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PART ONE

Trauma

1

Riots

As he listened to the frantic voice on the phone, S. Rajaratnam realised that his greatest fear had come to pass. He tried not to give in to despair. It was difficult. As one of the chief architects of Singapore's independence, he had experienced some tough situations – but this was the worst tragedy to befall his country in his five years in politics.

It was 21 July 1964, barely a year after Singapore merged with Malaya and two Borneo states, Sabah and Sarawak, to form Malaysia in September 1963.

The voice on the phone that late afternoon was that of his close colleague Othman Wok, the social affairs minister. Othman had looked up to Raja, as the culture minister was usually known, since their journalism days in the 1950s. They had then worked for different newspapers – Raja was a famous columnist with the *Singapore Standard*, while Othman reported for the Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu* – but both were joined in a common cause in the Singapore Union of Journalists to fight for social justice. Raja had led the union as its president with Othman as his deputy.

After Raja, together with Lee Kuan Yew and others, formed the People's Action Party (PAP) in 1954, Othman had joined the new left-wing party. What bound them was a common vision: to build a non-communal society based on justice and equality. In working towards this vision, Raja and Othman, as minority political leaders

in a Chinese-dominated country, came to represent both the face and spirit of the party's multiracial ideology.

Now, on this hot, horrible day in July 1964, Othman bore news of a racial clash that threatened to tear apart the very fabric of society. "Some Malays are causing problems," he reported. "Beating up Chinese bystanders. Things are getting out of control."¹

Othman, the only Malay minister in the Singapore Cabinet, was leading a PAP contingent as part of a 20,000-strong procession to mark Prophet Muhammad's birthday that day.

Over the phone, he told Raja the scenes he had just witnessed: Malay youths punching a Chinese policeman struggling to control the rowdy procession as it headed towards the Malay settlement of Geylang, then breaking off from the march to attack Chinese passers-by at random. Sensing danger, he and several others had slipped into the People's Association headquarters in Kallang. This was where he had rung Raja.

The day being a public holiday, Raja was catching up on his reading in his book-lined home, a bungalow in Chancery Lane. At 49, he was the oldest among the nine-man Cabinet, and often appeared unflappable in any crisis. "He was very cool," Othman recalled, "one who never got excited about anything."²

Raja might project an air of equanimity, but internally his thoughts were racing. He knew only too well how quickly racial and religious passions could boil over and lead to mass riots. In a series of phone calls, he quickly conferred with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and others on the dangerous situation. This was the first serious racial clash they had to deal with since taking charge of self-governing Singapore in 1959.

Gripped by urgency, he jumped into his sun-baked second-hand black Hillman and drove to his office at City Hall. As soon as he arrived and sat behind his desk, he began working the phone. Anxious reporters were clamouring for his views and the government's response. He was just as anxious to determine what was happening. As story after story came in of Malay groups attacking Chinese people, overturning their cars, scooters and hawker carts, and setting their homes and businesses

on fire, his alarm ratcheted up another notch. The mayhem was still spreading even as darkness began to descend.

The topmost priority of the PAP leaders was to contain the violence. To their frustration, however, they found their hands tied. Under the merger agreement between Singapore and Malaya, internal security did not come under Singapore's control but under the federal government in Kuala Lumpur (KL).

As reports of casualties poured in, the Singapore leaders urged KL to impose a curfew. Malaysian prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was away in America, leaving his deputy, Tun Abdul Razak, in charge. The curfew was finally called at 9:30 p.m. But still the streets seethed with savagery. Mob passions once roused could not be so easily doused.³

Disturbingly, reports began filtering in that the KL-controlled security forces, who were mainly Malay, were siding with Malays against Chinese. In turn, Chinese secret society gangs, having lost confidence in the police, led revenge attacks against Malays. The spiral of violence seemed unstoppable.

Lee and finance minister Goh Keng Swee kept in close touch with police commissioner John Le Cain and director of Special Branch George Bogaars. Raja took charge of crisis communication.

As the government's communications czar, he knew that the public needed assurance. The government must be seen to be in control, even if it might not be. The former newspaperman had long understood the power of words. In such a tinderbox atmosphere, just one wrong word, one insensitive phrase, could set off another cycle of violence.



