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**‘The Fundamental Issue is Anti-colonialism, Not Merger’:
Singapore’s “Progressive Left”, Operation Coldstore,
and the Creation of Malaysia**

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‘The Fundamental Issue is Anti-Colonialism, Not Merger’: Singapore’s “Progressive Left”, Operation Coldstore, and the Creation of Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

A generation of Singaporeans, born around 1930 and raised in Singapore, laboured under severe ethnic, linguistic, and economic discrimination; experienced of severe state-sponsored repression and violence; and, post-1945, were subjected to ‘some of the most ambitious projects of political development and social engineering in British imperial history’ by authorities tasked with turning them into loyal British subjects.¹ The working class struggled under an exploitative colonial economy, with massive inequality and structural wage discrimination and no regulation of labour conditions.² Singaporeans were powerless to resist colonial intervention and repression. Most lacked citizenship rights and were not enfranchised. When workers banded together in unions to try to negotiate for better wages, the colonial state arrested union leaders, forced unions to disband, and sent in police to violently break up strikes.³ To be a vernacular working class Malayan in Singapore in 1954 was to be a second-class citizen in the land of your birth.

In 1955, the colonial government introduced a new constitution designed to expand local participation in politics. In this new environment, a pro-labour left-wing movement grew and thrived. A coalition of organisations, including trade unions, civic societies, and student groups, successfully won protections for works, citizenship rights for Singapore’s disenfranchised, and pressured the government into enacting protections against discrimination.

The rapid growth and increasing strength of Singapore’s progressive left-wing movement alarmed the British colonial authorities, political rivals, and the leaders of the Federation of Malaya.⁴ By 1961, the left-wing had coalesced into the opposition Barisan Sosialis party and were on the verge of taking power in Singapore. Formerly part of ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), they had been expelled or resigned from the party when it decisively moved away from the left-wing platform it had been elected on. The PAP still claimed to be a left-wing party, and so to distinguish themselves, Barisan Secretary-General Lim Chin Siong referred to their movement as the “progressive left”.

The British and PAP sought to neutralise them via the merger of Singapore with the Federation. The British had long regarded the merger of Singapore and the Federation as crucial to the security of both the island and the broader region, while merger was a widely held desire of Singapore’s people

¹ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 98.

² Frederic Benham, *The National Income of Singapore 1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 1-9; W. G. Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore: Trade and Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 1-2, 32-33; Singapore, ‘Report of the Committee on Minimum Standards of Livelihood’ (Singapore Legislative Assembly sessional paper, Cmd. 5 of 1957), p. 13–26.

³ Charles Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study In Colonial Labour Unrest* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press Ltd, 1962), p. 352–53.

⁴ This article uses ‘Malaya’ to refer to the geographic entity of the Malaya, which includes the Federation and Singapore, and ‘Federation’ to refer to the political entity of the Federation of Malaya.

and a key plank of the platforms of all political parties in Singapore, the PAP included.⁵ However, merger remained 'postponed indefinitely' until Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's growing unpopularity imperilled his hold on power.⁶ Lee sought the achievement of merger to win back popularity. This goal dovetailed with British desires for a federation of its maritime Southeast Asian colonies under the control of a friendly pro-British government.

In order to overcome the Federation government's reluctance to take in Singapore, the British and Singaporean governments marketed the Barisan as communist-controlled. They argued that a communist government in an independent Singapore would pose a threat to the Federation, a threat which could be controlled if the Federation took over Singapore. In exchange for an agreement to merge, the Federation government demanded the arrest of Singapore's progressive left and the inclusion of the Borneo territories in Malaysia. To avoid criticism, the arrests were justified using the same argument of communist subversion. Operation Coldstore, on 3 February 1963, decapitated Singapore's progressive left-wing movement. By the time its leaders were released from detention – some of them after decades in detention – the PAP had cemented its grip on power and closed down any space for political opposition.

Fear of Singapore's progressive left, and particularly of Lim Chin Siong, provided the opportunity and timing for a major constitutional rearrangement of five different territories in Southeast Asia affecting nearly ten million people. Yet the historiography is largely silent on the nature of Singapore's progressive left-wing nationalist movement, failing to explain and assess the values and perspectives of the Barisan leadership.⁷ Lim remains, in the words of one prominent historian, an 'elusive presence in Singapore's history'.⁸ Presentations of the left divorce them from their own historical experience, interpreting them in the context of the cultural and historical assumptions of

⁵ For studies of British policy towards merger, see A. J. Stockwell, 'Malaysia: The making of a neo-colony?', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 26/2 (1998); Simon J. Ball, 'Selkirk in Singapore', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10/1 (1999); Karl Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore, 1941-68* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001); Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in Southeast Asia, 1961-1965: Britain, the United States and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶ Meeting with J Graham Parsons, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs USA on 7 Jan 1960, CO 1030/1148, The UK National Archives (TNA).

⁷ These include Dennis Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1986); John Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984); Tai Yong Tan, *Creating "Greater Malaysia": Decolonisation and the Politics of Merger* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008); Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998); Geoff Wade, 'Operation Coldstore: A Key Event in the Creation of Modern Singapore', in Soo Kai Poh, Kok Fang Tan, and Lysa Hong (eds.), *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore: Commemorating 50 Years* (Kuala Lumpur: SIRD, 2013); Ting Hui Lee, *The Open United Front: The Communist Struggle in Singapore 1954-1966* (Singapore: South Seas Society, 1996). Two exceptions are Karl Hack, 'The Malayan trajectory in Singapore's history', in Karl Hack, Jean-Louis Margolin, and Karine Delaye (eds.), *Singapore from Temasek to the 21st Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010); Kah Seng Loh et al., *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012). Memoirs of the events by former members of the progressive left include various essays in Jing Quee Tan and KS Jomo (eds), *Comet In Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 2001), and Soo Kai Poh, 'Detention in Operation Cold Store: A Study in Imperialism', in Soo Kai Poh, Jing Quee Tan, and Kay Yew Koh (eds.), *The Fajar Generation: The University Socialist Club and the Politics of Postwar Malaya and Singapore* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2010).

⁸ Tim N Harper, 'Lim Chin Siong and the "Singapore Story"', in Jing Quee Tan and K.S. Jomo (eds.), *Comet In Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 2001), p. 3.

the Anglophone colonial elite. The historiography is clear on the lack of evidence of communism, but if the progressive left were not communist, what did they believe? In the absence of the answer to this question, the motives of the Barisan have been assumed to be some degree of communist influence and manipulation.⁹

This article aims to articulate and analyse the beliefs and motivations of the progressive left leadership and situate them in the narrative of merger and Singapore's decolonisation. It uses vernacular sources – in particular, the writings and speeches of the Barisan leaders and other contemporary documents – as well as key documents that were previously retained by the British National Archives which were released in 2013.

DEFINING A GENERATION

Sociologist Karl Mannheim defined a generation in terms of collective response to traumatic events that unites a particular cohort of individuals into a self-conscious age stratum. These events occur when the cohort is most open to influence, in their late teens to early twenties. They act as agents of social change and become carriers of intellectual and organisational alternatives to the status quo.¹⁰ The future leaders of Singapore's progressive left were one such generation unit.¹¹ Every single member of the Barisan central committee who was detained in Coldstore was born within a few years of 1930.¹² They were born into a world of systemic discrimination, repression, and state-sponsored violence against the vernacular and working class. 1919 to 1932 was a time of protests, boycotts, and mass movements, when the discourse of nationalism and self-determination became common currency in Singapore. Anger at local colonial policies fuelled protests against imperialism and colonial rule.¹³ From 1932, a worried colonial government passed a series of increasingly restrictive legislation, arrested and banished protestors, and suppressed political activity. The Special Branch was created to monitor Singapore's population, and political protests were firmly ended. At the same time, Singapore was impacted by global recession, imperilling livelihoods and jobs.

