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## Introduction

The arrest of 16 people in the early hours of 21 May 1987 shocked the nation. Codenamed Operation Spectrum, the arrests were touted as a national security exercise and made under the Internal Security Act (ISA) even though not a single weapon or explosive was seized from any one of them. As if 16 arrests at dawn in one fell swoop were not sufficient to terrify the population, another six were detained a month later. These six had merely spoken out or campaigned against the first arrests.

The allegations against the detainees were bizarre. They were accused of having communist links<sup>1</sup> and later making use of lawful and registered organisations (both political and non-political), to further their aim of establishing a Marxist state. The government claimed that many of them had also made use of the Roman Catholic Church “to subvert the existing social and political system in Singapore, using communist united front tactics, with a view to establish a Marxist state.” Strangely, under continuous interrogations and torture, many of the detainees were ultimately forced to admit that they were unwittingly “made use of” by friends. And even stranger was the subsequent revelation by the government that it was unhappy with the four Catholic priests and not those 16 arrested.

In the days, weeks and months following the arrests, the government was unexpectedly kept busy rebutting statements and claims of ill treatment of prisoners from human rights organisations, Church, government and individuals outside Singapore and the international media. Friends of the prisoners had immediately set up a network around the world to rebut the government’s allegations, testify to the good character of the prisoners and claim that they were subjected to physical and mental torture. Singapore embassies and offices of the Singapore Airlines were inundated with queries and protests. Congress of the United States, the Diet of Japan and the European Union were kept informed of the arrests. Singapore ambassadors and ministers were compelled to answer questions on the government’s treatment of the prisoners and the use of detention without trial which is contrary to the rule of law in civilised countries.

The prisoners were released in stages but not before they were forced to appear on television for rehearsed interviews. By the end of December 1987, all were released except Vincent Cheng Kim Chuan.

The ISA empowers the government to arrest and imprison people indefinitely and without any trial. History has shown that innocent people—students, university lecturers, medical doctors, journalists, lawyers and trade unionists had been imprisoned for years without trial. Several were detained for periods longer than life sentences. The government’s refusal to release Vincent Cheng in December 1987 therefore caused grave unease among those who were released. This, coupled with the government’s relentless accusations of wrongdoings and denial that the detainees were ill treated, led to the issue of a joint public statement.

### Joint Statement and re-arrests

On 18 April 1988, nine released prisoners issued a statement rebutting the government’s allegations against them and confirming that they had suffered ill treatment. Eight of them were immediately re-arrested the next day. The ninth, Tang Fong Har who was in England, did not return to Singapore but embarked on a campaign to free her friends. She is today living in Hong Kong as a political exile.

The re-arrests in 1988 ended the hope of release for Vincent Cheng. It also led to the arrests of Francis Seow and Patrick Seong, two prominent lawyers who were acting for many of the prisoners. It seemed incredible that Singapore, a developed country could abuse lawyers so openly.

Left with the prospect of indefinite detention, several prisoners turned to the Supreme Court for relief. The court failed them. Its half-hearted judgment in December 1988 may have given hope to future generations of Singaporeans but it dealt a hefty blow on the prisoners. They were ordered to be released on a technical ground but were promptly re-arrested. They had to commence legal proceedings all over again.

By June 1990, everyone, including Vincent Cheng was released. They were all subjected to severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, assembly, free speech and expression for many years.

### Picking up the pieces

The released prisoners went about their lives quietly for two decades. Except for a few, they returned to the professions before their arrests. Vincent Cheng was the hardest hit. He lost his job as the executive secretary of the Archdiocesan Justice and Peace Commission which was shut down soon after the arrests in May 1987. Luckily his resourcefulness and intelligence led him to embark on a new career as a natural health care practitioner. Reflexology, a skill he acquired from books while he was in prison became handy.

