SINGAPORE
Continuity in Change as the
New Guard’s Agenda Becomes Clearer

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With the opening of Singapore’s seventh Parliament on 9 January 1989, the transition to an entirely new leadership from that which founded the independent nation-state and charted its economic and political course in the country’s first two decades was all but formally complete. The retirement of fourteen senior People’s Action Party (PAP) members together with the addition of seventeen new faces in the government’s ranks meant that fifty-six of the PAP’s eighty parliamentary members have entered the assembly since 1980. Only Lee Kuan Yew himself remains of the “Old Guard”, having already indicated that he intends to stand down as prime minister (PM) by the end of 1990.1 Not surprisingly, then, the new Parliament would be viewed with expectation, observers on the lookout for concrete indications of the political direction of the country’s younger leaders in this final passage of the transition. The sense of expectancy was further engendered by the presence of Singapore’s first Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP), Dr Lee Siew Choh, made possible by amendments in 1984 to the Constitution. Was this the beginning of a new era in Singapore’s politics, one in which the space for political opposition would be significantly expanded?

Speculation about Singapore’s possible political direction under the New Guard was, of course, not new. The carefully managed “changing of the guard” over the last decade ensured that. However, recent developments in Singapore have fostered contrasting interpretations of the significance of the leadership transition. According to one view, such reforms as the NCMP provision, the establishment of Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs), the Feedback Unit, the Institute of Policy Studies, together with a preparedness to modify unpopular policy on graduate mothers and uses of superannuation funds, are evidence of a more consultative, participatory and flexible form of government in the making. Protests by various government leaders about the need for a change of style have encouraged this interpretation. Against this view, however, recourse to the Internal Security Act (ISA), the treatment of the then opposition parliamentarian, J.B. Jeyaretnam, and curbs on the international press are cited as demonstration that Singapore’s political style is being

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1 The first clear indication of this timetable came in Lee’s National Day Rally speech in September 1988 but Lee has since specified the end of 1990 for his resignation as PM. See “Prime Minister Lee of Singapore Sees Dares for Retirement”, Asian Wall Street Journal, 10 October 1989, p. 3.
consolidated and not relaxed as the New Guard assumes the mantle. It was hoped, therefore, that 1989 would reveal in greater substance what changes, if any, could be expected in the Singaporean political process in this new era. Though this question will of course ultimately be answered in full by history, events in 1989 did indeed throw some light on this issue, giving us the clearest indication yet of the new leadership’s aspirations for Singapore’s polity.

In particular, as we will see below, events suggested that Goh Chok Tong and his colleagues are just as firmly committed to the notion that Singapore’s economic progress should not inexorably lead to the adoption of “Western style” democracy. However, faced with somewhat different circumstances from those encountered by its predecessors, the current leadership has seen a need to devise new techniques to meet political pressure for significant alterations to Singapore’s brand of democracy. Hence, not only were steps taken to safeguard the institutional powers traditionally enjoyed by the Singapore state, but attention now focused on the complex and challenging question of how to enact a cultural reformation to correct the trend towards “Westernization” and attendant political values. Out of such concerns, Singapore’s new leaders devoted much energy in 1989 to identifying, and exploring the means of implementing, a formal national ideology or a set of core values to serve as a statement of Singapore’s distinctiveness. Possibly this long-term project is most indicative of the preference for continuity over change which Goh Chok Tong told PAP cadres in January was characteristic of Singapore’s younger leaders. As he said, whilst there may be changes of personalities and even style within the Party, “where goals and basic values are concerned, there will be no change”. Indeed, Goh’s reassertion in Parliament just one week later that the second generation of leaders had, with Lee’s agreement, effectively been in control of the government since December 1984, should have corrected any misplaced anticipation of a significant redirection. Subsequent events may have underlined the difficulty ahead in such a stance, but certainly not the leadership’s resolve to achieve it.

National Ideology
The call for a national ideology arising out of the latest juxtaposition of “Western” versus “Asian” values and the threat of the former to Singapore’s survival can be traced to remarks made by Lee Kuan Yew in August 1988. In his National Day Rally speech, Lee lamented the way in which promoting English as Singapore’s first language had made it possible for Singapore to become a “pseudo-Western society", a false society devoid of any genuine, notably Asian, cultural heritage. Significantly, in developing this argument, it was noted that the 1987 ISA detainees were English-educated. Goh Chok Tong picked up on this theme in October whilst addressing the PAP’s Youth Wing when he expressed concern that “over the last decade there has been a clear shift in our values". This he identified as a shift towards individualism at the expense of communitarianism. Goh argued that it was the Confucian emphasis

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3Parliamentary Debates Singapore Official Report 92, no. 6 (20 January 1989), column 432.
on hard work, thrift, and sacrifice which underlay the economic success of East Asia and Singapore. Attempts to dilute such values would be disastrous for Singapore, both socially and economically. Rather than drift aimlessly along, he asserted, "we should have a clear statement of our national ethic."7 Soon afterwards Goh announced the appointment of Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong to head a committee to formulate a national ideology.

Against this background, the closing months of 1988 witnessed a combination of enthusiasm, reservation, and even suspicion in public reactions to this new government priority. Whereas the elevation of Confucianism was welcomed by sections of the Chinese community, some concern by the minority Malay community surfaced and questions were raised about the underlying purpose of the exercise.8 Hence, on the eve of Singapore’s seventh Parliament, the government still had some way to go before convincing people of the need for an official national ideology and settling on its contents. Starting with the first session of Parliament in 1989, however, and occupying most of the first half of the year, the PAP set about dealing with these questions.

In President Wee Kim Wee’s opening address to the seventh Parliament, an address which Goh pointed out had been written by himself in consultation with Brigadier-General Lee,9 concern over the perceived trend towards a “more Westernised, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life” was highlighted.10 Four core values were identified which were seen as fundamental to a national ideology intended to correct this trend: placing society above self; upholding the family as the basic building block of society; resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention; and stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony. In the same speech, it was emphasized that political stability, above all else, was the foundation of economic success. Clearly it was the intention that these core values would form the basis of political stability. During the next fortnight of parliamentary debate over the President’s speech, a variety of arguments surfaced in support of all four values, with suggestions of worthy additions also forthcoming.

A conspicuous feature of the debate was the strong rejection of the liberal democratic model by some of the PAP’s newest parliamentary members. Maiden speeches by John Chen Seow Phun, K. Shanmugam, and Loh Meng See contained some of the most concerted denunciation of this model and its relevance for Singapore, especially the concept of individual rights and freedoms associated with it. These could not, argued Chen, “be the principles on which we should build our nation”.11 Singapore’s multicultural nature was seen to contain a political sensibility which rendered such principles a threat to social cohesion. Collectively, the contribution to debate by the newcomers was to underline the importance of individual obligations to society. This was amplified in the maiden speech by Brigadier-

7Ibid., p. 15.
11Ibid., 52, no. 2 (10 January 1989), column 68.
General George Yeo, a PAP recruit and now the Minister of State for Finance and Foreign Affairs, though with care to reassure the wider audience that democracy and communitarianism could and should be reconciled. Indeed, Yeo maintained that the search for a national ideology was not a case of "choosing between East and West". Rather, "We are deciding what synthesis of East and West will best carry us as a society into the next century."  

