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# S. Rajaratnam

## The Authorised Biography

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S. Rajaratnam

*The Authorised Biography*  
*Volume Two: The Lion's Roar*

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*To those not yet born  
when these battles were waged*

*and in memory of  
S.R. Nathan and the pioneering foreign service officers  
who braved them all*



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# Foreword

*The Lion's Roar* is the second volume of Irene Ng's biography of Mr S. Rajaratnam, covering his life and work after 1963. Younger Singaporeans would not have known him in person, and may not even have heard of him. But he was an exceptional leader, one of the core group of founding fathers who shared a fierce conviction of what Singapore should be, and defied the odds to build a united, successful and confident nation.

Raja, as his friends called him, played many roles over the course of his extraordinary life. He was a journalist, anti-colonialist, philosopher, wordsmith, and diplomat – often several of these at once. Above all, he was a patriot who worked tirelessly to create a better future for Singaporeans.

He helped define Singapore's foundational ideals and values, framed principles and strategies to secure our place in the world, and fought with courage and conviction to make these words and ideas an enduring reality.

After Singapore merged with the Federation of Malaya, Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah) to form Malaysia, Raja campaigned for a "Malaysian Malaysia". Sadly, this proved incompatible with the race-based politics of the Federation.

After independence, in the aftermath of racial riots and the trauma of Separation, Raja crystallised his vision of a united, multiracial Singapore in the National Pledge.

As labour minister, he played a major role in transforming fractious labour management relations into our unique cooperative model of tripartism, where workers, employers and the government work together to expand the economic pie.

As our first foreign minister, Raja established the fundamental principles of Singapore's foreign policy. He advocated regional interdependence as the way forward for Southeast Asian countries, and negotiated the agreement that created ASEAN. He began Singapore's engagement of China. On his first visit there in 1975, he explained clearly to his hosts how Singapore, with its majority ethnic Chinese but multiracial population, intended to conduct its relations with China, cooperating on the basis of national interests and not ethnic affinity. When Vietnam attacked Cambodia in 1978, he rallied his ASEAN counterparts to oppose the invasion, emphasising the principle enshrined in the United Nations Charter – an existential one for Singapore – that international borders must not be violated.

Raja's responses to these long-term issues have stood the test of time. Dealing with similar issues decades later, I have often found myself following the lines that he laid out so long ago. We still uphold the same principles in our foreign policy. We still adopt a tripartite approach to industrial relations. And we will always strive to be, in the words of the National Pledge, "one united people, regardless of race, language or religion". Therefore, this book does not just recount facts and events from the distant past; it also explains rationales and realities that remain fresh and relevant today.

The book also conveys a vivid feel for Raja the person. I had the privilege of knowing Raja from different perspectives. First, as a boy growing up, I called him "Uncle Raja" – he was my father's genial comrade-in-arms and close friend. Years later when I decided to enter politics, he chaired the committee that interviewed me to be fielded as a PAP candidate. Then when we were colleagues in the Cabinet, he mentored me and the other young ministers, offering sage counsel but leaving us to find our own footing.

In all these different phases, I was always struck by how Raja could stay warm, affable and unflappable, getting along with all sorts of people. Perhaps this explained his remarkable ability to bridge conflicting perspectives and persuade others to his point of view, which won Singapore many friends and diplomatic successes.

Irene has done a service to Singapore with this biography. The fruit of years of thorough, painstaking research and countless interviews, this is a serious yet captivating account of the life of a pivotal character in Singapore's history. *The Lion's Roar* gives an insight into what Raja was like, what he believed in, and what he fought for. May it inspire present and future generations to build on his great legacy for Singapore while creating their own, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity, and progress for our nation.

*Lee Hsien Loong*  
*Prime Minister of Singapore*  
*Singapore, 7 December 2023*



# Preface

When I approached the trustees of S. Rajaratnam's estate in 2004 suggesting an authorised biography of the founding leader, I did not realise that the project would take over my life. Altogether, I have spent close to two decades conducting research for this two-part biography, trying to understand Raja the thinker, the writer, the politician, and the man.

I had known Raja since my days as a journalist, and had interviewed him in the 1980s and 1990s, both at his home and in his office. Writing his biography was the furthest thing from my mind then, but those encounters gave me a sense of the kind of man he was – his thinking, his values, his mannerisms.

