



Emergency committee for human rights in Singapore

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SINGAPORE HUMAN RIGHTS ALERT

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DETAINEES HOLD OUT. HARSH INTERROGATION. GOVT CAUGHT OUT.
CURSE ALL FOREIGNERS. FOCUS ON PATRICK SEONG. STATUTORY PING-
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DETAINEES HOLD OUT UNDER INTERROGATION

It took 10 days of secret police interrogation of the re-arrested detainees and their defence lawyer before the Singapore Govt was able to announce that the detainees had "changed their story". On April 28 Home Affairs Minister S Jayakumar held a press briefing and said that "far from the Marxist conspiracy being a fabrication, it was the joint statement [of the detainees on April 18] that was a fabrication designed for political agitation and to put political pressure on the government". The govt release said, "The allegation that the detainees have been forced to tell lies in order to back up a fabricated story has now been demolished by the detainees themselves in eight sworn statements." The govt was thus trying to rebut the detainees' public statement of April 18 that they were coerced while under detention last year to make televised "confessions" to support the govt's "Marxist conspiracy" story. (Note: their statement said they were not Marxist. They did not accuse the govt of fabricating the plot.)

The govt also announced that it would no longer hold a commission of inquiry into the detainees' allegations because they had been withdrawn.

GOVT PROVIDES PROOF OF OWN REPRESSION

However, it is obvious to the whole world with the exception of the Singapore govt, that the claimed retractions are merely further proof of its ability to coerce innocent people held incommunicado without trial to make self-incriminating statements. Such a "skill" has always been the hallmark of totalitarian states.

HARSH INTERROGATION AGAIN

During the ten days before the govt announcement, the detainees were held incommunicado in solitary confinement, interrogated round the clock by hostile psychological methods and reduced to bewildered exhaustion.

* Jim Anderson M.P. * Jocelyn Armstrong * Katie Boanas * Prof J Burrows * Very Rev Dr Alan Brash * Jan Cormack * Fr John Curnow * Sonja Davies M.P. * Manika Henare * Canon Hone Kaa *
* Michael Knowles * Margaret Lovell-Smith * Archbishop Alan McKenzie * Sir Guy Powles * Rev Barbara Stephens * Rev David M Taylor * Bishop Whakarūhiri Vercoe *

It has been noted by all families, most of whom were able to see the detainees for half an hour on Friday, 29 April (except for Patrick Seong who was seen on 30 April for the first time), that the detainees all had a strangely dark complexion. Last year they looked very pale after interrogation. Several families are worrying about the possibility that they have been drugged through their food.

It should be noted that academic studies of the types of techniques used by Eastern European states in the 1950s and the present Singapore secret police indicate that any normally adjusted person will eventually succumb to such psychological assault. You either need to be insane or else have experienced it in depth previously to have any chance of resisting. It is a testimony to their innocence and strength of character that the detainees held out so long this time.

VISITING PROCEDURE TIGHTENED

The secret police have tightened their visiting procedure for families. Now only two are permitted and they are separated from the detainee by thick glass and must talk through a telephone which is cut if they make any reference to the circumstances of the detention or conditions of interrogation and imprisonment. All detainees looked exhausted, some were blank-faced and listless.

GOVT CAUGHT OUT

The main point of recent events in Singapore is that the govt has been caught out in its use of internal security legislation to protect one-party rule.. It thought it could suppress legitimate social concern and democratic expression by the same repressive methods it has used in past decades. It has failed to convince the public of the credibility of its "Marxist conspiracy". It thought it had cowed a group of young community leaders into silence and destroyed their reputation in the community. It failed to prevent them standing up and telling the truth. The govt is now in the position that any increase in the use of its coercive powers proves the case against it.

Once again we can expect a conspiracy theory and scapegoats to be announced in order to divert public attention from the real issue: the suppression of democracy in Singapore. Already the govt has started to blame the foreign press and human rights organisations for the detainees' statement on April 18.

CURSE ALL FOREIGNERS

In a highly unusual step on April 29, 3 senior ministers and the Internal Security director held a press conference at which Trade and Industry minister Lee Hsien Loong (the PM's son) said the detainees' joint statement was intentional political propaganda and disinformation in advance of the general election in Singapore. He said it was an organised effort, not a spontaneous or indigenous event. He talked vaguely of foreign links, foreign supporters, human rights groups and the regional press. He even

said that the commission of enquiry had been called off because it had already become political theatre' not a judicial event. In other words, the govt realises that it will gain nothing from an inquiry of dubious impartiality which comes down in its favour. To its credit the govt now recognises the degree of cynicism about its judicial procedures both within Singapore as well as the international community. Deputy PM Goh Chok Tong looked uneasy during the conference and did not answer a foreign journalist who asked how long it would take for him to confess if he was arrested by the secret police.