Yeo's portrayal of the national ideology as a search for a synthesis of East and West leads to the obvious question of what elements of Western culture, as opposed to the liberal democratic political model per se, Singapore's leaders find most objectionable. Second Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong offered one of the few explicit statements on this:

> By adverse, undesirable influence of the western culture, we mean their drug taking, and their paying too little attention to family relationships but stressing individualism, their emphasis on personal interest and not paying much importance to social or national interest.

Dr Koh Lam Son also added sexual permissiveness as one such feature to be avoided. More generally, however, comparatively vague references to "unbridled individualism" rather than precise specifications characterized the debate. One wonders, however, whether cultural decay within Singapore is as manifest as the government's urgent campaign implies. Certainly most debate has centred on the projected political consequences of emerging values rather than the actual social ramifications already evident in Singapore. It is also not clear that the cultural maladies which have been identified can be so easily separated from the broader processes of capitalist development. Advanced capitalist development is characterized by the extension of private market relations and values to as many spheres of social life as is profitable. This necessarily brings about cultural change. However, in lamenting the erosion of traditional values, the government has been careful to restrict its criticism to the political systems of the West.

According to Dr Lee Siew Choh, former Barisan Sosialis leader and now representing the Workers' Party as an NCMP, the government's protestations about the need for a national ideology mask a hidden agenda, one quite different from the insulation of Singapore from negative Western cultural influences. The real purpose of the exercise, he maintained, was to try to resurrect mass support for the PAP and to ensure that the PAP would be firmly entrenched in office well into the future. He argued that this latest focus was simply an extension of a "chain of activities" by the PAP to arrest a sustained electoral decline in the 1980s:

> It started feverish reorganization of the local press to tighten control. It declared the PAP a so-called "national instrument" in order to inveigle the people to join up with the PAP and become part of the movement. It got the resident committees (RCs) into action. Still tighter control was imposed on the unions and mass organizations. It started propaganda about the so-called "Vision 1990" and so on.  

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1Ibid., 92, no. 5 (19 January 1989), columns 344-50.
2Ibid., column 346.
3Ibid., column 326.
4Ibid., 92, no. 6 (29 January 1989), column 402.
5Ibid., 92, no. 4 (18 January 1989), column 235.
The core values of this national ideology, though seemingly laudable, were thus seen by Dr Lee as a means to define away alternatives to PAP values and policies. Thus, he feared that “placing society above self”, as a guiding value, ran the risk of conflating a PAP government with the Singapore society, thereby fostering political subjugation. As for the notion of resolving major issues through consensus rather than contention, this was dismissed by Dr Lee as disingenuous since his understanding was that the PAP prevents freedom of opinion, association and assembly, and blocks access to information in the government and foreign press. The PAP’s intolerance of criticism, Dr Lee argued, made consensus impossible.\textsuperscript{17} Interestingly, a not dissimilar point was later made by the Joint (ad-hoc) Committee of Muslim Organisations (JCMO) in July, albeit in more circumspect fashion. In declaring its support for the four core values identified by Goh Chok Tong and Brigadier-General Lee, JCMO submitted that a continuous process of “democratization” was required to generate a “well informed public that is prepared to contribute intelligently” to the discussions fundamental to consensual political processes.\textsuperscript{18}

Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) leader and member for Potong Pasir, Chiam See Tong, expressed similar reservations to Dr Lee, although his tone was notably more conciliatory. He called on the government to submit convincing argument to reassure the people of Singapore that the push for a national ideology was not simply a ploy to harness the authoritarian features of Confucianism to dampen an aroused democratic spirit within Singapore.\textsuperscript{19}

Lest it be concluded that the government’s benchers were in total synchrony on the national ideology question, it should be acknowledged that some liberal-inspired reservations by government members about the possible contents and effects of the new campaign did surface in Parliament. Chay Wai Chuen, for example, argued that the development of Singapore had been well served by the immigrant culture characterized by the invisible hand of individuals pursuing self-interest.\textsuperscript{20} Abdullah Tarmugi also attempted to redress the balance in the debate in his call for a “more participatory form of government, less regulation, more flexibility”,\textsuperscript{21} a sentiment echoed by members Chng Hee Koh and Dr Ong Chit Chung.\textsuperscript{22} The Party hierarchy made it clear, however, that the principal purpose of the national ideology exercise was not to openly encourage any closer approximation of a particular democratic model, but rather to inculcate a sense of “differentness” which would call emulation of other models into question. This emphasis strongly prevailed throughout 1989 in leadership statements on the issue and, as we have seen above, it generally enjoyed significant and enthusiastic support from the PAP’s back-benchers as well.

Lee Kuan Yew has made no secret of the fact that in his preparation to step down as Singapore’s leader he is anxious about what he depicts as the loss of cultural roots, confusion of values, and impact of Western influence characteristic of younger Singaporeans. Underneath this cultural drift, however, lies a related malaise which

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., columns 253-34.
\textsuperscript{18}“Muslims Accept 4 Core Values”, Straits Times, 19 July 1989, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., 52, no. 5 (19 January 1989), column 358.
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 52, no. 2 (10 January 1989), column 57.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 52, no. 6 (20 January 1989), columns 388 and 418.
expresses itself in political terms: "They think they have all the freedom of choice now of a mature, developed society." But he warns, "I do not believe that. And they will discover it to be so." Measures such as the proposed change to an elected president with substantial veto power over the parliamentary executive reflect the conviction that all that has been achieved in Singapore since the mid-1960s could be so easily sacrificed should Singaporeans lose sight of the "special circumstances" confronting the nation.

The government has been anything but relaxed about the prospect of an entrenched political opposition in Singapore's political system. After some indecision in the early '80s about the best way of dealing with the evidently growing support in the electorate for the idea of an expanded role for the PAP's opponents, the PAP seems reluctantly resigned to the reality that it will be hard to duplicate the level of electoral support it enjoyed throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s. Attention has now turned to ways and means of conditioning the form that oppositional politics will take in Singapore. From the PAP's experience and perspective, a political system in which conflicts of interest and competing ideas are the essence of political debate and representation seems as alien as unworkable. Goh Chok Tong's instigation of an official national ideology therefore represents the second-generation's particular response to a perceived political problem on which both Lee and his successors are agreed: how to contain the apparent drift towards a less cohesive and a less manageable society. However, the strategy now being adopted by the new leaders is one which even Lee regards as ambitious.

Difficult as the project may be, Goh and his colleagues are now apparently committed to the task of inculcating a national ideology, or what is now being referred to as a set of "shared values", to avoid connotations of "straight-jacketed thinking". A Green Paper on the subject, originally planned for June 1989, is now expected in mid-1990 by which time Brigadier-General Lee's committee will have formulated the final details on the content of these "shared values" and the long-term process through which they will be encouraged. Little change, if any, however, can be expected to the fundamental elements already identified as the four key values. Meanwhile, concrete policies have already begun, with ten primary "seed schools" selected to promote the inculcation of core "Asian" values through a special preparatory programme for the study of Chinese as a First Language (CL1). Begun in July, this programme reaches five-year-olds before the normal primary school starting age of six years.