By the time I officially started on his biography in January 2005, Raja was already suffering from dementia. With the permission of his trustees, I began to browse his personal library and private papers in his old bungalow in Chancery Lane, a process that continued until some months after his death in February 2006. Other than his vast collection of books, there were boxes upon boxes of unsorted personal papers, files, notebooks and photographs, all gathering dust. From among them I found useful nuggets of information, hitherto never revealed, that I have woven into the narrative of this book.

One of them was a letter that Raja had written from his hospital bed in London to his wife, Piroska Feher, in 1983. I learnt much more about their married life from this single letter than all the other sources and interviews put together.

Yet the more I researched, the more I also found that Raja's life was full of carefully guarded secrets. He was a discreet man, a private man. He did not keep a personal diary with intimate details of his life and career, although he kept copious notebooks on ideas

or quotes he picked up from books and journals, and his thoughts on them.

He was firm about his decision not to write his memoirs. He gave many interviews and made many speeches, but, as a public figure with a deep abiding sense of privacy, he rarely revealed his personal feelings unless probed, and even then, he exhibited his reserve. Friends who had known Raja for years found him enigmatic and not easy to read. Though at the forefront of Singapore politics for decades, he drew no clique or claue around him, and did not try to.

While his many speeches, notes and books tell a great deal about his phenomenally wide-ranging interests, they do not offer much for the biographer looking for personal insights. While he was a very good propagandist for his party and country, he was no self-publicist.

His private papers are void of personal criticisms about his colleagues or juicy insider stories. This might seem unusual for such a prolific writer and storyteller, but Raja was first and foremost a decent and honourable man who practised self-discipline and self-restraint, almost as a religion.

All this made my job of providing a more intimate insight into his personality more challenging, but also more satisfying. The same went for my task of fleshing out Raja's long political career and driving motivations with concrete detail and descriptions. Given that his work was entwined in many areas of government, especially external affairs, I had to grapple with the inevitable political and diplomatic sensitivities involved.

To ensure that this biography would be as authoritative and definitive as possible, I sought the support of former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, then senior minister (SM), for the project at the outset in 2004. I am grateful that SM Lee, who had by then written his own memoirs, gave it, and granted me access to relevant Cabinet and other government papers. This permission continued under his political successors for this second volume.

Mr S.R. Nathan, who was then president of Singapore, facilitated my access to papers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Having once served Raja as MFA's permanent secretary, Mr Nathan needed no convincing that Raja's pioneering work in MFA should be recorded and not lost to future generations. He also happened to be one of the three trustees of Raja's estate, the other two being Professor Tommy Koh and Dr V.K. Pillay.

I was allowed access to records and papers in government archives with the understanding that citations be vetted for national security. I am glad to say that nothing has been redacted from the body of this work in this process. It must also be made clear that no government leader or official tried to exercise any sort of control over my interpretations or conclusions.

This point is important: this biography is official and authorised in the sense that I was given access to government papers and Raja's personal papers, and written with the support of the government, his estate's trustees and his close relatives. This should not be confused with presenting an "official" version of Rajaratnam's life and work. Rather, it is my version as his biographer.

It should be borne in mind that *The Lion's Roar*, volume 2 of S. Rajaratnam's biography, is focused on the story of one man – his character, his life and his legacy. Given his distinctive role as a founding leader of independent Singapore, the People's Action Party (PAP) and MFA, it is inevitable that most of his thoughts and actions were bound up with his country, his political party and the foreign ministry.

That said, this book is not intended as a history of Singapore, nor as an analysis of the PAP or MFA.

To be sure, learning how and why he made some of his most important decisions and policy choices is crucial to understanding Singapore's development, its political culture and its foreign policy principles. Beyond that, there are many lessons that can be drawn from his life and legacy, lessons that hold a deep relevance to the

current age, and lessons that could help a country and its people create their future.



While trying to get to the heart of Raja himself, I gradually realised that, almost without meaning to, I was building up a picture of what it was like to live and work in his time. It was a very different world from that of today, and probably unrecognisable for those in the future. In trying to get his work as well as his character into perspective, it seemed important to try to recreate this picture as faithfully as possible.