Raja planted himself in the thick of action in the operations room at the police headquarters at Pearl's Hill. His old journalistic habits – checking and analysing the facts, drawing inferences and extrapolating patterns – kicked in. Accustomed to working under high pressure, he bent over his battered Adler portable typewriter and typed out a press

release on the spot. Even as he detailed the police update, he made sure to emphasise the government's key message to the people: stay calm.

He handed the draft to the police secretary, Tharumaratnam Chelliah, and said: "Chelliah, anything you can change as you think suitable."⁴ More used to barked orders, Chelliah, who was coordinating police communications, was astonished by Raja's courtesy at this time of extreme stress.

Outside the station, wild stories of attacks and counter-attacks spread like wildfire across the island. Malay families fearing reprisals began fleeing from Chinese-dominated areas. Chinese families high-tailed it out of Malay areas.

It proved a formidable challenge for the leaders to keep the public informed amid the curfew and the chaos. To reach out to people in their homes, the government turned to radio and television, which Raja had introduced to Singapore just a year ago, in 1963.

Hours after the riots, at 10:45 p.m., Lee, with Raja standing by, made radio and television broadcasts in three languages – Malay, Mandarin and English – appealing for a return to sanity: "What or who started this situation is irrelevant at this moment," the Singapore premier said. "Right now our business is to stop this stupidity. Rumours and wild talk of revenge and retaliation will only inflame men's minds."⁵

Still the rampage raged on. By midnight on that first day, four people would be killed and 180 injured.

Raja was mortified to learn that the worst fighting was taking place near the Kallang Gas Works on the fringes of his own constituency of Kampong Glam, which was famous for its Malay heritage and notorious for its Chinese gangsters. To add to his horror, he received reports that at the Sultan Mosque – the heartbeat of the Muslim community in his ward – some federal security troops had passed their batons to Malay rioters to beat up the Chinese.

As the body count rose, so too his anguish and anger. Over the next four days, the toll would mount: 22 people killed and 461 injured. The scale of the communal clash was unprecedented in Singapore's post-war history.

For a man who had devoted his life to paving a non-communal path for his country, the racial clashes were especially hard to confront. Raja had often preached to all who would listen that building a non-communal foundation was the only effective defence against the racial and religious strife that had ravaged so many other newly independent countries. Yet the clashes erupted. They gave a hollow ring to his much-vaunted ambition for Singapore: to be an example to the world of a united multiracial society based on the principles of social justice and non-communalism.

It was a brutal time for Raja and his fellow leaders as they grasped that, without any control over the security forces, Singapore's stability – and, in fact, its very future – lay at the mercy of the Federation. Raja recounted later that, for the first time, he understood the reality of the famous saying by Mao Zedong, the communist revolutionary founder of the People's Republic of China: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." "We realised, to our horror, that with merger, an unarmed Singapore was looking into the barrel of a gun," said Raja. "We felt that, unwittingly, we had led the people of Singapore, not to freedom, but into a prison."⁶

As the days passed, this feeling of being trapped in a nightmarish scenario intensified. Behind the chaos, Raja sensed shadowy political predators on the prowl – the Malay ultras. These were the racial extremists within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the central party in Malaysia's ruling coalition, the Alliance Party.



Months before the riots, Raja had been sounding the alarm over the ultras' communal agitation. He singled out Dato Syed Ja'afar Albar, secretary-general of the Federation's UMNO, and Syed Esa Almenoar, secretary-general of the Singapore branch of UMNO.

The leaders of the Malay-based party, which was rooted in the concept of *ketuanan melayu* (Malay supremacy), had been in a foul mood since losing all three of its Malay-dominated seats to the PAP in

Singapore at the previous year's general election, in September 1963. It had been a devastating blow to UMNO's control of its traditional Malay base in Singapore.

Already unhappy over what they viewed as the PAP's insubordinate ways in the run-up to merger, the Alliance leaders were "even more angry" at the total evisceration of the Singapore UMNO-Alliance at the hands of the PAP, recalled Ghazali Shafie, a close aide and confidante of the Malaysian prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.⁷ To them, it was yet another red flag, warning of the threat that the PAP could pose to their own political base in the Federation if left unchecked.