Several of those released left Singapore for work or further education, at least for several years if not for good. Those who remain, made good the years they lost in prison. More importantly, they kept in touch with one another. They occasionally remember the anniversaries of 21 May 1987. They got together with friends and relatives on several of these anniversaries for meals, renewed their friendship and sang a song or two for old times' sake.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, friends and relatives came together for lunch at The Vines in Thomson Road. A small booklet of letters from prison was distributed to those who attended. Busy with work, the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary was forgotten. When the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary (2007) approached, several of the former prisoners decided to discuss and reflect on what happened in 1987. They invited the alleged leader of the conspiracy, Tan Wah Piow and a few concerned friends to a weekend retreat in Johor. It was a private gathering to trash out 1987 and exchange experiences. For the first time, a soul-searching discussion and analysis took place.

## Awakening

In May 2009, several young Singaporeans held a protest calling for the abolition of the ISA at Hong Lim Park. It was the 22<sup>nd</sup> year of 21 May 1987. *Remembering 22 Singapore Victims of ISA* was attended by several former detainees. They quietly observed the protest. The young people knew who they were but did not speak to them. It was good to see them organise the event.<sup>2</sup>

That protest had a great impact on the ISA survivors. They realised that Singaporeans were curious about the past and it was perhaps time for them to tell their story.

The following year, Function 8 was incorporated as a social enterprise and Teo Soh Lung's prison memoir, *Beyond the Blue Gate* was published.

In 2012, Function 8 in collaboration with MARUAH, a human rights organisation, commemorated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Operation Spectrum at Hong Lim Park. They put up an exhibition of various objects, artworks and constructed mock prison cells and interrogation room to give the public an idea of what it is like to be in prison. The event was called *That We May Dream Again, Remembering the 1987 'Marxist Conspiracy'*.

In March 2015, Roman Catholic Archbishop William Goh in his address to a "crowd of 5000 Catholics, including 40 priests"<sup>3</sup> at a special mass for former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, referred to the arrest of 22 people in 1987 as a "dark period" in the Church's history. He was also reported as having said:

"I think it is important for us to move on and to forgive, and most of all to continue to build the country. There's no point to go back to the past, trying to lick our wounds because it will not help in nation building... And as Christians all the more we should forgive and forget..."<sup>4</sup>

The archbishop is wrong to advise that it is pointless to go back to the past. It is not helpful to add that to go back to the past is to "lick our wounds".

To this day, the Catholic Church has not made any attempt to investigate the truth about the government's serious allegations against her church workers, volunteers and priests. Will silence and inaction light up the "dark period" in the Church's history? Will this "dark period" go away if the Church does nothing? Will the ghost of the past live to haunt us?

While we do not deny that the Church was also a victim of state violence in 1987, when Archbishop Gregory Yong, not being a politician, succumbed under pressure at the Istana, she can emulate the example set by Bishop Desmond Tutu who led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the 1990s. As we wait for the Church to take steps to be reconciled with the Catholic victims of Operation Spectrum, we are exceedingly grateful for the essays of Fr Patrick Goh and Edgar D'Souza. Their stories shed much light on the exemplary role of the Church before Operation Spectrum, which regrettably earned the displeasure of the authorities and met the full force of their suppression.

Operation Spectrum was a clumsy but successful attack on a re-emerging civil society. It was a multi-pronged attack that wiped out student activism, destroyed or crippled several legitimate organisations and one professional body—The Law Society of Singapore.

It is our hope that with this publication, Singaporeans will know what actually happened in 1987 and decide for themselves if there was a national security threat that necessitated the mounting of Operation Spectrum and the arrest of 22 people and two of their lawyers.

Teo Soh Lung  
May 2017

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### Notes:

- 1 *The Straits Times*, 22 May 1987
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j604lzFjFDY>—Remembering 22 Singapore Victims of ISA, accessed on 21 March 2017
- 3 <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/archbishop-goh-mr-lee-kuan-yew-did-what-he-thought-was-best-for-the-country>, accessed on 21 March 2017
- 4 *ibid*

## Still We Will Remember



Fong Hoe Fang graduated from the University of Singapore in 1979 with majors in Social Work and Sociology. He was a volunteer and committee member with the Spastic Children's Association of Singapore, the Singapore Children's Society and the Singapore Association of Social Workers. With two other friends, he founded Pagesetters Services, an advertising and design house in 1987 and currently offers a writing platform for new Singapore voices through the imprint Ethos Books.

