



Emergency committee for human rights
in Singapore

UPDATE NO.13
SINGAPORE HUMAN RIGHTS ALERT

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TWO RELEASED BUT UNFREE. GRATEFUL OF WORLDWIDE SUPPORT AND CONCERN. ADVISORY BOARD BROUGHT TO FOREFRONT. INNOCENCE VINDICATED. SINGAPOREANS SPEAKING OUT. SECURITY NOT THE REAL REASON. PUNISH AND DISCREDIT THOSE WHO DISSENT. ANOTHER REFERENCE TO SOUTH KOREA. REPRESSION AND "BRAIN DRAIN". HOARDING POWER FOR THEMSELVES. WE YEARN FOR FREEDOM LIKE EVERY ONE ELSE.

TWO RELEASED AFTER TWO MONTHS OF DETENTION

At 6 pm on 12 September, 2 of the 15 detainees were released by the Singapore government. They are:

1. Ms TANG Fong Har, 32, legal adviser to the now closed Catholic Centre for Foreign Workers.
2. Mr CHEW Kheng Chuan, 30, businessman and Harvard graduate.

Both Ms Tang and Mr Chew were arrested without trial on 20 June (during the second swoop) and served with one-year detention orders on 20 July. They were among the 5 who have made legal representations to the Advisory Board.

RELEASED BUT UNFREE

Although released, both Ms Tang and Mr Chew have their civil rights heavily restricted. They cannot leave the country without permission from the Internal Security Department (ISD). They are not free to associate with organisations or groups, and are restricted in their employment and place of residence. Neither can they advise nor work for any publication.

The detention has also cost Ms Tang her job. She was told by her employer that she could no longer work in her previous law firm. Ms Tang meanwhile plans to write some plays and poems. As a self-employed businessman Mr Chew is able to resume work in his own typesetting firm.

GRATEFUL OF WORLDWIDE SUPPORT AND CONCERN

On his release, Mr Chew saw one of his immediate tasks is writing to thank friends at home and abroad for their concern and

support. Even though being kept behind bars, the worldwide support and concern have not gone unnoticed by the detainees. The detainees seem to have a fair knowledge of the waves of international pressures and protests that have been brought to bear on the Singapore government seeking for their release.

GOVERNMENT'S REASON

However, in releasing Ms Tang and Mr Chew the Singapore government cited a quite different reason in the press statement. The release, according to the government press statement, is a result of the recommendations from the Advisory Board. The public is given the impression that the responsibility for the continued detention of the detainees now lies with the Advisory Board, a supposedly more 'neutral' body; the release of the detainees from now on is a matter for the Advisory Board to recommend.

ADVISORY BOARD BROUGHT TO FOREFRONT

In its inability to appease both local and international communities of its credibility crisis over the purported "marxist conspiracy", the government now moves to bring the Advisory Board to the forefront and hopes to sidestep this credibility crisis. It is widely believed that the intended effect is to shift the focus of the public onto the technicalities of representations to and recommendations of the Advisory Board. The move may also allow the government to fade to the background. Thus, further criticisms of the continued detention can then be blunt by the "impartial" image of the Advisory Board.

INNOCENCE VINDICATED

The release of the two detainees on 12 September is itself vindicative of the innocence of all those who are detained, and reveals the untenable nature of the government's allegations. Though the Singapore government would prefer not to be seen to take heed of international opinions, it is crucial that international pressures should not relent at the sight of two releases. All the more the tides of international concern and demand for the release of the other detainees be kept up.

It is therefore critical, at this moment, for all concerned persons and organisations to write to the Singapore Home Affairs Minister Prof. S. Jayakumar to demand for the release of the other detainees.

Address of Prof. S. Jayakumar:
 Ministry of Home Affairs,
 Phoenix Park, Tanglin Road,
 Singapore 1024.

SINGAPOREANS SPEAKING OUT

When faced with criticisms from abroad over the detentions, government officials have been "dismissing" these criticisms by

adopting the line that "foreigners do not understand Singapore" (See UPDATE 11 for Ambassador Koh's comments). However, the growing number of Singaporeans writing openly in the western media against the detentions has demolished such myth as the permissibility of "oriental repression". Among those who spoke out, two have featured prominently in the media.

THE ARREST: SECURITY OF SINGAPORE NOT THE REAL REASON

Writing in the ASIAN WALL STREET JOURNAL WEEKLY, Ms Linda Lim (an economist from Singapore, who teaches International Business and Asian Studies at the University of Michigan) suggests that, "in the absence of any substantial evidence of an imminent external or internal communist threat to the security of Singapore", the real reasons for the recent arrests may well be located in the PAP (the ruling People's Action Party) government itself.

PUNISH AND DISCREDIT THOSE WHO DISSENT

"Sadly", Linda Lim wrote, "the PAP government does not seem to be sure enough of its own considerable economic and social achievements and political control to allow the people of Singapore full democratic freedoms. It is unwilling to trust its own increasingly well-educated, increasingly middle-class, peaceful and very prosperous population with the freedom to dissent from its policies -- even validly, peacefully and cautiously. And the government seems determined to punish and discredit those who do so -- by digging up a non-existent communist bogey."

ANOTHER REFERENCE TO SOUTH KOREA

A reference to South Korea was also drawn by Ms Linda Lim. "Ironically, Singapore may in the long run be destabilized rather than stabilized by the arrests," she wrote. "Local resentment against the government's heavy-handedness could increase and, as in South Korea, eventually galvanize a serious political opposition that does not yet exist."

REPRESSION AND "BRAIN DRAIN"

Confirming the crisis of confidence in the middle class (as observed by foreign diplomats in Singapore that many are firming up plans to migrate), Linda Lim agrees that such repression could have a similarly dire effect on Singaporeans abroad. Many highly-skilled Singaporean professionals abroad could be discouraged from returning home by this unattractive lack of freedom.

REPRESSION OR MARKET?

"At the same time," she observed, "protectionism in the U.S. could be strengthened as lobbyists succeed in linking free access to the American market with local political conditions in exporting countries like Singapore." This last point is

particularly pertinent given the heavy reliance of the Singapore economy on U.S. investments and market.

"One might wonder", she questioned, "who is undermining Singapore's political stability, its economic prosperity and its hitherto proud international image -- a handful of idealistic yuppies or a government that would crush a harmless flea and all else around it with a tank?"

HOARDING POWER FOR THEMSELVES

Another Singaporean, journalist/law graduate, Mr Ch'ng Poh Tiong urges that the power to detain without trial should be rejected no less within an oriental society like Singapore. Writing in an N.Z. daily, THE PRESS, Mr Ch'ng admonished politicians in the Third World to stop thinking that people from those countries are not able to cope with democracy as practised in the West. He argues that those politicians who told their peoples that "we do not have a democratic tradition" and "governments must, to govern effectively, arm themselves with sweeping powers" are no more than just hoarding more and more power for themselves.

WE YEARN FOR FREEDOM LIKE EVERY ONE ELSE

Mr Ch'ng rejects unequivocally such proposition, often used by government official circles, that repression in an oriental society is permissible. "How can politicians," he asks, "suggest that people in the Third World and the Newly Industrialised countries are some kind of sub-species not worthy to enjoy, or unable to appreciate, the responsibilities of freedom? We yearn for it like every one else. And maybe because we have so much less, we deserve more."

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