⁴.

1. To discourage economic expansion that was likely to produce benefits to Kerala while the Communists in power.
2. To discuss with the officials of the government of India with regard to its attitude towards the reported business offers of the Rumanians and Hungarians in Kerala
3. To discuss the attitude of the leaders of government of India towards Communism in the light of continues praising of Communist ministry in Kerala by Srimali, the Education Minister and Dey, the Minister for Community Development.

In a telegram from the US Embassy to the Department of State on 26 August 1958 Ellsworth Bunker, the US Ambassador to India, expressed that their objective was to have a stable, non-communist, economically sound and favouring free world government in India which would give hope for building an Asian bulwark against challenges of international communism, especially Communist Chinese strength and ideology³⁵.

The National Intelligence Estimate on 2 September 1958 observed that the Communist Party would probably benefit most from a decline in Congress Party strength. It was further found that the Communist Party was better organized than any other opposition political parties and its members were more disciplined and attained a degree of respectability recently through the adoption of the policy of constitutional activity culminating significant gains in the elections in 1957³⁶. The Estimate further stated that the Communist Party alone would offer a clear-cut alternative to the old Congress way of doing things and even if the Second Five Year Plan was successful, the Communist Party would probably attract increasing popular support in West Bengal where poverty and unemployment would remain acute. The Estimate identified that the fertile grounds

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in India to the Department of State, Document 215, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

³⁶ National Intelligence Estimate, Document 217, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

of Communist Party were the ranks of the educated unemployed and the industrial working force in urban areas. The Estimate concluded that if the Communist Party was to lose control of Kerala after failing to provide good government and economic improvement, its chances of extending its influence elsewhere would probably be reduced and the Communists were unlikely to pose a serious threat to the Congress Party in 1962 national and assembly elections in India³⁷.

In conversation with C. Douglas Dillon, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, Morarji Desai, the Finance Minister of India, on 8 September 1958 said that the Communist threat in India was overemphasized in the US³⁸. Addressing his remarks on the problem in Kerala, Desai stated that the people in Kerala were not basically Communists. According to him, the success of the Communists in Kerala was attributable to two factors: namely that on the whole, the people were better educated and therefore had high expectations which could not be fulfilled; also the Congress Party had become disorganized by internal squabbles and the well organized Communist Party had taken advantage of this. But now Desai was happy over growing disillusionment in Kerala with the Communist government since many of the intellectuals had found that their individual liberties were being threatened. He expressed the opinion that the Communist government would be defeated in Kerala in the next elections. He added that the Kerala experience was the most fortunate thing that could have happened to India because it pointed up the Communist threat and other Indian States would not be likely to follow Kerala's example³⁹.

On 12 May 1959 the US Embassy in India assessed that the Soviet Russia would use trade to assist the economy and the Communist Party in Kerala and Russia would take whatever economic losses to accomplish these ends⁴⁰. The Embassy further observed that economic aid to India must be strengthened to meet the dangers of Soviet economic offensive.

The telegram sent from US Embassy in India to the Department of State on 28 May 1959 showed that Embassy officials and Consulate General of Madras met at New Delhi on 25 May 1959 and discussed the proposed school-closure agitation in Kerala to begin in June 1959 and the consequent request to the President of India to intervene in Kerala when law and order break down. The meeting supposed that the agitation based on communalism would begin with the formulation of a charge-sheet by the opposition

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Memorandum of a Conversation of Department of State, Document 219, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Paper Prepared in the Embassy in India, Document 228, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

parties as a basis demanding the ouster of the Communist government in Kerala⁴¹. The meeting further observed that both the Congress High Command and the KPCC seemed to have adopted greater realism and agreed that Communist Party in Kerala was dangerous to India and should be ousted from power in Kerala⁴². The meeting made it clear that All-India Congress Party leadership was more conscious than KPCC to overthrow the Communist government in Kerala. The meeting foresaw that the Communist government would face the most serious challenges during June-July 1959 from agitations which might easily lead to violence that the Communist ministry would be unable to control and leave way open to the imposition of President's rule⁴³. The meeting required Thomas W. Simons, the Consul General in Madras, to lend US assistance to non-Communist government in Kerala to be newly formed on the fall of Communist administration. The US assistance to the new government would be supply of food grains via PL 480; increased trade in such products as corn, cashew, pepper in order to strengthen indigenous industries; increased participation of US private investment in medium-size industries such as rayon, paper, rubber manufacture, sugar and tapioca plants; and US financial assistance for impact projects in the area⁴⁴. The meeting concluded that possibilities would be explored with selected government of India and diplomatic personnel especially from NATO countries for effective and immediate cooperation with new non-Communist government of Kerala to resolve some Kerala's basic economic problems.