⁹ For further historiographical discussion, see Siew Min Sai and Jianli Huang, 'The "Chinese-educated" political vanguards: Ong Pang Boon, Lee Khoo Choy & Jek Yueng Thong', in Peng Er Lam and Kevin Y.L. Tan (eds.), *Lee's Lieutenants* (Singapore: Allen & Unwin, 1999), p. 132; C J W-L Wee, 'The Vanquished: Lim Chin Siong and a Progressivist National Narrative', in Peng Er Lam and Kevin YL Tan (eds.), *ibid*; Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and its Pasts* (NUS Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', in Paul Kecskemeti (ed.), *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge: Collected Works of Karl Mannheim* (London: Routledge, 1952), p. 304-12.

¹¹ The idea of Singapore's left being a 'generation' has recently been adopted by recent books including Soo Kai Poh, Jing Quee Tan, and Kay Yew Koh (eds.), *The Fajar Generation: The University Socialist Club and the Politics of Postwar Malaya and Singapore* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2010); Jing Quee Tan, Kok Chiang Tan, and Lysa Hong (eds.), *The May 13 Generation: The Chinese Middle Schools Student Movement and Singapore Politics in the 1950s* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2011).

¹² Lim Chin Siong (1933), S Woodhull (1932), Dr Poh Soo Kai (1932), Low Por Tuck (1929), Wong Soon Fong (1934), Wong Soon Fong (1934), Lim Hock Siew (1931), Dominic Puthuchearry (1934), Fong Swee Suan (1931), Chan Sun Wing (1933), ST Bani (1934), Albert Lim Shee Ping (1931), Tan Yam Seng (1931), Chok Kok Thong (1935), James Puthuchearry (1923), Leong Keng Seng (1928), Ong Chang Sam (1936)

¹³ David Kenley, *New Culture In A New World: The May Fourth Movement and the Chinese Diaspora in Singapore, 1919-1932* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 49-52.

In 1942, Singapore was occupied by Japan. State sponsored violence and discrimination was intensified and became routine. After the war, the British reinstated the colour bar, exerted pre-war British paternalism and privilege, and established a British Military Administration that became a byword for corruption and incompetence.¹⁴ From 1947, it launched a sweeping educational policy that prioritised English-medium education and undermined vernacular education.¹⁵ Chinese schools were particularly targeted, starved of funding, accused of disloyalty, and their teachers and students arrested and expelled for criticising colonialism.¹⁶

With the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency in 1948, Singapore was turned into a police state. Over 1,000 people were searched daily at roadblocks, with 'not a single hour going by' without someone being searched for weapons or having their papers checked.¹⁷ Intense political repression suspended all forms of left-wing politics in Singapore, legitimate or otherwise. Nationalist parties and organisations were proscribed, newspapers were closed and editors imprisoned, and thousands of political activists and trade unionists deported or imprisoned. Throughout Malaya, over 30,000 people were detained between 1948 and 1952.¹⁸ It was later estimated that in Singapore alone 90,000 people underwent the detention screening process and 20,000 were voluntarily or forcibly deported over the course of the Emergency.¹⁹

In 1951, future progressive left leaders Lim Chin Siong, Fong Swee Suan, and Chen Say Jame were detained for protesting the colonial government's orders to sit for a pointless examination.²⁰ Unable to elicit a confession of communism, Special Branch resorted to torture and beatings.²¹ At the examination, 80 out of the 108 students turned in blank sheets in protest. They were all promptly expelled. Chen, Lim, and Fong were reduced to part-time jobs and were constantly monitored by Special Branch.²²

The same year, a pamphlet attacking colonialism, entitled *Malayan Orchid*, was published. Six of its authors, including James Puthuchery, were arrested and detained. Released in 1952, Puthuchery resumed his studies at the University of Malaya, where he met the founders of the University Socialist Club. In 1954, Puthuchery, Sandrasegeram Woodhull, Poh Soo Kai, Sheng Nam Chin, Jamit Singh, Lim Shee Ping, and Lim Hock Siew, among others, found themselves charged with sedition after an edition of the Club newsletter (*Fajar*) condemned colonialism in Asia.²³

¹⁴ Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire*, p. 101-14.

¹⁵ 'Educational Policy in the Colony of Singapore: Ten Years' Programme adopted in Advisory Council on 7th August 1947', (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1948), p. 1.

¹⁶ H.E. Wilson, *Social Engineering in Singapore: Educational Policies and Social Change 1819-1972* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1978), p. 161.

¹⁷ Colony of Singapore, Annual Report 1948, p.114.

¹⁸ Federation of Malaya, 'Detention and Deportation during the Emergency in the Federation of Malaya', Command Paper No. 24 of 1953; No. 456, Nicoll to CO, 23 July 1952, CO 1022/132, TNA.

¹⁹ Alex Josey, *Singapore: Its Past, Present and Future* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1980), p. 189.

²⁰ Sonny Yap, Richard Lim, and Weng Kam Leong, *Men In White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 2009), p. 23-24; Chen Say Jame, Interview by author, 20 Aug 2006.

²¹ Teoh Kah Chay, interviewer unknown, date unknown, accession 2331, SNA.

²² Melanie Chew, *Leaders of Singapore* (Singapore: Resource Press, 1996), p. 113.

²³ For more, see Poh, "Genesis of the University Socialist Club".

Mannheim stressed that different groups within each generation may interpret the events differently and split into antagonistic units, but they remain defined by the events and their orientation toward each other.²⁴ Such was the case with Singapore, where the same events produced a wide variety of differing voices. In particular, the chief antagonists to the future progressive left were a unit led by English-educated professionals Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, and Toh Chin Chye. One of the sharpest historical divisions between the PAP and the progressive left's leaders was personal experience of oppression by the colonial legal and security apparatus. While none of the PAP's leaders were ever detained or charged with sedition, nearly the entire progressive left's leadership had personal experience of it. Lee, Goh, and Toh all were also absent from Singapore during the peak years of the Malayan Emergency.²⁵

Mannheim portrayed generations as 'sources of opposition, challenging existing societal norms and values and bringing social change through collective generational organisation.'²⁶ The future leaders of Singapore's progressive left were a generation united by a deeply traumatic shared experience of poverty, discrimination, repression, and violence that peaked in their most formative years. Their shared response was a deep and abiding determination to free Singapore from colonialism.²⁷

A Harsh Lesson Learnt

At the same time, a wave of progressive anti-colonial movements was sweeping the globe, winning freedom for colonies in Africa and Asia. Regionally, these included China, India, Vietnam, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Indonesia. They were profoundly inspiring for the progressive left, offering hope that they too could win independence from colonialism. As they came of age, the progressive left coalesced into a coherent anti-colonial movement. In 1954, they joined with other anti-colonialists to form a left-wing political party, the PAP. In 1955, the support of the working class led to the election of a pro-labour government, to the shock and dismay of the European and Anglophone colonial elite. The PAP won the second-most seats, including Lim in Bukit Timah, and formed the main opposition.

The same year, Lim, one of the few literate members of the tiny Singapore Factory and Shop Workers' Union (SFSWU), was elected its Secretary-General.²⁸ Co-ordinating with unions led by fellow progressive left leaders like Fong and Woodhull, Lim led a series of strikes against exploitative employers who refused to negotiate. When the new government took the unprecedented move of attempting to impartially arbitrate instead of ordering police to break up the strike, the trade unions had their first victories. Throughout 1955 and 1956, the trade unions steadily improved the lot of workers. They flocked to join. On the day Lim became its leader, SFSWU had 273 members. Ten months later, it was 29,959.²⁹ The trade unions, part of a broad progressive left-wing movement in Singapore, grew in strength and provided the organisational basis for the PAP election victory in 1959.

²⁴ Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations", p. 304-12.

²⁵ The political philosophy of their leadership – Lee in particular – has been exhaustively covered in the existing historiography, including in Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*; Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, and numerous books by or about Lee Kuan Yew.

²⁶ Jane Edmunds and Bryan Turner, *Generations, Culture and Society* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), p. 8.

²⁷ Harper, "Lim Chin Siong and the 'Singapore Story'", p. 14-16. See also Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 113; Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, p. 50-52, 67, 81-82.

²⁸ Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 114.

²⁹ Colony of Singapore, Department of Labour Annual Report 1955, p. 35.