After living with the subject of Raja for so long, reading what he wrote, listening to his sound recordings, watching video footage of him and reflecting on his person day after day, I am mindful of the risk that my writing may suffer from unconscious biases. My background as a former member of parliament of the PAP might also predispose some to this view, perhaps even before they read this book. All I can say is that I have done my utmost to be as thorough and accurate as possible, while also empathetic.

Every attempt has been made to ensure that assertions made are supported by available evidence, and to present different views. Sensitive to the nuances of the evidence, I have worried over the drafts and re-written them thousands of times.

I cannot claim to know how it felt to be in Raja's size eight shoes, but to a certain extent, my previous experiences – as a journalist, as an MP (involved in the Government Parliamentary Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defence), as well as a director in the think-tank Singapore Institute of International Affairs, and then of the National Trades Union Congress, and now as a writer-in-residence of ISEAS – were useful to the biographer's task of understanding the background against which he worked, as he straddled the worlds of journalism, party politics, unionism and foreign policy.

Writers of biographies also have to be readers of biographies, and I have read many. The best biographers, it seemed to me, depend on



documents and data to flesh out their chronicles of another's life, but in the end they must rely on the art of storytelling to make history come alive.

And so, I have elected to take a narrative approach in this book. It aims to draw you into Raja's world and to take you back to his key turning points. This involves reconstructing the circumstances in which the political battles were waged, critical decisions were made and actions taken, while preserving the accuracy of historical events.

The narrative is drawn from more than a decade's worth of intensive and in-depth research. It includes interviews; Singapore government papers; parliamentary and official records; archival documents and audio-visual recordings; British, Australian and American records; Raja's private papers; and newspaper reports and photographs.

Besides interviewing more than 200 people, I have supplemented my research with oral history interviews from the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). They have provided me with different perspectives and colourful anecdotes. However, I have found that these varied accounts do not always accord with the facts, nor indeed with each other. After all, many of their recollections are of events that had happened many decades earlier, and therefore susceptible to lapses of memory and to the wisdom of hindsight.

My biggest challenge, therefore, has been to sort through the numerous accounts of events, cross-check with available records, sift through the evidence, and then craft a biography that is both accurate and authoritative. When stuck in a maze of contradictions, I relied on my journalistic compass, asking questions such as: What exactly do we know? How credible is it? What don't we know? How can we fill the gaps and provide a coherent, credible and convincing narrative?

The biographer's trade is never simply about chronicling facts and retelling received versions of events. As every historian knows, even the most data-driven research involves an element of interpretation. But the biographer faces the added challenge of fathoming the motives and emotions of the individuals involved.

There are many personal accounts of Singapore politics and diplomacy in the 1960s to the 1980s: memoirs and essays that offer significant insights into our understanding of the period. This being a biography of Raja, however, my narrative privileges his point of view.

Where disagreements and variances in recollection were integral to the story, I have set out the conflicting versions, hopefully without adding to the confusion. For minor unresolved issues not crucial to the story, I have abided by a guiding principle of good journalism: when in doubt, leave it out.

In describing key events, I took the precaution of not only reading newspaper reports (which can be inaccurate), but also listening to audio recordings of Raja's speeches and checking against his scripts and official records. Given his inimitable rhetorical style, I have tried to convey his worldview in his own authentic voice as far as possible.

It helped, of course, to have a rich resource in his voluminous speeches and writings, which can be found in the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute library and the NAS. Raja's intellectual life was profoundly diverse and closely intertwined with his personal and political life. But one should not rely exclusively on his published works, as they were written with public consumption in mind.

As for his letters and private journals, here too, one must be judicious about their use. After years of research, Raja's handwriting became as familiar to me as my own. From the size and shape of the letters in his copious handwritten notes, I learnt to recognise those written in his later years when he was suffering from dementia, and made judgments on their use accordingly.



After gathering all the material, a major task was to weave his thoughts, ideas and philosophies into the narrative fabric of this book without interrupting the flow. On the narrative structure: it is divided into six

parts – Trauma (1963–65), Beginnings (1965–68), Trials (1968–79), Shocks (1979–83), Transitions (1983–88) and Endings (1988–2006).

