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Introduction

The countdown clock for the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia started ticking as soon as the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the People’s Action Party (PAP) announced that Singapore intended to contest the general elections in Peninsular Malaysia scheduled for April 1964. One of the conditions governing the formal merger of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak—inaugurated on 16 September 1963—had been that only the indigenous electorate would be permitted to participate in the internal elections of respective member states, though political parties of other component states of Malaysia could participate through locally registered branches provided those standing for elections and those entitled to vote were nationals resident in that state.¹ The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) Alliance had registered a local branch and contested the Singapore state elections on 21 September 1963 (and spectacularly failed to win any seat, including in Malay-Muslim enclaves like Geylang Serai), but at the end of 1963, the PAP chose to formally declare that it would not participate in the forthcoming 1964 elections for Peninsular Malaysia² while reserving the right to do so in 1969. Apparently, however, in late January 1964, the PAP’s CEC, represented by Chairman Toh Chin Chye and Minister

for Culture, S. Rajaratnam, was either not aware of that undertaking or chose to ignore it while Mr Lee Kuan Yew was abroad. Mr Lee, who had been appointed by Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister of Malaysia, to head the twelve-member Malaysian Goodwill Mission to seventeen African states and India to counter Indonesian propaganda against Malaysia, was then on that assignment. In fact, on his return he was to have proceeded to the United States on the extension of that mission. On learning that the PAP had apparently reneged on the undertaking not to participate in the Peninsular Malaya general election, the Tunku, despite having praised him for an outstanding performance in the first phase, promptly dropped Lee Kuan Yew from the US leg on the grounds that if the PAP was in opposition to the Alliance, Mr Lee could hardly be a spokesman for the Federal government.

Whether the PAP's CEC would have gone against the redoubtable Lee Kuan Yew's wishes in his absence on its own volition, or without attempting to consult him in advance by some means, is open to speculation, as must be the decision to proceed on that course regardless when he was back and fully aware of the Tunku's acute displeasure.³ He had hitherto been at pains to reassure the Tunku that the PAP was committed to support the UMNO as evidence of the PAP's endorsement of Malaysia. Nor was the UMNO's outright disapproval assuaged by the PAP's claim that it would only be a token participation and strictly non-communal. But more incredibly, however, the PAP went on to explain that its basic purpose was only to displace the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) in the UMNO Alliance in the urban centres of the Peninsula because the MCA was a spent force. In the event, the PAP was registered in Kuala Lumpur in March 1964. Of the eleven candidates⁴ fielded by the PAP, only one—Devan Nair—who was domiciled in Malacca, was elected as the Member of Parliament (MP) for the constituency of Bangsar. It probably did not help matters that with Nair's election, combined with the twelve seats that the PAP was already entitled to in the Dewan Rakyat as the ruling party of Singapore, the PAP officially became Leader of the Opposition in the federal parliament. In that capacity, Lee Kuan Yew proceeded intentionally or otherwise to rub salt into

open wounds. “(He) … reiterated in the Dewan Rakyat in May 1964 that the PAP would remain a loyal opposition and help to create a harmonious, non-communal society in which prosperity would be equally shared among all men regardless of race, language or religion.”⁵ This was an unequivocal challenge to the policy of special rights guaranteed to Malays (bumiputras) in Peninsular Malaysia.

While it cannot be ruled out that Lee Kuan Yew saw Malaysia as a larger canvas for his personal leadership ambitions, it also cannot be ruled out that he subscribed somewhat fanatically to a concept of a meritocratic order in society as the way to uplift the quality of life for everybody. Coming from a “Baba”⁶ background, Lee Kuan Yew never demonstrated any Chinese chauvinism in the course of his leadership of the PAP. His cabinet appointments were well-represented by non-Chinese in key appointments, including Malays, Eurasians, Indians and Sri Lankans, as were key civil service appointments such as Ahmad Mohamed Ibrahim (Tan Sri Datuk and Queen’s Scholar) who was appointed State Advocate General of Singapore, an office that became that of Attorney General; Ahmad Ibrahim (another Malay PAP politician who shared the same name) who was the first Malay to hold a ministerial appointment as Minister for Health and later Minister for Labour; and Othman Wok who was Minister for Social Welfare. He had also endorsed two Indian presidents (Devan Nair and S. R. Nathan) and a Eurasian president (Benjamin Sheares). On the other hand, he did not hesitate to call to account (justifiably or otherwise) an ex- Deputy Prime Minister, and Singapore’s first elected president, Mr Ong Teng Cheong, for seemingly overstepping his remit. His approach seemed to have been to uplift communities more or less by their “bootstraps” rather than by extending preferential privileges. A rather telling story used to go around: in the Istana one day, when President Yusof Ishak and he were about to enter the lift, President Ishak moved aside to let Mr Lee go in first; Mr Lee then ushered President Ishak to lead the way, reminding him that he—Lee Kuan Yew—was the President’s prime minister.⁷

