The 1987 ISA Arrests and International Civil Society responses to political repression in Singapore

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Introduction

The penalising of prominent opposition figures via the Singaporean legal system has made many weary of confronting the *People's Action Party* government on their own turf. Unwilling to take up this challenge, some Singaporeans appear more prepared to push for change overseas, beyond the clutches of the PAP government.

While it is undeniable that a considerable number of Singaporeans opposed to the PAP government continue to work for a more open and democratic society from inside Singapore, this paper will argue that many people were prepared to take this course of action overseas. By the late 1970s and 1980s, prominent personalities within various expatriate Singaporean communities were already involved in overseas campaigns in response to their experiences of crackdowns in Singapore.

This paper will examine the conditions surrounding the controversial 'Operation Spectrum' beginning in 1987. This event played a major role in arousing suppressed feelings of justice among a new generation of Singaporeans, many of whom were living or studying outside Singapore at the time. The paper also hopes to shed some light on resistance to PAP regimes by expatriate Singaporean communities and international civil organizations.

PAP attitudes towards international NGOs and expatriate Singaporean communities

The PAP has subtly woven into the Singaporean psyche the myth of Singapore's unnatural existence as a non-Malay, non-Muslim nation-state in a Malay and Muslim region. The implied hostility of this relationship massages the insecurity of the largely immigrant Chinese ethnic majority (76 per cent) and stokes their dependency on the pro-Chinese PAP. As Christopher Lingle notes, this relationship is "the outcome of a careful weaving of reality alongside fable." (Lingle, 1996, p. 96)

This should not be viewed as a uniquely post-colonial phenomenon. These myths can be directly linked to the British colonial period when racial, national and gender identities were manipulated to produce an 'inferiority complex' on a national level. For example, colonial authorities to justify arbitrary action and policy used racial 'identities'.

Racial groupings were conveniently given positive and negative traits that were in turn used to justify differences in treatment by colonial authorities. This unnatural social climate cultivated a racially charged environment, where different communities were encouraged to compete with each other for the attention of colonial governments and the interests they represented. These supposed identities were never truly challenged even after the departure of colonial governments. Pro-British elites like the PAP, supplanting their colonial rulers, often found it politically useful to maintain existing misconceptions. Consequently racialist social, economic and political policies continue to play an important role in how post-colonial communities rule and perceive themselves. (Rerceretnam, 2003, pp. 2-3)

Taking into account this Singaporean 'inferiority complex' and 'fear' of outsiders, the PAP has expanded this notion to include the 'incompatible' Western culture into this equation. Christopher Lingle (1996) calls this the 'White Peril', which is largely a one-sided projection of images of 'Western decadence' used to prove that liberal democratic ideals can drag down the successes enjoyed in Singapore.

More importantly international and domestic political opponents are portrayed as 'political lepers' spreading the unwanted proclamations of Western inspired individual freedoms. (Lingle. 1996:38) Within the context of Eastern versus Western, individual versus so-called collective rights, comes the strange paradigm of 'Asian Values' and the justification to ignore some basic democratic and human rights. (Rahim, 1998, p. 56)

It is within this larger context that attitudes towards expatriate communities and international civil society should be viewed. Non-Government Organizations have long been discouraged from taking root in Singapore based on the states premise that "anyone who wants to make a statement on politics should join a political party." (Chee, 1995, p. 53) Consequently there are traditionally few NGO's that operate from Singapore. The very few that exist operate within a very restrictive platform, so as not to annoy the PAP regime. Hence many tend to be largely ineffectual and do not create or play a significant role within Singaporean civil society.

Internationally the PAP has a much more thorny relationship with many prominent NGOs. Prominent example of external organizations that challenged the PAP during the 1987 ISA arrests are the World Council of Churches, Asia Watch, International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) and Amnesty International. These NGO's played pivotal roles rallying support for the 1987 detainees. Naturally NGO's of such ilk find it difficult to gain entry or to operate even on an ad hoc basis in Singapore. An example of this was the denial of prominent ICJ barristers access to Singaporean courts to do *pro-bono* work for an opposition politician. (Lloyd-Smith, 2002)

PAP control doesn't stop at the borders of the island state. (Chee, 1995, p. 21) It is a well-known fact that Singaporean embassies and its foreign missions actively control the activities of expatriate communities and their community organizations, be they Singaporean students studying overseas or in migrant communities. Recognising their lack of control over expatriate communities, the PAP decided on several initiatives, most significantly the formation of the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) in the early 1990s.

