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Singapore: The Past in the Present

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Unquestionably, Singapore has economically thrived in the space created by its independent status as an island Republic. The Federation of Malaysia, from which Singapore was expelled in 1965, has also levered itself into the highest ranks of developing countries. Nevertheless, separation has not healed the wounds on either side of the boundary exposed by the failed merger (1963-1965). To be sure, atavisms from the past continue to feed Singapore's siege mentality, just as Singapore's astute political leadership reads lessons from a history of local radicalism, ethnic chauvinism, and international influences including the pull of global Islam and its influence upon local Muslim minorities. No less, in the official narrative, a sense of China-centeredness on the part of the majority population has survived the birth of the Republic and presents the contours of an enduring challenge around identity formation.

Economists cite Singapore along with Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong (the four little dragons) as models of third world economic success, yet it is Singapore alone which has failed to match economic success with the kind of political, intellectual, and social freedoms commensurate with the sophisticated inherited social organization forming the basis of the state and civil society. Ruled over by a hegemonic party ever since British power connived with Singapore strongman (today Minister Mentor) Lee Kuan Yew to eliminate the left, tolerance of autonomous civil society runs very thin. This has led some to describe Singapore under the decades-long rule of the People's Action Party (PAP) as an exemplar of "illiberal democracy." [1]

A broad scholarly and popular literature has emerged on the state in Singapore, now conventionally hyphenated as the PAP-state. [2] To wit, the subordinate role of the opposition, the inclination of government leaders to file defamation suits against critics, periodic crackdowns or writs against foreign media, and a petty side of administrative controls which has gained Singapore the reputation of a "nanny state." Neither has a modern version of neo-Confucianism been neglected. [3] Up front internationally with its "Asian" views on individual rights, modern Singapore has attracted criticism from a range of international civil society organizations, including the European Parliament, as well as governments, including measured notices found in annual U.S. State Department reports on human rights.

The passing of a long-time lone parliamentary opposition politician and secretary-general of the Workers' Party, J.B. Jayaratnam in October 2008, who was literally crippled by lawsuits, seems to symbolize official allergy to dissent of any kind. Earlier in November 2006, Dr Chee Soon Juan, Secretary-General of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party was convicted of speaking in public without a permit. He has also been bankrupted by defamation suits by the Lees and other PAP worthies. Although PAP has long maintained an official stranglehold over the print and electronic media alongside a range of dissuasive measures and controls used to muzzle critics, the new electronic media, as discussed below, has opened a new space for

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discussion on a range of Singapore/Malaysian issues by webloggers and others. Also, as the following examples reveal, memory of recent history is obviously deeply ingrained in the psyche of the ruling party.

None of this would appear to be exceptional in the former colonial world, nor in a good few Western countries. Singapore, however, has made an art form of its colonial-inflected legislation. Today's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), the Societies Act, the Newspapers and Printing Act, and the Sedition Act (revised 1985) all have colonial analogues. State controls over housing, environment, youth including compulsory military service for males, and education coupled with state interventions into the realm of familistic ideologies and even eugenics, along with corporativized controls over labor translates into a sweeping social engineering of the population. Malaysians, who have more space in which to operate than their former compatriots also chafe under colonial-era repressive legislation, though the victims – running from a former deputy prime minister, to lawyers, teachers, journalists, and community leaders and "terrorists" - would see the Malaysian variant of the ISA as less of an "art form" than a blatant political tool.

Contested Identities/Crisis Discourse

Blood Debt

Japan's occupation of Singapore and Malaya was obviously a wrenching experience for both victims and survivors.