While the flow is broadly chronological, in real life, Raja often had to deal with completely disparate matters, all of a sudden and all at the same time. Apparently unrelated incidents could influence each other, and all of them, taken together, had an impact not only on the man, his attitudes and his decisions, but also on the country and the region as well.

Therefore, there are times when I pause from the main narrative to expand on a particular theme, such as the drafting of the Singapore Pledge, or to explore certain parallel episodes – the death of Raja’s father in 1967, for example, which coincided with news of the accelerated withdrawal of British troops – to give readers a broader sense of the challenges that Raja faced.

There are also times when I turn the focus onto the people central to Raja’s life, such as Pirooska and Lee, to give a more rounded picture of the man. For similar reasons, there are occasions when I group together several related issues that preoccupied Raja over his lifetime rather than presenting them sequentially, such as the media and democracy.

This book dwells on the merger years from 1963 to 1965 in some detail, as that period most acutely defined Raja’s position on some fundamental principles, such as a non-communal system, that were to guide him for the rest of his life. Much space is also devoted to Raja’s campaign against Vietnam’s invasion and occupation of Kampuchea (Cambodia) from 1979. This campaign not only consumed a decade of his life, but also brought out the spirit of the man and his dedication to a set of foreign policy principles that I believe remain relevant today.

When it came to using journalism and literary techniques to drive the narrative, I have proceeded cautiously, taking care to go only so far as the evidence gathered reasonably suggests. To describe Raja’s expressions and mood at his first press conference as foreign minister in 1965, for example, I relied on audio recordings,

video footage and photographs. The same goes for scenes such as his tour to Kampong Glam after the race riots in 1964. And where conversations are reconstructed, they are based on reliable accounts of the people directly involved, or records such as verbatim transcripts of conversations.



As I wrote this book, I came to realise that this is a historical account with significant contemporary resonance. Raja's story is not simply reducible to the Singapore story. It is a very human epic with lessons for us all.

Raja reminds us that, in most cases, the final determinant of outcomes rests not with fate, luck or blueprints, but with how individuals, and societies, respond at the moment of trial.

His story also speaks to the very core of human existence and identity in a globalised world. A world in which nations have become increasingly interconnected as one global community – and yet, are still divided by “destructive nationalisms” and “tribal wars” based on race, religion and language.

While Raja's work was primarily in service of Singapore and the region, his ideas and outlook were truly universal. Thus, while I did not conceive this biography as a commentary on the current events, many of the issues addressed in the book – nationalism, globalisation and the rise of populist leaders fanning tribal politics, to name a few – will sound familiar to readers today.

Raja's story tells us much about the human condition; about what individuals, given genius, courage and willpower, can achieve beyond what most thought is possible, and what people and nations will endure if they have inspirational and moral leadership.

His story is also a plea for the value of declaring ideals and hopes that are fragile, and of asking the important questions: What sort of nation to create? What kind of people to be? What values to cherish most? And even, how to create one united humanity?

Throughout his sentient life, his personal compulsion was to shape the future, and his passion was to communicate with people, educate them, and stir their imagination.

Once, as a young journalist in 1992, I asked Raja what had motivated him to sacrifice so much of his life in all his three decades in politics. His voice crackled with passion as he replied: “To create a decent society. We wanted to make Singapore something we can be proud of, and that other Singaporeans can be proud of.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, many Singaporeans, particularly the older generation, still remember Raja. But many younger ones know little about him, or why he was such a towering figure in Singapore’s history. This book is written for the younger generations of today and tomorrow.



## Author's Note

While this is the second volume of my biography of S. Rajaratnam, it is written to stand by itself. As with the first volume, this book is intended for the general reader.

On the use of names: As there are many people with similar surnames – for example, Lee Kuan Yew and Lee Hsien Loong, or Goh Keng Swee and Goh Chok Tong – I have included their full names when they appear close to each other, and subsequently used their Chinese names to differentiate between them.

As for Tamil names, these follow the patronymic tradition, with the father's name preceding the personal name. Sinnathamby Rajaratnam's first name, Sinnathamby, is thus that of his father, while Rajaratnam is his given name. It is common for patronymic names to be reduced to an initial, hence S. Rajaratnam.

For easier reading, wherever possible, I have also opted for names that can be used more readily in conversation, after a proper introduction; hence the reference to Raja throughout the book. No disrespect is intended.