Meanwhile, still smarting from the total snub of the Singapore branch of the UMNO (SUMNO) by Malay voters of Singapore

during the 21 September 1963 Singapore general elections, UMNO Secretary-General Sayed Ja'far bin Hassan Albar, with a legendary animus towards Lee Kuan Yew, now pulled out all the stops in his anti-Lee offensive in Singapore itself on the grounds of the PAP's bad faith. He and other extremists also chose to decry Lee's declaration in the Dewan Rakyat as a criticism of the existing political order. Heedless of murderous consequences, he unleashed his goons to tear apart the fabric of Singapore's multiracial communal solidarity in predominantly Malay neighbourhoods. In July, at a convention of a wide range of Malay bodies, the Singapore government was accused of discriminating against local Malays on the grounds that 300 Malay families were relocated as part of a general housing redevelopment programme. The programme, in fact, involved far more Chinese. The meeting adopted a resolution demanding that Singapore Malays be given bumiputra rights and privileges in line with mainland Malays. The Malay press, especially *Utusan Melayu*,⁸ took up the cry. Tensions erupted into Malay-Chinese riots on 21 July when fights broke out during a Muslim procession on Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Rioting spread, and the whole island was placed under curfew but the disturbances continued for a week. By the time the curfew was lifted, 23 people had been killed and 454 injured. As normalcy began to slowly return, Indonesian agents—in furtherance of the ongoing armed confrontation against Malaysia—incited fresh communal violence, and on 3 September, provoked further bloody violence that killed 12 and injured 109. However, the opening events were initiated by Malays against Chinese in Kampong Amber and Paya Lebar.⁹

The Tunku and Lee agreed in late September 1964 to avoid for two years any public discussion of sensitive issues and stop public recrimination between the two governments. But by the end of 1964, Lee was being labelled a communalist and an enemy of Malaysia. The PAP, in response, doubled down on its call for a “Malaysian Malaysia” that did not favour any one community. Partly in response to an UMNO announcement that it intended to overhaul the Singapore chapter of the UMNO Alliance (SUMNO) to end PAP rule in Singapore by 1967, on 9 May 1965, the PAP inaugurated the Malaysian

Solidarity Convention, a united front of Malaysian opposition parties including political groups from Sabah, Sarawak and Malaya. The avowed objective of the convention was to establish a Malaysia that was not identified with the supremacy, well-being or the interests of any one particular community or race, and to fight for the ideal of a Malaysian Malaysia. The response from the Alliance was to warn of interracial strife, of the threat of the PAP seeking to remove Malay rulers, and to urge the central government to either detain PAP MPs or evict Singapore from Malaysia.

At the opening of the Malaysian parliament on 27 May 1965, the Yang di-Pertuan Agung made reference to an unspecified enemy within, but the UMNO backbenchers chose to explicitly portray the PAP as a Chinese communal party and Lee Kuan Yew became the target of sharp criticism. As it happened, Ong Eng Guan, the member for Hong Lim in the Singapore parliament suddenly resigned on 16 June that year. In a straight fight between Lee Khoon Choy of the PAP and Ong Chang Sam of the Barisan Sosialis in the by-elections held on 10 July, the Malaysian Malay press, hitherto a bitter enemy of the Barisan, came out in open support of Ong. Lee Khoon Choy won the Hong Lim seat. The political and communal atmosphere worsened. While in London for a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, the Tunku was notified that communal tensions were building up again and he came under pressure for strong action against the PAP. As a matter of fact, there had already been serious discussions between Singapore leaders and Tun Razak, then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, from 29 June but, against the backdrop of the Malaysian Solidarity Convention (MSC) strengthening Lee Kuan Yew's hand, these had been confrontational rather than conciliatory, with pressure being exerted by both sides. On 13 July, Singapore Finance Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee met with Tun Razak and openly suggested disengagement as the only way to stop a head-on collision. On 20 July, Dr Goh met Tun Razak again together with Tun Ismail bin Abdul Rahman, Minister for Internal Security, and reached an agreement (in consultation with Lee Kuan Yew, Lim Kim San and E.W. Barker), and he persuaded Tun Razak that the only way out was for Singapore