The government of the US offered financial assistance to start the liberation struggle⁴⁵. The assistance was given through the Churches and other organizations in Kerala to remove the Communist ministry through the liberation struggle⁴⁶. Ellsworth Bunker, the US Ambassador to India, reviewed the liberation struggle in Kerala in June 1959. He expressed doubt that this would result in the overthrow of the Communist government in Kerala, feeling that the action was somewhat premature, though it was difficult to foresee how something of this kind, once started, would end up⁴⁷. He observed that the new Congress Party leader, R. Sankar, was more of a practical politician.

⁴¹ Telegram from the Embassy in India to the Department of State, Document 231, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Email Reply from V.R. Krishna Iyer, 31 January 2014.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Memorandum of a Conversation of Department of State, Document 233, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

Liberation struggle

The genesis of the liberation struggle may be traced back to the very day the Communists assumed power in the state. However, it became a popular agitation only from 12 June 1959 with school closure demanding the dismissal of the first Communist ministry in Kerala. In the struggle, all the major opposition political parties: Congress Party, Praja Socialist Party, Muslim League and Revolutionary Socialist Party and the community organisations- Catholic Church and Nair Service Society-joined together under the leadership of Mannath Padmanabhan, the NSS leader, with the support of All India Congress Committee. Each group had their own grievances against the Communist government.

The main plight of the Catholic Church was Kerala Education Act of 1958. The Kerala Education Act tried to impose the control of the government on the private schools run by government grant. The Catholic Church owned majority of private schools in Kerala and they demanded the withdrawal of the controversial provisions of the Kerala Education Act. The Nair Service Society was unsatisfied with the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill. The bill aimed to take over the excess land from the landed magnets for distributing among the landless. The Nairs were the main landowning community in Kerala. So the Nair Service Society decided to strike against the government as the chief protector of the interests of the Nairs. But the Communist ministry did not heed the demands of the Catholic Church and the Nair Service Society. When they realised that the pressure and persuasion were not enough to resist the Communist onslaught on them, the Christians and Nairs were left with no other choice but to decide an all-out political war to oust the Communists from power. Soon the agitations of the Catholic Church and the Nair Service Society and the opposition political parties merged into one and they adopted the non-heard extra-constitutional method of liberation struggle or vimochana samaram to oust the Communist government from power.

The Muslim League had not even minor grievances against the Communist government. In fact, it disagreed with some of the charges levelled by other parties against the government, particularly in regard to the reservations in services and the appointment of a Muslim to the State Public Service Commission. However, the Muslim League joined the liberation struggle to get recognition as an all-India organisation from the Congress Party⁴⁸.

In Kerala, the Communist government provided a stable government as there had never been before. The short period of seven years between 1949 and 1956 had witnessed the rise and fall of five ministers - four Congress and one PSP - in Travancore-Cochin. These ministries were the product of political instability, groupism, and internal strife. Now these parties were denied opportunity to come to power again because of the stability of the Communist government. It antagonized the opposition political parties.

⁴⁸ The Hindu, 31 July 1959.

The educational and land reforms introduced by the Communist government were actually the measures the previous Congress and PSP regimes tried to implement. But this did not materialize because of the stiff opposition from the Catholic Church and the landed magnates. These vested interests had no shame in going to any extent to protect their interests including the unseating of the government in power. On coming to power the Communist government thus introduced the educational and land reforms which the previous regimes failed to implement. It irked not only the vested interests but also the Congress Party and PSP which formed the previous governments. The Congress Party and the Praja Socialist Party believed that the successful implementation of the educational and agrarian reforms would increase the popularity of the Communist government among the teachers and the peasants, and it would stand in the way of the coming of the Congress Party and PSP again to power. It forced, the Congress Party and the PSP would align with the Catholic Church and the NSS to prevent the implementation of the educational and agrarian reforms.