English troops marching in Singapore

Many accounts have been written in English and Japanese of the bloody events which transpired in Singapore following the British surrender to invading Japanese forces on 15 February 1942, known locally in Hokkien as *sook ching* or purge. Basically, Japanese commanders screened and purged Chinese males aged between 18 and 50. Forced to assemble at screening centers, those identified as anti-Japanese or pro-communist or falling into other categories, were transported to mostly coastal locations where they were bayoneted or machine gunned to death. Standard accounts suggest that the number killed in this way was of the order of 50,000, although Hayashi Hirofumi strikes a minimum figure of 5,000 dead with an upper threshold unknown. He also notes that the purge was planned even before the Japanese arrived in Singapore. [4]

Not all in Singapore were satisfied with the justice meted out by British war crimes investigators. In fact, a popular sense of injustice especially on the part of the Chinese community has simmered on to the present. In a study on the 1947 Chinese massacres trial conducted by British war crimes investigators in Singapore, Wai Keng Kwok [5] explains that, immediately after the trials, local Chinese sentiment truly sought a debt of blood or pay back from Japan especially for those involved in

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the *sook ching* screenings who had otherwise escaped justice. However, it was only in 1962, with the discovery of mass graves of several hundred people killed during the occupation, that "blood debt" claims were actively pursued. Only by the 1960s was the debt seen in monetary terms, as opposed to criminal indictment and justice.

Commencing in 1962, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC) launched a vigorous campaign for reclaiming the "blood debt" in the form of a cash payment from Japan, arousing strong anti-Japanese community sentiment. The Prime Minister, today Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew also pressed Japan on the reparations question during a visit to Tokyo in May 1963. With the inauguration of the Federation of Malaysia and then Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman's s endorsement of the claims, the campaign extended to Kuala Lumpur. Lee's expressed concerns were that, unless Tokyo made some kind of gesture as in the form of educational support, then the atmosphere would never become conducive to Japanese investment. A Japanese offer of about $5 million was declined as "unrealistic, unimaginative and inadequate." Tokyo answered that it would not negotiate if confronted with a "threatening attitude." A SCCC-organized rally on 25 August attracted between 50,000-150,000 protesters. Trade unions and representatives from all communities joined in. Seeking to head off the left, especially as the left-wing opposition Barisan Front had made capital out of the issue by calling the PAP soft on Japan, Lee himself delivered the keynote speech. As Australian diplomats interpreted the situation, Lee was in a bind. On the one hand, he threatened Japan "to come to terms with us or lose the Malaysian market." On the other hand, he was obviously aware of the importance of Japan's managerial assistance and investment necessary to launch Singapore's industrialization. With no response from Tokyo by 23 September, an imposed deadline, a Working Committee endorsed a five-day boycott on Japanese shipping and airlines. With Lee calling for the transfer of the Japanese Ambassador in Singapore, negotiations shifted to Kuala Lumpur and there the matter temporarily rested. [6]

The Blood Debt was officially settled on 26 October 1966 when Japan pledged $25 million in grants and a similar amount in special loans as quasi-reparations. Even so, according to Wai, [7] the SCCP remained indignant as they had not been consulted. While the Japanese business profile in Singapore would soar over the years, the PAP-state continues to micro-manage memory of the war, through textbooks, monuments and museums. Singaporeans of all communities are rather well apprised of most aspects of the Japanese wartime occupation. Most Singaporean school children can point to battle sites and execution grounds. They can also name heroes of various races lost in defense of the island, though probably few are aware of the role of communist youth working alongside the British.

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Civilian war monument

At the same time, the state keeps a tight lid on any overt public expressions of anger at Japan such as transpired in 1963. Nor does the state raise vexing war memory issues with Tokyo as does China and Korea. For example, community indignation in Singapore against Japan's wartime actions never reached the heights of China when, in April 2005, mobs attacked Japanese property in Shanghai and other cities in protest at the then Japanese Prime Minister's controversial visit to a shrine honoring war criminals. Nevertheless, on that occasion, Chinese community organizations in both Singapore and Malaysia rallied in solidarity. By the 1990s, as Wai [8] explains, public sentiment had shifted towards seeking an official apology.

The Demise of Nanyang University

The Nanyang University story nicely encapsulates the role of the ascendant PAP-state in shifting identities of the majority Chinese population away from engagement with the politics of homeland to a Singaporean identity in the making. Nantah as the university is known locally, was conceived in the early 1950s in part to create a learning space for students denied the possibility to study in China. While Nantah's debut in 1956 as the first and only Chinese-medium university in Southeast Asia had been contested by the British, its end in 1980 was at the hands of the PAP-state.

