

MALAYSIA

A few weeks after the students took to the streets in Kuala Lumpur, Regional Editor Denzil Peiris visited rural Malaysia where he investigated the plight of the peasants, whose poor conditions had sparked the student unrest



The emerging rural revolution

AWANG, the owner of a rubber smallholding in a village in Baling, northern Malaysia, has what the Malays call a *matang sawo* complexion - it is the light-brown colour of milk chocolate. Elsewhere in Malaysia, the grilling sun has given the men who work in the open a swarthy look. For Awang, however, the sun is filtered through the green canopy of his rubber trees, and is one of the rare kindly gestures he has known from either nature or man.

Awang, about 5ft 2in and 35 years old, has a family of six - his wife, their four children and a sister who was divorced after two years of marriage. From his holding of five acres he gets between 8 lbs and 10 lbs of latex a day. Reading the evening sky to judge the weather forecast for the following day, Awang knows that if it rains before dawn he will not go out to tap. The bark is wet, and though he does not understand the biological change that occurs within the tree, he knows there is no point in making that 5 am incision on the bark with his tapping knife... the tree will not yield its milk. On the average, accordingly, he can expect to tap for 25 days a month.

In November 1974 he was getting only 20 Malaysian cents for a pound of latex. The price of the finest quality sheet was low and had dropped in one day to M\$1.06 per kilo (about 2.2 lbs). Some days, the dealers held off buying latex. Even at the best of times last year, when the price of sheet had soared to a peak of \$2.65 per kilo in January, the boom was not impressively reflected in Awang's earnings. The dealers - the middlemen between the tappers and the export markets - were creaming off what should have been his share. Awang's earnings, therefore, averaged \$1.20 a day.

Awang has a little poultry and a few banana and papaya trees. He sells about four eggs a day at 10 cents each, and also the fruit. Although he has a cassava plot for his own consumption, he has to buy his rice, salt, cooking oils, fish - mostly salted and costing about 50 cents for a family meal each day. Schooling is free, but Awang spends about \$6 a month on his children's travelling expenses. The children need school uniforms, and the whole family clothes

rice. Baling is located in a region which does not get rice at the subsidised price of between 45 and 47 cents. For two rice meals a day, Awang's family needs 4 lbs at 67 cents a catty (1.3 lbs).

To live at a minimum level of comfort, the smallholder would need \$3 a day. To live just above the subsistence level, Awang needs \$1.50 daily. He is one of 545,000 smallholders all over Peninsular Malaysia (without Sarawak and Sabah), whose families make up 3 million of Peninsular Malaysia's 9.77 million population. They are one of the cornerstones on which Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak and his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) have built their pyramid of power.

According to the Treasury's Economic Report for 1974-75, of these smallholders growing various crops, about 48% have less than 3-5 acres of land each, about 20% from 3-5 acres and another 20% from 5-10 acres. The remaining 12% hold anything from 10-99 acres. To glean a modestly adequate subsistence from the land, a man needs at least 6 acres, some official sources say. Some of the rubber smallholders have set apart one acre of land for rice. About 25% of the total smallholders do not own their land, and either pay a fixed rent or share their crops with the landowner.

Awang is one of the lucky ones; he owns his land. But what Awang and other smallholders in Baling (and elsewhere) cannot understand is why the price of rubber alone should have drop-

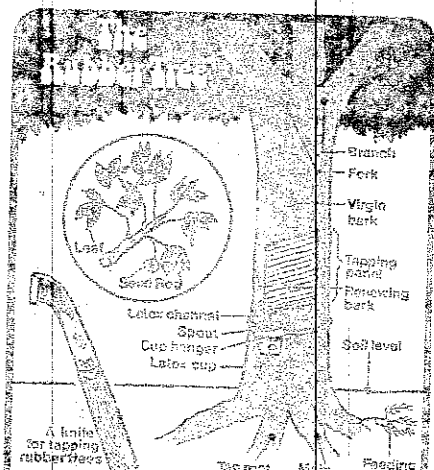
ped when the prices of all other essential commodities have increased. The Treasury Report acknowledges that consumer prices "have galloped to an annual rate of about 18% after a rise of 10.5% last year." In March it had reached the high annual rate of 24% and had fallen thereafter, according to the Treasury, but other sources say consumer prices rose 22% in November and that the prices of some items had risen by between 50%-200%. In October the sharpest increases were in food. Compared with August 1973, food prices were up by 24.3%.