Yet by that time, the leaders of the progressive left were behind bars. In 1956, as Lim and others were launching the Civil Rights Convention, Singapore's first multiracial civil rights movement, the British arrested its leaders. The detentions froze Singapore's labour and civil rights movements in its tracks. The detained leadership learnt a harsh lesson: that no matter what their achievements were or how much support they had from the people of Singapore, the colonial state could use internal security laws to arrest them and freeze all reform. 'If there is no real political freedom, there can be no long term economic development,' concluded Lim Chin Siong.³⁰ As long as the internal security laws remained controlled by unelected British officials, they would be used to influence Singapore for the benefit of the British electorate, not the Singaporean people. Thus, anti-colonialism had to begin with democratic control over internal security. 'In a colony ruled by another country, every issue of the people, whether political stability, economic development, or quality of life, is indivisible with the cause of anti-colonialism,' Lim said.³¹ 'Political rights such as independence, liberty, democracy, and freedom provide the country with the political conditions to improve people's lives and develop the country's economy.'³² When the progressive left emerged from detention in 1959, their chief priority was to place internal security laws under the control of a democratically elected government responsible to the people of Singapore.

PAP: YEAR ONE

The PAP government struggled over its first year. Crime rose, employment fell, and the severe housing shortage worsened. Its leadership, most of whom had no experience in government, struggled to reconcile the demands of its working class supporters with capitalist interests, to adhere to its anti-colonial platform while working with colonial officials, and to bridge differences of values and opinion within the party over how Singapore should be run.³³

But the PAP's leadership insisted nothing was wrong, demanding unquestioning obedience and rejecting the need for consensus. Decision-making was concentrated in the hands of a trusted 'inner cabinet'.³⁴ Government administrative and security apparatus was consolidated under their control.³⁵ This enabled speedy decision-making, but also mistakes. A pattern developed of policy implemented in haste and regretted at leisure, most notably over the cut to civil service pay,³⁶ the Women's Charter,³⁷ and the Pawnbrokers (Amendment) Bill.³⁸

³⁰ Bianjiweiyuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, ed. Malaixiya lishi de lingyimian (Malaixiya lishi de lingyimian, Kuala Lumpur: INSAN and Wasasa Enterprise, 2002), p. 64.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³³ Selkirk to MacLeod (Secretary of State for the Colonies), 20 May 1960, CO 1030/1148, TNA.

³⁴ Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, p. 223. The inner circle of Lee Kuan Yew, Toh Chin Chye, Goh Keng Swee, S. Rajaratnam, and Ong Pang Boon would be permanent fixtures in the cabinet for the next 20 years.

³⁵ Ping Tjin Thum, 'Flesh and Bone Reunite As One Body': Singapore's Chinese-speaking and their Perspectives on Merger', *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, 5 (2011-12), p. 37-38.

³⁶ *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (SCJP), 14 Sept 1959.

³⁷ Seow Peck Leng, Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates (LAD), 6 Apr 1960, C444-451; SCJP, 5 Mar 1960, 8 Apr 1960; Nanyang Siang Pao (NYSP), 5 and 7 Mar 1960.

³⁸ SCJP, 24 Mar 1960; 27 Mar 1960; NYSP, 27 Mar 1960; Straits Times (ST), 29 Mar 1960.

In particular, the PAP's vaunted labour policy suddenly collapsed. Throughout its first year, the party's trade union officials, led by Lim, worked to reform the labour movement. After legislation had been passed, the PAP leadership realised that the trade union movement could form a rival political power base. It abruptly withdrew registrations for all trade union federations and stopped the recently passed Trade Unions Bill from becoming law.³⁹ This decision caused much anger among the PAP rank-and-file, especially those who had put in effort into the reorganisations.⁴⁰

PAP members grew discontented over the leadership's authoritarianism.⁴¹ Political secretaries Woodhull and James Puthuchery criticized the 'tough talk, arrogance and downright cockiness of some of our Party officials' in the party newsletter. Woodhull agreed that decisions were generally correct, but 'short-shriftness and complete lack of explanation and persuasion' revealed a lack of confidence in the Party's capacity 'to evoke the right responses to reason and truth'.⁴² Looking back, Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye would admit that the critics were right.⁴³ But at the time, they were met with a harsh response, with Minister of Culture S. Rajaratnam and Lee Kuan Yew publicly calling them 'opportunists and turncoats',⁴⁴ a 'lunatic fringe' of the party, and 'bits of scum'.⁴⁵ British officials shared this disappointment. They appreciated the PAP leadership's difficulties.⁴⁶ Lord Selkirk (British Commissioner 1959-1963) summarised, 'What had been noted as self-confidence before the PAP took power soon became touched with arrogance, their energy became aggressive and their party loyalty marked with extreme intolerance of any opposition or criticism. Their discipline was characterised by bullying.'⁴⁷

SUSPICION

The biggest concern for the progressive left was a growing suspicion that Lee was actively blocking the release of detainees. Under Singapore's new constitution, Singapore's internal security remained under the control of an Internal Security Council (ISC), with joint responsibility between the Singaporean, British, and Federation governments. While the British had been prepared to fully cede control of internal security during the negotiations for the new constitution in 1957, Lim Yew Hock and Lee Kuan Yew had asked for the creation of the ISC instead. This would allow the next Singapore government to deflect blame for the use of internal security laws and continuing detentions.⁴⁸

³⁹ Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, p. 236.

⁴⁰ Lee, *The Open United Front: The Communist Struggle in Singapore 1954-1966*, p. 209.

⁴¹ Cheng Lian Pang, *Singapore's People's Action Party* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 11; Yap, Lim, and Leong, *Men In White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party*, p. 200-01.

⁴² *Petir*, Vol III No. 4, 19 Dec 1959; Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, p. 233-4.

⁴³ Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 90.

⁴⁴ NYSP, 14 Sept 1959.

⁴⁵ Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle For Success*, p. 234.

⁴⁶ Robert Scott (Commissioner General) to MacLeod, 23 Nov 1959, CO 1030/592, TNA; Report from BR Pearn (Foreign Office, FO), 21 Dec 1959, CO 1030/1148, TNA; Report from Selkirk to MacLeod, 20 May 1960, CO 1030/1148, TNA;

⁴⁷ "Singapore: Political Developments", Selkirk to CO, 4 Aug 1961, CO 1030/1150, TNA.

⁴⁸ Conversation Between the Minister for External Affairs and the Chief Minister of Singapore, A1838 TS383/5/3 Part 2, p90-93, National Archives of Australia [Henceforth NAA]; LAD, 4 Mar 1959, 14 Mar 1959, 19 Mar 1959; Kevin Y L Tan, *Marshall of Singapore: A Biography* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), p. 389-90; Kuan Yew Lee, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Edition, 1998), p. 258-9.

In the 1959 elections, the PAP leaders had pledged not to take power before current political detainees were released. Lim and his fellow leaders had refused to be released unless all the detainees were released. Lee promised that all detainees would be released within three to six months. In exchange, he asked them to sign a pledge deferring to his authority.⁴⁹ However, after an initial burst of releases, the pace of releases slowed. By early 1960, they had come to a halt. In the ISC, Lee pushed for continued detentions, but also covered his tracks. He tabled a document in the ISC in August 1959 calling for the release of the detainees, then asked for the ISC to veto the document on his behalf so that his government would not have to 'soil their hands'.⁵⁰ Publicly, he continued to blame the ISC for the lack of releases.

As unhappiness within the PAP grew, its leadership sought to remove one dissident in the cabinet – Ong Eng Guan, the Minister for National Development. In response, Ong tabled 16 resolutions at a party conference, demanding the party return to the platform it was elected on, and calling for the release of detainees. Ong was subsequently expelled and took two Assemblymen with him, forming the United People's Party. Ong later resigned his seat and challenged the government to a by-election. The progressive left were reluctant to disrupt party unity, but took the opportunity to ask the party leadership to clarify its position on detentions.