Initially the RSP supported the Communist government but later turned against it⁴⁹. The only complaint the RSP had against the government was in regard to its labour policy. The RSP felt that the government had followed a systematic policy of encouraging only unions sponsored by the Communists and adopted a completely hostile attitude towards other unions.

This was for the first time in India that a non-Congress Party emerged as a majority party on the floor of the legislative assembly and formed a government. It surprised and shocked the all India Congress leadership. That is why the AICC extended support to the KPCC to agitate with other opposition political parties and community organisations against the Communist government in the form of a 'liberation struggle'. Had the AICC not been interested in ousting the democratically elected Communist government, it would have instructed the KPCC to withdraw from the agitation and reprimand the errant Congressmen.

When the 'liberation struggle' started, the Nehru government did not give moral and political protection to the Kerala government. The least that Nehru as Prime Minister could have done was to condemn the movement which was meant to paralyse the administration. As the government of Kerala was a part of the administration of the whole of India, and as such under the constitution, they were entitled to protections. While Nehru expressed himself against the agitation in Bombay, and violent activities against the Punjab government, regarding Kerala, his attitude had been one of silent eloquence or of condemnation of the Communist government⁵⁰. In Uttar Pradesh, the birth place of Nehru, all the opposition, and the one-third of the Congress members, rallied together against the government resulting in the lack of majority support of the government in

⁴⁹ C.V.K. Panikkar, *What is Happening in Kerala?*, Revolutionary Socialist Party Publication, Delhi, 1957, p2.

⁵⁰ *The Hindu*, 28 July 1959.

the legislature, and Nehru remained moot on these developments⁵¹. Instead of making adequate measures to contain the agitation, Nehru dubbed it as a mass upsurge. This, in turn, only helped the agitation to become a formidable one. This was a grossly discriminatory attitude.

Nehru's appeal of non-violence in the agitation might be interpreted as an indirect approval of the agitation of Congressmen in Kerala against the Communist government. Moreover, Nehru did not offer any comment on the open alliance of Congressmen in Kerala with the NSS and Catholic Church. Nehru characterised the liberation struggle in Kerala as a civil war just before the dismissal of the ministry. But the agitation in Kerala was not a civil war in the true sense of the term, as there was no struggle between two groups of people.

Nehru was found guilty of not taking tough action against the Congressmen for promoting violence against the Communist government. Had Nehru intervened earlier and warned against the participation of KPCC in the struggle to oust the Communist government, the liberation struggle would have failed. This was because the KPCC was the main force behind the agitation in Kerala, and R. Sankar spoke not merely as the President of the KPCC but also as one of the warlords of the vimochana samaram⁵². The liberators had sound financial backing and received economic support from Christian organisations in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada as well as West Germany⁵³. Father Joseph Vadakkan, one of the main forces behind the liberation struggle, later confessed that he had known several persons receiving lakhs of dollars from United States, in order to fund the liberation struggle⁵⁴. Industrialists and capitalists made their contributions through the churches⁵⁵, and one Mannath Padmanabhan, alone spent as much as fifty lakh rupees on the liberation movement⁵⁶.

The Communist government was also equally responsible for the agitation. Taking examples from Soviet Russia, the first Communist ministry in Kerala used its power to spread Communist ideology through the governmental machinery. The appointments of the people's committees in order to supplement the activities of the officialdom reduced the distance between the party workers and government in running the administration. The focus of these committees was the protection of party interests. Even school children were not spared. Through the newly revised text books, the government tried to inculcate school children with the importance of Communism and the achievements of the Communist countries. This infuriated the Catholic Church. The formation of cell courts with Communist men to decide criminal cases went against the principle of natural

⁵¹ P. Govinda Pillai(ed.), *EMSinte Sampoorana Kritikal* (Mal.), Vol. XXII, Trivandrum, 2002, p131.

⁵² *The Hindu*, 30 July 1959.

⁵³ *The Desabhimani*, 11 August 1959; 2 and 3 August 1959.