Whether the push for an official "national ideology" or set of "shared values" can be successfully sustained into the longer term will be instructive. The challenge for the government is to reconcile its stated commitment to increased opportunity for political participation with the perceived need to assert Singapore's cultural distinctiveness. If the latter is seen in practice to place serious constraints on the former, the government might only intensify the pressure for political liberalization.

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89As quoted in "Younger Singaporeans Too Sanguine about Future: PM", Straits Times, 8 June 1989, p. 18.
93"Enrolment for 10 'Seed Schools' Starts in July", Straits Times, 29 June 1989, p. 17.
For the time being, however, the current search for a set of "shared values" serves a very definite ideological function, engendering a sense of collective identity and nationalism which at least temporarily steers attention away from more divisive issues.

**Legislative Amendments: ISA and Privy Council**

If the New Guard's explicit attention to the ideological realm marked a new turn in the PAP's approach to ensuring continuity in Singapore's political life, established and less sophisticated techniques were not sacrificed in the same effort. Rather, through amendments in 1989 to existing legislation, the government reasserted the political pre-eminence of the Singapore state by enhancing the prerogatives of the parliamentary executive in important respects. These initiatives can only be understood, however, with reference to developments in late 1988.

The first of these developments was the outcome of an appeal by then opposition Member of Parliament (MP), J.B. Jayaretnam, to London's Privy Council against a decision by a Singapore Law Society Disciplinary Committee to prevent him from practising law. The Law Society's ruling followed a request by the Attorney-General that Jayaretnam's case be investigated under Section 80 of the Legal Professions Act, which details the grounds for striking a lawyer off the rolls. The Workers' Party MP had been found guilty of four offences relating to his party's financial affairs, resulting in a one-month prison sentence and fines totalling $S$5,000. The latter automatically disqualified Jayaretnam for five years from membership of Parliament. However, Jayaretnam's appeal to the Privy Council against debarment was successful. The Law Lords questioned the logic of the decisions arrived at as well as procedural aspects relating to Jayaretnam's case.

The immediate consequence of the Privy Council's decision was to enable Jayaretnam to resume legal practice. However, if Jayaretnam was wrongly convicted, his disqualification from Parliament and the recent general election were now hot issues, with a presidential pardon seeming to Jayaretnam and his supporters an obligation on the government. From the perspective of the Singapore Government, however, the decision of the Privy Council was less compelling. It stressed that Jayaretnam's appeal was only against his debarment and not against the actual convictions on fraud which led to that debarment; the Privy Council therefore had not overturned the convictions, it had merely commented on them in the course of its decision on debarment. In any case, the Minister for Law, Professor S. Jayakumar, was to later argue that the Privy Council's proceedings did not provide any opportunity for the Singapore Attorney-General, Tan Boon Teik, to put forward vital arguments in support of the prosecution.

The other judicial development in late 1988 to influence the 1989 political agenda was the successful writ of habeas corpus through the Singapore Court of Appeal on 8 December by four ISA detainees. Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin and two other judges released the four on the technical grounds that the government had failed to satisfy the President that the detentions were necessary. The proof submitted to the President had been signed by the Permanent Secretary of the Home Affairs Ministry instead of the actual minister or Cabinet secretary as required. In any event, minutes after the detainees walked out the gates of the Whitley Road detention centre, new detention orders saw them quickly behind bars. What was most significant about the 8 December judgement, however, was that in the 107-page explanation of the decision the court rejected the idea that the government had the power to simply detain a person under the ISA without any fear of judicial scrutiny:
decision was unacceptable. Firstly, Singapore’s law could be governed by cases decided abroad in countries where conditions are totally different. Secondly, judges would effectively assume responsibility for national security decisions and this would usurp the executive’s power. Thirdly, preventive detention is by its very nature a precautionary measure and the evidence upon which judgements have to be made are therefore not amenable to normal judicial scrutiny.

These two amendments aroused critical comment both inside and outside Singapore. Opposition MPs, Chiam See Tong and Dr Lee Siew Choh, both focused on the question of the separation of powers raised by the ISA amendments. As Chiam saw it, the 8 December decision merely asserted that the government was not above the law and that it does not enjoy arbitrary power in its treatment of individuals. Likewise, Dr Lee saw no usurpation of the executive’s role in the 8 December decision, but only a statement of the courts’ role to ascertain the evidence for detention, which was a necessary safeguard against abuse of executive power. According to Dr Lee, that abuse is indeed established practice and it is this that the government is preserving through the amendments. In a dramatic expression of the same point, Chiam offered to go guarantor for Chia Thye Poh, who has been under “preventive” detention for twenty-two years, saying that he was prepared to resign his parliamentary seat and refrain from politics if Chia should subsequently participate in any of the violence he is alleged to be committed to. In short, the amendments, they argued, would continue to ensure that no evidence was required to put people away. The ISA itself was, according to Dr Lee, not necessary in Singapore and PAP talk of internal security threats disguised ulterior motives.

The question of safeguards against abuse of executive power was also taken up by PAP back-bencher K. Shanmugam. He suggested the provision for a residual judicial right to review the minister’s decision when the court is convinced that the decision is totally unreasonable. However, Goh Chok Tong insisted that security matters were inherently political and would have to be confined to the political arena. The best safeguard against abuse, he argued, was by ensuring that Singapore continues to be governed by “men of absolute integrity and judgement in politics”. This did not rule out the possibility of a political body of review, but it did exclude the judiciary. Moreover, Goh emphasized that he could not conceive of Singapore being governed without the ISA. Again, continuity in politics was underlined, characterized in this case by the sense of vulnerability to crisis and the need to trust the PAP in its strategy to deal with it.

In the debate over the propriety or otherwise of reducing the scope for appeal to the Privy Council, the point was made by journalist Cheng Shoong Tat in an article in the Straits Times that through unambiguously worded legislation it is possible to address the government’s fears of externally derived standards being brought to bear on Singapore. Indeed, Cheng argued, the experience of the Privy Council’s interpretation of Singapore’s Misuse of Drugs Act and various other legislation

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39Parliamentary Debates Singapore Official Report 52, no. 7 (25 January 1989), column 487. On 17 May, Chia was actually released from prison on the condition that he remains confined to Sentosa Island, a tourist resort, and that he does not address public meetings, join a political party, or associate with anyone who has been detained under the ISA. Significantly, Chia’s “release” did not involve him submitting a denunciation of the use of violence or an admission of links with the Communist Party of Malaysia. Chia has consistently maintained that both charges were without foundation and therefore required no public denunciation or admission. See N. Balakrishnan, “The Last Resort”, Far Eastern Economic Review, 1 June 1989, p. 25.

All power has legal limits and the rule of law demands that the courts should be able to examine the exercise of discretionary power. . . In our view the notion of subjective or unfettered discretion is contrary to the rule of law.\textsuperscript{39}

This view was arrived at after extensive discussions of preventive detention legislation and practice in various other countries and clearly challenged the 1969 precedent in the case of Karam Singh in the Federal Court of Malaysia which had subsequently guided Singapore courts. The 1969 case determined that ISA cases were not justiciable and therefore outside the purview of the courts except with regard to procedural matters.

The landmark decision on 8 December following upon the decision of the Privy Council in October was of great concern to the Singapore Government, opening up the possibility of challenges to its exercise of the extraordinary powers afforded it under the ISA. Through amendments in 1989 to the Constitution, the ISA, the Legal Profession Act, and the Judicial Committee Act, the PAP’s leaders acted decisively to nip this threat in the bud.