Lee refused to commit himself on the detainee issue. However, Lee was not worried at losing the support of his party's organisational base. Lee had made a secret alliance with the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) leader in Singapore, Fong Chong Pik. The CPM ordered its cadres through its underground network to support the PAP.⁵¹ Yet on election day, the PAP was crushed, winning only 2,820 votes (26.7%) to Ong's 7,747 (73.3%). The loss was a massive shock to Lee. It demonstrated that the CPM was unable to provide the organisational capacity he needed. His party's progressive left-wing could, but Lee did not want to make any concessions to them. Selkirk was particularly taken aback by Lee's 'dangerous obsession with Lim Chin Siong' and the degree to which Lee blamed Lim for his own failures.⁵²

MERGER

Lee needed a subject that was universally popular and which he could control and deliver quickly. He turned to the one issue which fit the bill: reunification with the rest of Malaya. He argued to the British and to Federation Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman that the Hong Lim result reflected the rise of a communist and chauvinist left wing in Singapore. Selkirk pointed out that his defeat was due to his own arrogance.⁵³ However, eager to secure their interests in Singapore, the British went along with his argument and quietly prodded the Tunku. The Tunku, initially reluctant chiefly due to the electoral implications of a large influx of working class Chinese into the Federation, eventually agreed to merger. On 27 May 1961 he delivered a pleasant shock to the PAP leadership and the British by announcing his favourable disposition to merger.

⁴⁹ Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 118; Bianjiweiyuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 76; ST 12 July 1961, 21 August 1961.

⁵⁰ Minutes of 6th Meeting of the ISC, 4 Feb 1960, CO 1030/1163, TNA; Secret 264, Selkirk to CO, 17 July 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA.

⁵¹ LAD, 10 Aug 1960, C542-543; 11 Aug 1960, C568, 589, 591-598; Lee, *The Open United Front: The Communist Struggle in Singapore 1954-1966*, p. 196-7.

⁵² 'Singapore: Political Developments', Selkirk to CO, 4 Aug 1961, CO 1030/1150.

⁵³ No. 263, Selkirk to MacLeod, 2 Sept 1960, CO 1030/1148, TNA; Secret 135, Selkirk to CO, 2 May 1961, CO 1030/1149.

To the rest of the PAP and the wider public, however, the Tunku's statement seemed innocuous. The Tunku had made several such statements before, only to back away from them each time.⁵⁴ There was nothing to indicate that this was different. Consequently, a statement by six progressive left leaders (Lim, Fong, Woodhull, James and Dominic Puthuchear, and ST Bani) on National Day did not mention merger, but focused entirely on reunifying a divided PAP and returning its focus to anti-colonialism. It emphasised 'genuinely full internal self-government', called for the abolition of the ISC, the end of British privilege to override the decisions of the Legislative Assembly, and the return of internal security powers to a fully elected and representative government. 'Political stability, economic expansion and raising the people's living standards are inseparable from the cause of the anti-colonial struggle,' it concluded.⁵⁵ Later, Lim reaffirmed this position, drawing a line in the sand: 'British colonialism is the enemy of the Singapore people. Supporters of British colonialism, either by words or deeds, are the enemy of the people.'⁵⁶

At the end of June, British actions betrayed to a surprised public that the process of merger was already under way. As late as mid-June, newspapers had still referred to merger as "a long way away".⁵⁷ The impression given by the actions and public comments of the British now made "Greater Malaysia" seem like a done deal, with Singapore and the Borneo territories exchanging one colonial master for another. Public opinion across Singapore and the Borneo territories erupted in surprise, shock, and fear at this sudden revelation.⁵⁸ Within the PAP, shock was compounded by revelations that Lee and Goh had been engaged in secret discussions with the Federation and the British since April.⁵⁹ PAP backbenchers and members demanded to know why the PAP leadership had left everyone else completely in the dark, and feared that the leadership was perpetuating colonialism under the guise of Malayan nationalism.⁶⁰ The abrupt volte-face of the Tunku, and the enthusiasm of the British for the plan, raised huge suspicions. Why would either endorse the scheme if they did not stand to substantially benefit?⁶¹

The PAP leadership spun the objections as being against the people's desire for merger. Lim replied that the central issue was colonialism, not merger.⁶² Tempers frayed as the PAP split between those who trusted Lee and those who wanted accountability. Accusations of betrayal flew and friendships were destroyed.⁶³ The left demanded Lee come clean. Anson's voters agreed, unseating the PAP and

⁵⁴ Mohamed Nordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1974), p. 129-36.

⁵⁵ ST 3 June 1961

⁵⁶ Bianjiwei-yuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 66.

⁵⁷ NYSP 10 June 1961.

⁵⁸ Thum, 'Flesh and Bone Reunite As One Body': Singapore's Chinese-speaking and their Perspectives on Merger', p. 42.

⁵⁹ Low Por Tuck, interview with Robert Chew, 7 Jan 1980, Accession 14, Singapore National Archives Oral History Centre (SNA-OHC); Record of Conversation between Australian Commissioner, Singapore and Selkirk, 30 May 1961, A4539 221/6/2A, National Archives of Australia (NAA). See also Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, pp. 135-6; Tan, *Creating "Greater Malaysia"*, pp. 44-47.

⁶⁰ NYSP, 14 July 1961; Utusan Melayu, 15 July 1961; Bianjiwei-yuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 68.

⁶¹ ST 8 July 1961; Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 118; Bianjiwei-yuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 69.

⁶² ST, 24 June 1961

⁶³ Yap, Lim, and Leong, *Men In White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party*, p. 199-202.

electing David Marshall, the 'biggest cannon in the available arsenal'⁶⁴, for 'more effective debate and opposition in the Legislative Assembly'.⁶⁵

Seeking leverage, Lee proposed to the British that he announce the release of detainees and the ISC countermand it. The British refused, declaring he had 'lived a lie about the detainees for far too long' and that 'it would be wrong for us to be party to device for deliberate misrepresentation'.⁶⁶ Lee then proposed instead to table the August 1959 ISC paper in the Legislative Assembly as proof he had tried to have the detainees released.⁶⁷ Selkirk called this 'unsavoury', 'objectionable', and stating the British 'could not be party to a further lie'.⁶⁸ 'Lee is not himself prepared ultimately to face the music', wrote Selkirk, but was 'asking for the British and Federation to take the public odium'.⁶⁹ Selkirk was particularly upset because his first act as ISC Chairman had been to stress the paramount importance of keeping confidentiality.⁷⁰ Despite this, Lee announced an extraordinary meeting of the Assembly for 20 July.

Selkirk and the leaders of the progressive left expected Lee's impending fall and were planning for life afterward. Both sides met at Eden Hall on 18 July. Lim and his colleagues 'clearly stated that they were loyal to Malaya, did not look to Communist China, that they would not resort to industrial unrest to achieve their aims. All were in favour of merger but not prepared to give Lee Kuan Yew a blank cheque...'⁷¹ They asked whether the British would intervene militarily to maintain control if Lee's government fell. Selkirk stated that as long as they adhered to the constitution the British would not intervene.⁷² 'Their visit to Eden Hall was that of prudent men who wanted to know whether the British would allow them to take office in the ordinary constitutional way,' Selkirk reported.⁷³

On 20 July, Lee tabled a motion of confidence. The PAP leadership sought to shift the debate to focus on merger, and declared that anyone who disagreed with them was against merger. Lee attacked Lim and his colleagues as reneging on the pledge they had made before release from detention in 1959. The left, meanwhile, emphasised that the issue was anti-colonialism. Lee Siew Choh reminded Lee of his corresponding pledge to free all political detainees. Toh responded by tabling the August 1959 ISC paper.⁷⁴ Toh implied that it was the British and the Federation who had

⁶⁴ SCJP, 27 July 1961.

⁶⁵ SCJP, 16-18 July 1961; NYSP, 20 July 1961.

⁶⁶ Secret 239, Moore to CO, 3 July 1961, CO 1030/1149; Secret 281, MacLeod to Moore, 6 July 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA; Secret 256, Moore to CO, 28 June 1960, CO 1030/1157, TNA.

⁶⁷ ISC Paper of 12.8.59 (ISC (59) (S) 2). See Secret 264, Selkirk to CO, 17 July 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA.

⁶⁸ Secret 263, Selkirk to CO, 17 July 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA; Secret 264, Selkirk to CO, 17 July 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA.

⁶⁹ Secret 264, Selkirk to CO, 17 July 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA.

⁷⁰ Minutes of 6th Meeting of the ISC, 4 Feb 1960, CO 1030/1163, TNA.