⁵⁴ Joseph Vadakkan, *Ente Kuthippum Kithappum* (Mal.), op. cit., pp127-28.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *The Hindu*, 26 August 1959.

justice. It attracted the wrath of the non-Communists. Again, the government supported Communist culprits, and it attracted reverse remarks even from the judiciary, on multiple occasions, against the government. Worst of all, the promotion of Communist trade unions by the government irked other trade unions and managers. It only swelled the number of liberators.

All these did not mean that other Congress-ruled states were free from similar charges⁵⁷. Nor did the previous Congress and PSP regimes in Travancore-Cochin. But there was a difference between other Congress-ruled states and the first Communist government in Kerala. As other Congress-ruled states enjoyed the support and backing of the Union government, no liberation struggle would be successful through the intervention of the Union government under Article 356 of the Constitution of India. But in Kerala, the liberators thought that Central intervention was possible.

The failure of the Communist government rested in the fact that it did not turn up for a round table conference with the Christian managements and Catholic Church in the initial stages of the introduction of the Education Bill. The government invited the managements and church for a conference only at the insistence of Nehru in the first week of July 1959 when the agitation for toppling the ministry reached at a stage which could not be suppressed through a mere conference. On the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill, the government would have prepared the bill so as to avoid the wrath of the small holders of Travancore.

The extreme anti-Communist feeling was propagated based on caste and religion by the opponents of the Communist government. The government could not effectively suppress it. It brought even the sympathisers against the government. The Communist ministry also failed to prove beyond doubt certain allegations levelled against the government. The opposition parties used it as a powerful weapon to oust the ministry.

The government stopped the usage of preventive detention and it was not used even once in Kerala under Communist regime⁵⁸. The government failed to take legal action against those who contributed inflammatory speeches, cooked stories and articles. It spread the message that the government was weak.

The Communist Party itself attested to the failures of its government, and in many respects making the liberation struggle unavoidable. The Fifth State Conference of the party, held in Trissur in November 1959, held the view that if the Communist government paid attention to certain issues the volume of the liberation struggle would have been reduced⁵⁹. The conference observed that the government failed to bring to its side even the beneficiaries of the administration of Communist ministry, particularly teachers, small holders, and common man, and this could be gauged from the Education Bill agitation

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Rashtriya Report approved by the Fifth Kerala State Conference of the Communist Party (Mal.), Trichur, 24- 29 November 1959, p51.

(1957), students' boat strike agitation (1958) and liberation struggle (1959). It stated that in all these struggles, the main attention of the government was the adoption of same methods the opposition used-suppression of struggle and the government failed to adopt reconciliation to bring the opponents to their sides and its uncompromising attitude was somewhat changed only when the liberation struggle reached its zenith. The conference added that that is why the government could not differentiate between the Christian Church and the Christians interested in the protection of the rights of the teachers⁶⁰.

The Fifth Kerala State Conference further expressed that delay in the distribution of excess land, formation of fisheries cooperative societies, the passage of the Prevention of Corruption Act and the Industrial Relations Bill, improper administration of forests, lack of government support to middle and small holders to start small scale industries and the maladministration of the department of education distanced people from the government⁶¹. The conference expressed the hope that if all these maladies were addressed properly, a large section of people would have sided with the government. The conference concluded that the government failed to check agitations and struggles properly.

The USA and the dismissal of the ministry

In his conversation with Murphy, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Ellsworth Bunker, the US Ambassador to India, on 19 June 1959 stated that he thought the Congress High Command had been correct in following a policy of permitting the Communist government to remain in office to commit mistakes and to demonstrate the people of Kerala that it was unable to fulfil its campaign promises⁶². The Ambassador further said that he believed the current agitation in Kerala for the overthrow of the Communist ministry in Kerala was premature in as much as the Congress Party in Kerala was not yet able to form an alternative government⁶³. He added that there was some hope that the new President of the KPCC, R. Sankar, would be able to reorganize and revitalize the Kerala Congress. Bunker felt that Indira Gandhi was a considerable improvement as the President of the Congress Party over his predecessor, U.N. Dhebar.

On 25 June 1959, Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA, discussed developments in Kerala during his intelligence briefing at the 411th meeting of the National Security Council; saying:

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp52-53.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Memorandum of a Conversation between the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Murphy) and the Ambassador to India (Bunker), Document 75, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

⁶³ Ibid.