FOCUS ON PATRICK SEONG

It is now clear that the govt is focussing the full weight of its interrogating power on lawyer Patrick Seong who defended some of the detainees last year. His fearlessness angered the govt and it is now taking its revenge on him. The STRAITS TIMES of 29 April headlined his alleged role as an instigator of the joint statement and his coerced confession that he had exceeded his role as legal counsel. It also said that the govt is not convinced that he has told all he knows. He, as well as others, is still being interrogated. His treatment is a warning to other lawyers to stay clear of controversy. There is no allegation that he is Marxist. The accusation is that he acted to embarrass the govt which, needless to say, is not a crime.

STATUTORY PING-PONG

The coerced statements that all 8 detainees and Patrick Seong have been forced to sign have been represented by the govt as retractions of their April 18 statement. Two points should be noted: these statutory declarations have no standing in law since they were clearly coerced and, secondly, a careful reading of several of the declarations reveals no retraction at all merely a "confession" of motives or of daring to pass information to the foreign media or human rights organisations.

"INSTIGATOR" IMPLICATES

Patrick Seong's declaration includes reference to ASIAWEEK's Lisa Beyer, the REVIEW's Margaret Scott and to the Emergency Committee for Human Rights in Singapore and two former Singapore residents now in NZ, Ms LAI Maylene and the Rev Chris Tremawan (sic). Since these names are reprinted in the STRAITS TIMES it can be assumed that the govt is preparing the ground to further attack these publications, organisations and individuals. Noticeably absent are the very influential human rights organisations to which Mr SEONG also related: Asia Watch (USA) and Amnesty International (London). Their omission can only be political.

MORE FORCED TO LIE

Ex-detainees who were not re-arrested because they did not sign the joint statement were also called in by the ISD and interrogated during the past week. All were pressured to sign statutory declarations saying that they were not mistreated last year and confirming the substance of their television "confessions".

On 27 April, Mr CHEW Kheng Chuan told Ms, Jocelyn LEE, Patrick Seong's wife, that he had signed such a declaration the previous day under threat of re-arrest. He was also told that the arrested persons would be released earlier if he signed it. Ms LEE and two other witnesses to this conversation then immediately made declarations themselves stating what Mr Chew had told them.

HOSTAGE-TAKING

The imprisonment and interrogation without trial under the Internal Security Act is a kind of govt hostage-taking as a way to blackmail its own citizenry into submission. If the families take legal action or publicise the plight of their loved ones they know that interrogation and ill-treatment will intensify and the ISD tell them the the detention will increase in length. Conversely they are told if they make no fuss then it will be better for their loved ones. Either way, the govt proceeds according to its own political agenda and timetable.

GOVT GETS UNION SUPPORT

The National Trade Union Congress of Singapore has come out in support of the re-arrests. Since the head of the NTUC is also a member of the cabinet, perhaps this is not surprising. The govt has told workers to choose between having their wages and having the Internal Security Act.

PRAYERS FOR THE SUFFERING

A second mass with a congregation of 800 has been held in Singapore for the detainees and another is planned. A prayer vigil has also been held and similar initiatives continue.

HABEAS CORPUS HEARINGS

All the hearings of writs of habeas corpus currently filed by detainees are set down for the high court on May 6. Several international human rights organisations are planning to send observers. Mr Jim Anderton, NZ member of parliament and govt member of the select committee on foreign affairs will represent the Emergency Committee for Human Rights in Singapore (NZ) at the hearings on 6 May. He is a former president of the NZ Labour Party. He is a prominent Catholic layperson and also a sponsor of this Emergency Committee.

SENIOR LAWYER SPEAKS AGAIN

Former solicitor-general and former president of the Singapore Law Society, Francis Seow, is counsel for two of the detainees. He has again spoken out, this time against the commission of inquiry proposal which has just been withdrawn. He said the Singapore govt holding such an inquiry is tantamount to putting a suspected child molester in charge of a creche. He also asked, "What credence can be given to the testimony of such witnesses [as the detainees] all the more so when they are in the hands of the very people whom they have accused of cruel and degrading treatment...".

"ESCAPEE" RE-AFFIRMS POSITION

Ms TANG Fong Har, the only ex-detainee to sign the April 18 statement who escaped re-arrest, issued a statement from West Germany on April 29 re-affirming that she was physically assaulted during her detention last year and that her "confession" was coerced. She concluded, "From my personal knowledge of the other 8 signatories I state categorically that if they had not been subjected to re-arrest and only God knows what they have been subjected to in the last ten or more days of detention, they would never have retracted their statement."