The first of the above amendments to become law in 1989 was the abolition of appeals to the Privy Council over the exercise of the ISA. Professor Jayakumar argued the need for the change on two grounds. Firstly, deference to the Privy Council was a hangover from colonialism. As an independent country, Singapore should not surrender its responsibility in security matters. Apart from Brunei, Singapore was the only Asian country which had retained the Privy Council link. Secondly, and this supposedly explained the timing of the move, the government had become increasingly concerned with what it saw as the interventionist trend of U.K. courts in reviewing the actions of the U.K. executive, notably in areas of national security such as had happened in the SyclerView case. Singapore’s courts would therefore have to retain the final say. As Professor Jayakumar explained, “This is because the political, social and economic circumstances of a country are crucial factors in interpreting and applying such law by the judges of that country.”\textsuperscript{40} Again, Singapore’s “different” circumstances meant that the standards of other countries could not readily be applied to it.

A subsequent and complementary bill, the Judicial Committee (Amendment) Bill, further restricted access to the Privy Council. With the passing of the Bill, appeals in civil cases to the Council were disallowed except where the parties involved agreed at the outset, and in writing, that they would be prepared to accept such an appeal, or in criminal cases involving the death penalty. The retention of limited access to the Privy Council was, as explained by Professor Jayakumar, to ensure that foreign investors have confidence of adequate protection.\textsuperscript{41} Amendments to the ISA in early 1989 addressed the government’s related concern for the autonomy of the parliamentary executive in what that executive deemed to be matters of national security. More precisely, the legislative changes, following the 8 December decision, reinstated the legitimacy of the “subjective test” and the notion that the executive’s judgements over the use of ISA are above the scrutiny of the courts.

In Parliament, Professor Jayakumar cited three reasons why the 8 December
brought before it demonstrates the Council’s track record of sensitivity to and respect for principles of law above interpretation of legislation.\textsuperscript{33}

Unavoidably, the debate over the ISA amendments guaranteed that the plight of existing detainees allegedly connected with a Marxist conspiracy to overthrow the government would remain in the spotlight. Two of these, Kenneth Tsang Chi Seng and Chew Kheng Chuan, were released in February “as they had responded positively to rehabilitation”.\textsuperscript{34} A further three detainees, Chng Suan Tze, Kevin de Souza, and Wong Souk Yee, were released the following month after they dropped legal challenges to their detentions. However, the remaining detainee cases, Vincent Cheng and Teo Soh Lung, carried the controversy one stage further. Both detainees issued writs of habeas corpus challenging their detentions, testing the government’s latest amendments. Teo received a set-back, however, when her counsel, renowned British human rights lawyer, Anthony Lester QC, was barred by the government from practising in Singapore for allegedly interfering in domestic politics by championing his client’s case abroad.\textsuperscript{35} The charges were subsequently denied by the British Foreign Office, a spokesperson for which remarked that his “expulsion from the courts in Singapore is bound to cause widespread dismay going beyond [Britain]”.\textsuperscript{36} Another distinguished London Queen’s Counsel, Lord Alexander, subsequently took up Teo’s case before the Court of Appeal in mid-November. He argued that Teo’s re-arrest in April 1988 was brought about by her public protestations of innocence and claims of ill-treatment in prison and that the government had produced no evidence that his client posed a security threat. At the end of the four-day hearing, though, the court reserved its judgement and, at the time of writing, had not declared its finding.\textsuperscript{37}

Cheng’s case in September, however, provided an earlier test for the government’s amendments. Michael Beloff QC pushed the argument that there were limits to the laws Parliament could pass and that the latest amendments exceeded them. Cheng, he argued, has merely been “practising and propagating the precepts of his Catholic faith” as allowed under the Constitution.\textsuperscript{38} However, this was successfully countered by Senior State Counsel S. Tiwari.

Whilst the above-discussed amendments were intended to consolidate and place beyond question the parliamentary executive’s prerogatives in the definition and treatment of national security issues, the amendments to the Legal Profession Act were more specifically intended to avoid a repeat of the Jeyaretnam case. New procedures for handling disciplinary matters discount appeal to the Privy Council and the possibility of investigating the validity of a lawyer’s convictions when deciding on disciplinary action. Debarment now becomes a matter for a three-judge court, the Chief Justice and two others, and a new Academy of Law has been entrusted with the


\textsuperscript{34}As quoted in “Two Marxist Conspiracy Detainees Gain Early Freedom”, \textit{Straits Times} (Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 25 February 1989, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{35}See “Govt Bars QC Lester from Working in Singapore”, \textit{Straits Times} (Singapore) weekly overseas edition, 11 March 1989, pp. 1 and 8; “We Don’t Want a Tussel over Lester, but . . . ,” \textit{Straits Times} (Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 25 March 1989, p. 11.


\textsuperscript{37}Sumiko Tan, “Court Reserves Judgement at End of 4-Day Hearing”, \textit{Straits Times}, 17 November 1989, p. 23.

\textsuperscript{38}As quoted in “Cheng Not Involved in Red Plot: QC”, \textit{Straits Times} (Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 16 September 1989, p. 7.
task of ejecting “errant” lawyers. This new academy can also refer suggestions to the Law Society and the Board of Legal Education and have the power to appoint “Senior Counsels”, a new category of lawyers modelled on Britain’s Queen’s Counsel. The governing body, the Senate, is comprised of a Chief Justice, Supreme Court judges, judicial commissioners, the Attorney-General, the president of the Law Society, and the dean of the National University of Singapore Law Faculty. Apart from the Law Society president, all of these are government appointees. This has prompted concern from Singapore’s Law Society, which pointed out that the London Inns of Court, to which Law Minister S. Jayakumar likened the new academy, has elected members on its governing body. The Law Society is also concerned that the academy’s disciplinary powers are vague and have the potential to usurp many of the existing disciplinary functions of the society. A meeting of 325 members voted unanimously to retain the right to appeal to the Privy Council over disciplinary action, apparently indicating strong support for safeguards against abuses of disciplinary powers.

In recent times the Law Society, and some of its individual members in particular, have caused the government considerable irritation. Public criticisms by the Law Society in 1986 of government legislation to curb the activities of the press in Singapore earned it a strong official rebuke for supposedly “interfering in politics”. The then president of the Society, Francis Seow, subsequently became the subject of close government attention: Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stating that Seow was unfit to hold such office since he had twice been suspended from practising law. Legislation was then introduced which barred anyone from holding office in the Society who had been suspended from practising for a minimum of six months, forcing Seow’s removal. However, Seow’s spirited criticisms of the government as an opposition candidate for the Workers’ Party in the 1988 general election probably served to heighten the government’s concern that the Society harboured and fostered aspiring politicians. The detention under the ISA of two elected members of the Council of the Law Society, Teo Soh Lung and Patrick Seong, in the wake of the alleged Marxist conspiracy, is also likely to have assumed special significance in government eyes.