According to the SIF website, the organization aims to "connect Singaporeans in the international community". The effectiveness of the SIF is very debatable and their influence among expatriate communities overseas is highly questionable. For example, a community leader based in Australia claimed that no one knows of or has contact with the SIF in Australia. This author strongly feels this to be the case in many countries. (Interview with Mr Lim Teik Hock, 20 August 2004)

Hence while the PAP may enjoy almost complete control, of social, economic and political facets of Singaporean life, the same could not be said of expatriate communities and foreign-based NGOs. Their control of NGO's and especially foreign-based student groups and community organizations was and is sporadic at best.

Resistance in an authoritarian landscape

In addition to the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for detention without a judicial trial, citizens fear that any criticism directed towards the PAP will be punished in ways that can directly affect their income or way of life (Selvan, 1990, p. 300). Challenging the status quo is therefore not an option open to the vast majority. By the late 1970's, the PAP government adopted a more discrete line of attack against its local critics; the use of the state-controlled judiciary via spurious defamation suits, was used to discredit and more importantly bankrupt opponents. This tactic was so successful that the PAP government even began using it against international publications like 'Newsweek', "Far Eastern Economic Review', 'Asian Wall Street Journal', 'Time', 'The Economist' and the 'International Herald Tribune' (Chee, 2001, pp. 173-180). By the 1980's most elements of resistance to the authoritarian rule of Lee Kuan Yew and the *People's Action Party* (PAP) had been largely neutralised. The political outlook and any ensuing responses by the ordinary Singaporean citizenry was at best muted.

The fear of governmental retribution was is constant. Consequently many felt the price for dissension was far too high and accepted anything they were

served. Singaporeans felt PAP political, social and financial power very deeply. However to suggest that Singaporeans, under the dictates of such an oppressive relationship, played a part in the perpetuation of their own oppression is not to deny the many ways the PAP kept them involuntarily in their place. The whole process was primarily an 'interaction' between the 'powerful' and the 'powerless' (Foucault, 1972, p. 119). Put simply, what was obtained from this 'interaction' was employment and a standard of living unattainable in any other Southeast Asian country.

Political purges

Political purges in post-independence Singapore occurred throughout the 1960's, 1970's, 1980's and most recently in 2002. The infamous 'Operation Cold Store' ISA arrests of 1963 showed how the PAP government with the support of the British authorities were prepared to take any measures to curtail any political threat no matter how legitimate.

In contrast to the earlier ISA arrests the purge of 1987 acted as a catalyst for local and expatriate Singaporeans alike and their many overseas supporters to challenge the PAP's anti-democratic hegemony. The strong international interest shown during the 1987 ISA arrests compares markedly to other PAP crackdowns past and present. Even the recent use of the ISA in 2002 to arrest 21 alleged terrorists did not stir similar levels of protest despite the fact the government has made no attempt to prove their case in a court of law.

There is one striking difference between the 1987 ISA detainees and their counterparts that came before or after them – the latter appeared not to have strong links with regional or international organizations. For example, detainees from 'Operation Cold Store' were primarily local trade unionists, opposition politicians, student and civic groups (Minchin, 1986, pp.127-8). The recent 2002 arrests were centred on Muslim-based groups, arguably with limited connections to influential NGO's. This problem is compounded by the prevailing anti-Islamic post-September 11 environment which discourages support for such groups. (Rahim, 2003, p. 209)

Conditions leading up to 1987

By the 1980's there were big regional changes taking place. Regional perceptions and concerns began to widen and became more inclusive. This worked hand-in-hand with the emergence of NGOs in many countries in the region. By the 1980's modern mediums such as television, video, facsimile machines were cheaper and international telephone services accessible. Back in the early 1960's, such aides to communication were a 'pipe dream' for many activists. The accessibility to new communications technology helped various advocates create and strengthen links outside their domestic circle. These links played a pivotal role in the protest campaign against the 1987 ISA arrests.

In addition to this, many of the 1987 ISA detainees were English-language proficient, professionally trained, including some who had worked in regional NGO's in places like Hong Kong. Furthermore, many personally knew or were acquainted with earlier groups of exiles like Tan Wah Piow who now lives in western Europe (Interview with Ms Y [anonymous], 4 July 2004, Sydney).