As the former Malaysia-based writer Han Suyin [9] related, Nantah and its students and graduates were exposed to considerable "prejudice and discrimination" under the British during its 25 year history. Its degrees were only given official recognition in 1966. Notably, the Special Branch routinely censored and confiscated books and magazines emanating from China. Their possession was a crime. When China became "red" all contacts were forbidden and student returnees were denied re-entry into Malaya or Singapore. These years also witnessed considerable pro-China activism on the part of Chinese middle school students. The status of unregulated Chinese private schools was tolerated up until 1949, but thereafter the government sought control. While the British promoted the English medium University of Singapore, two-thirds of children in early postwar Singapore attended Chinese schools. Careers in administration massively favored the English educated and the Chinese resented this discrimination. Even the short-lived appointment of Lin Yutang, an anti-communist (pro KMT) chancellor for Nantah, did not appease British opinion – inherited by the PAP-state – that Nantah was a hotbed of both Chinese chauvinism and communism. By 1974, Nantah was pushed to become an English medium university and fully converted to English in 1978 prior to its eventual absorption in 1980 as the National University of Singapore with its campus at Bukit Tinggi. By 1978, if not earlier, however, the ratio of

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enrollment in English versus Chinese medium schools in Singapore had been reversed. While the Singapore government ascribes this remarkable shift to parental preference, the truth of the matter is that the very existence of Nantah subverted the PAP-state's vision of Singaporean identity. But Nantah was not alone in being targeted. One by one the Chinese schools were merged or closed and jobless Chinese school teachers emigrated or went into business. More than a few Nantah graduates fell foul of the ISA. Chinese language newspapers were equally emasculated. Nantah and what it stood for – namely *huaqiao* pride – was undoubtedly seen by PAP as an embarrassment in the campaign for merger with Malaya.

The reinvention of Nantah in the early 2000s with the creation of a namesake hardly redeems the legacy of the former University. As one blogger aptly stated the matter, the namesake would fail a DNA test on lineage. Neither would backhanded compliments to Nantah graduates for their "Chinesesness and Confucianist values" echo the vision of the Chinese guilds and clan associations who sponsored the original. It is not the place of this essay to trace the rise of a new multicultural and multi-lingual Singapore with English as the language of professional esteem, but suffice it to mention that the "Chineseness" of the past – as symbolized by Nantah and the Chinese Middle schools – has been relegated to history, stripped of their militant anti-colonialism and, with some qualification, their Chinese chauvinism and pro-China orientation as well.

The Marxist Plot Affair of 1987

Also revealing of shifting identities in a socially engineered space, as much as a sense of manufactured crisis, was the arrests under the ISA on 21 May 1987 of 16 individuals, men and women, accused of plotting to overthrow the government and, vaguely, using communist united front tactics to establish a Marxist state. Six more were subsequently arrested including teachers and students of Singapore Polytechnic unconnected with the former group. At the heart of the former group were members of the Catholic church. Others swept up included affiliated members of Third Stage, an English-language social theater group active in support of the plight of Filipina domestics, while the leading conspirator fingered was the owner of a so-called Marxist book shop. Even the American Embassy was targeted as part of this Christian-Marxist conspiracy under the charge of "foreign interference." Incredibly, in a state where even unauthorized assemblies of people are strictly prohibited, a demonstration outside the American Embassy railing against American "interference" was allowed to run its course. The Home Minister went further in seeking to link the principal suspect, former Singapore student leader living in exile in the UK, Tan Wah Piow, with a Marxist professor, the Khmer Rouge, the Viet Cong, and other liberation fronts and Marxist regimes. [10]


The Straits Times

16 held last week involved in conspiracy to overthrow the Govt, says ministry

Marxist plot uncovered

MG Lee defines parameters for foreign journals circulating here

Marxist plot revealed

If the charges and consequences were not so serious, then the representation of the "Marxist plot" in the city-state's controlled media could also be lampooned as risible in its crude attempt to concoct a conspiracy. The principal conspirator, for example, was subject to a televised confession, while the full panoply of

