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Preface

When I was released from detention under the Internal Security Act (ISA) the second time in 1982, Lee Kuan Yew said that I was defiant, but that he would give me a second chance. He was referring to the press statement I had made upon my first release at the end of 1973 where I had called him, ‘a political pimp’. Therefore, it would seem that being defiant was one of the reasons for my arrest under the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance (PPSO) and its successor, the Internal Security Act (ISA). I am still defiant. I draw a strict line between what is just and what isn’t.

In 1994, when the 30-year limit came up for the records of the British archives to be partially declassified for the period up to 1963, I went to spend some time in London at the Public Record Office. I wanted to have the facts to back up the stand that my friends and I took, that we were arrested under the PPSO, and later the ISA, for political reasons and not on any account of security or subversion. This stand is diametrically opposed to Singapore’s mainstream account which the younger generation has been fed with. As late as 2006, when Tan Jing Quee and Michael Fernandez spoke at a forum about the use of the ISA and their prolonged imprisonment, the Singapore government issued a statement that ex-political prisoners would not be permitted to rewrite history. It was both a threat and a challenge.

In 2009, I accepted the challenge. Tan Jing Quee, Koh Kay Yew and I edited *The Fajar Generation: The University Socialist Club and the politics of postwar Malaya*. The thrust of this book, however, was against British imperialism and not directly at the PAP. With the opening of a bigger space for discussion of Singapore history as a result of this publication, the PAP could not give a reasoned response. And so, the ruling party fell back on a reproduction of *Battle for Merger*, which was no more than an anti-communist diatribe.

With encouragement from friends, especially those in Function 8, I decided that a more comprehensive book on the tumultuous events of the 1950s and 1960s in which I was personally involved should be written. I would like to thank Hong Lysa and Wong Souk Yee for their expertise in research and crafting the book. Without their enthusiastic help, this book would not have seen the light of day. However, all opinions expressed in this book are solely mine.

I am also most fortunate to have Ngoh Teck Nam as translator of the Chinese version of this book. Teck Nam is a comrade and a fellow ex-political detainee.

Historian Thum Ping Tjin has most generously shared with me recently-released documents which he has consulted at The National Archives in Britain. These include documents which he obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.

Finally, I owe it not only to comrades and friends, but also the younger generation, to explain and debunk the official Singapore historical narrative.

Poh Soo Kai
November 2015
Most critically, between the Tunku and Lee, it was apparent that the British chose to back the latter. The Tunku had shown himself to be weak when he succumbed to pressure from Indonesia and the Philippines on the need to 'ascertain' the wishes of the Borneo territories to join Malaysia. The Tunku also had a firm grip on electoral victories in his territory, as long as he did not alienate his base in UMNO. While he was a political compradore who received the independence of his country on a silver platter, he was by far more secure in his position than Lee, and hence less vulnerable to British pressure.

Lee revealed in his memoirs that the Tunku had told him in mid-August 1964 immediately after the riots that the British prime minister, Alec Douglas-Home had advised the Tunku to form a national government to include the PAP. The Malaysian prime minister did not fall in line. Lee's stock with the British improved further with the Labour Party under Harold Wilson winning the 1964 general election, as he crowed about at the time. In his memoirs Lee put it in self-righteous terms: 'The Tunku would have to deal with a British Labour government that would not be sympathetic to feudal chiefs who put down a democratic loyal opposition that abjured violence.' The position of the British is pertinent to understanding the brinkmanship that Lee and the PAP indulged in with seeming recklessness and impunity.

Lim Kean Siew's comment on the Josey expulsion episode of mid-1965 hit the nail on the head. He asked rhetorically why the PAP was protesting so much over the expulsion of Alex Josey, when journalists like Said Zahari and A Mahadeva were being imprisoned without trial. The only difference was that Josey was a supporter of the PAP. Lim called the PAP's fears over the possibility of the arrest of Lee 'even more strange'. The Alliance had been using detention without trial before the formation of Malaysia; the PAP itself used such arbitrary laws in Singapore with little hesitation to arrest and detain Barisan Sosialis leaders. Apparently as long as such laws were not used against the PAP, it was all right.

The Tunku could not keep Singapore without British support, and with opposition from its majority Chinese population. Arrangements for Singapore's Separation were crafted by Razak and Goh Keng Swee following the PAP victory in the Hong Lim by-election to 'allow for both sides to disengage from what would be a disastrous collision'. Singapore would run its own army, but for operational purposes, it would be put under whoever commanded all Malaysian forces opposing Indonesia during Confrontation. Lee stressed in his memoirs that Razak kept changing his mind, and that the British were completely in the dark about the moves towards Separation. He even congratulated himself and Eddie Barker who drafted the legal documents for pulling off a constitutional coup against the British government.

Barisan member of parliament Chia Thye Poh pointed out then that Separation was executed without the consent of the Singapore parliament, or of the people. It could thus be said to be a coup against the people of Singapore who, all said and done, had voted in a referendum for merger.