1987 ISA arrests: Initial Reactions

The arrests began in the early hours of the 21st May 1987, and within weeks 22 people were detained, for varying periods of time. Most were social workers, dramatists, and Catholic Church welfare workers, detained on the pretence that they were part of a 'Marxist conspiracy' intent on overthrowing the government. (*Emergency Committee for Human Rights in Singapore*, 20 July 1987, p. 7) (Seow, 1994, p. 67)

While there is little doubt that the 1987 arrests had a big impact on the lives of the detainees and their families and friends, its affect went much further than this. Out of Singapore a myriad of individuals, informal groups and NGOs for the first time found themselves united by an issue.

Compared to arrests in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980's overseas attention was particularly strong in the 1987 arrests. Major regional publications such as 'Asiaweek', 'Far Eastern Economic Review', and even Kuala Lumpur-

based 'The Star' newspaper followed the ISA arrests very closely. These articles were generally critical of the PAP government and cynical of the Marxist allegations against many who were in fact practising Christians.

A mere five weeks after the initial arrests, then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam complained that over 200 organizations from around the world had sent protest letters to the government. (*ECHRS*, 31 August 1987, p. 3)

Apart from the very active role played by detainee support groups and several opposition political parties in Singapore, overseas Singaporeans, small and large international groups, and even Malaysians (their support predate the Malaysian governments own detentions several months later) played a disproportionately large role in highlighting and publicising the inequities of the PAP government arrests.

Why did foreign organizations and expatriate Singaporean communities play such a prominent role?

Previous political purges and the development of a loose network of Singaporean exiles is part of the answer. Former student leaders of the University of Singapore Students Union from the early 1970's, some of whom were implicated as ring-leaders of the 'Marxist conspiracy', were instrumental in drumming up opposition to the Singaporean government during 1987 arrests. Mr Tan Wah Piow, long exiled in London, and Mr Tsui Hon Kwong, in Hong Kong, and several other ex-student union activists living in Netherlands and France acted as catalyst for the growing resistance to the PAP government (Interview with Ms Y [anonymous], 4 July 2004, Sydney). This network formed in response to the 1987 arrests became known as the 'European Committee on Human Rights in Malaysia and Singapore' or 'Kehmas' for short. According to the Netherlands-based 'International Institute of Social History' website, 'Kehmas' was initiated as part of a Malaysia/Singapore workgroup, the latter group set up in 1974 (Mehmet Bilgen, undated, accessed 16 Oct. 2004)

Unlike earlier political purges, this group of tertiary-educated individuals were more professionally mobile in comparison to their earlier political counterparts. Over the years, many relocated to 'First World' countries where they established themselves professionally. Tan Wah Piow played a prominent role in arousing pro-democratic sentiments when he fled to London in the mid-1970's. According to one interviewee who was a student at the time, Tan loomed large over progressive circles in the Singaporean and Malaysian student communities of the day (Interview with Mr Lim Teik Hock, 20 August 2004, Sydney). The trend continues with the likes of Mr Tang Liang Hong in 1997 and Mr Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff in 2002 (Straits Times Interactive, 24 July 2002). A large number of past and present activists also make an effort to leave Singapore, even for short periods of time, usually for further studies or employment. This constantly feeds small but growing enclaves of anti-PAP resistance in the Asia-Pacific region, the USA and Europe.

So far we have discussed secular-based opposition to the PAP, however the issue of religious opposition particularly from that of the Roman Catholic Church should be taken seriously. The borderless nature of any international belief system must worry the PAP government immensely. Unlike a religion, the control of the PAP government is confined to the limits of it's small 660 square kilometer island. In contrast, the reach of organized religions like that of the Roman Catholic Church is global and PAP control of Singaporeans could be tenuous in some scenarios that directly involve the Church. In addition, the solidarity that came through during the 1987 ISA arrests, including support from other non-affiliated Christian groups, showed that religion was a force to be reckoned with.

More significantly, the line between religion and secularism appeared rather blurred among prominent people involved in the 1987 ISA arrests and their support groups. While many had a strong belief system based on religious doctrine and teachings, they also appeared to be firmly based in the realities of modern secularist society. This multifaceted approach gave them a

formidable advantage and shows clearly through the substantial support accorded to them in the aftermath of the arrests in May 1987.