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the print media demonized the alleged conspirators as if no other news mattered. Even upon release in September 1987 after seven months in detention, all but one of the group were re-arrested in April 1988 and incarcerated for recanting their confessions. More than that, they claimed to have been tortured. [11]

The case also cast light upon Singapore's media management including the international media. The Home Affairs Ministry claimed that the media, including three Hong Kong publications, had conducted a "hysterical campaign" against the Singapore government, blaming foreigners for orchestrating the dissident Singaporeans to issue the torture statement. In reprisal, the government issued circulation restrictions on the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, former *Asiaweek* magazine, and the *Asian Wall Street Journal*. [12] Defamation suits would follow against foreign news magazines and their editors over the years. Tan Wah Piow [13] chose Malaysia to launch a rebuttal, stating that he never sought to effect change in Singapore by means that were unlawful.

The story is also told by the former Attorney General, Francis Seow [14] in a kiss and tell book. One of a clutch of high flying PAP-defectors, the Attorney-General, ex-President of the Law Society turned opposition candidate, was himself arrested under the ISA and investigated for alleged foreign interference in Singapore's internal affairs at the critical moment he was offering legal aid to the "plotters." All that was missing in this egregious case of judicial overkill were the severed heads. Another PAP giant fallen from grace was former President C.V. Devan Nair who began to go public with "scathing" denunciations of the government's authoritarian political style in a speech to graduates at the National University of Singapore on 23 June 1987. Rare in public discourse in the island republic, he asserted that "public disenchantment seems to have been growing in direct proportion to what are seen as attempts to acquire monopoly control over the formation of public opinion and responses on a variety of issues." [15] An embittered Nair would subsequently follow Seow into "exile" in North America.

It is notable, however, that the number of Singapore citizens describing themselves as Christians doubled from 10 to 19 per cent between 1980 and 1988. New converts are mostly Chinese drawn from white-collar occupations. While Protestant churches in Singapore generally come under the umbrella of the National Council of Churches of Singapore, some youth have been attracted to evangelical and/or charismatic churches. Around one third of parliamentarians are Christian. But what appeared to be anathema to the authorities in the "Marxist plot" case was the professed liberation theology of the small group of Catholic Christians from the minuscule, albeit historically rooted community representing just 4 percent of Singapore's population. Across the causeway, the Malaysian authorities also – incredulously – claimed to have uncovered "Marxist and Christian" groups subscribing to liberation theology and, on another front, church groups seeking to Christianize Malays. [16] If there was a convergence of understanding between Singapore and Malaysia on the nature of the threat then it would not be surprising given revelations that, up until a pact was drawn up in 1978, each side actively penetrated each other's intelligence services. [17] With its transnational connections and its universalistic theology, the lay Catholic activists in the field of labor rights for exploited domestics unquestionably challenged the PAP-state's sense of its proprietary ownership of state and civil society, echoing the French Sun King's epigrammatic declaration *l'état c'est moi*.

One sequel to the 1987 plot combined with a sense that rising religious revivalism was common to all the major faiths represented in

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Singapore was passage of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (March 1992). As Khun [18] explains, for very good reason the Act disallowed ill-will or hostility between different religious groups but, additionally, it buttressed the determination of the government – no doubt with the "liberation theologists" in mind – to firmly separate church and state.