While the government’s latest reforms will make it impossible for a repeat of Jayaretnam’s successful appeal, it appears that the effects of that decision have been significantly contained within Singapore. A presidential pardon has been rejected on the grounds that Jayaretnam had not shown sufficient “remorse, contrition or repentance” for his “offences”. Instead, the official statement pointed out that “The President has taken note of several strong public statements you have made about your rights.” Jayaretnam also failed in his subsequent attempt to have the High Court declare that, in view of the Privy Council judgement, he should never have been disqualified from Parliament in 1986 and, therefore, continued to be the MP for Anson and was eligible to contest any parliamentary election. He has indicated that he will appeal against Judicial Commissioner Chao Hick Tin’s decision.

Whilst Jayaretnam’s case may appear to have reached the end of the road in Singapore, it was to inspire yet another controversy between the Singapore Government and the foreign press in 1989. Columnist for The Times (London), Bernard Levin, in an article on 19 June entitled “The Law Grossly Misused”, argued

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that Jeyaretnam had been hounded by Lee Kuan Yew through the Singapore legal system principally because of the Prime Minister’s intolerance of political opposition. He described Jeyaretnam as “manifestly a man of scrupulous integrity — professionally, personally and politically”.[41] Following this, Singapore’s High Commissioner in London, Abdul Aziz bin Mahmood, submitted a letter of reply which was subsequently published in abbreviated form. Subsequent attempts by Aziz to have the full text published as an advertisement were also unsuccessful. In response, the High Commission published advertisements in August in Britain’s Financial Times and the Guardian, as well as Singapore’s Straits Times, which told readers about The Times’ refusal to publish part of the government’s reply.

The case did not finish there. The day after the High Commission’s advertisements, Levin wrote another article in The Times, “A Lively Trade in Vilification”, recounting how Prime Minister “Lee has filled the judicial Bench with his placemen” and insisting that the offer by the Singapore High Commission of immunity, whilst it might have protected the paper from financial loss, would not have made complicity in defamation any more principled. Levin also took the opportunity to charge that the Straits Times is probably the most un independent newspaper outside Rumania . . . too willing to damage Lee’s opponents. . . .”[42] Attempts by Aziz to respond to these claims in letter form were subsequently rejected by The Times on the basis that Aziz’s advertisements in other newspapers were in bad faith, having failed to point out that any cuts in the original letter by Aziz were negotiated. Meanwhile, Jeyaretnam has filed libel suits against Aziz, the Singapore Government, and the Straits Times.

**Foreign Press and the Role of Religion**

The conflict with The Times, though but one in a sequence of disputes with the foreign press lately, had a different slant to it in that Levin’s article was for external and not internal consumption. It could not, thereby, so easily fit the government’s notion of “interfering in domestic politics”, as it had charged international press operators in Singapore with. Nevertheless, the year was not without event on this latter question either. The Asian Wall Street Journal challenged the restriction on its circulation resulting from 1987 convictions under the controversial aspect of the Newspaper and Printing and Presses Act but had its case dismissed by the Court of Appeal. A subsequent attempt to have the case heard by the Privy Council faltered in view of the recent amendments to the Judicial Committee Act described above.[43] However, by far the most dramatic episode in the continuing saga during 1989 was the libel case brought by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew against the Far Eastern Economic Review for its reporting of events in late 1987. The October court case had Lee cross-examined in the witness box for four days and both the defence and prosecution lawyers constructing arguments with the aid of Internal Security Department (ISD) notes which had not hitherto been publicly revealed. Though the case centred around the reporting of a meeting between Lee Kuan Yew and Catholic Church officials at the Istana in the wake of the ISD’s detention of sixteen social workers between May and June 1987, including six lay workers belonging to the Catholic Church, the logic behind the arrests themselves, Lee’s more general understanding on Church-state

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[41] Ibid.


boundaries, and his views on the New Guard’s handling of recent events, were all to feature prominently in what transpired.

The Prime Minister’s case against the Review concerned two passages in an account in the 17 December 1987 edition which, Lee’s counsel maintained, portrayed him as intolerant of the Catholic Church, opposed to freedom of religious belief, intent on victimizing Catholics, and of having tricked a reluctant Archbishop Yong into making a press statement to the effect that the Archbishop was satisfied that the government’s case against individual members of the Church was not one against the Church at large.

The Review’s counsel argued that Lee had evidently attached “unnatural, extraordinary” meanings to the phrases contained in the passages and that to suggest that Lee had targeted priests engaged in social work not approved by the government could not reasonably be interpreted as intolerance of the Church or religious belief.44 As for the alleged portrayal of deception, the Review’s defence maintained that, in the offending passage, the reported view of Father Joachim Kang that Yong had been “cornered” was not only presented as Kang’s opinion, but, moreover, would be understood by any reasonable reader to be a reference only to the fact that Yong had just twenty minutes notice of a press conference intended to receive a statement from the Church about the significance of ISA arrests for Church-government relations.

During the course of the case it became clear that the Prime Minister certainly did have deep concerns about certain activities by Catholic Church members in Singapore and the political implications such activities were seen to contain. ISD notes recorded that Lee had remarked to Yong and his colleagues that he was not particularly worried about the sixteen detainees: “they were novices just starting to do mischief”, whom he would have to deal with “in a way that would make it less likely for others to follow in their wake”.45 He was reportedly more concerned with the ongoing question of “do-gooders who wanted to help the poor and dispossessed, getting perverted along the way to Marxism”.46 This was what Lee understood had happened in the Philippines where liberation theology had been influential, something not to be repeated in Singapore. Lee indicated to the delegation that he was deeply suspicious of the Church’s statements on peace and justice and associated these with the united front tactics of communists, accusing Father Edgar D’Souza of being a “skillful united front operator”.47

Lee’s remarks about the Church and his tendency to link its members’ interest in issues of social, political, and economic justice with subversive activity prompted defence lawyer Geoffrey Robertson QC to observe that Lee was “a prisoner of his own remarkable past”, through which he appears to interpret all present events. According to Robertson, Lee was “obsessed with liberation theology, the Philippine revolution, and the communist united front tactics of the 1950s and 1960s” and saw “things through spectacles he wore in the 1950s to see united front tactics in the Church’s joint statement and the language of religion”.48

46Ibid., p. 16.
48Ibid.
In Justice L.P. Thean's 114-page judgement he ruled in favour of the Prime Minister, awarding "aggravated" damages of $230,000, plus interest and costs. According to Justice Thean, the Review article contained defamatory imputations which tended "to bring the plaintiff into public odium and contempt and lower him in the estimation of right-thinking people in Singapore". Moreover, Justice Thean maintained that the Review's lawyer, Geoffrey Robertson, had "exacerbated the hurt" to Lee with his "offensive" line of cross-examination. However, the saga will roll on a bit further yet. Not only will the Review be appealing against the decision, the Attorney-General, Tan Boon Teik, has brought a contempt of court action against the Asian Wall Street Journal in relation to an article it published on 1 December about Justice Thean's decision against the Review. Tan contends that the Journal's article contains comments that "would inevitably lead citizens and others who have recourse to our courts to question the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary in Singapore".