Day after day, the ultras had been portraying Malays in Singapore as victims of oppression, and the PAP government and the Chinese majority as their oppressors. They reserved their sharpest attacks for Lee with allegations that were by any standards incredible – that he was an agent of the communists and of the Jakarta regime, which was then engaged in a Confrontation campaign to destroy Malaysia. They also targeted PAP Malay legislative assemblymen, in particular Othman Wok, denouncing them as anti-Islam, infidels and traitors to their race.

Raja himself felt the heat. Resettlement issues in his ward of Kampong Glam, sited around the muddy banks of the Rochor and Kallang rivers, were being exploited by the ultras to foment more resentment among Malays.

Kampong Glam was home to, among other sites of cultural significance, the Istana Kampong Glam, which was once the royal seat of the Malay sultans in Singapore.⁸ Despite the ward's grand past, however, many areas presently resembled little more than an overcrowded swamp. It was crammed with crumbling squatter huts and slum tenements, most without proper drainage or sanitation. The squalid grounds swarmed with Chinese triad gangsters specialising in extortion, and local mafia-type smugglers dealing with merchandise from trading boats that used Kampong Glam as a pier.

To improve the abysmal living conditions, the government had unveiled plans to resettle about 2,500 families from Raja's ward and its neighbouring areas, Crawford and Rochor, to new housing flats. This

was to make way for housing and industry under its urban renewal programme to carry the country into the modern era.

These plans were immediately seized upon by the UMNO ultras to accuse the PAP of driving Malays from their homes. Although only 200 of the 2,500 families affected were in fact Malays, *Utusan Melayu* – essentially an UMNO mouthpiece – claimed that about 3,000 Malay families had been issued quit notices, and painted a dark future for all Malays in Singapore.⁹

To rally them behind UMNO, the Malay-based party formed an “action committee” to defend their rights. To Raja’s exasperation, his repeated clarifications on points of fact to the *Utusan*, which he made on behalf of the Singapore government, were routinely ignored.

In an effort to explain the situation directly to the Malays, Lee and Raja jointly toured the affected areas on 31 May. Together with other leaders, including Othman, they also held an intensive series of dialogues with Malay groups to address their concerns.¹⁰ “Raja had a tough time in his ward,” Othman recalled. “A lot of Malays were unhappy that the government wanted to develop that area, especially the houses near the Sultan Mosque. UMNO was telling the Malays that the PAP was chasing them away.”¹¹

All this was taking place in a highly charged atmosphere amid Indonesia’s subversive efforts to break up Malaysia.¹² Raja, who had a taste for polemics, had been at the forefront of Singapore’s propaganda war against the Indonesian “Crush Malaysia” campaign since it began in 1963. The latest developments threatened to tie the threads of the Federation’s racial politics and the Indonesian Confrontation into a knot beyond undoing.

Filled with foreboding, he repeatedly warned of the consequences of being swayed by racial demagogues who were “ready to exploit racial fears and prejudices for personal, political or economic ends”. In one of his most plaintive calls for caution, he stressed that these were “dangerous men for they will only succeed in bringing violence and hatred among our people”.¹³ Prophetically, he added: “Once racial conflict breaks out, it is not the demagogues who suffer but the ordinary

people.” He had made this speech at a grassroots event in February, five months before the riots. All to no avail.

Now, in July, as the riots raged, he could not but fear for his core vision of a non-communal system. As he revealed later, “during the riots, I thought it would all collapse”. He summoned every bit of his fighting spirit to press on. Raja would face several tests of his character, but none was more severe than the vicious season of 1964.



On the second day of the riots, Raja was made Singapore’s point man for dealing with the Federation government on the racial troubles.

His KL-appointed counterpart was Federation minister Mohamed Khir Johari, who was close to the Tunku. Khir was designated the “director of operations” with full authority to work with the security forces in Singapore.