For compatibility with contemporaneous quotations, I have also retained place names and other names that were in use at the time. Hence, for example, the references to Kampuchea (and not Cambodia) from 1975 to 1989, and Peking (instead of Beijing) until 1979.

For the same reason, readers introduced to Teng Hsiao-ping and Chou En-lai in chapters relating to the period before 1979 (when the Chinese government began using the Pinyin spellings in all foreign language publications) would be reintroduced to the same personalities as Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai after that year. To avoid confusion, the narrative provides updated spellings in parentheses.

While I have opted for the preferred modern spelling in British English throughout the text, I have generally kept the spellings in direct quotes as they appear in the original sources. So, for example, while words with the prefix multi were not hyphenated – multiracial, multicultural, multilingual, multireligious – those hyphenated in direct quotes in the original documents have been left as they were. Similarly for American English spelling in direct quotes.

In an attempt not to overload the general reader, I have tried to reduce the volume of scholarly apparatus as far as I could to essential references. For the same reason, I have kept footnotes to the necessary minimum.

For those interested, I have listed the relevant sources at the end of this book. Supporting material is provided in the form of a selected bibliography.



# Introduction

*“You can make the tomorrow you want, provided you have the wisdom, the guts and the will to struggle for it.”<sup>1</sup>*

**T**hat sentence captures in a nutshell the guiding philosophy of S. Rajaratnam, who stands out among the founding leaders of Singapore as its chief national ideologue and foreign policy strategist.

This philosophy, with its emphasis on the future and the power of the human spirit, had been a basic premise of his political ideology long before he entered politics in 1959, and even longer before Singapore became independent in 1965. It was a dictum that was put to the test in his own eventful life. As a founding leader of the People’s Action Party (PAP) who went on to hold multiple key ministerial portfolios, he lived out his faith in unfathomable circumstances. Heartbreak, anxiety and despair hovered constantly over his attempts to overcome them.

Yet his guiding belief in the power of the human will did not come naturally to him; neither did it come easily. Born on 25 February 1915 in Jaffna, Ceylon, he was a child of the colonial era, when Ceylon, India, Malaya and large swathes of the world were part of the British Empire. He was also a child of several identities not of his own making. In his original birth certificate, his name was registered in Tamil script as Rajendram (which can mean “God among Kings” in Sanskrit), thanks to his maternal grandfather in Ceylon. That changed after he turned six months old – his mother, Annammah, brought him to Seremban,

Malaya, to join his father, Sinnathamby, a supervisor in a rubber estate. There, his devout Hindu parents consulted the family priest and astrologer, and renamed him Rajaratnam (“Jewel among Kings”).

In the rubber estate, Raja, as he was usually called, found himself the latest addition to the generations of Jaffna Tamil immigrants who had settled in the area. He grew up in an environment in which blood relations, tradition and tribe largely defined one’s world. His religious elders believed that one’s destiny was written in the stars, that one’s fate was determined at birth, by one’s horoscope, and could not be fully escaped. From young, he watched them consult the astrologer on anything and everything – be it choosing a marriage partner, starting a new job, or even determining an auspicious time to leave their house in the morning.

My first volume of Raja’s biography, *The Singapore Lion*, describes how he struggled with this fundamental notion as a young man; how he had his political awakening in London as a law student in King’s College from 1935, flirted with Marxist theory and found his gift as a writer as well as love with a Hungarian woman, Piroska Feher. It also relates how the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 changed everything for him. His real university was not King’s College, from which he dropped out in 1940, but war-time Britain, where he learnt that politics was literally a matter of life and death.

At the age of 32, Raja returned to Malaya in 1947 with a new wife, Piroska, and a resolve to shape his own fate as well as that of his country, Malaya, of which Singapore was an inextricable part. He had found his calling: to fight for independence for his own country, and to usher in the post-colonial society to come.

He became a journalist, using the power of words and ideas to stir people to action and to bring about change. His main vehicles were the English-language newspapers *The Malayan Tribune* and *The Tiger Standard*, also known as the *Singapore Standard*.