Awang had heard of some tenant families in smallholdings who were forced to eat yams and other low-quality foods instead of rice. He had heard, too, of three or four deaths of people who had eaten jungle yams - through long storage the yams had developed poisonous elements. According to one Government doctor, mothers in some parts of Malaysia no longer breast-feed their children but give them powdered milk. Now, however, they are diluting the powdered milk because it has doubled in cost. The result has been increasing malnutrition among infants.

Awang also cannot understand why he should have had to exchange more than two catties of rubber for a single catty of rice, which accounts for 50% of a peasant family's total expenditure. And in November last year, it rained frequently and Awang had no latex to sell.

THE explosion came in mid-November in the Baling district. Awang will not say whether he joined them or not, but peasants did join protest marches against deteriorating conditions. The biggest of these demonstrations was on November 21 when about 12,000 peasants took to the streets. It was the first time in 28 years that peasants had marched. Previously, they had joined the massive popular opposition to the British proposal for a Malayan union in 1946.

"Hunger marches" are so frequent in India and South Asia that, like the callouses on peasants' feet, they are ignored. The Malaysian authorities are not



November 21. The word reached the several university campuses in Malaysia, although the newspapers were either ignorant of the protests, or had been told to black out their reports. The next stage in the "Baling explosion" was the eruption in the universities, first on the *padang* (open space) in Kuala Lumpur, then on the campuses in the capital and among students in some of the technical, agricultural and other universities elsewhere. All of these were demonstrations of sympathy and support for the undeniable social distress in Baling. One of the leaflets distributed by some university students not only analysed the "Baling issue," but also referred to "the imperialists' plunder of our natural resources and exploitation of our workers and peasants." The leaflet alleged that

marks a new phase — a qualitative change — in Malaysian politics. The slightly left of centre, slightly right of centre Government of Tun Abdul Razak is being attacked by an extreme right and left of Malays, both waving the banner of social justice.

The most formidable force in this new opposition to what, in fact, is a Malay Government, claims legitimacy from the principles of Islam. Its concepts of social justice are based on Islamic ideas of the equality of man, the distribution of wealth, and business ethics. It is a serious threat to the Government of a country so structured that the approval of the Malays is presently the inescapable condition for Parliamentary power. Hitherto, the opposition was either nakedly communist or based on Chinese dissatisfactions. Whatever "red herrings" were drawn by the Government across the Baling upsurge, it was essentially and predominantly a confrontation between Malays and their Malay Government.

The Baling affair also linked dissatisfactions among the politically-conscious students and lecturers with the problems of the masses outside the campus. Up to now, campus "radicalism" was for student rights. Now it is associated with rural poverty, and will increasingly be so. Baling also revealed the increasing alienation and disenchantment of the emerging, though small, Malayan intelligentsia with the political style of the Razak Government. It further revealed the poverty of structures

for free debate and the expression of dissident opinion in the Malaysian political system. The last elections brought Malaysia, through the ballot box, almost to the edge of a one-party state.

Both the State-owned newspapers and other media, and the publications in the private sector, operate under controls and directives from the Government. Malaysia's system of censorship has now become self-defeating. Protest and dissent have gone underground. Leaflets are surreptitiously left in public places or dropped in letter boxes and presumably reach a wide readership. Even if they are grotesque distortions or fabrications, the Government cannot reply to them. Malaysia is another Southeast Asian country coming face to face with the fact that, in an open society with a free press, although freedom can degenerate into licence, the right to criticise and to hold contrary opinion must, in the long run, constitute the surest safeguard to political and economic stability.

development in the rural areas. The industries in the urban complexes, the Arabian Nights' opulence of hotels for tourists, the cars that clog the city roads and the spending spree of the *nouveaux-riches* and the new entrepreneurs, are the affluent side of a dual economy of some industrial growth along with an impoverished peasantry.

Statistically, Malaysia has had a "boom-boom" growth rate. But in terms of human conditions, a significant improvement in the rural people's lives has not occurred, though some growth may be observed. Malaysia is not unique in this. It is the Asian drama: a microscopic number of the opulent urban living it up amid peasant poverty.