### 30 Years, 30 Lines

*Still we will remember  
the thunder of those years.*

*How lightning's forked tongue  
tore the green from virgin trees  
and burnt the bark of the old.*

*How white fire's hammer hand  
crushed the spines of some  
and pinned others under stone.*

*Incessantly it raged  
fracturing families and bonds  
extracting silence from our land.*

*Only the winds continued their howl  
screaming naked power and  
spinning things around.*

*We could but only mark  
the places of brethren who fell.*

*We could but only view  
the bodies of those who bled.*

*We sprinkled the earth  
with the salt of quiet tears.*

*Waiting ...  
as time tamed the storm  
as yesterday's savage silence takes new form.*

*Now we paint our words on other skies  
plant where the wounded and fallen lie.*

*We nurse our fallen tears  
channel the trickling trails  
that would fold unbroken land.*

*Not a river yet but  
still we seek our sea.*

The building was in total darkness when I turned into Irving Road from Paya Lebar Road. I felt something was wrong... the scene was a far cry from the vibrant one I had come to associate with the Geylang Catholic Centre (GCC). Where were the inhabitants who had brought so much life and hope to the Centre?

I circled the building twice with my motorbike in low gear, instinctively pretending non-interest even as I peered discreetly into the grounds of the once-community centre where the GCC had just made its home at the suggestion of the Catholic Welfare Centre and the Ministry of Social Affairs.

A deep sense of anxiety descended upon me. Where was everyone? I had no way of quickly contacting Father Arotçarena who was director of the GCC. Neither would calling the Centre's hotline be of any help—it was obvious that no one was there.

I turned the motorbike around and headed to Geylang, Lorong 24A from where the GCC had moved about a week earlier. There was no sign of the GCC or its residents and volunteers at Lorong 24A as well.

When I reached home, Dad was at the door. He would usually be in his armchair even after I had turned off the bike engine, and returned greetings only after I entered the house. But it was obvious that he had heard the engine and on this occasion, decided to meet me at the door.

“Your friend, Soh Lung has been arrested... ISA,” he said in his Cantonese.

Speechless, I just looked at him as I wrestled with the random thoughts that came furiously to mind. How could it be? What was she doing that was so wrong? Soh Lung had been the informal legal adviser to, as well as a “stand-by” volunteer at the Crisis Centre (CC)—a group which some friends and I had set up to offer temporary shelter to battered wives and run-away teenagers in June 1981. The CC had been stationed at the GCC for some years, and had the benefit of both the use of the GCC's space as well as useful discussions and deliberations on welfare work with its various volunteers and professional service providers over the years.

“It was in the 7pm news,” Dad continued. Then, as I rushed into the house to make calls to others in the group, he said something strange, “Do you need any money?” It was only much later that I realised the meaning of that question. He had been an eye-witness of Operation Coldstore in 1963 and its aftermath. And now small amounts of surreptitious money was all he could safely offer as help to those maligned.

The phone calls to others in the group yielded nothing substantial. It was just a series of “I heard this,” and “so and so told me that”. There was nothing more I could do as I waited for the 9pm news to come on.

My wife, Wai Han, who had returned home from work by then, was equally shocked and upset by the news. I was too distracted at that point to realise how badly the news and events had affected her—but more of that later.

On 22 May 1987 and over the next few weeks, the newspapers ran full-page stories on the discovery of an alleged plot by alleged Marxists against Singapore. It must have been the lengthiest press release in the world because it was quite clear that it was a monologue in the national print media from the government, with nary a reply from those accused, or the organisations they worked for.