Capital Punishment/Global Cop

Capital punishment is frequently justified as punishment in the case of heinous crimes, but also as a deterrent to crime. How this has played out in Singapore and throughout Asia? In the East Asia region only two legal jurisdictions have historically eschewed the death penalty, namely the former Portuguese colonies of Macau and East Timor. Portugal abolished the death penalty in 1867. Other Asian countries joining the abolitionist camp are Cambodia (1989), Hong Kong (1993), Bhutan (2004), and, in 2006, the Philippines, with another group of Asian countries abolitionist in practice in line with the global trend towards abolition. The retention by Singapore (and Malaysia) of colonial era legislation relating to the death penalty then should not surprise, but it does. [19] Murder, kidnapping, treason, and certain firearms cases are all capital offenses in Singapore. While opiate use among especially elderly Chinese had a long history in Singapore and, while opium divans operated semi-legally through until the mid-1970s, tolerance turned to intolerance with the rapid passage of the Misuse of Drugs Act of 1973 [revised editions]. Under the Act, the death sentence was made mandatory for possession of, for example, more than 15 grams of heroin, 30 grams of cocaine, or 500 grams of marijuana. The Act thus creates a presumption of trafficking. The Act [Part II 8A] also places a heavy burden on the accused to prove innocence. Even Singapore citizens consuming a drug outside the country can be held liable "as if that offense had been committed within Singapore." This is all the more remarkable given the complex value systems regarding opiate use in colonial and even early post-colonial Singapore. Noorman Abdullah [20] is one who has exposed the active construction of illicit drug use in Singapore as a social problem.

It was not until the 2005 execution of a Vietnam-born Australian drug smuggler that vital statistics relating to capital punishment in Singapore reached public knowledge. Notably, the hangman in the employ of the state let it be known that, over 46 years, he had carried out 850 hangings. Earlier, in reply to a question asked in parliament, it became known that 340 people were executed between 1991 and 2000 [420 between 1991 and 2009]. It is believed that 70 percent of hangings are for drug offenses, with 22 hung for drug smuggling in 2001 and 17 the year before. But not all sentences and executions are reported publicly. It would appear from a range of media reports that, as with the Australian hung in 2005, a significant percentage of the executed were foreigners apprehended in transit at Changi airport. Clemency appeals have seldom been heeded and diplomatic campaigns have inevitably stalled.

In 1968, the execution of two Indonesian marines deemed "saboteurs" who infiltrated the city-state during the "war of confrontation" sparked anti-Chinese race riots across Indonesia. But drug cases have also aroused international indignation. For example, in 1995, the President of Portugal, Mario Soares, unsuccessfully sought clemency for a 25-year old Singaporean woman executed for drug smuggling (then one of three women executed for drug offenses including two aged 18 at the time of their crimes). Even non-drug cases have sparked emotions. In 1994, the Philippines government called for retaliatory actions against Singapore for failing to grant a stay of execution for a Filipina convicted in a murder case.

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According to Amnesty International, [21 Singapore leads the world in executions putting to death more people than Saudi Arabia, China, and Sierra Leone on a per capita basis. The grim statistics appear to belie the official claim that capital punishment serves as a deterrent, especially in drug cases. In any case, debate on capital punishment has largely been driven underground in the era of the "war on terrorism".

The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests of 2002 While the PAP-state was defensive over the retention of the ISA in the wake of the Marxist Plot affair, local and international responses to the 2001 "September 11" terror attacks in the United States has seen more than one Western country introduce forms of preventive detention that rival or exceed those of Singapore. The U.S.-run Guantanamo prison is one that readily comes to mind. No doubt the announcement in December 2001 that 15 members of Singapore's Islamic community had been detained under the ISA for plotting to bomb strategic targets in Singapore, followed by the detention of a further 21 persons in August 2002, was greeted with satisfaction by the U.S. and its allies in the war on terror. Domestically, the arrests were described as exposing the most serious threat posed to Singapore's security since the days of the Malayan Communist Party (although that is a chimera as well, especially as the distant rural-based guerrillas offered no demonstrable threat to urban Singapore).