Lee's views recorded in the ISD notes are consistent with subsequent expressions of concern within government about Christianity in general and fundamentalism in particular and its growing influence within Singapore. The President's address in Parliament last January acknowledged the contribution religious organizations have made through educational, social, and charitable work but warned such organizations not to "stray beyond these bounds, for example, by venturing into radical social action. Religion must be kept rigorously separate from politics." The Report on Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore, commissioned by the Ministry of Community Development and released in late February, not only documented the dramatic recent increase in the growth of Christianity in Singapore, especially in Protestant evangelical charismatic Faiths, but drew attention to the appearance of a link between socio-economic status and English education and receptivity to Christianity. The Report expressed a fear that, allowed to develop, Singapore could be faced with a situation where "religious conflicts become intertwined with social class conflicts". Moreover, the Report recognized the implications of this for public administration should "persons in positions of authority, such as MPs, civil servants, and teachers, confuse their public with their religious roles". In particular, there was concern that religion-inspired conceptions of social justice might begin to influence public policy. The growing number of ruling party members won over to Christianity makes this concern one for the intermediate rather than just long-term future.

To underline the government's insistence that religion and politics be confined to distinct domains, Home Affairs Minister S. Jayakumar announced in October that legislation is being prepared to deal with individuals or groups failing to respect the distinction. Meanwhile, after introducing compulsory religious education in 1982

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41Ibid., p. 24.
45Ibid.
46"Bill Soon to Keep Religion and Politics Separate", Straits Times (Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 7 October 1989, p. 16.
into Singapore’s schools, the government has also declared that this will now be phased out and replaced with a civics course which may incorporate the teaching of some Confucian values. Quite clearly, the present trend towards Christianity amongst English-educated Chinese runs counter to the aim of the new national ideology to consolidate “Asian”, notably Confucian, values. Ironically, the compulsory religious studies programme had been expected to foster greater interest in Confucianism.

The spread within Singapore of Christianity, especially of fundamentalism, begs explanation. The authors of the government Report maintain that Chinese Singaporeans, who constitute the bulk of converts, are dissatisfied with their traditional religions which are now seen as “illogical, unrealistic and superstitious”. Christianity, by contrast, is seen as rational and systematic, a view encouraged by the dominance of English instruction. The concept of “anomic”, a feeling of social dislocation or alienation, was not considered helpful in explaining the increased conversions. However, as Haas recently observed, Lee Kuan Yew’s observations in his 1987 National Day address in which he spoke about the need “to give more attention to socio-psychological and spiritual needs” appeared not unrelated to his concern that rapid economic and social change in the other newly industrializing countries had also been associated with a substantial growth in conversion to Christianity.

Whilst Lee has made it clear in his recent testimony that he considers the merging of politics and religion a particularly potent threat to Singapore’s political stability, he and his government have consistently maintained that the appropriate place for political discourse is through the formal party system. The Law Society and student unions have both incurred the government’s wrath in recent times for not observing this. The concern with the spread of religion should therefore principally be understood as a reiteration of the government’s view that political parties and not interest groups are the only legitimate conduit of political expression. Interest groups, at least in Lee’s mind, have the potential to provide ideal cover for united front activity and should, therefore, be nipped in the bud.

Another theme to Lee’s testimony was his emphasis on the younger generation of leaders as being principally in charge of affairs at the time of the controversial events of 1987. His intervention into the ISA and related matters, he maintained, stemmed from First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s absence from Singapore. From his testimony it would appear, however, Lee also had a particular interest in the changing role of the church which he possibly thought some of his younger, and especially Christian, colleagues might not be as well placed to appreciate. What was of special significance, though, was his view that Singapore’s younger leaders were likely to show less tolerance of the foreign press than leaders of his generation. If that is the case, it is hard to imagine an end to the consuming battles that guarantee global focus on Singapore’s domestic affairs. Certainly the new leaders appear no less anxious than Lee and his former colleagues to restrict debate of government policy to Parliament and formal political parties. They seem to have inherited from their predecessors a strong suspicion of social and political comment from individuals and organizations outside these limits.

Emigration

Simultaneous with a surge in religious conversions in recent years, Singapore has also experienced a strong increase in emigration, of mainly English-educated Chinese professionals. In Lee Kuan Yew's National Day Rally speech in August, it was revealed that 4,707 families migrated in 1988, the great majority of which had moved to Australia and Canada. This was double the figure for the rest of the 1980s. Concern was expressed that the exodus represented a threat to Singapore's continued economic growth, with many of the country's most skilled workers lost to it. The reasoning behind the outflow naturally preoccupied the government. With Singapore forging ahead economically and political stability assured for the foreseeable future, why the exodus? Lee's emotional National Day speech indicated that he was both confounded and bitterly disappointed by the trend.

Reflecting on the possible reasons for the flourishing emigration, and assuming that material advancement was the greatest attraction, the Prime Minister condemned such shallow motives: "You need passion to build a nation. If you just do your sums, plus, minus, credit, debit — you are a washout." However, in lamenting the apparent absence of emotive commitment to the nation-state, Lee admitted that greater research and analysis was required to comprehend the problem. No doubt, the reasons for emigration are many and varied, material considerations simply being the least sensitive for the government to publicly discuss. There is also a touch of irony in Lee lamenting a pragmatic or utilitarian mentality in Singaporeans since this has been actively cultivated by his own regime, in lieu of "Western"-style democracy, for nearly three decades. There are, of course, a number of non-material gripes held by disgruntled Singaporeans which might loosely be categorized quality-of-life considerations. The exact weight of these is unclear in the absence of detailed research. However, one reason commonly cited by emigrants for departing is the desire to spare their children the intense competitiveness of Singapore's education system. This system, and the associated rigid credentialism and elitism of Singapore, is seen by the government as integral to the economic progress of the city-state. There is also speculation that the government's constant emphasis on Singapore's strategic vulnerability may have engendered deep insecurity about the longer term, a point publicly conceded by Goh Chok Tong. Others, notably Dr Lee Siew Choh of the Workers' Party, maintain that the political climate in Singapore, characterized by excessive government regulation and intimidation of critical opinion, is the most important factor behind rising emigration amongst professional groups. Whatever the case, Goh Chok Tong appears to have given recognition to some of the above concerns when he talked about the need for a "qualitative transformation" in which "prospects for advancement and lifestyle" are available to graduates and non-graduates alike; a society in which everyone feels he or she has a place. Whether this can be achieved without some alteration to the basic values and political structures Goh and his colleagues are committed to consolidating is problematic. In the mean time, various articles have appeared in the Straits Times which emphasize the negative side of life abroad for emigrants, with special focus on racism in Australia and Britain.\footnote{As quoted in Simon Elegant, "Singapore's Emigration Rate Stirs Debate", Asian Wall Street Journal, 9 October 1989, p. 1.}

\footnote{"We Can Build a Singapore That We Want", Straits Times (Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 7 October 1980, p. 24.}