⁷¹ Note of a Meeting held at Eden Hall at 4.30pm on Tuesday 18 July 1961, 31 July 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA.

⁷² The "Eden Hall Tea Party" is described in detail in *Drysdale, Singapore: Struggle For Success*, p. 275-78; *Bloodworth, The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, p. 234-36.

⁷³ Letter from Selkirk to Maudling (Secretary of State for the Colonies), 12 July 1962, CO 1030/1150, TNA.

⁷⁴ LAD, 20 July 1961, C1680-3; *Drysdale, Singapore: Struggle For Success*, p. 281-82; *Bloodworth, The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, p. 230-31.

blocked further releases of detainees, and as such releasing the detainees would jeopardise merger. Selkirk was furious, but – with his Minister’s concurrence – stayed silent.⁷⁵

The motion passed with twenty-seven votes for, eight against, and sixteen abstentions. Thirteen PAP assemblymen abstained and were expelled. Around two-thirds of the party membership, including nineteen of twenty-three organising secretaries, left with them.⁷⁶ A press release signed by the dismissed members attacked Lee for his internal party purge and ending all pretence of democracy: ‘Party members are obliged to be loyal to the objectives and principles of the Party, not the individuals who are trying to monopolise power in the Party.’⁷⁷ They predicted that Lee would eventually use the internal security laws against them, but urged the people to remain calm, reminding them that ‘we have the constitutional means of removing ruthless men in office. The people can rest satisfied that they have the constitutional means of rejecting these wild men in power.’⁷⁸ In August, the expelled PAP members formed a new party, the Barisan Sosialis, with Lim Chin Siong as secretary-general.

ANTI-COLONIALISM VS MERGER

Over the ensuing months, the progressive left repeatedly emphasised that the chief issue was anti-colonialism. ‘The fundamental problem is still opposing colonialism,’ said Lim over and over.⁷⁹ He pointed out that merger could not be separated from colonialism, because any merger arrangement would have to be approved by Britain, which, quite rationally, would not agree to an arrangement that did not protect its interests. Likewise, why would the Federation agree without a great inducement?⁸⁰ Finally, he repeatedly emphasised the importance of constitutional action. The British had guns; the people did not.⁸¹ Victory could only be achieved via the court of public opinion. Merger – as the PAP also admitted – could not plausibly occur without the consent of its people. Likewise, as Selkirk had reminded them, the only way the Barisan would ever be able to assume power was through the constitutional process.⁸²

When the details of the negotiated agreement on merger were released in August, the Barisan was horrified. Under the terms, Singaporeans would lose some of their existing rights. To “quarantine” Singapore’s Chinese from Federation politics, residents of Singapore could only vote in Singapore, effectively keeping the two territories separate, and it would be under-represented in the Federal Parliament.⁸³ Most importantly, a government in which Singapore was only partially represented

⁷⁵ Secret 264, Selkirk to CO, 17 July 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA; Secret 301 MacLeod to Selkirk, 20 July 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA.

⁷⁶ Lee, *The Open United Front: The Communist Struggle in Singapore 1954-1966*, p. 205.

⁷⁷ NYSP, 23 July 1961.

⁷⁸ ST, 23 July 1961

⁷⁹ Bianjiweiyuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 73, 79, 88, 92, 104.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 85-88.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 80-81.

⁸² NYSP, 14 Aug 1961; SCJP, 14 Aug 1961. See also No. 304 Selkirk to CO, 17 August 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA.

⁸³ Priority 359, Moore to CO, 30 Aug 1961, CO 1030/1150, TNA. See also Selkirk to Maudling, 12 July 1961, CO 1030/1150; Secret 244, Selkirk to Sandys, 5 Oct 62, CO 1030/1150; Thum, ‘Flesh and Bone Reunite As One Body’: Singapore’s Chinese-speaking and their Perspectives on Merger’, p. 46-47.

would control internal security. The manifestation of colonialism in Singapore was a lack of democratic control of internal security. Thus, the proposed terms of merger would lock Singapore into a perpetual state of colonialism.⁸⁴ 'According to Mr Lee's arrangements, the Federation government will exercise absolute political sovereignty over Singapore's people by controlling the internal security of Singapore... but half of Singapore's citizens will be deprived of their right to elect their representatives at the Federal parliament which will rule over them. Isn't this betrayal?' Lim demanded. Lee argued that Singapore's government would retain crucial "decision-making powers", but, replied Lim, 'Once the Federation has control of Singapore's internal security, it will exercise complete and absolute political sovereignty over all Singaporeans. Under that circumstance, what is the use of other decision-making powers?'⁸⁵ Lim said.

Accordingly, the Barisan stated that they would only accept a merger in which Singapore was equally represented, with all Singapore citizens becoming full citizens of Malaysia on an equal basis with other states. The PAP dismissed this on the grounds that that the Federation had different standards for citizenship, which would strip many of Singaporeans of their citizenship. The Barisan pointed out Article 22 of the Federation constitution gave its Parliament latitude to decide who qualified for citizenship.⁸⁶ More importantly, the government of Singapore should be trying to preserve Singaporean rights, not giving them away because a foreign government demanded it. 'Do they represent Singapore or the Federation government?' demanded Lim.⁸⁷

However, the Barisan were fighting an uphill battle to put this message across. The leaders of the left had been barred from running in the 1959 elections and so were not in the Assembly. Malayan newspapers were pressured into not publishing anything favourable to the left.⁸⁸ Lee, using government dominance of the airwaves, made a series of radio speeches titled "The Battle for Merger", and later published the speeches under that title. The PAP successfully focused the media message on merger, not anti-colonialism, as the central issue.

The Barisan also did themselves no favours by getting bogged down in details. After their proposal for fully equal and representative merger was rejected, they switched to proposing full independence – and hence full control over internal security – as a way to achieve self-determination before merging with the Federation. This allowed the PAP to attack them as being against merger. The Barisan quoted Lee's statement that merger 'was as inevitable as the rising and setting of the sun'.⁸⁹ If so, it did not matter if Singapore became independent first. But the public was mindful that before May 1961, the Tunku had been growing less and less enthusiastic about merger. If this opportunity was not seized, it might never come again. The PAP's deal was flawed, but a flawed deal was better than none.

⁸⁴ Bianjiweiyuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 93.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁸⁶ Article 22: If any new territory is admitted to the Federation after Independence Day in pursuance of Article 2, parliament may by law determine what persons are to be citizens by reason of their connection with that territory and the date or dates from which such persons are to be citizens.

⁸⁷ Bianjiweiyuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 116.

⁸⁸ Secret 285, Singapore to CO, 9 June 1962, CO 1030/1158; Secret 297, Singapore to CO, 15 June 1962, TNA.

⁸⁹ Bianjiweiyuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 67; Yap, Lim, and Leong, *Men In White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party*, p. 236.

Over the ensuing months, the Barisan repeatedly criticised the details of merger, especially over the citizenship issue.⁹⁰ However, this played into Lee's hands as he could go to the Tunku and negotiate a compromise. In extremis, he could simply say that the Federation would not accept it. Without access to the Tunku, the Barisan could not propose any concrete alternatives. This also allowed Lee to repeatedly wrong-foot the Barisan, forcing them to shift positions, confusing the public and allowing the PAP to portray the Barisan as duplicitous.⁹¹ Armed with the unwitting input from the Barisan, Lee crafted a form of merger that addressed the major public concerns. Singapore would have autonomy in the three areas that Chinese-speaking majority cared most about – their hard-won labour rights, education policy, and citizenship.⁹²

But the public would have to be consulted to give merger legitimacy. In January 1963, Goh Keng Swee committed the PAP to a referendum. The Federation and British felt it was 'a major tactical error' to move the vote from the Legislative Assembly, where the PAP could win every vote, to the public, where the Barisan held an advantage.⁹³ However, Lee engineered a 'Hobson's choice': he ensured that all alternatives to the PAP option were repugnant, leaving the public with no real choice.⁹⁴ The British called this 'a dishonest manoeuvre' and the Tunku 'a dirty game', but both stayed silent.⁹⁵

INVENTING A COMMUNIST "UNITED FRONT"

Alarmed by the formation of the Barisan, the Federation leaders declared merger conditional on the arrest of Singapore's opposition.⁹⁶ But the British refused to act without justification. They had no legal basis on which to act. 'There is no law against communists or communism as such in Singapore. The most that can be said is that the Malayan Communist Party is an unlawful society and that membership of it is a punishable offence,' noted one internal memo, which only carried a fine of \$3,000 and/or imprisonment for three years. Given the paucity of evidence, this was 'unlikely to be possible to prove.'⁹⁷ Without actual proof of violent subversion, arrests would be construed as an attempt to silence legitimate opposition to Malaysia.⁹⁸ Their colonial reputation was already

⁹⁰ For more on debate over citizenship, see Tan, *Creating "Greater Malaysia": Decolonisation and the Politics of Merger*, p. 91-121.