On arriving in Singapore the following day, Khir told the press that he would be in “constant touch” with Raja. While the two men had to coordinate their efforts, Khir certainly had the upper hand by virtue of the Federation’s powers.

With security escort, Khir, who was also chairman of the Singapore UMNO branch, could go anywhere in Singapore even when the city was locked down in curfew. The Malaysian minister recalled later: “I was more or less like the ‘uncrowned king of Singapore’ ... I had full freedom to travel everywhere.”¹⁴

It struck Raja as reprehensible that, at this moment of high racial tension in Singapore, Khir would include in his delegation the very same communal demagogues whom the PAP leaders had fingered for the riots – Singapore UMNO leaders Syed Esa Almendoar and Syed Ali Redha Alsagoff.

The Singapore minister’s suspicion was now thoroughly aroused: were the arsonists playing firemen? It was as clear as day that while Khir was ostensibly going about his duties to maintain peace on the island,

he was assiduously courting Malay support for UMNO. In a further display of his authority, his Malaysian party largely sidelined Lee.

As the American consul-general in Singapore, Arthur H. Rosen, reported to Washington, “for a few days, Central Government leaders virtually took over the Singapore Government ... Kuala Lumpur’s muscles were flexed for all to see.”¹⁵ Yap Chin Kwee, the Tunku’s political secretary who accompanied Khir in Singapore then, recollected later: “Khir Johari had a job to do; he would get instructions from Tunku.” He added: “Tunku wanted all the Malay problems in Singapore to be represented by UMNO through Khir Johari.”¹⁶

Khir himself made no apologies for his efforts to rally the Malays behind UMNO and to position himself as protector of Malay interests in Singapore. His motivation, he said later, was to ensure peace in Malaysia. He maintained that he needed Syed Esa’s help to calm the ground.

His relationship with Raja at this point was, on the face of it, friendly. Khir personally found Raja, despite his reputation as a feisty politician, to be affable and easy-going in person. The UMNO chieftain recalled later: “He was my main point of contact during the riots.” At the same time, however, the Malaysian minister was deeply wary of Raja’s zeal for the PAP’s vision of a non-communal Malaysia. “Raja’s views could cause trouble,” he said.¹⁷

Still, it is a testament to the two men’s belief in personal diplomacy that, despite their intense political rivalry, they were able to build a relationship that would outlast their political careers, meeting up for casual lunches well into their retirement years.

In public, Raja might wear the persona of a brash ideologue with a sharp tongue. In person, however, he was a mild soul with a sense of humour that could make people feel at ease, regardless of their culture or background. Standing five feet eight inches tall, he had a certain self-possessed dignity – it was something about the quiet, thoughtful look in his deep-set dark eyes and the good-humoured contours of his mouth. His movements, like his conversational voice, were measured,

completely unlike the impassioned tone of his diatribes against political opponents. He was a ferocious lion with the smile of a peacemaker.



In working with Khir during this precarious period, Raja's single-minded goal was to restore order and stability to the island. For this, a good working relationship at their level was essential. By this time, he was deep in the trenches dealing with a barrage of rumours and lies that could find a ready audience and trigger another outbreak of violence.

One pernicious rumour that sent shock waves across the island involved the alleged massacre of a Muslim religious teacher, Sheikh Osman, who was an imam at Joo Chiat mosque, and his family by Chinese rioters. Outraged by the "news", more than 1,000 Malays gathered at a mosque in Jalan Labu on 23 July, where they were incited to avenge the alleged killings.

When Raja learnt that, lo and behold, the imam and his family were in fact alive and well, he collared Khir immediately to make a television appearance with the religious leader to scotch the rumour. "So I did appear on TV to tell the truth together with that religious leader," Khir later recalled, "and therefore in one move, we managed to calm down the people."¹⁸

As Raja sought to pierce the fog of what would be called fake news today, the germ of suspicion began to grow in his mind that the riots were orchestrated. Reading through the *Utusan Melayu's* reports, he found the paper's non-stop racist attacks on the PAP breathtaking in their audacity and malice. It fed UMNO secretary-general Ja'afar Albar's incendiary campaign. The Malay daily, written in Jawi script, was widely read by the Malays in Singapore's rural heartlands.