WASHINGTON & NEW YORK LAWYERS PROTEST DETENTIONS

On April 30, 157 lawyers and law professors in Washington DC and New York protested to PM Lee Kuan Yew about the arrest of lawyer Patrick Seong and the reimprisonment of 8 detainees. After expressing their concern about the travesty of due legal process, they said, "These latest actions reflect an extraordinary intolerance for political dissent and have further tarnished the image of the Government of Singapore." They urged the immediate, unconditional release of the detainees. They sent a similar letter to Secretary of State Schultz.

On April 26, 74 Philadelphia public defenders sent letters of concern and alarm at the arrests and the continuing detention of Vincent Cheng to 5 US legislators from Pennsylvania and to the Singapore ambassador.

AUSTRALIAN LAW ACADEMICS

On April 27, 90 law teachers from the four law schools in Sydney, Australia sent an open letter to PM Lee Kuan Yew condemning the arrests and demanding the detainees' release. They also express their doubt about the good faith of the govt in its plan to hold an inquiry.

MEDIA COMMENT

There has been so much media comment and it is still appearing daily that we reproduce only a cross-section of it: the editorial from the May 6 edition of ASIaweek entitled "Unequal Bargain" and the April 20 editorial from THE WALL ST JOURNAL entitled "The Press & Mr Lee" which was published the day after the re-arrests.

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The Press and Mr. Lee

The American concept of the marketplace of ideas, instead of producing harmonious enlightenment, has, from time to time, led to riots and bloodshed." So Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew lectured the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington last week. He defended his arbitrary and increasingly bizarre press restrictions as necessary to keep the foreign press from stirring racial tensions in his city-state paradise.

Well, the problems The Asian Wall Street Journal encountered in Singapore concerned a story on the establishment of a second financial securities exchange. When we refused to print a tedious government letter to the editor on this racially charged matter, the government restricted our circulation there to 400 copies a day. (Over the previous year, the Asian Journal had devoted much space to letters from Singapore officials.) Our sister publication, the Far Eastern Economic Review, was restricted over a story on an alleged "Marxist conspiracy," but whatever racial tensions the Review might stir also will be stirred by the pirated copies now circulating under imprimatur of Mr. Lee's government. Or perhaps the racial tensions are stirred by advertisements, which are the only things excised from the pirated copies.

Five days after the prime minister's Washington lecture, his government faced the unfortunate necessity of rearresting some of the "Marxist conspirators," affiliated with the Catholic Church, who had been released after televised public confessions of trying to subvert the state. On Monday, nine of them issued a dramatic statement recanting the confessions, complaining that they had been coerced by lengthy interrogation, enforced sleeplessness, exposure to cold and blows to the face. Even before the public statement, Amnesty International had come to the same conclusion. Singapore police promptly rearrested eight of the nine, the last being out of the country.

It is of course true that under Mr. Lee, Singapore's economy has developed smartly, that in his early days he subdued a very real communist threat, and that his discourses on foreign affairs have the same kind of profundity as that other born-again statesman, Richard M. Nixon. But some other bits of history are necessary. Prime Minister Lee took on his domestic press in the 1970s; the result was the closing of Nanyang Siong Pau, a major Chinese-language paper, as well as the Singapore Herald. Singapore's domestic papers today somehow tend to parrot the government line.

Mr. Lee's government also has managed to constrain political dissent. One opposition legislator was cashiered in late 1986 because of party-finance violations. That leaves only one opposition member in the 79-seat parliament, though the opposition polled 37% of the vote in the 1984 general election. The government now is studying a plan for teaming up parliamentary candidates, which might make it even harder for opposition members to get elected. Mr. Lee's tendency to overmanage his city-state has extended even to eugenics. In the 1970s, the Singapore government offered advice and economic incentives to "Stop at Two" meaning two children. More recently, worried by a brain drain as well as declining birth rates among the college-educated crowd, Mr. Lee has suggested that Singapore's brightest might want to boost their reproduction rates by taking up polygamy.

Despite this history, the erudition of Prime Minister Lee's sophistry seems to have won him good reviews on his recent trip to the United States. In particular, the ethicists of the U.S. press corps busy themselves counting angels on the head of a Larry Speakes quote, but seem unable to recognize a politician in frontal attack on press freedom. In the case of Teddy Kennedy's assault on Rupert Murdoch, this tendency was too much for the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals. A footnote in its opinion upholding Mr. Murdoch zinged the New York Times for editorially praising Mr. Kennedy's attempt to block an exception to the rule banning newspapers from owning broadcast properties in their own cities, despite its own ownership of New York broadcast properties under an exception to the rule.

In the case of Lee Kuan Yew's speech to American editors, we find a fawning column about his attempts to keep out "the American disease" reprinted in the International Herald Tribune, which circulates freely in Singapore by virtue of not reporting much on the news there. The author detailing Mr. Lee's complaints of adversary journalism was Jim Hoagland, a columnist for, incredibly, the Washington Post.

