

RATIONAL CONVERSATIONS

KIRSTEN
HAN

The
Silhouette of
Oppression



EPIGRAM

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THIS IS AN EXPANDED VERSION
OF AN ESSAY ORIGINALLY
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ON THE AUTHOR'S BLOG.

There are parts of the world where journalism is a frightening, dangerous job. Arrests, detention, kidnappings, even murder. Singapore isn't one of those places. Yet the Southeast Asian nation ranks 151st in the latest World Press Freedom Index—below Myanmar, Russia and Afghanistan—and many citizens consider political journalism a “scary” endeavour. Somewhere along the trajectory of

their life, the average Singaporean has picked up the belief that politics—being involved in it, having opinions about it, commenting on it—is somehow risky. “Things happen” to people who stick their necks out.

The same political party has ruled Singapore for decades; 2019 will mark the sixtieth anniversary of the People’s Action Party coming to power. It’s brought stability and uninterrupted, long-term plans that have led to some success, but also make political decisions seem like inevitabilities rather than negotiations. We’re told that this is part of the secret sauce to being a modern-day miracle; why seek challenge and dissent, when things can be so much simpler? Do you want more democracy, with its mess and chaos and ugly disagreements, or do you

want efficiency, peace and economic growth? It’s better this way, we’re told.

We believe it, for the most part. We believe it because it’s easier to believe than to challenge. Life is comfortable here, a humid tropical blip just above the equator turned cool with air-conditioning in glass malls containing everything needed to enjoy life. The streets are clean, the public transport (relatively) reliable, the city safe enough to leave one’s bag unattended while buying drinks in a food court. The Wi-Fi is fast and mobile networks work even in tunnels.

Access to these modern conveniences makes it easier to be satisfied with the status quo. It’s difficult to believe oppression happens in such privileged “First World” environs. The cafés with rainbow cakes, the queues for the latest

iPhone and the rows of designer boutiques in posh shopping centres don't fit the image of authoritarian states we tend to have: all grey and angular, with visible police patrols and dissidents grabbed off the streets.

Yet there's an exchange that I have over and over with Singaporeans. An instance that stuck in my mind was with the middle-aged manager of a food stall.

"Journalism is tough, right?" he said as he counted out my change. "I guess if you don't write about politics here it's not too bad..."

"Oh, I do write about politics."

His eyebrows shot up above his glasses. "But that's so tough!" he exclaimed. "If you write the truth you get into trouble, but if you don't no one reads it because you're a liar."

Or the time with a private-hire driver who, after hearing about my work, commented, "What a dangerous life you lead."

This internalised fear isn't all paranoia; there's a history behind this cautious nervousness, a story obscured through a neat manipulation of the narrative, but whose shadow lives on in the half-hidden recesses of a national consciousness.

...

The police came bashing on doors in the early hours of the morning in 1987. They searched homes, confiscated books, took people away. Decades later these former detainees tell of interrogations and intimidation that sound

more like excerpts of Orwell or Kafka than real life.

“Standing barefoot beneath the blast of the air-conditioner without having taken breakfast, and with just three hours of sleep, I shivered and thought of how best to keep warm... There was one male officer who came in and shouted something. My answer did not satisfy him or rather he was not prepared to be convinced. He gave me four hard slaps... The slaps sent a gush of hot blood to my face,” wrote former detainee Teo Soh Lung in her memoir *Beyond the Blue Gate: Memoirs of a Political Prisoner*.

The national broadsheet printed statements from the government verbatim. They told the nation these people were Marxists seeking to overthrow the state. “Confessions”

were televised; these social workers, lawyers and Catholics were cast as threats to national security.

The message to Singapore’s tiny civil society circle was clear: *This is what can happen. This is what we can do*. Activism and dissent became muted for years, disrupting the continuity of a budding resistance that was itself a tentative resumption of an earlier era of political activity and community organising. (That era, too, had been crippled with arrests and detentions.)

This is a part of our collective past that we do not discuss. It isn’t mentioned in textbooks, nor does it feature (or so I’m told) in the Internal Security Department’s Heritage Centre. We laud the achievements of our small country over and over again every National Day as a massive



Kirsten Han is a Singaporean freelance journalist and Editor-in-Chief of New Naratif, a platform for Southeast Asian journalism, research, art and community-building. Her work often revolves around the themes of social justice, human rights, politics and democracy, with bylines in publications like *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Asia Times* and *Southeast Asia Globe*. Kirsten is also a founding member of We Believe in Second Chances, a group advocating for the abolition of the death penalty in Singapore. In 2018, she was awarded an honourable mention by The World Justice Project in recognition of her reporting on rule of law issues.

ABOUT THE SERIES

Rational Conversations by Epigram Books is a series of essays and speeches by prominent Singaporeans on issues close to their heart.

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