All public news of the affair, known now as Operation Spectrum, came only from the mainstream press. Additional and ground information had to come via word-of-mouth from friends and families of the detained workers, and investigations from our personal efforts. The mainstream media had failed miserably and this time spectacularly, in their public duty of providing neutral information and balanced views to society.

And as the weeks passed, it became clear to me that four main organisations had been targeted and they were mainly religious ones—the GCC, the Young Christian Workers movement (YCW)—an international movement founded in 1924, the Student Christian Movement (SCM)—an international Christian movement which came into being in 1889 and the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC)—an arm operating under the Roman Catholic Church in Singapore. And for good measure, the names of The Law Society of Singapore and the Workers' Party had been dragged in, either as camouflage or as a warning to the fledging civil society movements in Singapore. The government had come to fear any legitimate organisation which had started to logically and effectively question its official narratives. For weeks, I was worried for the Crisis Centre and its volunteers, whether any of us would be dragged into this government onslaught as collateral damage.

My fears were not totally unfounded as the Crisis Centre which was then generously housed within the premises of a voluntary welfare organisation in the Bukit Merah area, was very soon after told to move out within 24 hours, purportedly acting on 'orders' from the president of the then Singapore Council of Social Services.

Wai Han who was heavily pregnant with our second child and due to deliver in two weeks' time, burst her water bag unexpectedly, and our child was delivered via a caesarean operation two weeks early. Incensed by Operation Spectrum, worried for the safety of the CC volunteers, troubled by the immediate 'move-out' orders for the CC which resulted in sudden homelessness for the current residents and coupled with the premature delivery, she struggled with a long period of post-natal depression. We decided that we should shut down the centre for the safety of the volunteers, and in fairness to any future residents, as well as to take care of her health.

Many years later, I met one of the ex-volunteers of the centre accidentally on the streets of Singapore. She had been one of the most enthusiastic and effective volunteers in the centre, but had left without a word and became uncontactable

suddenly some months before Operation Spectrum. As we spoke about the old days, she revealed that she had been approached by the Internal Security Department to be an informer. She was then a civil servant. Rather than betray the group, she chose to stay away. I am sure there must have been others like her. Such episodes tell me that Operation Spectrum had been planned long ago, and also showed me how abuse of the Internal Security Act by the powers-that-be is so detrimental to the development of caring communities.

I wasn't formally connected through joint projects with any of the organisations mentioned earlier, though we had mutual friends whom I had kept in touch with occasionally by appropriately and mutually tapping on one another's resources from time to time. It was therefore not in my place to speak up in defence of those detained without trial as a part of these organisations. However, the sheer audacity of the government's claims and actions against the reality on the ground which we worked and lived with, galvanised me to seek counsel and support from community and social groups other than those which had been pinpointed.

To my utter disgust and disappointment, I discovered that these groups which aimed to serve community and the marginalised had no stomach for the truth when that truth reflected badly on the government. They refused to even listen, and sought refuge behind the mindless mantra that the government cannot be wrong. On hindsight, I realise now that for these organisations, it was fear which defeated logic and truth. Men of straw... how painful that lesson was. But could I blame them when even the institution of the Roman Catholic Church denied its own after a traumatic meeting with the then Prime Minister whom many believed was the real impetus for this cooked up conspiracy?

In a fit of righteousness and despondency, I left those organisations, some of which I had served faithfully and religiously for more than 10 years. Of course, I think some of those organisations were relieved that I left. Perhaps they found it difficult to acknowledge the cowardice and betrayal wrought by fear. Far easier to be an ostrich with its head in the sand.

I could not abandon my friends. It could just as well have been the volunteers at the CC or myself on the receiving end. I could not let the lies go unchallenged because lies, when repeated long enough without challenge, have the propensity to become perceived truth.

However, there were no more structured organisations to work with. They had either been banned, shut down, or bent on their knees. It would be just friends and other volunteers, whose sense of justice and fairness had drawn them into community work in the first place, who continued their personal quests to redeem those who had taken the brunt of one man's displeasure.