Ironically, the most outstanding improvement in rural life is now turning into a two-edged sword. In the rural areas, education is widespread and federal and state government scholarships offer rural youth the ladders to the universities. However, one of its disturbing impacts is to make the rural student attending a city university agonisingly aware of the poverty back home in his *kampong*. University education also furnishes him with the knowledge for a critical questioning of Government policies and conduct. The spread of academic education is not matched with the growth of white-collar jobs. As the number of job-seekers grows, the rural young are beginning to think it is not enough to be a Malay: to get early employment, one must be a Malay with proper connections.

A Government White Paper, explaining the University of Malaya protest, saw the hidden hand of communist manipulation operating under the cover of the Chinese Language Society. As a general theory that the communists could exploit cultural movements, it is plausible. As a blanket explanation for what happened at the universities, it is a tattered cloth. It raised several questions that could embarrass the Government. How, for instance, was it that despite the cosseting and pampering of the Malayan students by the Government, the privileged, favourite offspring became the prodigal son? Among the evidence offered of communist subversion was the seizure of "toy rifles" — presumably power comes from the barrel of a pop gun. But the biggest hole in the document was that it did not touch on the demonstrations by the students of the Kebangsaan University (National University). Unlike the multi-racial University of Malaya, Kebangsaan is almost entirely Malay. Many of the girls there dress in the traditional, conservative Muslim style. Between 70%–80% of its students are non-ethnic Chinese. They



Student unrest: Demonstrations of sympathy.

"from 1967 to 1971, the total capital outflow amounted to \$3,017 million — three times the total public expenditure of \$1,007 million in the First Malaya Plan." They claimed that in 1969 alone, "British imperialists looted our country of \$2.2 million." The leaflet asked the Government, "in view of such unprecedented plunder, why do you go all out to invite foreign 'investment' with such benefits as exploitation of our worker-peasants, tax holidays, etc?"

One of the students' demands called for the nationalisation of "multinationals" such as Sime Darby. But the attack on foreign investors was peripheral. Possibly, it came from the Socialist Club in the University of Malaya. The eye of the storm was the issue of rural poverty, which had seized almost all students in the several universities, regardless of ideology.

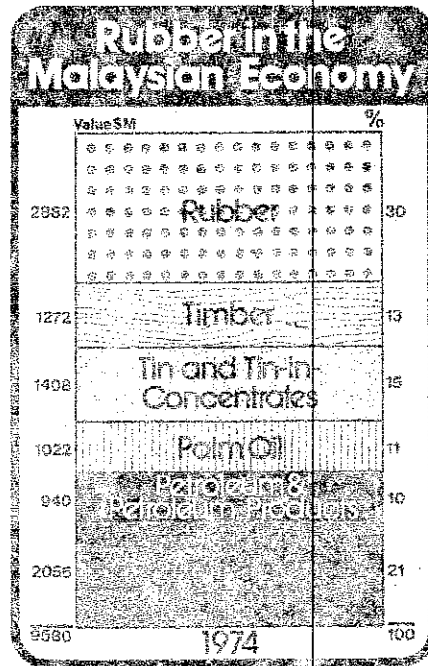
Baling already has its place in Malaysian political history. It was here, in a small mountain village, that Tunku Abdul Rahman, the then Prime Minister, met the communist leader, Chin Peng,

of several factors. There is pervasive and intense student dissatisfaction with the Government's failure to deal with corrupt politicians. The complaint is that, as in the case of the Selangor Chief Minister Dato Harun, investigations have been made but no information is available on their outcome. Students are disappointed, too, in the leadership, especially with UMNO's "Young Turks," Dr Mahathir, the Minister for Education, and Musa Hitam, Minister for Primary Industries, who were expected to give politics a new look. As in Singapore, the students resent the Government's way of talking down to them: They find most objectionable the Government's "Big Daddy" mentality: The Government knows best — "leave us alone and let us get on with the job."

The students were supported by a large number of the academic staff. Several of them — one, a Malay aristocrat — were arrested. They share the students' resentment of the Government's elitist approach. Both students and staff are united in their detestation of the illiberal atmosphere in Malaysia. Academics and students are perturbed by the Government's failure to tackle inflation and other economic difficulties. But the most compelling factor was that rural poverty struck a responsive chord in the Malaysian student. Apart from the high proportion of students from the rural communities in Kebangsaan and other universities, about 1,000 students in the University of Malaya are "sons of rural people," according to its Vice-Chancellor, Ungku Aziz.