to secede completely. The Tunku was duly notified, and he authorized Tun Razak to finalize the terms of separation. On 5 August, the Tunku stopped in Singapore at the Paya Lebar Airport where he was met by UMNO supporters denouncing Lee Kuan Yew. The Tunku was later to say that while he was convalescing from shingles in London, he had had plenty of time to think things through and had come to the conclusion that the only viable option to preventing chaos was to evict Singapore from the union. On 6 August, Dr Goh, Barker, Tun Razak, Tun Ismail, Tan Siew Sin and V. T. Sambanthan (Malaysian Minister for Telecommunications and Works) signed the agreement just after midnight. On 7 August, the Tunku wrote formally to Dr Toh in the latter's capacity as the Chairman of the PAP. On 9 August, the Federal Parliament passed the bill approving the separation with 126 in favour and none against. Singapore representatives were absent. On the same day, Lee Kuan Yew issued the proclamation making Singapore a sovereign and independent nation.

Other than the resignation¹⁰ on 11 August, in a fit of pique of Sayed Ja'far bin Hassan Albar, the Secretary General of UMNO, the expulsion was conducted with utmost civility, to the point where it would not have been out of place for Singapore to be grateful to the federal government. Malaysia was the first country to recognize Singapore's independence and to sponsor Singapore for membership in the United Nations, and with the Kingdom of Jordan, to the British Commonwealth. Moreover, Article V of the Separation Agreement of 7 August 1965 expressed agreement to enter into a treaty of external defence and mutual assistance, and provided for a Joint Defence Council to be established. The Malaysian government would assist Singapore within reason in external defence. But the Malaysian government would have the right to continue to maintain the bases and facilities currently used by its military forces and to use them as the Malaysian government considered necessary for the purpose of external defence.¹¹

Under these circumstances, together with the presence of Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom (ANZUK) bases in Singapore (at the time with no hint of termination), the Singapore government may have been a little precipitate to initiate a military build-up as early

as October 1965, though such a build-up would hardly have been possible overnight. Perhaps the trauma of rejection and the vaporization of a pan-Malaysian vision as well as ominous rumours that there were Malaysian leaders contemplating the reattachment by force, if necessary, of Singapore sans its current political leadership probably left a bitter grievance. Lee Kuan Yew was rumoured to have spent two to three weeks after the expulsion at one of the Changi holiday chalets in a black, un-consolatory mood. He also nursed the suspicion that a deeper game was afoot: he saw in the offer of Brigadier Syed Mohamad bin Syed Ahmad, the commander of the Malaysian Fourth Infantry Brigade stationed in Singapore under Malaysian terms before the separation, to supply motorcycle outriders to escort him to the first opening of the Singapore Parliament in December 1965, the possibility that Malaysia wanted to “remind us and foreign diplomats who would be present that Malaysia was still in charge in Singapore.”¹² Being of Singapore origin, the brigadier may well have been honouring his original homeland instead for having attained independence. Or perhaps, Dr Goh, an acknowledged polymath, saw an irresistible opportunity to indulge in a lifetime preoccupation with military activities. Shortly after the expulsion, he had promptly offered to switch from the Ministry of Finance to take over the home affairs and defence portfolio.

But setting up the Singapore Armed Forces (in lieu of the Singapore Military Forces with its roots in the Singapore Volunteer Corps dating back to 1854 and its two regular infantry battalions under the British in the 1950s to early 1960s) was to prove a political masterstroke. There is no denying the inescapable responsibility of a government to secure its independence and protect its physical assets, its citizens and its way of life. To do this, a disciplined organization with the capacity to apply deadly force needs to be made available. Traditionally, this would mainly have been a military force of paid, careerist volunteers, but inevitably they would comprise a combination of individuals of varied backgrounds from homicidal psychopaths to romantics to the lower strata of society with little alternative economic value, possibly those that have the least vested interests in the survival of the community. On the other hand, it could be argued that it is a basic responsibility

of everyone who benefits from citizenship or permanent residency to be prepared to fight for the privilege. Dr Goh's initial template for the Singapore army (the air and naval components being on the backburner for the time-being because the British were still based in Singapore) was for a regular force of ten to twelve infantry battalions with supporting arms backed by a reserve force of volunteers to be mobilized as necessary. Mr Lee pushed instead for compulsory national service by all medically fit males within a specified age group for a limited full-time period followed by reserve service for a limited number of days per year commensurate with the envisaged total order of battle appropriate to the expected threat scenario.