His byline became a force in national politics as he crusaded against colonialism, communism and communalism. Besides writing for local radio and newspapers – which in those days were circulated in both

Malaya and Singapore – he also worked as a stringer for foreign news agencies such as the London Observer News Service, the Pan Asia Newspaper Alliance and *JANA*, the news magazine of resurgent Asia and Africa.

Raja fought for more than a decade for the independence of his people in Malaya. They had been dominated, divided and exploited by the British for more than a century, and he rebelled against this. In 1954, together with his anti-colonial allies, he formed the left-wing PAP, led by Lee Kuan Yew.

When the British gave Malaya – but not Singapore – its independence in 1957, he mounted another struggle – this time for Singapore’s independence through merger with Malaya to form Malaysia. His entrance to politics was announced in a five-paragraph article in *The Sunday Times* on 29 March 1959. Headlined “Newsman quits job to work for PAP”, it told readers simply that Raja, 44, the president of the Singapore Union of Journalists, had resigned from his job at *The Straits Times* to do “full time” work for the PAP.

When the PAP swept to power in self-governing Singapore in 1959, Raja, who became the country’s first culture minister, stood out even among the most ideological leaders driving the merger campaign. He had long imagined Singapore and Malaya as one entity, as one “nation in the making” – to use the title of his 1957 radio play – and had considered their eventual union as necessary, if not inevitable. He was elated when the union finally materialised in 1963.

For Raja, at least at that point, nothing was more important than building a united Malaysia, where people of all races would be equal. That was his big dream, his lodestar. His abhorrence of colonialism, of the exploitation of man by man, of racial discrimination and prejudice, had a moral rather than a political motivation.

*The Singapore Lion* ended with the merger in 1963, with a glimpse of the troubles to come. This second volume, *The Lion’s Roar*, covers the period from Singapore’s merger with Malaya to form Malaysia in 1963, to his death in 2006.

It traces Raja's crusade for a "Malaysian Malaysia" during the merger years, and its tragic end. It charts his subsequent odyssey to fight for Singapore's survival as an independent country and to create the national ideology of a country born in turbulent times. It reveals the mistakes made along the way – from inexperience, miscalculation, and sheer desperation – and the efforts to overcome the dramatic reversals that threatened to destroy his dreams.



Raja came from a special generation of Singapore leaders – larger than life, tough, brilliant, complex people. Forged in life-and-death battles, they shared a fierce drive to succeed.

Besides Raja, the core leaders of the first-generation Cabinet were Lee, the country's prime minister; Goh Keng Swee, the finance minister; and Toh Chin Chye, the deputy prime minister. While there were other ministers pulling their weight, it was essentially these key leaders who made the critical decisions that decided Singapore's fate at its most vulnerable moments.

But Raja had some qualities that set him apart. The depth of his convictions, the breadth of his interests, and the length of his vision made him an exceptional figure, as did the power of his prose and polemics. But he had something more than that – an almost limitless imagination paired with fearless audacity. It was these qualities that helped to infuse his dispirited colleagues, including Lee, and a doubting nation with a sense of optimism and self-confidence in the most dire hours of independence, when they did not know whether Singapore was going to survive.

Of all the varied chapters in Raja's tumultuous life, the story of his struggle for a Malaysian Malaysia, and then a Singaporean Singapore, is one of the most insightful in terms of the clues it provides into his character and motivations.

Raja's abiding vision was to build a progressive society that was just and fair, and that provided equal opportunities and rights for

all, regardless of their race, language or religion. “Regardless of race, language or religion” had long been his leitmotif. By this he meant creating a new social and political order in which these factors did not enter into the country’s economic and political calculations.

It counts as one of his most powerful ideas. It became his signature, his lifelong obsession. It was encapsulated in the Singapore Pledge, which he drafted in 1966. Among the founding fathers of Singapore, he occupies a special place in its history for pursuing this vision with a high heart.

His politics, however, came with an equally high price of personal hardship and pain. Like most visionaries ahead of their time, he found himself in many instances having to face the agonies of shattered hopes and unfulfilled dreams.

But unlike some others, after every obstruction, every catastrophe, Raja somehow reinvented himself and revived his dreams. With his genial smile and contagious optimism, he was buoyed by the unshakeable conviction that someday, all that he had struggled for would come to fruition, even if it might not be in his lifetime.