⁹¹ For example, see Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, p. 257-67.

⁹² Thum, 'Flesh and Bone Reunite As One Body': Singapore's Chinese-speaking and their Perspectives on Merger', p. 48-49.

⁹³ Priority 338, Moore to CO, 11 July 1962, CO 1030/1158, TNA; Secret 167, Tory to CRO, 16 March 1962, CO 1030/1157, TNA.

⁹⁴ Secret 167, Tory to CRO, 16 March 1962, CO 1030/1157, TNA; 'Note of a Meeting held at 2.30pm on Wednesday, 16 May 1962, in the Colonial Office', CO 1030/1158, TNA.

⁹⁵ Matthew Jones, 'Creating Malaysia: Singapore security, the Borneo territories, and the contours of British policy, 1961-63', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 28/2 (2000), p. 85-86; Selkirk to Maudling, 12 July 1962, CO 1030/1150, TNA.

⁹⁶ Selkirk to Maudling, 12 July 1961, CO 1030/1150, TNA; Secret 244, Selkirk to Sandys, 5.10.62, CO 1030/1150, TNA.

⁹⁷ Radford (Singapore) to Roberts (CO), 22 Oct 1962, CO 1030/1158, TNA.

⁹⁸ 'Political Implications of Proposed Action by the Internal Security Council in Singapore', 22 Feb 1962, in Moore to Dato Nik Daud, Federation Ministry of Internal Security, CO 1030/1157, TNA; 'The Federation Government's Attitude to the Security Situation in Singapore', in Tory to Selkirk, 19 April 1962, CO 1030/1157, TNA.

damaged by reports of violence and torture – most recently in Kenya and Nyasaland.⁹⁹ Moreover, Selkirk believed that arrests were unnecessary. With the Tunku having directed the Singapore Alliance to vote with the PAP ‘when necessary to hold situation’, the PAP had a solid majority in the Assembly on crucial votes.¹⁰⁰ If the Barisan adhered to constitutional methods, they could not win a vote; if they resorted to illegal activity, they would be arrested.¹⁰¹

Selkirk believed that the Federation leadership feared the consequences of a left-wing Singapore government rallying Malaysia’s non-Malays to demand equality for all citizens, undermining UMNO’s political supremacy.¹⁰² The Tunku openly worried at Lim Chin Siong’s ‘frightening’ organisation abilities and talismanic presence and the ‘extremely skilful, successful, and devoted’ Barisan leadership.¹⁰³ Their arrest on security grounds before the creation of Malaysia would neatly solve this fear.

Under Lee’s direction, Singapore Special Branch produced a paper describing an extensive communist conspiracy in Singapore, directed from the underground by the CPM and led in the open by Barisan politicians as part of a Communist “United Front”.¹⁰⁴ The Security Liaison Officer (SLO)¹⁰⁵, Maurice Williams, tore apart the paper, noting numerous major deficiencies. Firstly, ‘in spite of intensive investigations, no evidence has been obtained’ of a conspiracy, and that the paper’s conclusions were entirely ‘surmise’.¹⁰⁶ Secondly, sharing the goal of Singapore’s independence with the Communists did not make someone a Communist sympathiser. Thirdly, it was ‘inconceivable that Secret Branch investigations would have failed to yield any evidence of such control and direction’ of a conspiracy of such massive breadth and scale. Finally, the label Communist “United Front” was so broadly applied that it referred to anyone unhappy with the government.¹⁰⁷ Thus, he concluded, ‘The developments since August 1961 outlined in the paper do NOT support this conclusion’ stated in the Special Branch paper, and strongly advised against repression.¹⁰⁸

Unable to proceed with arrests, the Federation and Singapore governments sought to provoke the Barisan into unconstitutional action on their own.¹⁰⁹ A campaign of harassment against newspapers, publications, trade unions, and opposition politicians commenced.¹¹⁰

⁹⁹ Secret 90, Maudling to Moore, 23 Feb 1962, CO 1030/1157, TNA; Secret 277, Tory to Snelling (CRO), 11 May 1962, CO 1030/1157, TNA.

¹⁰⁰ Secret 5998, From FO to Washington, 30 Aug 1961, CO 1030/1150, TNA; Secret 591, Tory to CRO, 11 Aug 1961, CO 1030/1149, TNA.

¹⁰¹ ‘Singapore: Political and Security Situation’, in Moore to Wallace, 19 Apr 1962, CO 1030/1157, TNA.

¹⁰² Secret 243, Moore to Maudling, 4 May 1962, CO 1030/1157, TNA; Secret 244 from Selkirk to Sandys, 5 Oct 1962, CO 1030/1158, TNA.

¹⁰³ Tory to Snelling, 1 May 1962, CO 1030/1157; Secret 240, Moore to CO, 2 May 1962, CO 1030/1157, TNA.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Security Situation since August, 1961’, 17 April 1962, CO 1030/1160, TNA.

¹⁰⁵ The Head of MI5’s Singapore office.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Security Situation in Singapore’, 25 April 1962, CO 1030/1160, TNA.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Secret 277, Tory to Snelling (CRO), 11 May 1962, CO 1030/1157, TNA.

¹¹⁰ Secret 285, Moore to CO, 9 June 1962, CO 1030/1158, TNA; Secret 290, Moore to CO, 11 June 1962; Secret 297, Moore to CO, 15 June 1962, CO 1030/1158, TNA.

Meanwhile, Lee sought to go over Selkirk and appeal directly to his superiors in London. But when he met British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in May 1962, Lee was forced to admit under close questioning that the Barisan leaders were merely 'stooges' and not leading Communists, and that the trade unions were no more communist than the Electrical Trades Union in Britain – i.e., not controlled by communists and functioning chiefly as a left-wing pressure group.¹¹¹

However, after a cabinet reshuffle in July, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations Duncan Sandys was given the additional responsibility of the Colonial Office. He was determined to see through merger and avoid conflict between the Colonial and Commonwealth Offices that had undermined the formation of the Central African Federation.¹¹² Accordingly, in a meeting with the Tunku and Lee in London on 31 July, Sandys carefully mapped out the path forward. If Special Branch first made out individual cases for all the individuals, and then the ISC approved the arrests on the basis of joint responsibility, he would not interfere.¹¹³ On Lee's return to Singapore, Special Branch was instructed to prepare the cases.¹¹⁴

REFERENDUM

The referendum was called for 1 September. Lee's "Hobson's choice" ensured the Barisan could not plausibly back any of the alternatives on offer. They had tried advocating blank votes, but the PAP then amended the referendum bill to allow the government to decide what blank votes meant.¹¹⁵ The PAP strained its campaign to the legal limit, freely using public money and government facilities to promote its Alternative A. It deluged the state with radio broadcasts, advertising jingles, posters, and pamphlets, including 200,000 free copies of Lee's *The Battle for Merger*.¹¹⁶ It mobilised the ostensibly non-political People's Association and Works Brigade to canvass voters and distribute campaign material.¹¹⁷ On the ballot paper, the Singapore flag was placed next to Alternative A and foreign flags next to Alternatives B and C. On information posters, all hands were seen putting a cross next to Alternative A. On polling day itself, the Singapore flag was hoisted outside the centres. Election officers used Alternative A as an example when instructing voters how to mark their ballots. Rumours flew that, through the use of serial numbers on the ballots, voters who cast blank votes would be identified and lose their citizenships. Goh sent out some 40 trucks fitted with loudspeakers to warn people that blank votes would be considered Alternative B, which would cause Singaporeans to lose their citizenship.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ 'Extract from Record of a Conversation at Admiralty House between the Prime Minister, Mr Maudling, and Mr Lee Kuan Yew', 16 May 1962, CO 1030/1158, TNA. For more on the Electrical Trades Union, see Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), p. 125-28.