Tunku Abdul Rahman best summarised Lee's role in rushing in and out of Malaysia in the inscription he penned in the copy of his 1977 memoir that he sent to Lee. Lee did not think that it was revealing or awkward to inform the readers of The Singapore Story that the Tunku regarded him as:

Mr Lee Kuan Yew: The friend who had worked so hard to find Malaysia and even harder to break it up.

51 Lee Kuan Yew, The Singapore Story, p. 627.
52 Lee Kuan Yew, The Singapore Story, p. 577.
53 The Straits Times, 'Why this big fuss over Josey? Toh asked', 10 July 1965.
54 Lee Kuan Yew, The Singapore Story, p. 629.
He smiled and said "Dr Poh, may I call you Dr Poh ?"  
"Of course," I replied.  
You see, we were never addressed by our name in detention. You 
were number so and so. Mine was 42. So that was courtesy on his part.  
His next question was: "And now Dr Poh, what is your story?"
My obvious reply: "Story? What story do you want?"
He knew he had lost. He got up stiffly and stomped towards the 
doors. That was indeed a very quick and abrupt end to the interview.

On another occasion, also at Whitley Road Detention Centre, I 
was alone in a large open cell with a small exercise yard. You could shout 
to your neighbours, but you could not see them. Dr Tow Siang Hwa, 
the acting head of department when I was posted to Kandang Kerbau 
Hospital in 1961, came to see me. We had a chat in the tea room. He 
decided to send me a Bible, and said he would arrange for someone to 
read it with me. That someone turned out to be a senior officer at Whitley 
though I was unaware of his position at the time. I had no objection. I 
only insisted on reading the Bible from page one. And he did not know 
anything from Genesis. He must have found my interpretation more 
reasonable than his, for soon the sessions were discontinued.

The Barisan after the September 1963 general election
While I did not expect to be incarcerated for 17 years, I fully expected that 
the Barisan would be defeated in the September 1963 general election. 
The hope of so many of the Operation Coldstore political prisoners was 
that the party would triumph and we would be immediately released. 
That was wishful thinking. The ‘debate’, or rather the illusion that there 
was one was nothing more than a means to condemn those of us who 
challenged Lee Kuan Yew’s plans as communist, to set us up for arrest. We 
knew about the aborted plans for our arrest following the Brunei revolt. 
Some of us received a tip-off a few hours prior to the knocks on the door 
on 2 February 1963. Lee Kuan Yew would not have gone through all that 
trouble, only to have the Barisan win the election. The Barisan entered 
the election with both hands tied, with its most effective leaders and 
cadres in prison, and the whole machinery of state unabashedly thrown 
against them in the election campaign.

I had expected that we would be freed in about 2 to 3 years. Once 
Singapore was in Malaysia, the military base would be in the hands of the 
Central government, and the Barisan would no longer be a threat to it. 
Similarly, even if we did well in future elections, Singapore would be only 
one of 13 states in the Federation of Malaysia, and the impact would be 
diluted. We, Barisan leaders, were prepared to work within Malaysia, in 
cooperation with the Labour Party and Parti Rakyat.

Hence even though we knew of our impending arrest, we did not draw 
up a contingency plan for big demonstrations when that happened. If we 
had done that the UK would have been forced to send in troops, which 
would have been an international issue, making merger difficult. But our 
reading of the situation at the time was that we would go in, come out 
after the formation of Malaysia, and fight the next election.

We did not calculate that Lee would leave a Barisan ‘rump’, which 
would work to his advantage, as he told the British. We also did 
not expect that Separation would take place within two years. With 
Separation, we knew we would be in for a very long time.

Lee Kuan Yew cast the net wide to include clearly non left-wing 
individuals in Operation Coldstore, but he also left out the ‘lesser men’ 
from the Barisan, to be proceeded against more quietly and gradually 
after Malaysia. This was the ‘rump’ he referred to. It came into play in 
a big way after the September 1963 general election, where the Barisan 
won 13 seats to the PAP’s 31, and 33.2 percent of the votes. The 
most fateful result in that election was that Dr Lee Siew Choh lost in 
Rochor constituency by 89 votes to Toh Chin Chye. Dr Lee Siew Choh 
had left his seat of Queenstown to face Toh who was the incumbent, 
party chairman to party chairman. This move also handed Queenstown 
to the PAP.

The Rochor election result was a turning point. Dr Lee Siew Choh 
henceforth made even grander gestures and became absolutely inflexible.

27 CO 1030/1159, UK High Commission, Singapore to Secretary of State 
for the Colonies, 27 November 1962.
He saw the Barisan Legislative Assembly members, mostly from Nantah and the trade unions who took an independent stand from him as his rivals for leadership of the Barisan and the left. He did not know much about socialism, or being left when I encountered him in the Barisan. However after our arrest, a new phraseology entered his speeches, the language of the Cultural Revolution, which he never used before. He became determined to have his way. It is highly possible that he had a confidant who was giving him advice, deliberately or otherwise. I do not like the fact that Lee Kuan Yew was so confident that ‘the rump’ would be to PAP’s advantage.