The rise of an outspoken, English language proficient middle-class

The economic ascendency of Singapore in the 1960s brought with it a new affluent generation in the 1970's and 1980's. For example, between 1960 and the 1992, the per capital gross national product increased seventeen fold (Rodan, 1996, p. 19). By 1988, 503 respondents to a press survey claimed to identify as 'middle-class' – statistically 3 out of 4 Singaporeans[1] (Rodan, 1996, p. 29). Lee Kuan Yew has acknowledged in 1987 that 'our society has become 80 per cent middle class' (Rodan, 1996, p. 30). Unlike their parents' generation, this new generation looked to other areas for socio-economic and political inspiration. Familiarity with post-colonial concepts of equality, justice and democracy played a large role in how many comprehended the world around them.

Despite government policies that economically, socially and politically segregate communities along racial lines, among the English-educated middle classes, issues such as race, religion, language or gender were to an extent loosing their significance in post-colonial Singapore. Growing economic success in the Southeast Asia region in a similar way broke down barriers between their fellow regional middle-class compatriots. This brought many to question the contradictions and inequities long accepted by previous generations.

With economic success in Singapore and the rise of the new middle class, many families found they could send their children to study abroad. The popularity of overseas tertiary studies in the 1980's coincided with the commercialisation of education in many English-speaking western countries. The USA, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand were (and still is) the countries of choice for tertiary education (Mazzarol, T., 12-15 July 1999, p.2).

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[1] The general conception of middle-classes being; earning at least $2,000 per month, owning a 3 or 4 bedroom flat, and having a person in the family with a tertiary education.

Of the Singaporeans interviewed for this article many had misgivings about the Singaporean tertiary educational system plus the high government-imposed second language requirements for acceptance into local universities, forced many more abroad. More importantly when overseas, many a Singaporean saw through the naive PAP view of society and the world. Away from the constrained Singapore media, government infrastructure and political system, they began to see gaping holes in the traditional authoritarian rationale of Lee Kuan Yew's PAP.

When abroad many a young Singaporean found themselves in a truly politically plural, multicultural, multinational and multiracial environment. Socialisation while still often within the context of a local Singaporean student clique often included students from Southeast Asia or the wider Asian region. This inculcated a new affinity between students, inspiring a pan-Asian identity on campus.

Western colonial cultural barriers crumble away in the 1980s
In the 1980s massive changes were taking place in countries such as Australia, Canada, NZ, the UK and the USA. Large-scale immigration from the Asia-Pacific region began in earnest around this period, and this facilitated the dismantling of long held barriers to socialisation with persons of Asian descent. It was also during this period that local community and political organizations began taking an interest in the region and began supporting pro-democracy causes. The interaction between the host countries and the overseas student communities played a very important role in influencing Singaporean and other overseas students. Political views, lifestyles, philosophies and practices were adopted and brought back to Singapore.

Use of new technologies
In the 1980s new technologies that facilitated global communication were fast become affordable. Fax machines, video, personal computers/word processors and cheaper direct dialling phone services were now more accessible to students and community organizations. Many student groups

also had easy access to university-funded facilities. Local student government bodies were often very supportive and would not only provide political support but also give open access to a full range of modern office, telecommunication and even sometimes TV and radio facilities.

A good example of this was a publication called the "*Emergency Committee for Human Rights in Singapore".* This fortnightly newsletter was relayed around the world via a simple office fax machine from Christchurch in New Zealand and was one of the main sources that helped garner international support for the 1987 detainees.

In Australia local Singaporean support groups such as the 'Network of Overseas Students' Collective in Australia' (NOSCA) had extensive use of university union facilities. Facsimile machines, photocopying and computer-based desktop publishing technology allowed for the production of high quality and the quick turnover of literature, publications and media releases. This helped facilitate the organising of public meetings and the coordination of protest actions in support of the ISA detainees.

Internationalisation of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO)

The concept of the 'Pacific Community' gained popularity by the early 1980s mainly via governmental, business and intellectual circles. This term naturally seeped into community circles soon after and was taken up in earnest by some non-governmental organizations (NGO) based in various capital cities in the region. Growing regional economic success brought with it greater economic interdependence between communities which in turn fuelled local versions of 'regionalism' (Yamamoto, 1995, p. xi). Under this new climate, many new and existing NGOs formed linkages that would otherwise not have existed due to differing nationalists or domestic concerns. However by the 1980s, these concerns began to encompass issues outside traditional boundaries. This new incipient NGO movement helped to highlight the plight of the Singaporean detainees in 1987.