Certainly, he was not alone in his desire to build a non-communal and meritocratic Singapore that was open to the world – a Singaporean Singapore, as he called it. But, more than anyone else in the early decades of Singapore’s evolution, he became its symbol and its spokesman. Yet he was not typical of the times, nor was he the archetype of Singapore’s national character – for that, too, was still a work in progress. What Raja was, was the *essential* Singaporean.

It might seem strange that such a person – a Jaffna Tamil born in Ceylon and raised in Seremban, a university drop-out who spent 12 years in London mixing with progressive Afro-Asian writers and radical thinkers – should have come to embody this. I would argue the opposite: only by standing outside of the conventional concepts that made up Singapore then, could someone reimagine and remake Singapore, as Raja sought to do.

As this book shows, only a man with his set of experiences, interests and ideas could have envisioned Singapore transforming

into a “global city” at a time when Lee was talking about building a “metropolis”.

If anyone deserved the mantle of “Singapore’s philosopher king”, it was Raja. He was a man of ideas and action who combined moral philosophy with political power. A deeply philosophical thinker, he was equally at ease pontificating about the ills of a wealth-driven culture, ethnocentrism and xenophobia, as he was about the cures to the diseases that plague dysfunctional democracies and the international order.



As Singapore’s first and longest-serving foreign minister, Raja also came to embody another aspect of Singapore – its distinctive views of the city-state’s place in the world and of the role of small states in international relations.

His efforts to secure Singapore’s sovereignty on the international stage set the direction for the vulnerable city-state’s foreign policy and its approach to international relations for generations to come. He also played an important role in the defining events that shaped the region – the Indonesian Confrontation in the 1960s, the British military withdrawal in the early 1970s, and Vietnam’s invasion of Kampuchea in 1978. His work makes him a significant figure in the history of Southeast Asia.

At each step of his perilous journey, Raja found himself having to face unexpected dangers and to make critical decisions – some particularly contentious – that would decide the country’s fate. My account of the early years of Singapore’s independence reveals how powerfully “the past” sought to reassert itself, and how dreadful were the dilemmas which confronted the brave souls who took it upon themselves to represent the future. Far-sighted, patient and persistent, Raja forged alliances, sustained the spirits of those around him, and translated the meaning of their struggle into words of force on the international stage.

One would be hard put to invent a foreign minister who could have better guided Singapore's foreign policy through the dark days following its independence.

There was another vital role he played at a turning point in Singapore's history, a role which hitherto has been grossly underappreciated. It was his leadership as labour minister during another time of peril – the accelerated British withdrawal in the late 1960s to early 1970s. Raja oversaw the most far-reaching labour reform in the nation's history and, by doing so, ushered in a new era of industrial relations. He was the political linchpin of a new deal that laid the foundation for a unique tripartite alliance between unions, employers and the government; a system that would prove to be a key competitive advantage for Singapore.

Raja's story is thus one of trials and also of the triumph of the human spirit. Above all, it is a story of a faith in Singapore – or at least his idea of Singapore – a faith that he clung to until the end.

This is why the dictum in the epigraph to this introduction lurks behind almost every story in this book, even those stories that may not, at first glance, seem to have anything to do with it. Running through all of Raja's struggles was the common factor of faith: faith not in any god, but in man's ability to imagine, to create, and to overcome.



That said, Raja did not work alone. And his life, and indeed Singapore itself, would have turned out very differently had it not been for his key allies – most of all Lee, who got him into politics in the first place. As Raja himself said in 1990, he had been involved in many momentous events that he could not have conceived of without Lee in his life. Thus, while this is a book about Raja, it is also one about his closest colleagues, the decisions he made with them, and how he acted when things turned out wrong.

In this connection, one of the most common criticisms of Raja was that he was little more than Lee's mouthpiece and faithful follower.

This book makes clear that Raja was very much his own man with his own views and his own voice. It was perhaps a major contradiction of Raja's career that he was at once Lee's loyal lieutenant and a politician beating his own path. It is a tension that is present throughout much of this book.

This biography also brings out the tensions and contradictions that arose as he navigated the complexities of establishing non-communal politics in a multiracial society in an age of "tribal wars", developing a foreign policy that promoted national interest in a globalising world, and evolving a model of governance and democracy that worked for Singapore in a turbulent region. He was an ardent nationalist and yet a true internationalist who was ahead of his time.