The Barisan was losing its direction. A split occurred in May 1964 between Dr Lee Siew Choh and his supporters who called for a boycott of registration for national service which the Central government had instituted, and the group of Barisan Legislative Assembly members who urged the people to register ‘under compulsion.’ Led by Chia Thye Poh they were conscious that the people were afraid of the penalties and recriminations for defying the legislation passed by an elected government of an independent country. They had the support of party branches. The Barisan made house-to-house calls, distributing anti-conscription pamphlets. Chia Thye Poh and Kow Kee Seng filed a legislative motion calling on the Singapore government to urge the Central government to stop the conscription of youths for military service. But they stopped short of calling for the people to boycott the registration exercise as this would alienate them.28 Dr Lee Siew Choh’s son and TT Rajah’s refused to register; they went to prison.

Dr Lee Siew Choh resigned as Barisan chairman over the issue. He returned to the position almost a year later, in March 1965, finally accepting the various attempts to get him back for the sake of party unity. He insisted that the assemblymen issue a public admission of the error of their ways on national conscription. Most significantly, he demanded to know what and who made them change their minds. A sensible party leader in those circumstances would try his best to bury the hatchet, not try to pin down ‘enemies’ among the party leadership, and pursue conspiracy theories. The reply from those members whom he interrogated was that ‘we changed our position as the people’s attitude had changed.’ This was at the period of the high tide policy of the CPM. Like Chin Siong in the Hong Lim by-election the Barisan leaders though not receiving orders were aware of the CPM’s policy, and did not want to fracture the unity of the left wing.

Dr Lee Siew Choh was taking an aggressive line of action which was appropriate when the tide was high and mass support for the party strong. But that was not the objective condition at the time. Unlike Chin Siong, Hock Siew and me who had intended to work within Malaysia, he continued to pursue an anti-Malaysia line, with the catch-phrase of ‘crush Malaysia’, and present the case against Malaysia in international forums like the Afro-Asian non-aligned conference. With Separation, he called Singapore’s independence ‘phoney’, without presenting a constructive, effective strategy to accompany it.

In December 1965, Dr Lee Siew Choh ordered the Barisan Members of Parliament to boycott the opening of Singapore’s first parliament, and subsequent sittings. Some of the MPs protested that the decision was made without any discussion in the party ranks. In October 1966 he asked for the resignation of all Barisan MPs including those in prison who had been unable to take their seats since their election. His intention was to protest against the undemocratic acts of the government, ‘expose’ the PAP’s ‘phoney independence’ and to carry on the struggle outside parliament. This was followed by the boycott of the 1968 general election, which saw only 7 seats contested, and the PAP taking them all, winning the election even before it was held. In the 1972 general election, the Barisan fielded a motley lot of 10 candidates, the only recognisable name at the time being Dr Lee Siew Choh himself. The PAP won all the seats contested, and repeated this in the next two general elections.

In taking the extreme left position, Dr Lee Siew Choh did get to be the hero of the extreme left in Malaysia and Singapore at the time of the Cultural Revolution. In this he was ahead even of the CPM Singapore committee operating in Indonesia. After Eu Chooi Yip and Fong Chong

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28 The Straits Times, ‘Stop Call-up’ move by Barisan Sosialis’, 10 September 1964.
Leaving none unscathed

A person who has directly encountered the ISA can never be the same. Even those let off without any charges made against them would thereafter go through a good part of their life with a sense of insecurity.

Political prisoners usually broke within the first five years, when they still had not sorted out their problems with commitments outside. There is no doubt that when somebody made a statement and was then released, that made it difficult for those who stayed. You cannot help but feel let down. They worked on you about that time.

Worse, it was not unusual that during the course of ‘negotiating’ with the ISD, a detainee would have to give replies to questions which would be freely interpreted. Many would not incriminate friends by saying outright falsehoods about them. But they would be asked if they thought it was possible that so and so could have done this or that. Anything short of an outright denial, which would be taken as a refusal to cooperate, would suit the interrogators. They were not out for information, which they usually would already have had. They simply wanted something for their file on the person under interrogation, which could be made known to his friends if ISD so wanted. Such materials could be used to cause distrust and enmity between former comrades.

One political prisoner I know said during interrogation that I advised him to go to China, when the general understanding among detainees was NOT to choose this path. I had indicated to him that it might be a better choice than going out and be unable to face friends, but this context was deliberately withheld when the word spread. I understood how these things worked. I do not hold such ‘confessions’ against any one as long as the person did not become a turncoat.

Former political prisoners have maintained their silence for decades. Fear of reprisals from the state is a part of it. So too is not knowing how to tell their story: how to tell your children that you had been a political prisoner, when your sons and daughters were being taught that these subversive elements endangered the security of the country and had to be put away without trial; how do you explain to your children that you had signed a security statement.