This, Raja believed, was the moment when UMNO showed its hand: on 24 July, the UMNO journal, *Merdeka*, made the outrageous claim that the incidents had happened because of the PAP government's treatment of the people "and of the minorities in particular who feel that they are being oppressed and victimised".

At the same time, UMNO's echo chambers gave all credit to the Alliance leaders in KL for bringing help to Malays and peace to Singapore during the riots, and portrayed the PAP leaders as weak and cowardly. The ultras, through *Merdeka* – which was controlled by Albar – began calling for a change in the top leadership of the PAP.

Over the following days and weeks, the KL narrative took an even more sinister turn: yes, Indonesian and communist agents could have been involved in the riots, but it was the PAP government's poor treatment of Malays in Singapore and their "insensitive" statements that had provoked the crisis.¹⁹

Given the volatility of the situation, Raja considered the provocative comments as nothing short of irresponsible. While pinning the blame on the PAP, the Alliance leaders were making excuses for UMNO hardliners who had turned the atmosphere toxic in Singapore. From Raja's vantage point, the campaign by Albar and his acolytes deserved nothing but harsh condemnation. None, however, was forthcoming from KL.

The wildly conflicting accounts of how the riots started were laying bare not only the deepening suspicion and mistrust between the two sides, but also their widening rift.



As they scrambled to get to the bottom of the riots, Raja and fellow PAP leaders started to wonder, uncomfortably, if the relentless anti-PAP and anti-Lee campaign in *Utusan* was sanctioned by the Tunku and his deputy premier, Tun Abdul Razak. They were not far wrong. Abdullah Ahmad, then aide and political secretary to Razak, would reveal decades later that the two most powerful leaders in Malaysia had, in fact, authorised the anti-PAP campaign in the *Utusan* and, far from being concerned, "chuckled every time" Lee hit the roof over the newspaper's reports.²⁰

At the time, this was not apparent to the PAP leaders. In February 1963, just the previous year, Raja had in his tribute to the Tunku on

his 60th birthday declared that “an undeniable source of the Tunku’s greatness is that he has steadfastly refused to win popularity by playing to racial and religious prejudices”.²¹ Raja had genuinely believed it. He had regarded the Tunku, born to a Thai mother as one of the 45 children of Kedah’s Sultan Ahmad Hamid, as a tolerant and moderate leader who was open to the PAP’s multiracial vision for Malaysia. In the run-up to merger, the Tunku himself had suggested as much to the PAP leaders. As far as Raja was concerned, it was on that basis that Singapore had joined Malaysia on 16 September 1963.

Except there was a problem. The Tunku and his Alliance Party leaders brought with them rival ideologies and political cultures that flew directly in the face of Raja’s own and that of the PAP’s. The path that the Tunku took to achieve power in Malaya was by effecting the alliance of UMNO with the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) in 1951 and with the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in 1955. The structure of the Alliance reflected its race-based approach, which was premised on Malay dominance with UMNO as the central party in the coalition. Despite the Tunku’s expressions of enthusiasm for merger, Raja had glimpsed the contradictions and the potential conflicts in the unfolding.

Now, they were fast coming into sharp focus as the Tunku faced pressure from UMNO hardliners to take tougher action against the PAP. Albar, who wanted Lee put in jail, had made no secret of his views that the Tunku was weak in his handling of the Singapore premier. His campaign appeared to have the full backing of Razak, who was poised to succeed the Tunku when the paternalistic premier left the scene. As Razak himself told foreign correspondent Dennis Bloodworth at the time, he welcomed Albar’s role in ensuring that “a firm front will be preserved against Lee”, and in putting the Singapore premier in his place “if Lee did not cooperate fully with Kuala Lumpur”. Confirming the collusion, Khir said approvingly: “Albar was known as the ‘lion of UMNO’. I think Albar did his part well in keeping with his name the lion of UMNO.”

The PAP had a lion, too – Raja. But, against every instinct, he had to keep his claws sheathed – just barely – in the interest of calming tempers all round.



