



Emergency committee for human rights in Singapore _____

BACKGROUNDER

to the Visit to Singapore of Asia Watch, Washington DC

Introduction

Singapore society is subject to a unilaterally imposed social contract engineered over more than two decades by the Lee government. The contract determines the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, the goals of society and social production. It is enforced by means of total administration and regulation of the entire population in all aspects of life. The social bases of cultural and political alternatives to PAP Chinese power have been systematically cut away. A social contract which is unilaterally decided can only be maintained by eliminating all challenges to it.

The politicisation of the civil service so that there is no practical distinction between the government and the ruling party has long been achieved. All social institutions have had their independence undermined and been reduced to rubber stamps for party policy. This is particularly true of the judiciary (the Chief Justice and several other High Court judges are on renewable contracts, the jury system has been abolished, the govt has implemented an express 2 year training course for graduate engineers to become magistrates and judicial officers). The legislature has been reduced to a ruling party public relations exercise. The island is physically laid out as a large military camp. The walls of its political prisons have been moved outwards and are now congruent with the state's territorial borders. Hence it is possible to "release" some political prisoners from their immediate confines in secret police cells.

The identification of ruling party and government as one entity enables the government to characterise party political rivals or socially committed community workers as enemies of the state. They are therefore not rivals who may contest for the confidence of the people according to democratic process but, rather, they are portrayed as subversives to be eliminated by all means possible.

The serious marginalisation and low socio-economic status of the indigenous people, the Malays, is a basic and highly sensitive

indicator of the nature of Singapore society. The government has obscured its essentially racist policies by a range of token gestures to the Malay community. But, in relation to their population percentage, they are severely under-represented in the professions, the middle and upper levels of government, the education system, business and industry. They are over-represented in the prisons. Birth control measures (including sterilisation) are subtly targeted at them and the Indian population. Their villages have been destroyed by urban "re-development" and their social structure weakened by administrative dispersal to different housing estates. Their loyalty to Singapore has been publicly questioned by senior politicians within the past year. The proximity of Malay nations of Malaysia and Indonesia make government suspicion of their loyalty a continuing factor in the treatment of Singaporean Malays.

In Asia, Singapore is not seen merely as an economic model for other countries to emulate. It is also seen as a model for sophisticated, complete administrative social control of a population. Instead of the party in power doing battle with highly developed opposition parties and pressure groups, total social control prevents the normal human processes of social interaction which give rise to organised, collective challenges to entrenched power.

The domestic lives and cultural habits of the people are regarded as objects of legitimate government party interference and manipulation. Having lobotomised the citizenry over two decades, it is then possible to attract foreign investment and pay lip service to the facades of due process and parliamentary democracy without a serious challenge arising from within the country. This model is eminently more attractive to technocratic authoritarian governments in Asia than expensive and messy counter-insurgency warfare or unofficial death squads.

Because of the invisibility of social control to the casual outside observer, the high volume of tourist visits to Singapore provides valuable global public relations for the government.

Suggested Areas of Concern

There are three areas which, together, should provide an entree to the Singapore situation and assist in an incisive analysis.

1. The Legitimation of the Abuse of State Power

The abuse of state power to harrass and silence potential rivals and socially concerned critics. Through:

- electoral and parliamentary procedures, the amendment of the same and of the constitution itself;

- use of other legally constituted institutions (judiciary, executive and administrative branches of govt) including the use of police and intelligence organisations for comprehensive constant surveillance of the population.

Some specifics:

Judicial Proceedings - civil (defamation) and criminal proceedings against Mr J B Jeyaretnam.

Parliamentary Privileges Committee proceedings on Mr Jeyaretnam.

Constitutional Amendments permitting the revocation of citizenship especially with regard to Mr Tan Wah Piow.
Administrative action of cancelling passports thereby rendering a person stateless especially with regard to Mr Tan and Mr Paul Lim.

Newspapers and Printing Presses Act - specifically the amendments passed in 1986 to control foreign publications and opposed by the Law Society.

Legal Profession Amendment Act with regard to Mr Francis Seow.
The Parliamentary Committee hearings.

The Commission of Inquiry into the independence of the judiciary held in 1986 with regard to Mr J B Jeyaretnam.

Internal Security Act and Advisory Board hearings especially with regard to the recent detainees.

Executive prerogative - former President Devan Nair.

2. Social control policies

- controlled media and printing industry;
- population control through the HDB (Housing and Development Board) in whose apartments over 80% of the population live according to strict regulations;
- the connections between the health system, the eugenics policy of creating a meritocracy, the sterilisation policy directed at the poor and non-Chinese, and the marriage bureau operated through the government Social Development Unit for the rich and educated;
- the militarisation of society especially the education system and the imposition of compulsory military service (National Service or "NS");

- through bureaucratic obstruction the right to organise political parties is severely restricted; the formation of a party must be approved by the registrar of societies who requires detailed information which takes a long time and in itself is part of the intimidation which follows such initiatives. Should a party be formed and registered it has to contend with numerous obstacles to its functioning: stonewalling on obtaining offices in housing estates, police permits to hold meetings, a hostile govt media, continuous attempts to destabilise and infiltrate the party by govt agents, continuous surveillance of all activities, mail, telephones and financial accounts, pressure on those who join to leave or to inform, no access to govt depts either for information or for advocacy on behalf of electors. In practice the entire civil service apparatus is closed to an opposition party except when the govt feels it is in its own interests to permit a certain level of functioning. Most opposition parties are heavily infiltrated and are to some extent orchestrated by the govt itself to preserve an image of political plurality and to demonstrate to the public how pathetic any opposition is in comparison to the PAP.

- denial of free trade unions or right of free association through administrative obstacles to establishing new societies (the head of the council of trade unions - National Trade Unions Congress or NTUC - is also a cabinet minister);

- denial of access of public to accurate information and statistics;

- pervasive imposition of national security doctrine ("Total Defence") by govt to instruct citizens of their duty to serve the state while the democratic rights of citizens are brushed aside and the responsibility to the people of the elected representatives is presented paternalistically.

3. Economic Support for the Abuse of Constitutional Power

- Singapore as an armaments manufacturer and middleperson for illegal international transactions (e.g. the recent Bofors scandal in Sweden involving the transshipment of Swedish arms in Singapore for illegal destinations).

- the scale, type and political impact of US investment in and trade with Singapore needs to be investigated.

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