¹¹² Jones, 'Creating Malaysia: Singapore security, the Borneo territories, and the contours of British policy, 1961-63', p. 92-95.

¹¹³ 'Malaysia Discussions: Note of Certain Points Discussed by Mr Duncan Sandys, Tunku Abdul Rahman, and Mr. Lee Kuan Yew in the Commonwealth Relations Office at 7.00pm on 31 July, 1962', CO 1030/1158, TNA.

¹¹⁴ Secret 447, Selkirk to CO, 4 Sept 1962, CO 1030/1158, TNA.

¹¹⁵ Lee, *The Open United Front: The Communist Struggle in Singapore 1954-1966*, p. 237.

¹¹⁶ LAD, 15 Mar 1962, C129-30.

¹¹⁷ Yap, Lim, and Leong, *Men In White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party*, p. 237.

¹¹⁸ Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, p. 160; Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, p. 261.

The government was also heavily aided by the business elite, who came out strongly in favour of the PAP's proposals for merger due to the concessions in commerce, education, and labour. They took out full-page advertisements in the newspapers urging people to vote in favour of Alternative A, emphasising that it would preserve business, culture, and jobs.¹¹⁹

On referendum day, 71.1% of voters chose Alternative A and 25.8% cast blank ballots. The Barisan, furious at the PAP's methods, rejected the result and accused the PAP of cheating. 'The referendum result did not indicate the real public opinion,' declared Lim, 'We will absolutely not recognise the result of a completely undemocratic referendum.'¹²⁰ It is impossible to say what the outcome would have been with a differently worded ballot, but there is no doubt that Singapore's people wanted merger and had chosen the best available option. Lee had secured a merger agreement that protected Singaporean interests, endorsed by the commercial and traditional elite of Singapore, and no plausible alternative arrangement had presented itself, nor was a second bite at the apple likely. Despite their rhetoric, the Barisan's actions indicate that they were resigned to merger. In the same speech, and subsequent speeches, Lim outlined the party's strategy in Malaysia: build a multiracial coalition with other left-wing and anti-colonial forces in Malaysia to achieve power by peaceful constitutional methods.¹²¹ In particular, he felt the PAP had heavily damaged the constitutional process through its cheating.

The PAP used threats and cheated to gain victory... the people can clearly see that if the PAP can juggle with the law and threaten and cheat today, they will be able to do so tomorrow. So it will not be easy to restore public confidence in the parliamentary democratic system. But as long as the authorities preserve the conditions for peaceful constitutional struggle, we will continue to carry out peaceful constitutional struggle. If the PAP continue to cheat and threaten, we will keep exposing their cheating and threats. If they want to juggle around with and break the parliamentary democratic system, they have to bear all the consequences... we won't wallow in the muck with them.¹²²

Lim knew that the only way the Barisan could ever achieve power in Singapore or Malaysia was to win at the ballot box; but in order for the result to be upheld, the constitution had to be sacrosanct. Yet the referendum result demonstrated that the constitutional processes could also be manipulated to produce non-democratic results. As Selkirk had predicted – and again noted in the wake of the referendum – the Barisan were caught in a no-win situation.¹²³

Faced with this scenario, Barisan members were deeply frustrated. They had adhered to constitutional methods, believing that – as in Kenya and Nyasaland – the British would not hesitate to use violent suppression in Singapore as long as the law remained on the books.¹²⁴ But even if the ISC was abolished, the referendum demonstrated that constitutional processes could be manipulated. Finally, even independence was no guarantee of freedom from colonial control, as colonial powers had left behind friendly governments, institutions, and structures hostile to

¹¹⁹ NYSP, 31 Aug 1962.

¹²⁰ Bianjiweiyuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 140.

¹²¹ ST, 16 Oct 1962.

¹²² Bianjiweiyuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 142.

¹²³ Selkirk to Sandys, 7 Sept 1962, CO 1030/1158, TNA.

¹²⁴ 'Meeting at Barisan Sosialis Headquarters on 23 September 1962', attached to Moore to Wallace, 7 Dec 1962, CO 1030/1160, TNA.

progressive forces, as in India and the Federation.¹²⁵ Lim urged his colleagues to recognise that their political struggle was ‘a long term struggle,’ and ‘we can only beat the current government when the general election comes.’¹²⁶ The party agreed that their only option was to keep using peaceful constitutional processes with the aim of winning elections to the Federal parliament and building a multiracial progressive coalition.¹²⁷

CONSISTENCY

Before Special Branch could finish writing the cases, the Brunei Rebellion broke out on 8 December. Amidst the shock, it was noted that Azahari, the leader of the rebellion, had lunched with Lim Chin Siong a few days prior.¹²⁸ While George Bogaars, Head of Special Branch, openly observed them from a nearby table, Azahari had attempted to sell a sceptical Lim on the idea of armed rebellion, which Lim refused.¹²⁹

Despite this, the Barisan declared that the rebellion was ‘a popular uprising against British colonialism and must command the support of all genuine anticolonialists’.¹³⁰ The Federation leaders and Lee seized upon this. By supporting the rebellion, the Barisan had provided, Lee declared, ‘a heaven-sent opportunity of justifying action against them.’¹³¹ Likewise, the Federation declared that this was the ‘tactically ideal moment’.¹³² Selkirk spent the bulk of his four-page telegram to Sandys explaining that it was now impossible to deny the Federation the arrests they so badly craved without jeopardising merger. In six lines, Selkirk added that recent intelligence demonstrated communist control of the Barisan, and that Lim had never explicitly ruled out violent action.¹³³

The evidence which Selkirk cited¹³⁴ was accounts of two post-referendum Barisan meetings.¹³⁵ Barisan members had complained that the constitution was pointless if it was so easily manipulated, asking if there was another way forward. Selkirk chose to interpret these as calls to abandon constitutional action, and disregarded their unanimous agreement to keep following peaceful constitutional action. Selkirk’s assertion that Lim never ruled out violent action was based on Lim’s statement that ‘so long as the conditions for peaceful constitutional struggle remain available to us, we will persist in the peaceful constitutional method of struggle,’ but, as noted above, Lim was speaking about the importance of maintaining integrity and public faith in the constitution.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Bianjiwei-yuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 145-46.

¹²⁷ Meeting at Barisan Sosialis Headquarters on 30 September 1962’, attached to Moore to Wallace, 7 Dec 1962, CO 1030/1160, TNA.

¹²⁸ Secret 43, Selkirk to CO and FO, 9 Dec 1963, CO 1030/1160, TNA.

¹²⁹ Secret 214, Moore to CO, 2 April 1963, CO 1030/1573, TNA; Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse*, p. 271.

¹³⁰ Barisan Sosialis Statement, 4 Dec 1962

¹³¹ Top Secret 571, Moore to CO, 10 Dec 1962, CO 1030/1160, TNA.

¹³² Top Secret 929, Tory to Sandys, 11 Dec 1962, CO 1030/1160, TNA.

¹³³ Emergency Top Secret 573, Selkirk to CO, 11 December 1962, CO 1030/1160, TNA.

¹³⁴ Declassified in 2013.

¹³⁵ ‘Meeting at Barisan Sosialis Headquarters on 23 September 1962’ and ‘Meeting at Barisan Sosialis Headquarters on 30 September 1962’, attached to Moore to Wallace, 7 Dec 1962, CO 1030/1160, TNA.

