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**Essays**

**Singapore's 'Martyr,' Chee Soon Juan**

July/August 2006

*By Hugo Restall*

**Striding into the** Chinese restaurant of Singapore's historic Fullerton Hotel, Chee Soon Juan hardly looks like a dangerous revolutionary. Casually dressed in a blue shirt with a gold pen clipped to the pocket, he could pass as just another mild-mannered, apolitical Singaporean. Smiling, he courteously apologizes for being late—even though it is only two minutes after the appointed time.

Nevertheless, according to prosecutors, this same man is not only a criminal, but a repeat offender. The opposition party leader has just come from a pre-trial conference at the courthouse, where he faces eight counts of speaking in public without a permit. He has already served numerous prison terms for this and other political offenses, including eight days in March for denying the independence of the judiciary. He expects to go to jail again later this year.

Mr. Chee does not seem too perturbed about this, but it drives Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong up the wall. Asked about his government's persecution of the opposition during a trip to New Zealand last month, Mr. Lee launched into a tirade of abuse against Mr. Chee. "He's a liar, he's a cheat, he's deceitful, he's confrontational, it's a destructive form of politics designed not to win elections in Singapore but to impress foreign supporters and make himself out to be a martyr," Mr. Lee ranted. "He's deliberately going against the rules because he says, 'I'm like Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi. I want to be a martyr.'"

Coming at the end of a trip in which the prime minister essentially got a free ride on human rights from his hosts—New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark didn't even raise the issue—this outburst showed a lack of self-control and acumen. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the man who many believe still runs Singapore and who is the current prime minister's father, has said much the same things about Mr. Chee—"a political gangster, a liar and a cheat"—but that was at home, and in the heat of an election campaign.

Mr. Chee smiles when it's suggested that he must be doing something right. "Every time he says something stupid like that, I think to myself, the worst thing to happen would be to be ignored. That would mean we're not making any headway," he agrees.

But one charge made by the government does stick: Mr. Chee is not terribly concerned about election results. Which is just as well, because his Singapore Democratic Party did not do very well in the May 6 polls. It would be foolish, he suggests, for an opposition party in Singapore to pin its hopes on gaining one, or perhaps two, seats in parliament. He is aiming for a much bigger goal: bringing down the city-state's one-party system of government. His weapon is a campaign of civil disobedience against laws

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designed to curtail democratic freedoms.

“You don’t vote out a dictatorship,” he says. “And basically that’s what Singapore is, albeit a very sophisticated one. It’s not possible for us to effect change just through the ballot box. They’ve got control of everything else around us.” Instead what’s needed is a coalition of civil society and political society coming together and demanding change—a color revolution for Singapore.

So far Mr. Chee doesn’t seem to be getting much, if any traction. While many Singaporeans don’t particularly like the PAP’s arrogant style of government, the ruling party has succeeded in depoliticizing the population to the extent that anybody who presses them to take action to make a change is regarded with resentment. And in a climate of fear—Mr. Chee lost his job as a psychology lecturer at the national university soon after entering opposition politics—a reluctance to get involved is hardly surprising.

Why is all this oppression necessary in a peaceful and prosperous country like Singapore where citizens otherwise enjoy so many freedoms? Mr. Chee has his own theory that the answer lies with strongman Lee Kuan Yew himself: “Why is he still so afraid? I honestly think that through the years he has accumulated enough skeletons in his closet that he knows that when he is gone, his son and the generations after him will have a price to pay. If we had parliamentary debates where the opposition could pry and ask questions, I think he is actually afraid of something like that.”

That raises the question of whether Singapore deserves its reputation for squeaky-clean government. A scandal involving the country’s biggest charity, the National Kidney Foundation, erupted in 2004 when it turned out that its Chief Executive T.T. Durai was not only drawing a \$357,000 annual salary, but the charity was paying for his first-class flights, maintenance on his Mercedes, and gold-plated fixtures in his private office bathroom.

The scandal was a gift for the opposition, which naturally raised questions about why the government didn’t do a better job of supervising the highly secretive NKF, whose patron was the wife of former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (she called Mr. Durai’s salary “peanuts”). But it had wider implications too. The government controls huge pools of public money in the Central Provident Fund and the Government of Singapore Investment Corp., both of which are highly nontransparent. It also controls spending on the public housing most Singaporeans live in, and openly uses the funds for refurbishing apartment blocks as a bribe for districts that vote for the ruling party. Singaporeans have no way of knowing whether officials are abusing their trust as Mr. Durai did.