This paper has compiled a list of organizations that officially supported the 1987 ISA detainees. To date a total of 64 organizations have been identified, many ad-hoc organizations alongside more established religious, academic, governmental, student and professional bodies.[2]

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2 List of organizations that officially supported the 1987 ISA detainees.

The following information was collated from various issues of the 'Emergency Committee for Human Rights in Singapore', published from 26 May 1987 to 3 October 1988 and from observations made by interviewees. .

Emergency Committee for Human Rights in Singapore (Christchurch, New Zealand)
Human Rights Support Group for the Singapore 18 (M'sia)
Christian Conference of Asia (based in Singapore, expelled on 30 Dec. 1987)
Archbishop of Malaysia, Soter Fernandez (M'sia)
National Union of Journalists (M'sia)
Free Singapore 16 (Philippines)
Perak Education and Research Assoc for Consumers (M'sia)
various Catholic organizations and regional Asian organizations (Hong Kong)
'9 human rights, religious affairs and student work led by … lawyer Mr Thongbai Thongpao" (Thailand)
'Churches and ecumenical bodies … coalition of lawyers, academics and community leaders' (Kyoto, Japan)
National Council of Churches (S Korea)
Network of Overseas Students Collectives in Australia (also known as the Overseas Student Collective) (Sydney, Australia)
UTS SA Overseas Student Dept (Sydney, Australia)
UNSW SU Overseas Student Services (Sydney, Australia)
Sydney University SRC Overseas Student Dept (Sydney, Australia)
Malaysian & Singaporean Human Rights Commission (Sydney, Australia)
National Council of Churches (NZ)
Catholic Commission for Evangelisation, Justice & Development (NZ)
University of Auckland, Law faculty (NZ)
University of Canterbury, Law faculty (NZ)
American Friends' Service Committee (Hawaii, USA)
AsiaWatch (Washington, USA)
National Council of Churches (New York, USA)
Amnesty International (London, UK)
'various Church groups' (London, UK)
International Commission of Jurist (Geneva, Switzerland)
International League of Human Rights (Paris, France)
(*ECHRS*, 13 June 1987, pp. 3-6)
Australian Catholic Bishop George Pell (Melbourne, Australia)
Australian Anglican Archbishop David Penman (Melbourne, Australia)
Kansai Emergency Committee on Human Rights in Singapore (Kyoto, Japan)
International Mission of Jurist;
ICJ (Geneva)
International federation of Human Rights (Paris)
Asian Human Rights Commission (HK)
Lawasia (Sydney)
(*ECHRS*, 2 July 1987, p. 3)
Tan Sri Dr Tan Chee Koon, ex-leader of Msian parliamentary opposition (M'sia)
Japan Civil Liberties Union
'eight legal academics and lawyers from Australia' (Australia)
Philippines Catholic Bishop Francisco Claver (P'ppines)
Friends of Singapore (HK)

This list should be much longer and as pointed out earlier in this article by the then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam, probably well in excess of 200 organisations and individuals sent protest letters to the government of the day. As the PAP government presently holds this information there is only a slim likelihood of this listing ever being made public.

The 64 groups contained in the listing (see *Appendix*) can be broken down into 6 broad categories; Ad Hoc, Church, Student, Professional and Governmental/Political groups.

Ad Hoc groups   7

Presbyterian Church (Atlanta, USA)
Bishop Bede Heather (Parramatta, Sydney, Australia)
(*ECHRS*, 15 July 1987, pp. 2-9)
National Council of Churches of Christ (USA)
Church Committee for Human Rights in Asia (Chicago, USA)
Harvard University Alumni (USA)
'30 religious … women's, peasants', workers', development, media, theatre, and civil rights groups' (Sri Lanka)
Christian Workers' Fellowship (Sri Lanka)
Archbishop of Perth, Most Rev W Foley (Perth, Australia)
CORSO (NZ)
(*ECHRS*, 12 August 1987, pp. 6-9)
'14 members of the Japan Diet' (Japan)
(*ECHRS*, 31 August 1987, pp. 3)
'39 legal academics and lawyers from the UK, Australia and New Zealand signed a letter' (Aust, UK, NZ)
(*ECHRS*, 2 October 1987, p. 3)
Amnesty International (Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge Uni, UK)
Cambridge University Students' Union (Cambridge, UK)
US Dept of State
Amnesty International (Saskeatchewan/Ontario/Winnipeg, Canada)
'letters signed by 55 members of Congress condemning the detentions' (USA)
(*ECHRS*, 21 December 1987, pp. 9-12)
'One third … NZ Parliament (34 MPs) … expressing … extreme concern' (NZ)
Amnesty International (Canada)
Amnesty International (Hong Kong)
(*ECHRS*, 25 April 1988, pp. 6-9)
American Bar Association (USA)
The Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (USA)
Nelson Riis, New Democrat House Leader (Canada)
S'pore and M'sian British Association SIMBA (UK)
'Tokyo's Catholic Community' (Japan)
The National Christian Council in Japan (Japan)
International Young Christian Workers (HK)
Korea Christian Action Organisation (S Korea)
(*ECHRS*, 3 October 1988, p. 9-12)
Khemas (various European cities)