We met in informal small groups, sharing information, writing letters, and giving general support to the larger and more organised groups that had sprung

up to bring a semblance of objectivity to what the world now calls, “fake news” of the mainstream and then, only media.

And while fear was palpable, to the great credit of these friends, many stood their ground, finding different ways to resist. Some even became collateral damage as a new wave of arrests occurred—snaring some of those who had dared to act as defence lawyers for those detained.

We wrote letters to the families of those detained, affirming our belief in the innocence of our friends and praying for truth to prevail. We held meetings to revive flagging spirits and to share new information. We kept each other updated on the physical and mental well-being of those detained, on the progress of their legal actions against the government.

These small informal meetings were not earth-shattering nor were we entranced with the view that it would change anything. But I believe it was important for the families of the detained, to know that they were not alone.

Meanwhile Father Arotçarena had closed down the GCC soon after the initial arrests as the centre could not continue under the circumstances. There was also the sudden shock when he found himself arbitrarily suspended from his duties as a priest through a newspaper report instead of through his superiors in the church.

Three other priests who had been in the forefront of the organisations that faced the government’s juggernaut had also been suspended by the church despite their earlier resignations from their positions in the organisations.

Father Arotçarena then left for France for reasons best revealed in his book, *Priest in Geylang* which was published in French in 2013 and translated into English in 2015.

In 1988, Wai Han and I were in Europe for a vacation, and we decided to visit Father Arotçarena and hear from him first-hand about the incident. We found him extremely concerned for the welfare of those arrested. France has many churches with long histories and breath-taking architecture. At every church that we visited with him, and there were many, the first thing he did upon entering was to burn a candle for those arrested. It was incredibly touching for me that a man whom I had always known to focus on the substance of his God, could now only use a form of his beliefs to offer comfort to his people half a world away.

Perhaps it’s the sense of powerlessness in the face of naked power. Perhaps it’s a recognition that there are evils which one needs our God to deal with. But I think I understood the oft-quoted phrase, “Do your best, God will do the rest” a little better after that visit.

Upon our return, Wai Han and I continued to strive to do our best with others to seek release for, and give support to those who were still behind bars.

One of the most creative acts of support and resistance we conducted was probably Christmas carolling at the gates of Whitley Road Detention Centre in the December of 1988.

It was a spontaneous decision which a group of us made when we met during one Christmas season. Fortified by the spirit of Christmas and good food, we decided to go carolling outside the gates of Whitley Road Detention Centre to bring cheer to our detained friends.

Soon after the group started singing lustily, one of those huge police riot vans arrived with a large squad of police personnel. It would have been really funny if the occasion wasn’t quite so tragic. The thought of friends scampering off into the dark sanctuary of the nearby Bukit Brown cemetery grounds with the police in hot pursuit never fails to bring merriment whenever I think about it.

More important, the sight of these same friends helping each other jump across crevices, rounding the tombstones and playing hide and seek in skirts and others in shorts while the police struggled with the terrain as individuals, demonstrated to me in a very physical way, the importance of unity and helping hands in overcoming problems.

It’s been 30 years since that infamous day of 21 May 1987. Many people have asked me why some of us from that era are still harping on the past. They wonder why we have not forgiven and moved on.

They are mistaken. We have moved on. Many of us have carved careers and new lives for ourselves despite the shadows. What we seek is not retributive justice but reconciliation through restorative justice. We seek acknowledgement that the work and actions of these groups in 1987 while odious to the powers that be, were legitimate and socially desirable in the context of a maturing society which recognises strength in diversity. We seek realisation that freedom to participate in community life does not lie within the confines of in-bred official visions, and that peace, justice and equality for our nation enshrined in the National Pledge should not remain just an aspiration.

For me, the sad thing about an unresolved 1987 is not that I will be unable to remember the then-Prime Minister for the good things he did (and there were undoubtedly some), but that I will never be able to forget him for the wickedness of Operation Spectrum and how it has set back our society in ways we will never fully know until the time comes.