

A Wound That Still Festers in Singapore



1987: Singapore's Marxist Conspiracy 30 Years On

Edited by
**Chng Suan Tze,
Low Yit Leng and
Teo Soh Lung**

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Reviewed by Salil Tripathi

I WAS a correspondent in Singapore from 1991 to 1999, first for a local newspaper, *Business Times*, then a regional business magazine, *Asia, Inc.*, and finally the *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)*. Whenever I tried interviewing Singaporean officials, they rarely drifted from their prepared scripts. It was years before some would guardedly hint at something off the record, and even then it was often about countries in the neighborhood. Singaporean bankers, lawyers and others rarely offered any opinion. Why is it like that? I once asked a Singaporean journalist friend. "Because we are Singaporeans, lah," he told me.

Recent history alone was enough for me to realize why. The wounds of Operation Spectrum were still fresh when I reached Singapore in late 1990. At dawn on May 21, 1987, Singapore authorities rounded up 16 men and women under the Internal Security Act (ISA). These people included church workers, theatrical artists, professionals, journalists and lawyers. They were accused of conspiring to overthrow the government to create a Marxist state. I had read those stories when I was in India, where I was a correspondent earlier.

Operation Spectrum was swift and efficient. Those being arrested had no inkling. The arrests stunned Singapore, because there was no hint of any political tension. Many of those detained were doing what they considered to be God's work: assisting and working with the poor, making them aware of their rights and helping them navigate Singapore's official machinery, should

they have disputes to be solved. They worked with factory workers and migrants at the Geylang Catholic Centre and Jurong Workers' Centre. The church supported, even encouraged, their outreach to the poor. The arrests disrupted many lives, sent a chill through Singapore and stunted the development of alternative visions for the city-state by perhaps a generation.

With the publication of *1987: Singapore's Marxist Conspiracy 30 Years On*, edited by three of the detainees — Chng Suan Tze, who was a lecturer, Low Yit Leng, who was a manager, and Teo Soh Lung, who was a lawyer — the lid is finally being lifted on what happened that night and during its aftermath. The book brings together short recollections and essays, drawings and poems by around 40 people, including many of the detainees and their family members. The accounts are personal, autobiographical and subjective. The language is sparse and clean, and given what they experienced, devoid of any loud bitterness. It is a one-sided view, but the authors and editors see it as a corrective to the prevailing, dominant view, which is that of the state.

Reading these pieces, what becomes apparent is the ordinariness of their lives — and how many of them were resentful of the patronizing governance of the People's Action Party (PAP). None appears to have harbored any political ambitions. The stories they tell have only been whispered about in the past, and have not been published prominently in Singapore's official media.

Yet what's interesting is that the book is published in Singapore and available there. Soon after publication, some Singaporeans carried the book, with its bright yellow cover with "1987" written in red, to Singapore's mass transit system, stood in a line blindfolded and pretended to read; it was an act of performance art that symbolized the silencing of debate about that crucial part of Singapore's history. Coming on the heels of Teo's prison memoir, *Beyond the Blue Gate* (2011), Jason Soo's work-in-progress film, *1987: Untracing the Conspiracy* (2015), Tan Pin Pin's documentary, *To Singapore, With Love* (2013), which focuses on an earlier crackdown in the 1960s, and Sonny Liew's graphic novel, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2016), which deals with Singapore's early history and clashes with the official narrative, and which won three Eisner Awards this year, it would seem we are witnessing a Singaporean Spring. Perhaps so, but not so fast.

The ISA remains a law feared by many Singaporeans — it was used in the past against student leaders, trade unionists, and those opposing the government, most notably in 1963, in what was called Operation Cold Store. Most Singaporeans know it is wise not to question or challenge such decisions. In 1987, the day after the arrest of the 16 people, there was a brief report in the pro-government *Straits Times* newspaper.

But unlike in the past, there were rumblings this time. As this volume recounts, a week later, nearly 2,500 people attended a Catholic Mass, which the republic's archbishop attended, as did 23 priests. The church issued a press release expressing full confidence in the church workers who had been detained. The indefatigable opposition leader and former Member of Parliament, Joshua Jeyaretnam, protested at the Istana, the official residence of Singapore's president, and was arrested and later released.