Church groups	19
NGO	18
Student	6
Professional/academic	6
Government/political groups	4

There are far too many organizations to examine so this study will be concentrate on specific groups of organizations that played a significant role at the time.

Ad Hoc groups:

These groups were specifically set up to address the 1987 ISA arrests and in most cases were disbanded soon after 1988. They were located in Malaysia, Philippines, Kyoto, Hong Kong, Sydney and various west European cities. However the more prominent groups appeared to be operating out of Europe, Sydney, Hong Kong and Malaysia.

In this group the 'Emergency Committee for Human Rights in Singapore' (ECHRS) played a disproportionately large role in publicising the plight of the ISA detainees. The ECHRS was based in Christchurch, New Zealand and published a fortnightly newsletter between 26 May 1987 to (approximately) 3 October 1988. According to one interviewee, this Christchurch-based group were 'friends' with some of the ISA detainees. However this was definitely not their sole motive for support. They apparently had strong views on the poor state of human rights and democracy under the PAP government. The ECHRS was funded by a Church organization, probably the 'Christian Conference of Asia', who was later expelled from Singapore in December 1987 (Interview with Ms Y [anonymous], 4 July 2004, Sydney, Australia).

Another group worthwhile of mention is 'Kehmas'. According to interviewees this group was solely set up in response to the 1987 ISA arrests. The group was jointly set up by Mr Tan Wah Piow, the supposed 'ringleader' of the accused Marxist plotters and several other pro-democracy minded Singaporeans based in various European cities. According to the PAP

government, Tan masterminded the "Marxist conspiracy to subvert the existing social and political system in Singapore through communist united front tactics to establish a communist state" (Seow, 1994, p. 69) In spite of it's ad-hoc beginnings, a quick internet search shows 'Kehmas' was still active on indigenous Penan issues as late as 1992.

Church groups:

Numerically the largest group in this list was made up of Church-based organizations; a total of 18 altogether. Malaysian Church leaders were quick off the mark with a pastoral letter (2 June 1987) signed by the three Malaysian bishops supporting their Singaporean counterparts right to involve themselves in social and economic matters ('Marxist plot revisited: Reactions of the Church in Singapore', www.singapore-window.org/sw01/010521m3.htm, accessed 16 Oct. 2004). Support from this category was extensive with protest letters coming from the Hong Kong, S. Korea, New Zealand, UK, Australia, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Japan

Non-Government Organisations (NGO):

These groups played a significant role in publicising and highlighting the illicit nature of the arrests. For example, various Amnesty International offices 'adopted' 12 Singaporean detainees as prisoners of conscience.

The 'International Commission of Jurist' (Geneva), 'International Federation of Human Rights' (Paris) and 'Asian Human Rights Commission' (Hong Kong) were part of a prominent international delegation calling itself the 'International Mission of Jurists' and collectively went to Singapore to personally investigate circumstances surrounding the arrests between the 5th and the 9th of July 1987 ('Marxist plot revisited: Reactions of the Church in Singapore', www.singapore-window.org/sw01/010521m3.htm, accessed 16 Oct. 2004). Such initiatives by prominent professional and NGO bodies helped embarrass the PAP government internationally.

Student groups:

The student groups appear to be mainly based in Sydney, Australia and Cambridge, United Kingdom. The Cambridge University-based Singaporean student group was still active in the early 1990's and was described by a contemporary at the time as primarily being a political discussion group. However a protest letter was sent by the 'Cambridge University Students' Union' not the Singaporean student group. One can only assume the issue was put to the student union by it's Singaporean members.