The idea of a conscript army (eventually extending beyond the army to select components of the air force and navy) was an astute choice for Singapore, perhaps the only one. Singapore had limited manpower, and at the time of expulsion, its economic future looked bleak. A large all-regular military force would have been an exorbitant indulgence in upkeep and related service benefits, compared to drawing on, firstly, the obligation of citizens and permanent residents to defend their homeland, and secondly of the refreshing of troops with younger cohorts on a periodic basis, supported by a cadre of careerists to provide the training and upper levels of the command elements. In Singapore's case with its multiethnic population, barrack-room integration also provided an invaluable arena for nation-building among males (at least). The ethos would reach into practically every household. Nor was the PAP averse to the idea of bringing every male youth for significant periods of his life under military law, especially in the early stages of independence when the political climate was still turbulent. Also, of immediate, if short-term benefit, was the piggyback access the proposed "national service" provided through a planned provision for the enlistment of all new civil servants, returned scholars such as Colombo Plan scholars, and graduates of institutions of higher learning in Singapore, to man key appointments in the Ministry of Interior and Defence (MID) with high calibre personnel, despite the high dudgeon it produced among those directly affected. This would eventually segue into the cycle of enlistment as the enlistment age and demographics merged. And it

must also be added that in due course, there were many parents who expressed their appreciation for the discipline among their sons that a stint of barrack-room spit-and-polish imbued in them.

In the meantime, the Singapore Volunteer Corps (SVC), which had been absorbed into the Malaysian Territorial Army, had reverted to Singapore and would adopt the new nomenclature of the People's Defence Force (PDF). The Singapore government acknowledged from the outset a traditional Chinese aversion for the military. To remedy this, the government proceeded to expand the PDF and seed it with high-visibility personalities including MPs, civil servants, professionals and even a women's training wing under a comprehensive part-time service programme, including officer cadet and non-commissioned officer (NCO) training conducted at six training depots.

To kick things off, in February 1966, MID blitzed community centres, government offices, secondary schools and tertiary institutions with a glossy advertisement pamphlet entitled "Serve with Pride" for career officer training at an unspecified location in an as yet unbuilt establishment. It offered premium salaries at all levels of education—the basic being the school leaving certificate—up to an honour's degree in any field (from a recognized university). The response was overwhelming. Some 3,000 applied. After some basic "psychometric", physical and medical fitness tests and interviews, about 500 candidates were selected. A first cohort of 300 was sent to the yet un-named Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute at Pasir Laba in the far west of the island. The initials of the institute would in due course find a place in the national lexicon as "SAFTI" and eventually as "Safti". The first course would begin on 1 June 1966. The trainers would come from an "Instructors' Preparatory Course" under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Kirpa Ram Vij, and conducted by "advisors" from the Israeli Defence Force code-named "Mexicans" (in the worst-kept national secret in Singapore's history).

The first public inkling of conscription as such came when Dr Goh announced in November 1966 that all newly appointed government and statutory board male officers, subject to medical fitness, would do a stint of full-time military service. In February 1967, he tabled

legislation in parliament to amend the National Service Ordinance first passed by the British in 1952 (but withdrawn because of public outcry¹³). Mr Lee made the formal announcement on 21 February 1967 at the Toa Payoh Community Centre. The first cohort of 900 was enlisted on 17 August 1967, one month after the first cohort of career officers from the Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute was commissioned.

It is highly likely that the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) advisors contributed to the concept of national service as the IDF is based on universal conscription of both men and women. On the lookout for any international endorsement of the establishment of the state of Israel, Mordecai Kidron, the Israeli Ambassador to Thailand, had sought Lee Kuan Yew's agreement in 1962–63 to set up an Israeli consulate in Singapore, but Mr Lee had asked Kidron to hold on until Malaysia was inaugurated. When he accepted Dr Goh's spontaneous offer to take over as defence minister, Mr Lee authorized Dr Goh to contact Kidron about IDF support for setting up the Singapore Army. Kidron presented the Israeli proposals, but he was put on hold until India and Egypt politely declined their respective invitations—almost certainly made as an alibi for public consumption—following which Singapore accepted the IDF offer without making it public.¹⁴ There is no reason to imagine that either India or Egypt would have fitted the bill, especially when it would have been far more logical to approach the British who were already available in Singapore. Israel, on the other hand, had similar geopolitical circumstances as Singapore, had fought the British to a standstill in Palestine, and had rewritten the rules of asymmetrical warfare in the prevailing context. And probably of considerable satisfaction to Mr Lee was that choosing the IDF was a way of cocking a snook at the Malaysian government.