The government responded. On June 2, Lee Kuan Yew, who was then Singapore's prime minister, met Archbishop Gregory Yong and his delegation. They were shown confessions signed by the detainees, in which they said they had conspired to destabilize Singapore and were acting under the instructions of Tan Wah Piow, a left-leaning former student leader who had opposed the government, been jailed, and lived in exile in the UK. The delegation was also told the names of four priests implicated in the conspiracy. (The four resigned their church positions two days later). A press conference was held after the meeting, which the book suggests the archbishop was ignorant of but had no choice but to attend, where he

distanced himself from the detainees — although the remarks broadcast on television edited out a few caveats he had placed in his statement.

The supposed ring-leader of the conspiracy in Singapore was a man called Vincent Cheng, who had been trained in the seminary. He was mild-mannered and unassuming, the executive secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission. On June 9, Singaporeans saw a pre-recorded interview with him in which he confessed to the conspiracy. He was given a two-year detention order; others were given shorter detention orders — some were released in late June, but six more people were arrested that month. More confessions were broadcast.

But things didn't go to plan. Nine of the released detainees issued a joint statement in April 1988, saying they were not part of any conspiracy and that the confessions were extracted under duress, and they alleged they had been ill-treated. Several provide graphic accounts of how they were made to stand for hours in air-conditioned rooms, with a blast of cold air directed at them. Some have said they were beaten. Eight (including two of this book's editors, Chng and Teo) were arrested the next day; the ninth, Tang Fong Har, was abroad, and hence she avoided arrest.

Some detainees have written depressing accounts of being kept in tiny cells in solitary confinement, but their prose is devoid of any harshness or rancor. There is a deep sense of the injustice they suffered, but there is also steadfast denial that they had any part in a Marxist conspiracy to overthrow the government.

Some of the detainees pursued legal means to secure their freedom. Some lawyers refused to accept instructions from the detainees' families. What comes across clearly is filial love — how the parents, siblings and other family members steadfastly supported their loved ones, not once believing what they were being told about the detainees. There is the near-comical but disappointing account of a lawyer leaving the building after a relative comes to him seeking his services, and sending the relative a message through his secretary that he won't be returning to the office. Francis Seow, former attorney general and former president of Singapore's Law Society, did represent Teo, but he too was arrested later.

Two international lawyers who are now renowned legal luminaries, Geoffrey Robertson and Anthony Lester, took up some detainees'

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cases and even secured a procedural victory. But those detainees were immediately re-arrested. Amnesty International and other organizations launched a long campaign from Australia, the US and Europe. A US diplomat was expelled from Singapore. At the Hong Kong harbor and in front of the offices of Singapore Airlines, the republic's best-known global brand, you could see protests.

Cheng, Teo and others continued to seek legal redress, but they did not succeed. In June 1990, they were finally released, but stiff conditions were imposed on them, one of which was that they could not associate with one another. Some went into exile. Some adopted a low profile (Cheng became a natural healthcare practitioner).

Only in recent years have the former detainees begun to speak out. In 2009, some held a protest calling for the abolition of the ISA at Hong Lim Park in downtown Singapore, the one place where public protests are permitted in the city.

ees have said that the confessions were coerced.

It may be useful to place Operation Spectrum in the broader context of Singapore's local politics and the regional environment. In the mid-1980s, Singapore had suffered a recession. In 1981, 16 years after independence, the PAP suffered its first electoral defeat in a by-election, when Jeyaretnam won a seat in parliament. During nationwide parliamentary elections in 1984, Jeyaretnam won again. In parliament, he proved to be an inconvenient voice, speaking of workers' rights, rising inequality, economic hardship and social problems. He was only one against dozens of PAP lawmakers, but he held his own. Many older Singaporeans recall the spirited debates between him and Lee Kuan Yew. The PAP had enjoyed total dominance in parliament until then; Jeyaretnam's vocal opposition was contentious, and Lee did not like criticism. From the late 1980s, Lee, his ministers or the Singapore govern-

What led Singapore to crack down on these individuals? The government's narrative has not changed. It says that there was a plot to replace Singapore's capitalist society with a Marxist alternative. But as several writers in this volume point out, despite extensive raids on their homes and offices, and surveillance of their activities in the months before the arrests, the raids yielded no incriminating literature nor weapons.

The next year, some former detainees formed Function 8 as a social enterprise, and they have since published 10 books in English and Chinese, the first of which was Teo's memoir. In 2012, on the 25th anniversary of the arrests, there was a public exhibition at the park, where several speakers called for the removal of the ISA. It is remarkable and encouraging that the government permitted these activities.