Agitation against the Communist government of Kerala State in India has continued to be quite strong. Fortunately for us, the Communist government in that state had made a number of grave mistakes. They had put 6,300 people in prison and fourteen had been killed. Nehru had gone down to Kerala to look the situation over. He has the theoretical power to take over the State government but he is obviously loath to do so if he can avoid the step. We do not know precisely what Nehru will do but our guess is that he will do nothing. If this guess is correct, it is very unlikely that local agitation alone will prove sufficient to oust the Communist government. Meanwhile, these developments have posed a very grave issue for the entire Congress Party in India. The party is split down the middle as to whether to throw out the Kerala Communists or not.⁶⁴

On 9 July 1959 Allen Dulles, Director of CIA, again discussed the Kerala situation during his intelligence briefing at the 412th meeting of the National Security Council. He expressed:

As for the campaign against the Communist government in Kerala State in India, it is gaining steadily in intensity. Meanwhile Nehru is still trying to decide whether he should throw out the Communist government and institute presidential government from New Delhi. Nehru obviously does not wish to do this but may ultimately be forced to take the step.⁶⁵

The Intelligence Bureau in India served as the agent of the CIA, and the main source of information on Kerala affairs. The Hindu reported on 18 April 1957 that the Intelligence Bureau had strengthened its service in Kerala once the Communists came to power. B.N. Mullik, then Director of IB, was against the Communist government in Kerala and played the central role in taking the decision of the dismissal of the ministry. His biography titled "My Years with Nehru 1948-64" is a testimony to that.

The IB had very good organization in Kerala under M. Gopalakrishna Menon and the agency came to know of every move of the party and the government as soon as it was planned. When Pandit Pant, the Union Home Minister, asked about the intervention of the Centre in Kerala affairs on 5 July 1959, B.N. Mullik answered that it would be better to let the government of Kerala collapse by the force of events, rather than by any action of the Central government⁶⁶. Both the Home Minister and the Prime Minister agreed with the view tendered by B.N. Mullik.

On 13 July 1959 E.M.S. Namboodiripad, the Chief Minister of Kerala, categorically stated that the Communist government would not resign and seek fresh elections in view of the present agitation⁶⁷. The Communist Party also reiterated the same view⁶⁸. It forced

⁶⁴ Editorial Note, Document 235, South and Southeast Asia, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-60, Vol. XV, Office of the Historian, US Department of State, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ B.N. Mullik, My Years with Nehru 1948-1964, New Delhi, 1972, p351.

⁶⁷ The Hindu, 14 July 1959.

⁶⁸ The Hindu, 18 July 1959.

B.N. Mullik to change his stance. By 18 July 1959, he came to the view that time had come for the Central government to intervene and he expressed it to the Home Minister⁶⁹. But the Home Secretary, B.N. Jha, felt that no Central action should be taken, as the state government had its majority in the assembly intact and no constitutional crisis had developed.

On 19 July 1959, the Home Minister asked B.N. Mullik to prepare a note giving the entire history of the Kerala struggle and proving the necessity of Central action. B.N. Mullik prepared the note and produced it on the very next day before the Home Minister, Pandit Pant. The Home Minister went through the note very carefully and made several corrections and improvements and then asked B.N. Mullik to take that report to the Prime Minister which he did. The Prime Minister also went through the note carefully and ultimately made the laconic remark that probably Central action had become necessary⁷⁰.

On 20 July 1959 B.N. Mullik reiterated the Home Minister that the Central action in Kerala should not be delayed and certainly this action must be taken before 9 August 1959⁷¹. The liberators planned a mammoth picketing of state secretariat on this day⁷². Mullik cautioned that the picketing would cause massive bloodshed and disorder in Kerala. However, B.N. Jha, the Home Secretary, still maintained his opposition to Central take-over in Kerala. On 22 July 1959 a charge sheet against the government of Kerala was prepared by B.N. Mullik and A.K. Sen, the Law Minister, at the instance of Home Minister. Then the Home Minister asked to B.N. Mullik to send the charge-sheet to the Governor of Kerala, so that he could have the facts before him and then come to his own decision whether Central action was necessary⁷³. But no move came from the Governor till 26 July 1959.