Of course, Raja's legacy was not perfect. Both in foreign and domestic policy, many of his actions were controversial and remain so. While affable and gentlemanly in person, he could be merciless in combat. The force and clarity with which he expressed his views could crush more sensitive souls. But he always tried to do right by his people and his principles. And while his style of persuasion might not have suited every person or circumstance, it is worth comprehending.

In writing this book, there is one question that I was forced to consider time and again: would Singapore have succeeded without Raja's involvement in the struggle for its independence, survival and progress?

My answer can be found in the pages of this book.

Suffice to say here that it is extremely hard to see how Singapore would be what it is today without his profound and multifaceted contributions.

But the question has a wider importance, for it asks not only about Raja's place in Singapore's history, but also whether the ideas and principles that he championed still have a relevance now and in the future. The answer is not for me to give, but for the people of Singapore, particularly the younger and future generations, to decide.

In his many speeches to young Singaporeans, Raja often reminded them that a nation could determine its own fate, that its people could



create the type of society they wanted to belong to and the kind of future they desired for themselves and the nation. “A nation creates its own future – every time and all the time. Nothing is predestined,” he asserted in 1982. “Everything is determined by the will or lack of will on the part of peoples composing a nation. In other words, it is in our hands to choose the kind of future we want.”<sup>22</sup>



It is a great pity that he did not write a book to draw the separate strands of his ideas on nations, nationalism and globalisation; on race, religion and language; and on governance, leadership and democracy to provide a coherent and accessible foundation of his thought, or what might be called “Raja-ism”.

A book was, in fact, on his to-do list. One of his announced plans after his political retirement in 1988 was to write a book tentatively titled *From Wanderers to Star-makers*. Unfortunately, for reasons explained within these pages, the book never materialised.

But, as its working title suggests, it would be about how transient migrants with their separate languages, religions, cultures and histories – the wanderers – struck roots in new lands and transformed into “star-makers”, people who made their own destiny.

He might not have produced the last major work that many had hoped for, but he stands witness to the truth that, as American journalist Walter Lippman once said, men are mortal, but ideas are immortal. The name S. Rajaratnam will forever be linked to the resonant words in the Singapore Pledge as well as to the transformative concepts of a “Singaporean Singapore” and “global city”.

In the body of his speeches, he left the basic tenets of Singapore’s foreign policy. After his death, his speeches continued to be read. A good selection can be found in the anthologies *The Prophetic and the Political: Selected Speeches and Writings of S. Rajaratnam*, edited by Chan Heng Chee and Obaid ul Haq; and *S. Rajaratnam on Singapore: From Ideas to Reality*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan.

In honour of his contributions as Singapore's founding foreign minister, several institutions and initiatives were named after him. In 1998, a decade after his political retirement, the S. Rajaratnam Professorship in Strategic Studies was set up at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) at Nanyang Technological University. Then, in 2007, a year after Raja's death, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies was established as an autonomous graduate school and think tank, incorporating the IDSS.

The following year, in 2008, MFA launched the S. Rajaratnam Lecture series, an annual event that invites prominent people to speak to the foreign service on topics related to diplomacy and international relations. In 2014, a S\$100 million S. Rajaratnam Endowment was set up by Temasek Holdings to support programmes that foster stronger ties in the region and internationally. And in 2022 – 50 years after Raja's "global city" speech – the vision, as he articulated it, became the focus of the annual flagship Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

And yet, in all the official and intellectual commemorations of Raja's life, in all the events and speeches, it is easy to overlook the fire that burned in him throughout his life: the unrelenting conviction that the future is what human beings make of the possible – and the seemingly impossible. It demands from them a creative act. And, like all acts of creation, it will take imagination and ingenuity; patience and pain; and an infinite faith in the power of the human will.

And so we come back to the book that Raja never wrote, about wanderers who become star-makers. My two-volume biography is, in essence, the story of how one wanderer became a star-maker. It is the story of the transformation of a wandering wordsmith into a political giant whose voice reverberates through time.

He was the true Singapore lion who roared, and roared till the end. In a way, it is a perfect metaphor for the life of Raja and the Singapore to which he had devoted that life.