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ment sued many foreign publications — including *FEER*, *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *The Economist* and others — in Singapore courts, winning handsome libel awards against them.

There was also the broader regional turbulence. Most notably, in 1986, the Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown, replaced by Corazon Aquino in a revolution that stunned many in Southeast Asia. There was political unrest in Thailand. And in neighboring Malaysia, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah was challenging Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

Lee did not want Singapore's stability to be affected in any way. What if the activities of the church workers, journalists, executives and lawyers who were working with Singapore's economic underclass led to public disenchantment, and if more opposition candidates won seats in

parliament? Lee believed in total control, and by working to solve the grievances of the less fortunate Singaporeans, these do-gooders were pointing out the schisms in Singapore that the government said didn't exist or it was trying to eradicate.

To be sure, Singapore's economic growth since independence had been exceptional, as the outwardly oriented, export-driven, foreign investment-friendly economy had begun to thrive, and its goal was to leapfrog over the region. Since it lacked natural resources and its size was small, it wanted to build prosperity by being a useful middleman, an important cog in the global wheels of commerce, getting lifted by rising global wealth. This meant keeping markets open and the economy hospitable to foreign investment — it meant providing a skilled workforce that was compliant and did not go on strike and accepted competitive wages (which critics would call low) to retain foreign investment. It also meant relying on foreign labor. Many of these were anathema to the left, and because the main trade union, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), was close to the government and the ruling party, workers who felt aggrieved had few avenues to turn to. A joke in Singapore in those days was that NTUC stood for Never Trust Union Chief.

Could the Catholic Church workers and their followers sow the seeds of a future revolution? Could Jeyaretnam's victory lead to more rabble-rousing opposition MPs in parliament? That was the PAP's worry — that alternative voices could lead to genuine debates about the development model to be pursued.

Unwilling to take risks, in 1988, the government changed the way elections were conducted in Singapore, introducing Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), which grouped together individual wards into larger constituencies comprising up to six members per "team," of which at least one had to be a minority candidate. Its ostensible goal was to ensure that minorities would be represented adequately in parliament. But its effect was to make it hard for opposition parties to assemble teams, because they found it difficult to get well-educated, experienced minority candidates willing to take the political risk of becoming opposition candidates.

Today, Singapore has 89 elected MPs in parliament, but in effect, there are only 29 constituencies — 13 are single-MP constituencies and 16 are group constituencies, made up of four, five or

six members each. In 2015, the PAP won 69.86 percent of the popular vote (a 9 percent upswing from the previous election), which gave the party 83 seats in parliament. The Workers' Party won from two wards — one single-member constituency and one GRC, giving it six MPs.

Lee Kuan Yew died in 2015. Much has changed in Singapore today. Books from Function 8 are available. The recent publication of Jeremy Tiang's novel, *State of Emergency*, traces political arrests in Singapore and Malaysia from the 1940s to the present. Tan's and Soo's films about political arrests are not banned. The availability of Liew's graphic novel too seems to indicate a more liberal, open environment, where issues that formerly could only be discussed in hushed tones at *kopi tiams* — local coffee shops — can now be raised more openly.

But there is a catch. Tan's film cannot be shown in public — it can only be screened in homes or at private gatherings, and its DVDs cannot be bought or sold in Singapore. Soo's film can only be seen at one location and only by those over 21, which means younger Singaporeans will have to wait longer to see the film. Amos Yee, a teenager who made an insolent, tasteless video about Lee after his death, was arrested and is now seeking political asylum in the US. Roy Ngerng, who wrote a blog called Heart Truths, about Singapore's politics and economy, was sued for libel and found guilty in 2014. The National Arts Council withdrew grants made to Liew for his graphic novel and Tiang for his novel about political detentions in Singapore, after discovering that the content of their work was at odds with the official narrative of Singapore's history. Curiously, the council congratulated Liew after his Eisner Awards.

Singapore is now at a crossroads. It is difficult for the city-state to impose the kind of controls and restrictions that Lee once could with ease. At the same time, its government remains reluctant to let its far better educated and tech-savvy population enjoy the kind of freedoms others in similarly developed societies take for granted. It is hard to tell what turn Singapore might take. *1987: Singapore's Marxist Conspiracy 30 Years On* shows the path to avoid.

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