\footnote{See, for example, Alan Hubbard, "Britons Want Govt to Pay Immigrants to Go Home", Straits Times (Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 9 September 1989, p. 5; Nicholas Way, "Just How Deep-Rooted Is Anti-Asian Feeling in Australia?" Straits Times
Coupled with a significant fall in birth rates, the recent brain-drain trend led Singapore's immigration officials in July to target Hong Kong's nervous population in the wake of the Beijing government's repression of demonstrators. Under a new scheme, places are available for 25,000 Hong Kong families, an estimated 100,000 people, through which permanent residence can be taken up at any time over the next five, or possibly even ten, years. To the surprise of the government, initial public reaction within Singapore was very negative, prompting Lee Kuan Yew to devote part of his National Day message to these reservations. PAP feedback had discovered fears that Hong Kong Chinese would constitute formidable competition in business and employment owing to their extreme diligence and resourcefulness. However, fear of competition was not an option for an open economy like Singapore's, Lee argued, and, in any case, the skills of these people were desperately needed to compensate for existing and projected labour shortfalls. As for suspicions by Singapore's minority races that the possible influx is designed to shore up Chinese dominance, given that 78 per cent of all 1988 emigrants were Chinese, the Prime Minister undertook to ensure that the present multiracial balance would be maintained. However, Mohammed Jufrie of the Social Democratic Party maintained that there was nothing immutable about the current racial proportions and argued that a decline in the proportion of Chinese might actually enhance Singapore's multiracial society. In any case, the likelihood that Singaporean officials will net the quantity of Hong Kong immigrants it has targeted appears slim. By early September, only 4,000 of the 350,000 application forms distributed in Hong Kong had been returned. Moreover, in the past four years only 35 of the 1,000 Hong Kong citizens who have been granted permanent residence have actually moved to Singapore. Like Singapore's emigrants, they too seem more attracted to the West. In recognition of the difficulty ahead, a high-level ministerial committee headed by Brigadier-General Yeo has been established, with the dual tasks of examining ways of making Singapore an attractive place for foreign talent to settle and for existing nationals to identify with more strongly.

International Relations
Singapore's international relations in 1989 were dominated by two issues, both with a regional focus. In the first half of the year, stern measures by Singapore's authorities to deal with illegal immigrants, notably Thai guest workers, threatened to sour relations with Thailand. A wider controversy was subsequently initiated when Lee Kuan Yew offered Singapore as a host for U.S. military facilities in the climate of uncertainty about the future role of U.S. bases in the Philippines. Both incidents served as reminders to Singapore's policy-makers that its economic pre-eminence

(Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 9 September 1989, p. 11; Yeo Toon Joo, "It's Tough to Be an Immigrant in a Minority Community", Straits Times (Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 30 September 1989, p. 13.


37PM: Why We Must Continually Attract Talented and Dynamic People to Join Us in Singapore", Straits Times (Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 12 August 1989, p. 4.


39Ibid.


within ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) bestows on it no special diplomatic status within the bloc.

Singapore's heavy reliance on imported labour, and the government's determination to overcome it, is of course not new. After all, the complex of policies comprising the drive for the so-called "Second Industrial Revolution" initiated in 1979 was premised on the notion that continued foreign labour dependence was economically, socially, and politically unsustainable in the longer term. However, throughout 1988 foreign workers flowed in to Singapore at a rate of 2,000-3,000 per month, with an estimated half of all jobs in the manufacturing sector going to non-Singaporeans. The 150,000 imported workers made up about one-quarter of the manufacturing sector's total work-force. 68 Without doubt, the flood of foreign workers had contributed greatly to the strong recovery of Singapore from the mid-1980s recession, but with projections of moderation in the economic recovery for 1989 the government evidently felt the time was ripe for a renewed drive to contain the influx. Hence, in late 1988 a new S$60 million incentive package was introduced to assist employers to automate production and the levies imposed on employers for imported labour were increased from S$170 for manufacturing and S$200 for construction to a flat S$220 per month as from January 1989. The maximum dependency ratio on foreign workers by a firm was also reduced from 50 to 40 per cent.

Against this background, in early 1989 attention focused on illegal immigrants and overstayers who not only avoided the imposition of the foreign worker levy on the employer, but who, in many cases, incurred costs on the government purse. Senior Minister of State (Home Affairs), Dr Lee Boon Yang, informed Parliament in January that 1,014 imprisoned overstayers and illegal immigrants currently constituted 17 per cent of the total prison population and, projecting this to a yearly figure, represented a cost of S$9.4 million. 69 The greater fear expressed by Dr Lee, however, was that these people "may attempt to sink roots here, with even more serious long-term consequences to the society." 70 The problem, however, was seen to be partly the result of unscrupulous employers trying to circumvent worker levies and other regulations. Dr Lee thus introduced amendments to the Immigration Act in January intended to stiffen the already severe penalties for overstayers and illegal workers and to make employers engaging these workers directly answerable. Under the new legislation, a mandatory three months' imprisonment and three strokes of the rattan was to apply to any foreigner entering Singapore illegally or overstaying in excess of 90 days. Moreover, employers would be presumed to have knowingly employed illegal immigrants found on their premises and liable to prosecution. The legislation was further amended in August to dispense with this presumption for cases where five or more illegal workers were involved, whereupon employers too would be liable for a mandatory three strokes of the cane.

Parliamentary debate over the initial amendments to the Act evidenced widespread reservation within the government's back-bench over the provision for mandatory caning, some pleading for at least discretionary power for the courts. This stance earned the MPs a stinging rebuke from retired former Senior Minister S. Rajaratnam who saw such questioning as divisive and confusing to the electorate. Instead of

70 Ibid., column 595.
criticising government policy, the role of back-bench MPs, argued Rajaratnam, was to rally support for such hard-line policies. Goh Chok Tong was to later categorize this policy as but one of a recent series of politically unpopular but necessary actions which essentially involved “managing the problems of success”. Economic success, it seemed, in no way erased the need for tough government.

The diplomatic significance of the government's amendments, which were to come into effect from 31 March, stemmed from the substantial number of Thai workers comprising the illegals and overstayers. The legislation was roundly condemned in Thailand where corporal punishment does not exist and there was genuine difficulty in sharing the Singapore Government's view on the seriousness of the crime. Thai officials also argued that in many cases the workers themselves had been conned by unscrupulous employment agents in both countries and had been unaware that their entry was illegal. Moreover, it appeared to the Thai Government that the new measures were quite mercenary since the illegal workers issue was conveniently overlooked earlier when the Singapore Government placed a premium on the completion of certain big construction projects. The depth of Thai concern resulted in the Singapore Government offering an amnesty to all illegal workers and overstayers leaving Singapore by 31 March, with the Thai Government sending four naval ships, two trains, and two air force transports to assist with transportation of approximately 10,000 people. However, when illegal immigrant Somkid Kamjan became the first Thai to be sentenced to caning and jail following his failure to take advantage of the amnesty, there was outrage from Thai labour unions, government officials, and the daily press. The Thai Daily News referred to Singapore's use of the cane as "barbarous, despicable, cruel and inhumane", colourful and emotive but also representative of the ill-feeling aroused by the incident. This led to the Singapore Government offering yet another amnesty on 18 July, overstayers and illegals having three weeks to give themselves up and be repatriated. This offer, coupled with an agreement to have as many as 8,000 Thai workers legally returned to Singapore, and for Thai authorities to take steps to punish Thais responsible for smuggling workers illegally into Singapore, largely defused the issue in diplomatic terms.