As identified in a government White Paper, [22] the plotters comprised the Singapore chapter of the Al Qaeda-linked Southeast Asia-based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the group blamed for the 2002 Bali bombing and other outrages. As confirmed by evidence seized in Afghanistan, even before the 9/11event, the clandestine group had identified strategic targets in Singapore, including the crucial water pipeline from Johor state in Malaysia along with Western embassies and other interests. Albeit without elaboration or documentation, the White Paper also traced the roots of JI back to the Darul Islam movement in Indonesia in the 1940s, its revival in the 1980s, and regrouping of exiles in Malaysia. Altogether, those detained offer a mixed group of local Muslims, reflecting the complex ethnic-linguistic patterning of Singaporean society. Led by Taliban-trained Ibrahim Maidin, they were identified as, variously, Malay, Pakistani, Indian, Arab, Javanese and Boyanese, and Malayalee. The majority had grown up in Singapore and had gone through compulsory "national service" or military training. They were also seen to have deviated from majority Muslim community norms by embracing a sense of brotherhood transcending ethnicity and national boundaries in a way that would have been unthinkable even for the fiercely "nationalistic" Malayan communists with their focus on reclaiming the "Malayan" state.

Be that as it may, the Singapore JI chapter was described as owing its existence to complex networks ranging from Afghanistan to the southern Philippines, to Aceh and southern Thailand. In this account, the language of *jihad* and the propensity for violence separated this generation of Islamic activists from its forebears. For Singapore, the JI is seen as not only threatening communal harmony at a time when Islamic concerns have deepened among the 15 percent of the community who identify themselves as Muslim, but also threaten to compromise relations between Malaysia and Singapore, testy at the best of times since separation. As then Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong lectured Washington in 2004, the war against Islamic terrorism is an ideological struggle even more complex than that against the communists because it engages not only reason but faith. [23]

Besides the Darul Islam allusion, the White Paper also observed that the outlawed "terrorist" group extolled a vision of a Daulah Islamiya Nusantara or an archipelago-wide

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Islamic state. While short on analysis and, even understanding, the question may reasonably be asked whether JI plausibly harks back to earlier versions of Islamic pan-Malayanism and whether a call for restoration of the Caliphate linking all Islamic communities globally is not without local historical precedent. The answer is not so straight forward given the primary historical loyalty of Malay Muslims to their Sultans and their *negeri* or sense of specific bounded cultural space. First, the world of rajas and Sultanates such as characterized the Southeast Asian region, seldom accepted an all-embracing caliphate. Second, while there are many who would place *ummat* over state in ways that fit the apparent JI vision, still others seek to reclaim Islamic notions of state otherwise lost to the modernizing secularist elites who came to dominate post-colonial Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia alike. [24]

The Great JI Escape and Recapture of 2008-2009

Visitors to Singapore through most of 2008-early 2009 would have been struck by the ubiquitous presence of wanted posters of enemy number one, the escaped JI/Al Qaeda leader, Mas Selamat Kastari. A Singaporean of Indonesian origin, Selamat was alleged to have plotted to hijack a plane with the intention of crashing it into Singapore's international airport. Head of JI in Singapore, and commanding a five-man cell, Selamat was originally apprehended by Indonesian authorities in east Java and deported to Singapore in 2006. Pending investigations, Selamat escaped from a high security detention center in Singapore in February 2008 by wriggling out of a bathroom window. “Bathroom break” humor and other ribald responses at government ineptness became a popular staple, as weblogs and other internet sources demonstrate. A matter of high embarrassment for the Republic of Singapore, recriminations reached the person of the Home Minister. He survived, but not the superintendent of the prison and other flunkies. The general public also had good reason to be concerned at the lapse of state security including the failure on the part of security forces to capture the fugitive in the largest such exercise ever mounted in the island Republic. Adding to these concerns, even if Selamat's escape was not an inside job, he evidently found good cover among his co-religionists in Singapore before crossing into Malaysia's Johor state and going underground.

Almost one year later, on 1 April 2009, Selamat was arrested in Johor under the Malaysian ISA, which allows for detention without trial for up to two years (extendable). Although Singapore requested his extradition, Malaysia has declined ostensibly owing to ongoing investigations into his terrorist networks. On 25 June 2009, Malaysian police detained a further three terror suspects under the ISA allegedly for conniving with Mas Selamat to revive JI's activities in Malaysia. [25] The final fugitive of Selamat's original Singapore-based cell, Husaini Ismail, was arrested in central Java in June 2009 by the Indonesian authorities reportedly acting upon information supplied by the Singaporeans.