Therefore, on 26 July 1959 the Home Minister asked the Home Secretary, B.N. Jha, who was not in favour of intervention, to ring up the Governor by telephone in the presence of B.N. Mullik, so that Jha should not sound indecisive. Jha telephoned to the Governor in the presence of B.N. Mullik in the course of which the latter told to the Governor that he should not delay his report based on his own judgment any more. On the same day Jha met the Prime Minister as per the instruction given by the Home Minister, Pandit Pant, and he returned with a sense of satisfaction and said to B.N. Mullik that though they were all 'action-wallahs', the Prime Minister had told him that no decision had been taken on any Central action on Kerala⁷⁴. That evening Pandit Pant, the Union Home Minister, asked to B.N. Mullik as to whether he was present during Jha's talks with

⁶⁹ B.N. Mullik, *My Years with Nehru 1948-1964*, op. cit., p352.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *The Hindu*, 26 July 1959.

⁷³ B.N. Mullik, *My Years with Nehru 1948-1964*, op. cit., p355.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p356.

the Governor and whether the Governor understood the trend properly, and he sounded in the affirmative.

B.N. Mullik met the Prime Minister and the Home Minister next day and produced the evidence that Communist ministry in Kerala itself wanted Central take-over and urged them that there should be no more hesitation in dismissing the government⁷⁵. But E.M.S. Namboodiripad himself rejected it later⁷⁶. The assessment of political trends made by the IB was more acceptable to Nehru than that of the Congress Party because the later was bound to be coloured or biased⁷⁷. The Prime Minister agreed that action had to be taken and B.N. Mullik was asked to talk to the Home Minister about it.

On 29 July 1959 B.N. Mullik met the Home Minister and the former was asked by the latter to verify whether the Governor was sending the report. B.N. Mullik checked it and found that the Governor was due to dispatch the report by that afternoon's air service. If so the report would reach New Delhi only on the 30th morning of July 1959. This was not satisfactory to Pandit Pant and he wanted the full verbatim contents of the report that very night of 29 July 1959⁷⁸. So B.N. Mullik asked Ravindran, Officer of IB at Madras, to obtain this report with the consent of the Governor during the halt of the plane at Madras, open it and communicate the contents to B.N. Mullik on telephone and then dispatch it by the same plane⁷⁹. From seven to eight that evening Ravindran dictated the report from Madras on secraphone to B.N. Mullik. In this way, the entire report of the governor, consisting of about thirty pages, recommending the supersession of the government of Kerala, was relayed on the telephone. By 10 p.m., B.N. Mullik produced the report before Pandit Pant, the Home Minister.

As soon as the formal report of the Governor arrived on 30 July 1959, orders dismissing the Communist government in Kerala and its takeover by the Central government, were issued and these orders became effective from 31 July 1959.

Conclusion

The government of the United States feared that the successful working of the Communist ministry in Kerala would cause Communist victories in the forthcoming general elections to the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies favourable to international Communism. In response, the US beefed up its anti-Communist operations in India in general and Kerala in particular. The CIA was tasked with disrupting this possibility, and largely operated through the Indian Intelligence Bureau and the Congress Party at the Centre. The main strategy of the CIA was to discredit the Communist government in Kerala and to publicise that the Communist government in Kerala failed to provide political stability

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Govinda Pillai (ed.), *EMSinte Sampoorana Kritikal* (Mal.), Vol. XXII, Trivandrum, 2002, p65

⁷⁷ B.N. Mullik, *My Years with Nehru 1948-1964*, op. cit., p361.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p357.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

and economic improvement so as to check the spread of Communism in the region. The US calculated that the main force behind the growth of Communism in India was its economic backwardness. Consequently, the US government started the process of economic empowerment of India through several methods. During this time the opposition political parties and the community organizations started the liberation struggle to oust the Communist ministry and CIA monetarily helped the struggle. But, the CIA found that the local agitations alone would not topple the ministry and operations at higher level were necessary. The CIA saw this higher level in the Intelligence Bureau and the Congressmen at Centre. Even though Nehru stubbornly opposed the intervention of the Union in Kerala, he became prey to the larger conspiracy hatched by the IB and Congressmen at the Centre. 🙄

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