Regardless of the politics, Israel's contribution would prove to be seminal. The IDF helped to formulate the development of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) as a whole, the upgrading of the officer corps, the relationship between the civilian authority and the military, and crucially, operational doctrines which have survived to this day as something of a neural foundation of the SAF.

But the SAF was only one of the imperatives for the outcast republic. Even more critical was the economy. The Malaysia proposal had visualized Singapore as the “New York” of the federation and a common market, serving as an entrepot for the whole federation, with Kuala Lumpur as the “Washington”. Singapore, on the other hand, was dependent on its neighbourhood for nearly all its economic and commercial needs, particularly water-supply. The local agricultural sector was negligible. The British bases contributed up to 40 per cent of the GDP either directly or in terms of the local services they underwrote. Expulsion forced the government to dust off the economic expansion plans formulated when Singapore became self-governing in May 1959, among which were the development of the Jurong Industrial Estate, an Economic Development Board, joint ventures with foreign industries, shipbuilding, financial and communication hubs, and international trade (and, brilliantly, the clean-up of the Singapore River).

Kirpa Ram would have a part to play in several of these fields in the course of his working life.

Notes

1. In Peninsular Malaya, any citizen domiciled in any of the eleven states therein could stand for election to the federal parliament, though for state elections they had to be residents of the respective states.
2. In an interview with Professor Chan Heng Chee, a PAP Minister seems to have led her to conclude that “it appears that Lee Kuan Yew during the merger talks did give some form of promise to Alliance leaders that the PAP would not participate in the 1964 elections, but this was without prior discussions with other PAP leaders who therefore did not feel bound by Lee’s words.” Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Eastern Universities Press, Times Media Private Limited 2003), p. 287.
3. “... I had the strong impression that although the idea of contesting the next election had been under consideration, Lee’s own opinion tended to be against it. He was however, wobbly on the issue ...” T. K. Critchley, Australian High Commissioner, Kuala Lumpur, 1964. See Lau, *A Moment of Anguish*.
4. In line with the Democratic Action Party (DAP)’s stated position that it was not challenging UMNO, two of the eleven candidates fielded did not campaign when they found themselves in straight fights with UMNO candidates.

5. Daljit Singh and V. T. Arasu, eds., *Singapore: An Illustrated History, 1941-1984* (Information Division, Ministry of Culture 1984), p. 269.
6. “Baba” could be the descendants of mixed marriages between Chinese and Malays, and sub-continental and Malays and among themselves.
7. Based on an account to this writer provided by President Ishak’s aide-de-camp several years ago.
8. Utusan (renamed Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Berhad) and its print and online publications closed down on 21 August 2019 due to insolvency (*Straits Times*, 20 August 2019, p. A13). However, on August 22, UMNO injected funds to keep it operating.
9. Lau, *A Moment of Anguish*, p. 195.
10. It was subsequently reported by T. K. Critchley, the Australian High Commissioner, that Sayed Jaafar had actually been sacked because “he had played into Lee’s hands”. Lau, *A Moment of Anguish*, p. 279.
11. The Malaysian Royal Navy HQ, K.D. Malaya, was based in Singapore as also its naval basic training base K.D. Pelandok until 1984 when they were relocated to Lumut. Meanwhile, camps being used by the Malaysian Armed Forces under the Malaysia agreement would continue to be used by them until the troops were redeployed out of Singapore.
12. Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (Times Editions, Times Media Private Limited, 2000), p. 26.
13. In a court ruling related to the introduction of conscription of Australians by the British government in 1917, the verdict was that a colonial government did not have the right to conscript natives of a colony to defend its own vested interests.
14. The publicity blackout lasted until Kirpa Ram Vij announced the IDF involvement during his keynote text in the programme for the commissioning parade of the first cohort of cadets trained at SAFTI on 16 July 1967.