On 24 July at 3:30 p.m., the minute the day's curfew ended, Raja and deputy prime minister Toh Chin Chye visited the riot-stricken areas in their wards in a long convoy of Land Rovers, cars and vans carrying security men and the press. Theirs was among the first high-profile tours by Singapore leaders aimed at showing their ability to get things done and to restore peace.²²

The duo, dressed in white short-sleeved shirts, looked sombre as they stood in an open-top Land Rover, which they had commandeered from the government's veterinary division. They surveyed the sorry scene as their convoy rumbled slowly through every dusty *lorong* and street in Kampong Glam, Rochor and Crawford. Shards of broken glass here, burnt wooden carts there, stones and debris everywhere – all reminders of the recent horrors. The sheltered corridors of the two-storey shophouses that used to throng with merchants of different races selling goods side by side – spices, flowers, textiles, rattan ware – were eerily silent. The aromas of camphor and perfumed flowers that used to fill the streets were replaced with the smell of terror. Overhead, jutting from upstairs casement windows, washing hung on long bamboo poles like banners of mourning.

Raja and Toh took turns on the microphone to announce their presence. Through the loudspeakers on their Land Rover, their voices boomed out a central message: keep calm and help restore order; don't allow rumours to disrupt the peace.

Hearing blaring voices and roaring vehicles in the streets, a straggle of residents emerged cautiously from their homes onto the five-foot ways. Others clambered onto their clay-tiled roofs, and perched like nervous sparrows on the alert. Those who chose the indoor safety of

locked doors peered out from their iron window grilles as the ministers' convoy rolled past.

As the leaders reached the towering Sultan Mosque, where many Malays had taken refuge, all was quiet. Some came out to cluster behind the cast-iron railings of the mosque's low boundary walls. Their expressions were guarded, even closed. As with the other Malays he had met, Raja found them petrified by the violence. He addressed them in bazaar Malay. Most of the Chinese attackers, he told them, came from outside the area. "They are not your neighbours," he said.

Raja would recall later that the ordinary Malays "didn't strike me as the people who were seething with hatred for the Chinese or anything. They were terrified." This was one of the observations that led him to conclude that the riots were not spontaneous, but "planned and with a purpose". He tried to reach out to them with more assurances. But when he left them, it was with a disconcerting sense that a distance had opened up between them and the PAP leaders, for reasons that he did not grasp in their full subtleties until later.

As their Land Rover turned into the Chinese quarter, the ministers found the mood disturbingly sullen. Some residents sulked with arms crossed, while others skulked in the shadows of the five-foot ways. Their faces were cold, and their eyes burned with anger. As the convoy reached them, they erupted into a chorus of taunts. As Toh recalled later, "we were rebuffed with jeers from our Chinese constituents when we urged them to keep the peace and remain calm".²³ As the leaders would discover later, the Chinese anger stemmed from talk that the Singapore government had failed to protect them during the riots, thus forcing them to depend on Chinese secret society members.

As the fissure between the Malays and Chinese threatened to widen to an unbridgeable chasm, Raja called on his fearful community leaders to regroup. At the constituency centre, he said: "Let us stop this madness while there is still time, while the desire for friendship between communities is still strong." With his encouragement, the community leaders began forming groups to keep order in each street and to restore racial harmony.

These efforts marked the beginning of “goodwill committees”, or *jawatankuasa muhibah* in Malay, that would soon be set up in every constituency to help keep the peace between the races. To be effective, each committee had to be drawn from the different races. Raja’s Kampong Glam set the early gold standard: its goodwill committee was made up of four Malays, four Chinese and two Indians.

Lee Khoo Choy, then political secretary to the prime minister, had one word for Raja’s leadership during the riots: “Inspirational”. “He was our political strategist in managing racial issues, urging all the PAP wards to form their own goodwill committees and guiding us,” he recalled.²⁴ The start of the goodwill committees gave something concrete and positive for Lee to announce in his regular radio and TV broadcast on 24 July. By 27 July, all 51 constituencies had set up their own goodwill committees.

Determined to show visible progress, Raja made repeated rounds to his ward accompanied by his goodwill committee. It was a frenetic period, as he also often joined the other key ministers fanning out to their own wards.