Cyberwars in Singapore (and Malaysia)

One party and one party-dominant states, of which there are numerous examples throughout East-Southeast Asia, have much to fear of the subversive potential of the Internet, just as the new technology is indispensable in the present age. To wit, while researching this article, the following news item swam into view: “Malaysia tells media to ignore online news sites.” [26] Reading on, it appears that a Malaysian government security ministry circular of 15 March 2007 instructed top editors of a dozen newspapers and five television stations not to “give any consideration whatsoever” to anti-government material posted online. Apparently, the Ministry’s circular was first exposed by the

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independent online magazine Malaysiakini.com, just as a Minister had labeled bloggers as purveyors of *cerita donggeng* (myths). So, just who is leading and who is lagging in this cyber arena? According to Reporters without Borders, in Singapore, "The Internet is censored along with the traditional media, but the government was one of the first in the world to realize its importance as a means of dissent by civil society. It began regulating Internet activity in 1999 and the 11 September 2001 attacks speeded up an already advanced process." [27]

More or less, this is the ground staked out by Cherian George in his *Contentious Journalism and the Internet*. [28] George places cyber media management in Singapore and Malaysia under the microscope, describing state-media relations in these two countries, especially after the arrival of the Internet. In Malaysia, the arrest at the outset of the Asian financial crisis of then deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim sparked frenetic cyber forum activity in that country. No such *reformasi* or reform movement touched Singapore where cyber developments took other form. [29] In Indonesia, we observe, cyber activism did make a difference in the events surrounding the downfall of the Indonesian New Order government of President Suharto as the Asian financial crisis started to bite. George describes such Internet-based alternative media as "contentious journalism." Joining the public debate on contemporary issues, they are contentious because they challenge national elites.

The first case from Singapore discussed by George is Sintercom, a website which straddled the pre- and post-regulation periods, transforming itself from a newsgroup forum on Singapore issues to a website. Mildly contentious, and at first hosted offshore by a group of U.S.-based graduate students, the migration of the site to Singapore saw its unregulated space suddenly subject to the first regulations beginning in July 1996. Even though this group built networks with the government, within a year the site had closed. The second case he examined was Think Center-turned website founded by a "colorful activist" whose style went further than the other cases in actually practicing alternative journalism, such as in publicizing police investigations into their role. "Watching the watchers," as Think Center conceived its role, was undoubtedly a significant phase in the life of this circle of socially concerned activists and, indeed, in recent Singapore media history. Think Center, too, quickly fell foul of the authorities as it sought to confront a gamut of new regulations restricting web content. [30]

Needless to say, since George conducted his research, the Singapore globosphere has moved on. New audiences have swum into view, and new technology has arrived including podcasts and 3G mobiles (Singapore boasts 99.8 percent cellular penetration), just as new lines of attack have presented themselves. As tracked by such international organizations as Reporters Without Borders, the cyber war continues unabated with the screws being tightened on the regulatory environment. Drawing comparison with the infamous ISA, in November 2002, the Computer Misuse Act was passed by parliament to authorize complete surveillance of all Internet users through real-time software and legalizing arrest before any offense is committed. "Cyber-criminals" can now be imprisoned for up to three years. Ominously, on 6 September 2003, the online forum Singapore Review, which carried criticism of the government, was hacked. As Reporters without Borders sums up, the Internet in Singapore today is virtually devoid of political content and dissent only occurs on websites and discussion forums hosted outside the country. [31]

The first case from Malaysia discussed by George is that of Harakah, the cyber version of the leading opposition party Parti Islam's (PAS)