Protest about Baling was, accordingly, not an intellectual exercise. It was a gut reaction from the students' own experience of rural misery. It was this which sent them on to the roads of Kuala Lumpur and to the Selangor padang.

NOOR, from Dungung, a village in Trengganu, is a 23-year-old undergraduate in the arts faculty of the University of Malaya. His father is dead, killed in an accident, and his family is very poor, with little to live on except the produce of five coconut trees and crops of long beans, cucumber, brinjals and red peppers. The family has no padi land. The vegetable crops give it a return of between \$5-\$6 per month. There is no furniture in the house and a mat spread on the floor substitutes for a bed. Noor has a scholarship of \$2,800 a year to see him through university. He sends his mother \$30 a month from what he has left after paying for his board and other expenses. Noor is by no means unique. The 1,000 rural students



the parents and a mat for the children. When they go home for the holidays, the students help out in the fields.

Insofar as the agitation among the peasants and the students was organised or directed, it would be naive to presume that the communists did not "do their thing." Although evidence is lacking of their direct involvement, one may expect that seeing the tensions in Baling they would have encouraged the protests. But observers agree that the main thrusts behind the peasants and the students were ABIM (Angkatan — Force, Belia — Youth, Islam, Malaysia) and the socialist-inclined Fary Rayayat (People's Party). Party Rayayat's immediate significance is that it is a bridge between Malay and Chinese radicals in a society in which, so far, each of these subsections in the two communities has functioned independently. Several university lecturers and students are office-bearers and activists. The potent force in Malaysia, where 80% of the people are from impoverished rural communities and the burgeoning intelligentsia is of rural origin and still holds fast to Islam, is ABIM.

ABIM's leader is Anwer Ebrahim. He is in his 30s. He was a president of the University of Malaysia Students' Union. His organisation has grown to dominate the Government-sponsored Malayan Youth Council, which is the national centre for all youth organisations. Ebrahim was held under the Internal Security Act in the Baling crisis.

ABIM's strength is less in its numbers than in the enthusiasm of its members. The movement was started in the universities a few years ago and has spread over the whole country. Its members

Recently, it has found supporters in the army. ABIM stands for an Islamic religious purism in politics and social life. It is organised on the basis of cells. Members meet on Fridays (the Muslim sabbath) and after prayers political talks are held. Most of its activists are in the religious institutions of higher learning. Some of the activists are graduates who have returned from similar institutions of Baghdad, Mecca and Medina. The movement is against corruption and the "decadence" of the West. It argues that the salvation of the Malays is in practising a purer version of Islam. There are many students in Baling and other parts of Kedah and Kelantan, the traditional Malay states which had been neglected educationally, who have returned from religious institutions of higher learning in Egypt.

ONE of the Government's responses to the deteriorating incomes of the rubber smallholders was to buy their rubber direct through State purchasing centres, thus eliminating the middleman. Already this has increased the smallholders' incomes by 30%. But the soil for social discontent has not been ploughed over. The problem of rural poverty remains. Ungku Aziz, who has been studying the subject for more than 20 years, says Malaysia has been fairly successful in the technical side of agriculture — higher yielding seeds, double cropping, pesticides, etc. Progress has also been made in the technological potential for change in productivity. But the Government is still overlooking exploitation.

"You can't persuade a farmer to grow more rice if the additional element from his effort is going to be creamed off by landlords, traders and others," says Ungku Aziz. "Until this is done, the farmer will not adopt modern technology. In a sense, we have put the cart before the horse."

Ungku Aziz believes that, generally, those who are borrowing from low-interest-rate credit institutions are not those who most need help. Less than 15% of the credit goes to the impoverished farmer.

There are regulations on tenancy reforms, but most of them are not implemented. The Treasury Economic Report for 1974-75 confesses that only about 5,000 tenancy agreements had been registered up to the end of 1974, although the basic objectives of the Padi Cultivators Act of 1967 were to provide security of tenure to padi cultivators and to control the level of rent in padi farming.

The disturbing question in Malaysia, as in India and some other Asian countries where similar protective legislation is on the statute books, is whether