Further controversy surfaced in August when the Minister of State for Finance and Foreign Affairs, Brigadier-General George Yeo, announced in Parliament that the Singapore Government had offered to host some U.S. military facilities. The offer was explained as a way of easing the burden on the Philippines, thereby making it easier for it to decide to continue to host existing U.S. bases, the Clark Air Force Base and the Subic Naval Base, for which existing agreements expire in 1991. It was revealed that the U.S. Government had sent a survey team to Singapore in June to examine naval and air facilities in the light of the offer but that a final decision on the offer was yet to be made. In Yeo's announcement, he emphasized Singapore's strong support for U.S. bases in the Philippines, arguing that although Singapore shared the ASEAN vision of the region as a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPPAN) — a vision given formal expression through a joint ASEAN agreement in 1971 — in the mean time a continued U.S. presence in Southeast Asia was desirable.

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Reaction within ASEAN to Singapore's offer was mixed, but certainly there was consternation and concern in some quarters. In particular, the reaction from Malaysia was negative, the prevailing view being that any new U.S. base would threaten rather than enhance stability by placing pressure on the Soviet Union to expand its presence in the region. Moreover, Malaysians had great difficulty reconciling Singapore's offer with its membership of ZOPFAN. More fundamentally, however, any new U.S. presence in Singapore necessarily had implications for Malaysia's air space and sea lanes, so the question of Malaysia's national sovereignty was also an issue. Prime Minister Mahathir made his position clear: "We would not like to see squadrons of American planes being based in Singapore or the American navy converting part of Singapore into a naval base."

Though official government statements on the prospects of U.S. bases in Singapore were measured and unemotive, the broader Malaysian response was more vociferous. The local press carried highly critical articles accusing Singapore of breaching ASEAN solidarity by taking unilateral decisions which clearly affect all member countries, condemning what was seen as a violation of ZOPFAN and emphasizing the threat the offer posed for current initiatives to reduce the global arsenal. Whilst each of these points warranted consideration, the authenticity of ASEAN's assertion of neutrality notwithstanding, there was an underlying suspicion of Singapore's motives which lay at the heart of the controversy. Clearly, some were not convinced that the Singapore offer was first and foremost an attempt to aid a decision on the bases in the Philippines; instead, they wondered if the real design was to enhance Singapore's military status and alter the regional balance of power. Malaysia's Information Minister and UMNO Secretary-General, Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, argued that the presence of U.S. forces in Singapore would make it a "superpower base". UMNO Vice-President, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was even more forthright in his depiction of Singapore's action as aggressively directed at Malaysia: "You are telling us: What you see is this sea of hostile Malays surrounding you and you are saying: 'Hey, don't meddle with us, we have the Americans behind us.'" UMNO Youth was particularly vocal in its denunciation of the Singapore offer, sending a delegation of protest to the Singapore High Commission in Kuala Lumpur. Opposition within Malaysia was sufficiently irritating for sections of the PAP to result in the formation of the PAP City North Action Group, which comprised representatives of twelve constituencies, to "counter developments adversely affecting Singapore's independence and sovereignty and to defend it against external interference and coercion."

By contrast with Malaysia, the Thai reaction to Singapore's offer was positive. Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila expressed the view that U.S. use of bases in Singapore

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As quoted in "A New Bases Debate", AsiaWeek, 1 September 1989, p. 21.


As quoted in "We See Bases Offer as Directed as a Deterrence Against Us", Straits Times (Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 2 September 1989, p. 2.

As quoted from Tan Tarn How, "PAP Activists Form Group to Counter External Interference", Straits Times (Singapore), weekly overseas edition, 10 August 1989, p. 2.
would promote regional security and ease pressures for more substantial ASEAN defence expenditure. Furthermore, he rejected the argument that Singapore's offer should have been referred to a regional forum, insisting that the matter was a bilateral one in which Singapore duly exercised its sovereign rights. Thailand's National Security Council chief, Suvit Suthanukul, also emphasized the necessity of U.S. bases in the Philippines to regional security and welcomed Singapore's attempt to ease political tensions in the Philippines hampering a renewal of the existing agreements.80

Though less alarmed than the Malaysians, Indonesian officials were clearly concerned about the Singapore offer. President Soeharto indicated to Prime Minister Lee that so long as Singapore's offer was restricted to a maintenance function he had no objection. However, he is also reported to have remarked that "if it goes beyond maintenance, this will be dangerous as it will attract outside powers into the region",81 clearly reflecting similar concerns to those of the Malaysians. Whilst not questioning Singapore's sovereign rights on the bases issue, Indonesia's former foreign minister, Dr Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, raised the complex but related question of the possibility of some sort of military co-operation among ASEAN members in future.82 The issue was not taken up as enthusiastically outside Indonesia, the Malaysian and Singaporean Governments probably happier for the time being that their membership of the Five-Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) is a safeguard.

As things evolved, Singapore's neighbours were to find no major difficulty in the outcome of the bases offer. It was revealed in October that the nature and scale of proposed U.S. military co-operation was modest. There would be no new bases. Instead, facilities on a military base that is being vacated by New Zealand would be used by the Americans to position aircraft, make ship calls, and undertake some repair work.83 There would be, therefore, no troops or a significant buildup of U.S. strategic capacity. However, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, obviously reflecting on the behind-the-scenes discussions which kept differences with Malaysia and Indonesia manageable, underlined the value of long-standing personal links with Dr Mahathir and Mr Soeharto. Lee is apparently concerned that the shared experiences of the 1970s between himself and Dr Mahathir, which have facilitated an understanding if not unanimity between Singaporeans and Malaysians of that generation, cannot be called upon by Goh Chok Tong and his counterparts across the causeway. The exchanges between UMNO Youth and the PAP Action Group would probably have added to this concern. However, as important as personal ties and understandings are in diplomatic relations, these have not in the past prevented sensitivities akin to those recently aroused from surfacing. These sensitivities are rooted in the historical background of the two states, a legacy which will survive well into the future. As the bases affair ultimately demonstrated, the bilateral relationship is now sufficiently mature to accommodate publicly debated differences without lasting repercussions. It is also sufficiently mature as not to depend on personal ties for its consolidation. The
real significance to attach to the bases affair lies in the growing confidence of the Singapore Government to take a lead on important regional issues.

Concluding Remarks
Reflecting on the political developments within Singapore in 1989, there are two points which warrant emphasis. Firstly, it is quite clear that the new leadership is intent on preserving the goals and values which have characterized the PAP for over two decades. There is no vision of major transformation. Secondly, however, it is recognized by the New Guard that this will become an increasingly difficult exercise as social, economic, and cultural changes will place new pressures on existing political structures. The fundamental concern which pervades the PAP is that Singapore should not copy wholesale the liberal democratic models of the West with their institutionalized interest group conflicts and emphasis on individual rights. To avoid this, the PAP is having to show increasing imagination, hence the new campaign for a national ideology. Resigned to the likelihood of a significant political opposition grouping continuing and possibly expanding in Singapore, PAP leaders are exploring how that might be conditioned so that the essence of Singapore’s existing political culture is not undermined. In line with this, a scheme is also currently under consideration to allow for the appointment of up to six nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) for two-year terms. Like the NCMPs, the NMPs would principally be restricted in Parliament to the right to debate, but unlike NCMPs they would not represent a political party and be nominated by a Special Parliamentary Select Committee. The attraction of this reform for the government may be the potential it has, through a process of co-option, to stymie the development of close political connections between sectional interest groups and opposition parties. Possibly this is the area in which we can expect greatest innovation from the new leaders: in the mechanisms for achieving continuity in Singapore’s politics.

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