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big-selling newspaper. The second Malaysian case is that of Malaysiakini.com, as mentioned above, perhaps the best known of the "contentious journalism" sites in these two countries. Ultimately, George finds greater space in Malaysia for contentious journalism (after all Malyasia.kini survives and flourishes in impressive four-language format). [32] This assessment should not be surprising given Singapore's entrenched one-party dominant system in contrast to Malaysia's increasingly vulnerable ruling coalition government, albeit a system in which one party has managed to dominate (also through state management of the media). Even so, Malaysian bloggers such as UK-born Raja Petra bin Raja Kamarudin, scion of the royal house of Selangor, have not been immune to the application of repressive legislation. Editor of Malaysia Today news portal, a website advocating transparency and accountability in government, Raja Petra has been twice detained under the ISA (most recently between September-November 2008 allegedly for defaming Islam) although also released by a high court ruling calling into question the scope of the ISA law under which he was detained. In October 2008 Raja Petra also faced sedition charges for allegedly implying on his website that the person who was the then deputy prime minister of Malaysia (current prime minister) and his wife were involved in the murder of a Mongolian model in very murky circumstances. This was one of the first criminal cases against a blogger in Malaysia. Also facing defamation charges, the "royal blogger" has gone into hiding to avoid what he apparently fears is another arrest under the ISA. [33]

Both countries, as mentioned, enforce preventive detention laws and journalists have been victims in both countries. George sees Malaysia as more overtly coercive, at least clumsy (as in the Anwar Ibrahim affair), although Singapore and Malaysia both practice significant behind-the-scenes prior restraint over website content. Above all, George confirms what governments also know, that cyber space as such is not without bounds but is rooted in real-world communities, at least for practitioners of alternative journalism. George also makes the case that all sides, whether "hypocrites or heretics," purport to believe in democracy. He is optimistic that Internet culture has strengthened media diversity and that pluralism will prevail. Well, maybe not for individual practitioners, but for the collective good, even if only incrementally. [34] On the other hand, expatriated Singaporean James Gomez, writing from insider knowledge on the use of the internet by opposition parties in Singapore, is dubious as to their ability to gain electoral advantage from the new media beyond a certain "outreach." [35]

Envoi

A tour of west Malaysia in June 2009 by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, the first in a decade, had pundits and bloggers wondering about his real agenda; whether buttering up the Malaysian opposition, including the spiritual leader of the Islamist PAS along with the leader of the Democratic Action Party once twinned with Singapore's PAP, or just making courtesy calls on Sultans and ruling figures. This was no "trip down memory lane," as billed, but called up a long agenda of outstanding issues between the two countries, from water to landfill, possibly also including the terror question. Some media comment also ran to the scurrilous, with former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, who declined a meeting with Lee, comparing the elder statesman to a visiting Chinese emperor and likening Singapore to a "modern Middle Kingdom." [36] Those with longer memories will recall that, back in 1963-65, PAP's electoral meddling in Malaysia was one of the factors that led to Singapore's expulsion from the Federation.

Pro-active as ever, between 6-18 July 2009, Singapore staged an anti-terror drill involving

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2,000 participants from 15 state agencies including the Armed Forces simulating the deadly Mumbai attacks of November 2008. No doubt such prudence was confirmed by the 17 July 2008 terror bombings of the J.W. Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta, just as closer regional cooperation appears to be the key to eliminating the terror scourge. While few outside of a fringe group would wish to see a revival of JI, a larger and larger chorus of voices on both sides of the causeway separating Malaysia from Singapore reject the premise of being hostage in perpetuity to outdated colonial-era ISA legislation under which legitimate voices have also been silenced. [37] Better intelligence sharing, better policing is no doubt in order in the quest to neutralize JI and their ilk. But, equally urgent is the need for more responsive and accountable governance in line with popular aspirations across the region to build stronger and more open civil society and social fabric.

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In countries where there are treatment centers dedicated to helping out drug addicts, it is generally understood that a rehab program is the third part of the addiction rehabilitation process.

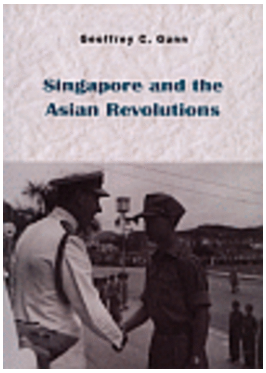
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