In Sydney, various Singaporean and Malaysian student groups appeared more willing to directly express disapproval at the 1987 ISA arrests. The 'Network of Overseas Student Collectives in Australia' (NOSCA) also known as the 'Overseas Student Collective' (OSC) was set up by two Malaysian architecture students at the University of NSW in 1980. For the next 5 years, the group was, like it's Cambridge University counterpart, a rather ineffectual discussion group. However by the mid-1980s the group began to grow in size and influence. NOSCA did not limit itself to Malaysian or Singaporean issues, and had a very regional perspective cultivating extensive links with regional NGOs, international activists groups and other like-minded Australian organizations. They were involved in campaigns on deforestation and human rights in Malaysia, China, Indonesia and the Philippines, advocated against the exploitation of foreign students particularly in substandard Australian private 'colleges' and were supportive of local Australian Aboriginal communities during the Bicentenary celebrations in 1988.

NOSCA organised via various Student Union groups at Sydney University, the University of NSW and the NSW Institute of Technology (later renamed University of Technology, Sydney). Between 1987 and 1988, NOSCA ran numerous public meetings on the 1987 ISA arrests, produced literature, ran media campaigns and also lobbied student organizations and Australian politicians in support of detainees. During this period they formed the 'Malaysia Singapore Human Rights Commission which was utilised as a body to address the ISA arrests in Singapore and the arrests in Malaysia the following year.

In 1989, NOSCA even 'crashed' an informal Singaporean expatriate buffet attended by the then Brig. General Lee Hsien Loong (now Prime Minister) at the former Regent Hotel at Sydney's Circular Quay. A few non-Singaporean supporters unknowingly handed anti-ISA leaflets to the younger Lee and chanted anti-PAP slogans very much to the embarrassment of Lee and embassy staff. (Interview with Mr M [anonymous], 9 August 2004, Sydney, Australia).

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show how the ISA arrests of 1987 acted as a catalyst for local and expatriate Singaporeans and their supporters, to challenge the PAP's anti-democratic hegemony. Intense international interest shown during the 1987 arrests compares significantly to other PAP political crackdowns, past and present. The circumstances surrounding this event had one distinct difference in comparison to earlier political purges. International support was much easier to garner after the 1980s due to a growing climate of regionalism. Linkages between different NGOs pushed many to encompass issues outside their traditional boundaries. The associated groups and arrestees had strong links with regional and international organisations. Even recent ISA arrests such as the one involving the accused Jemaah Islamiah (JI) conspirators in 2002, judging by international reactions, arguably have limited connections to influential NGO's.

These circumstances worked together and strengthened the political clout of Singaporean expatriate communities. These internationally based communities were outside the control of the PAP regime and played a strong role in pressuring the regime. For example, student groups such as the 'Network of Overseas Students Collectives in Australia' (OSC) worked from different Sydney-based university campuses. Similarly 'Khemas', a collection of Singaporean activists and dissidents, then based across western Europe, criticised and questioned the legitimacy of claims made by the PAP regime. And last but not least, the 'Emergency Committee for Human Rights in Singapore' (ECHRS), based in New Zealand, was the primary source of information to the international press and NGOs.

The PAP realising their worsening state of control, especially over expatriate Singaporean communities decided on enhancing links. It is noteworthy that these linkages are supervised largely through their foreign embassies or consulates. For example the 'Singapore International Foundation' (SIF) was set up to 'connect' with Singaporean communities. It is more likely, judging from the PAP's bad public relations experience during the 1987 arrests, that their primary aim was to influence and where possible control expatriate Singaporean communities. However judging from feedback from some present-day community leaders, to date these initiatives appear rather ineffectual.

Apart from the fundamental changes to the regional political landscape, the 1987 ISA campaigns were aided by several other important elements. Accessibility to new media-related technology, the upsurge in social and economic mobility among dissenting professionals, acceptance of democratic ideals, the breaking down of traditional cultural and language barriers and the growing acceptance by host communities of foreign issues such as the 1987 arrests, helped strengthen opposition to the PAP regime.

Hence while the PAP may enjoy almost complete control within the island state, the same could not be said of expatriate communities and foreign-based NGOs. Their control of NGO's and especially foreign-based student groups and community organizations was and is at best, sporadic and ineffectual.

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