Is it too much to hope that scales will drop from even such eyes with the dramatic statement of the nine accused "Marxists," the support of their charges by Amnesty International, and their immediate rearrest? Prime Minister Lee's problem has nothing to do with the press sparking racial tensions in Singapore. It has everything to do with the press telling the truth about the kind of regime he is running there.

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ASIAWEEK

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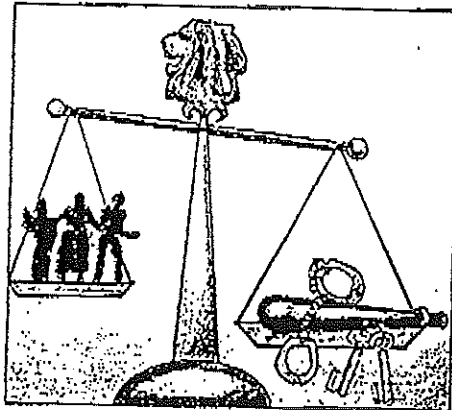
Unequal Bargain

Arguing in the 1950s against a precursor of the Internal Security Act, a Singapore oppositionist compared detention without trial to making love: it gets much easier after the first time. The critic was Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, who proceeded later to prove the justice of that analogy over a three-decade love affair with the ISA. In the early days, Singapore's only prime minister since 1959 invoked the emergency powers against a clear and present danger, namely the armed and substantial Communist Party of Malaya insurgency. The difference between then and now, however, was only too evident on April 19 when eight citizens (along with one of their lawyers) were picked up for protesting that the government had unfairly accused them. The eight were among 22 people interned last year and later released (bar one) after issuing statements used to back claims of a "Marxist conspiracy." The government has admitted that there was no immediate peril from this alleged cabal of lawyers and church workers — only a future, hypothetical one. According to the government, however, by protesting now that their statements had been extracted by threats and abuse, they have betrayed their real guilt. So even without being any imminent danger, into the slammer they go.

Is this what the ISA has become: a self-justifying and perpetuating convenience? While professing to take the charges of abuse seriously, the Home Ministry read the protests as evidence against the detainees. "When they claim — or, worse, if they truly believe — that they have done nothing wrong," said a ministry statement, "there is every likelihood that they will resume their former activities." This sounds like traditional criminal justice in China, a system in which a person wrongly arrested and accused could be held guilty of having called the moral authority of the state into question. In this case, the eight detainees complained that they had been repeatedly slapped, threatened with internment for years on end, shouted at, deprived of sleep and interrogated under the blast of punishingly cold air-conditioners — what seems to be a favourite Special Branch trick. The government has promised to impanel a commission of inquiry to look into these charges. In the meantime, the detainees are held to be guilty and thrown back into the environment in which the abuses allegedly took place. If the commission hopes to establish any sort of truth about the complaints, it doesn't seem likely that much help will be forthcoming from the complainants.

From the beginning, Mr. Lee's government said it

would not bring the "Marxists" to court because it did not have enough evidence to convict under normal standards of evidence. This has been the justification of the ISA all along: because revolutionaries are cunning enough to cover their tracks, the state needs arbitrary authority to stop them. But what sort of plot was this supposed to be? Far from stocking arms and preparing to mount uprisings, the detainees have been accused of having such wispy agendas as "infiltrating" an opposition party. Amazingly, moreover, by official lights it's apparently possible to be a conspirator without knowing anything about a conspiracy: many detainees reportedly were told they were unwitting dupes. Even assuming that a conspiracy existed, can they be held accountable? Under the ISA, as in free love, apparently anything goes.



Just how unworthy this is of a state that has achieved an industrialised-nation standard of living ought to be obvious. Not only is the Communist Party of Malaya no longer a force to be reckoned with — senior Malaysian security officials admit that the tiger is toothless — but Marxism simply has no appeal in a society like Singapore's. This is true wherever prosperity has taken firm root. Is it a crime against security, then, simply to be a Marxist, without advocating or undertaking violence?

If so, Singapore is redefining the norms of democracy. In the Japanese Diet sit some 40 proudly avowed Marxists — outright Stalinists, some of them, who rejoice in their bourgeois homes, cars and vacations in Hawaii — and everyone knows what a turbulent mess Japan is.

A greater danger in Singapore today is the too easy use of the ISA, just what Mr. Lee foresaw years ago. In fact, the problem seems less political than religious almost, one in which belief in the One-True Government is considered the litmus test of loyalty and entitlement to civil rights. Without the full evidence, let alone any court judgement, Singapore's loyal press often dutifully characterises every charge against the detainees not as an allegation but as fact. Tellingly, what was left out of the detainees' statement as printed in the *Straits Times* were those portions in which they affirmed their loyalty as citizens and their emphasis that they did not require the government to respond. What was printed was their profession of legitimate political ideals — "more democracy, less élitism . . . less interference in the private lives of citizens" — and their stories of ill-treatment.