At the same time, he sought the cooperation of the local press to report responsibly.²⁵ As culture minister, he had a measure of influence, if not control, over the national media in Singapore, particularly the radio and television. He kept his ear close to the ground. He monitored UMNO’s activities in Singapore, constantly analysing its propaganda, calculating, and trying to think a few steps ahead.

To rally the beleaguered PAP assemblymen and keep them updated, Raja and the other ministers held several secret meetings with them. Khoo Choy recalled one crucial meeting on 3 August – this was a day after the curfew was lifted completely on 2 August. Their key concern was to prevent a recurrence of the riots.

Raja, in his role as director of the PAP political bureau, girded the assemblymen with key lines on national unity to keep them on message, and also to counter the anti-PAP sentiments on the ground. Convince your residents, he told them, that it was the state government – and not the central government – which had helped those affected by the

riots. His thinking was that, as Khoon Choy explained, “if we could convince the Malay base, they would be less susceptible to anti-PAP propaganda in the future.”²⁶

Throughout this dangerous period, Raja did not underestimate the strain that Lee was under. The extremists showed no let-up in calling for the prime minister’s head. When Lee visited the trouble spot of Geylang Serai, he was jeered by UMNO extremists and, together with Rahmat Kenap, the assemblyman for the area, vilified as “pigs”.

During such times of acute crises, the PM drew succour from Raja’s dauntless spirit. Both had offices in City Hall – Lee’s on the second floor and Raja’s on the first – and they met almost daily for discussions even when utterly exhausted, physically and emotionally. Raja acted as Lee’s political confidant and morale booster, as he had done earlier in their gruelling battle against the communists.

Herman Hochstadt, then secretary to the prime minister,²⁷ was a witness to Lee’s reliance on Raja, and one of the very few privy to the PM’s pressures at this critical period. “The situation was getting quite hot and I could see it in PM’s office, all the action that was going on,” he recalled. “The PM very frequently asked Raja to see him.” It was clear why. Raja came with ideas on vision and strategy, and an irrepressible can-do attitude. “He developed his own ideas. What drove him was his own philosophy,” Hochstadt added. “He was influenced by PM, and the two of them influenced each other.”²⁸

The two leaders’ joint sense of mission was evident as they trudged from kampong to kampong around the island, under the blazing sun and frequent heavy downpours. It both relieved and inspired Raja when, at each stop, Lee showed again his trademark brash determination that promised to meet all challenges and his charisma that could move crowds.

Apart from worrying about Lee’s situation, Raja was also concerned about the unremitting pressure on the PAP Malay assemblymen. They were “under great strain”, he recalled later. For being associated with the PAP, they had suffered from UMNO’s systematic undermining of their position among the Malays to the point of danger to their lives.

Raja's respect for them shot up when they came out fighting. "They toured the areas with PM. They assured the PM. But it must have been a psychologically very tense moment for them," he said later.²⁹ This was the standard by which Raja judged the moral fibre of individuals. Those who showed courage and loyalty to the cause, despite the risks to oneself, won his esteem.

Yet while the PAP leaders were rising to the challenge, their political stock was falling. Ground reports they received indicated that the government was losing public support. If it were to be weakened further, Singapore could well fall into the hands of the communalists, the communists or the Indonesians, all of whom were eager to seize the strategic prize of Singapore. As he thought through the implications, he became even more convinced that this was a battle that the UMNO demagogues could not be allowed to win.

Within the Cabinet, Raja and Toh were the most resolute in pressing for a firm strategy to halt UMNO's communal politicking. They wanted an open inquiry into the riots, arguing that it would force the issue and clear the PAP of blame. Without a formal inquiry, they contended, the party would be unable to regain the support of those angered by the PAP's failure to stop the riots.

While agreeing broadly with their assessment, Goh Keng Swee urged caution to avoid worsening relations further. He suggested talks with Razak to discuss a way forward. Goh had known Razak since their student days in Raffles College and enjoyed a degree of rapport that allowed for open communication. Lee gave the green light. What emerged from their talks on 28 and 29 July, however, gave Raja little reason to stand down.