In the same speech, Lim explicitly rejected violence. Asked about the possibility of repressive detention, Lim replied, 'as long as the unjust and undemocratic laws exist, there will be no guarantee for the people's basic freedoms and democratic rights, and there will always be the possibility of repression anytime and anywhere. So we should prepare for the worst...'¹³⁶ No matter what happened, he stressed, violence was out of the question. 'Our immediate objective is to defeat the government in a general election. If merger is forcibly implemented, we will strive for victory in the federal election...The PAP will work hard to suppress and restrict us... we must be patient and calmly analyse our work. We must persuade the people slowly and should absolutely never be irritated nor attack.'¹³⁷

Supporting the Brunei rebellion was a matter of principle. Lim directly addressed this in a speech on 23 December at a rally supporting the rebellion: 'It is a just cause, precisely because it is fighting against colonialism, for freedom... It is our duty not only to fight against colonialism locally but also to support wholeheartedly the struggle against colonialism that is being waged in other regions. If we are not internationalists, then we should rightly be called chauvinists. We recognise that colonialism and imperialism respect no national boundaries.'¹³⁸ The left, he reminded his audience, had issued similar statements, supporting anti-colonial revolution in the British colonies of Aden and Cyprus, along with Algeria, the Congo and other African states, and West Irian, with no repercussions.¹³⁹ The latter statement, on West Irian, had been backed unanimously by all parties in the Assembly, including the PAP.¹⁴⁰

But by the time Lim delivered the speech, news that arrests were imminent had leaked. Operation Coldstore, planned for 16 December 1962, had collapsed when Lee Kuan Yew tried to manipulate the arrests to strengthen his own political survival by inserting the names of fifteen additional political opponents, to the Tunku's anger.¹⁴¹ Over 1,000 police had been on standby, and the activity was impossible to hide. Newspapers were ordered not to report it, but it became an open secret.¹⁴² The Federation conducted its own arrests, and it was believed that Singapore was inevitably next.

Lim continued to emphasise that the Barisan was committed to peaceful constitutional struggle. 'If peaceful constitutional methods are available only a maniac or a fool would seek a road of bloodshed,' he said. But the choice was out of their hands. 'History has shown us that the methods by which independence is achieved depends not only on the desires and wishes of the subject people, but primarily upon the attitude of the colonial masters. Where the colonial masters wished to see violence and bloodshed, there was violence and bloodshed.' Citing the Algerian War, he argued that 'Colonial wars are not waged just because the peoples of the colonies desire to see their own home burnt, their friends or family shot. Colonial wars are perpetrated to preserve the old order. The goal of the colonial war was to preserve the colonial system.'¹⁴³ He reminded his audience that the priority was opposing colonialism in all its forms, and quoted Sukarno, who had pointed out that colonial powers would try to preserve their influence even after independence by

¹³⁶ Bianjiweiyanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 147.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹³⁸ *The Plebian*, 31 Dec 1962.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ ST 24 January 1962.

¹⁴¹ Top Secret 155, Lansdowne to CO, 17 Dec 1962, CO 1030/1160, TNA.

¹⁴² First Report of Interrogation of Detainees Held Under "Operation Coldstore" by Director Special Branch, 17 July 1963, CO 1030/1578, TNA.

¹⁴³ *The Plebian*, 31 Dec 1962.

instigating divisions and provoking violence, thus legitimising repression. This was Singapore's fate, warned Lim. The PAP would accuse of them of being communist, instigators of violence, and racist, and use this as an excuse to conduct repression. His 'whole-hearted support' for Indonesia's anti-colonial position was misquoted in the next morning's *Straits Times* as 'whole-hearted support' for 'Indonesia's pro-revolt stance'.¹⁴⁴

It took two months of shuttle diplomacy before Operation Coldstore was remounted. Lee was given a major concession by having the post-operation communiqué refer to Malaysia, allowing Lee to claim that merger was dependent on the arrests.¹⁴⁵ He was also allowed to insert three names of the original fifteen political opponents into the arrest list 'to strengthen his own chances of political survival'.¹⁴⁶ In the meantime, the Federation and Singapore governments ramped up their public rhetoric, with the Tunku describing a 'fifth-column' in Singapore and Rajaratnam declaring that the 'anti-Malaysia, anti-democratic', 'anti-national and pro-communist forces' would try to destroy Singapore's economy. Anticipating arrests, Lim predicted the 'establishment of a Fascist and military dictatorship in the country,' and pleaded that 'only with the free and unhampered participation of the progressive forces can the constructive energies of our people be released.'¹⁴⁷ As January drew to a close, the *Nanyang Siang Pao* risked censure by publishing an editorial which all but openly implored the government not to conduct the arrests.¹⁴⁸ But this had no effect. Coldstore was finally carried out on 3 February 1963, removing the left's intellectual and spiritual leadership. The Barisan, a vast tent united only by their hatred of the PAP, slowly split apart and collapsed in acrimony.

CONCLUSION

Singapore's progressive left was a generation united by the severe historical disruptions which had continually roiled Singapore throughout their lives. Their unity lay in an abiding commitment to oppose colonialism in all its forms. The repeated usage of violence by the British in their other colonies, as well as the British refusal to rule out the use of violent repression in Singapore, indicated that as long as the ISC existed the British would use repression, or the threat of repression, to exercise unelected influence over Singapore's governance. The left did not call for the abolition of the laws, but worked to remove control of the laws from those who were not elected by and responsible to Singapore's electorate. They thus opposed the ISC as an undemocratic, unrepresentative body which perpetuated colonialism. Likewise, their chief objections to merger were over the transfer of control of internal security laws in Singapore to a body which was not fully representative of the Singapore's people.

With the British, Federation, and Singaporean governments having agreed in July 1962 to the arrest of the Barisan leadership, the referendum was the only chance the Barisan had of defeating the Malaysia plan. Their failure to do so lies in their inability to clearly communicate how the Malaysia plan would continue colonial rule in a Malayan nationalist guise, with severe consequences for Singaporeans' freedoms. Instead, the PAP successfully kept public focus on merger, not anti-

¹⁴⁴ ST, 24 Dec 1962.

¹⁴⁵ Top Secret 99, KL to CRO, 23 Jan 1963, CO 1030/1576, TNA; Top Secret 100, KL to CRO, 23 Jan 1963, CO 1030/1576, TNA; 'Internal Security Measures in Singapore', Feb 1963, CO 1030/1573, TNA.

¹⁴⁶ Top Secret 56, Selkirk to CO, 29 Jan 1963, CO 1030/1576. The three were all Ong Eng Guan's lieutenants in the United People's Party.

¹⁴⁷ ST, 1 Jan 1963

¹⁴⁸ NYSP, 23 Jan 1963.

colonialism. In this it was aided the overwhelming popularity for reunification with the rest of Malaya, by pressure on the media, and by control of government resources.

Equally, the Barisan were undone by their political inexperience and naivety. By getting bogged down in the details of merger, they unwittingly played the game on terms which Lee Kuan Yew and the Tunku could control. The PAP leadership, led by a lawyer and academics intimately familiar with the minutiae of parliamentary procedure, outmanoeuvred the trade unionists and physicians who comprised the Barisan's leadership. By announcing their plans for blank ballots publicly, they gave the PAP time to invent an alternative. In opposition, they could have retained ambiguity as to their policies but instead publicly articulated a non-aligned, pro-labour platform which did little to endear the British and Federation to them.¹⁴⁹ The Barisan also helped the ISC in the court of public opinion by refusing to compromise their principles to the prevailing political circumstances. By this time their members were frustrated by the PAP's dubious (albeit legal) tactics in the referendum, and their internal discussions reflected this, as well as a growing recognition that they were in an unwinnable situation. But they recognised that their only hope of attaining power was via the constitutional process. A public statement endorsing the Brunei rebellion did them no favours.

Finally, their own internal cohesion was born of a shared experience of detentions and oppression, but this also created different priorities from Singapore's public. Singaporeans did not share their defining experience of detention. But Singaporeans were measurably better off from having workers' rights, protections from discrimination, and citizenship, which the progressive left had done so much to win. They also did not want to be indefinitely cut off from their families in Malaya. It is likely that the progressive left underestimated the willingness of Singaporeans to accept a flawed but concrete package of Malaysia over the ideal but abstract package of freedom and democracy.

¹⁴⁹ Bianjiweiyuanhui (ed.), *Linqingxiang yu tade shidai (xiace)*, p. 163-64.

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