It gets worse. Mr. Durai’s abuses only came to light because he sued the Straits Times newspaper for libel over an article detailing some of his perks. Why was Mr. Durai so confident he could win a libel suit when the allegations against him were true? Because he had done it before. The NKF won a libel case in 1998 against defendants who alleged it had paid for first-class flights for Mr. Durai. This time, however, he was up against a major bulwark of the regime, Singapore Press Holdings; its lawyers uncovered the truth.

Singaporean officials have a remarkable record of success in winning libel suits against their critics. The question then is, how many other libel suits have Singapore’s great and good wrongly won, resulting in the cover-up of real misdeeds? And are libel suits deliberately used as a tool to suppress questioning voices?

The bottling up of dissent conceals pressures and prevents conflicts from

being resolved. For instance, extreme sensitivity over the issue of race relations means that the persistence of discrimination is a taboo topic. Yet according to Mr. Chee it is a problem that should be debated so that it can be better resolved. “The harder they press now, the stronger will be the reaction when he’s no longer around,” he says of Lee Kuan Yew.

The paternalism of the PAP also rankles, especially since foreigners get more consideration than locals. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund will hold their annual meeting in Singapore this fall, and have been trying to convince the authorities to allow the usual demonstrations to take place. The likely result is that international NGO groups will be given a designated area to scream and shout. “So we have a situation here where locals don’t have the right to protest in their own country, while foreigners are able to do that,” Mr. Chee marvels. Likewise, Singaporeans can’t organize freely into unions to negotiate wages; instead a National Wages Council sets salaries with input from the corporate sector, including foreign chambers of commerce.

All these tensions will erupt when strongman Lee Kuan Yew dies. Mr. Chee notes that the ruling party is so insecure that Singapore’s founder has been unable to step back from front-line politics. The PAP still needs the fear he inspires in order to keep the population in line. Power may have officially passed to his son, Lee Hsien Loong, but even supporters privately admit that the new prime minister doesn’t inspire confidence.

During the election, Prime Minister Lee made what should have been a routine attack on multiparty democracy: “Suppose you had 10, 15, 20 opposition members in parliament. Instead of spending my time thinking what is the right policy for Singapore, I’m going to spend all my time thinking what’s the right way to fix them, to buy my supporters’ votes, how can I solve this week’s problem and forget about next year’s challenges?” But of course the ominous phrases “buy votes” and “fix them” stuck out. That is the kind of mistake, Mr. Chee suggests, Lee Sr. would not make.

“He’s got a kind of intelligence that would serve you very well when you put a problem in front of him,” he says of the prime minister. “But when it comes to administration or political leadership, when you really need to be media savvy and motivate people, I think he is very lacking in that area. And his father senses it as well.”

However, the elder Mr. Lee’s death—he is now 82—is a necessary but not sufficient condition for change. Another big factor is how civil society is able to use new technologies to bypass PAP control over information and free speech. The government has tried to stifle political filmmaking, blogging and podcasting. Singapore Rebel, a 2004 film about Mr. Chee by independent artist Martyn See, was banned but is widely available on the Internet.

Meanwhile, pressure for Singapore to remain competitive in the region has sparked debate about the government’s dominant role in the economy. Can a top-down approach promote creativity and independent thinking? The need for transparency and accountability also means that Singapore will have to change. That is the source of Mr. Chee’s optimism in the face of all his setbacks: “I realize that Singapore is not at that level yet. But we’ve got to start somewhere. And I’m prepared to see this out, in the sense that in the next five, 10, 15 years, time is on our side. We need to continue to organize and educate and encourage. And it will come.”

He doesn’t dwell on his personal tribulations, but mentions in passing selling his self-published books on the street. That is his primary source of income to feed his family, along with the occasional grant. As to the charge of wanting to be a martyr, once he started dissenting, he found it

impossible to stop in good conscience. “The more you got involved, the more you found out what they’re capable of, it steels you, so you say, ‘No, I will not back down.’ It makes you more determined.”

Perhaps it’s in his genes. One of Mr. Chee’s daughters is old enough that she had to be told that her father was going to prison. She stood up before her class and announced, “My papa is in jail, but he didn’t do anything wrong. People have just been unfair to him.”

*Mr. Restall is editor of the REVIEW.*

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