

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Ousted! An Insider's Story of the Ties That Failed to Bind.* By Patrick Keith. Singapore: Media Masters, 2005. Softcover: 198pp.**

This book is about the separation of Singapore and Malaysia from an insider who felt it was time to unshackle his “self-censorship” and to tell “a different way of approaching the separation story” (p. 3). It is true of any major political event that there will always be an enduring curiosity for new information. This book brought on such a curiosity to see if there are other facts on why Singapore and Malaysia parted company

The book is divided into three sections: eight sub-sections in Section 1, six in Section 2, and eight in Section 3. The events are well documented but the narratives do not run chronologically. The first section starts mid-stream of the Tunku's life, in 1965, while he recuperated at the Ritz Hotel in London. It went on to offer interesting snippets of his life as a young student in England and later as Malaya's first chief minister. The author relates an episode the Tunku had with Lee Kuan Yew, while he was recuperating in London, when Lee insisted that the exasperated Tunku sign at the back of an envelope to attest to an agreement (p. 24).

The next two sub-sections talk about the early days of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Alliance and Merdeka, Soekarno and *konfrontasi* (pp. 27–54). In the rest of the first section, the book talks about the Tunku's continuing problems with Indonesia, of the racial riots in Singapore, which the Tunku believed were instigated by the then Indonesia's ambassador to Malaysia, Lt. General Djatikusomo (pp. 57–58). The Tunku made regular visits to Singapore and, in one visit, told the leaders of the Singapore branch of the Alliance party that Lee Kuan Yew had challenged his leadership (p. 64). Lee had accused Dato' Syed Jaafar Albar, UMNO's secretary-general, for inciting

the Malays. Lee toured New Zealand and Australia to explain to them that “Malaysia was really worth defending” (p. 66).

In the last sub-section of Section 1, the book talks about more difficulties the Tunku had with Lee. The Tunku had taken umbrage with Lee’s alleged question on the indigeneity of the Malays. Despite Lee’s denial, the Tunku and his associates were unrelented, and UMNO demanded Lee’s arrest (pp. 70–72).

The first sub-section of Section 2 is about Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore, of Lee’s belief in merger with Malaysia, his fight against the communists and the rivalry he had with MCA’s chief and finance minister, Tan Siew Sin, for the support of the Chinese. The section also touches on Tan’s demand for Singapore to cough out a bigger financial contribution to Malaysia’s coffers (pp. 84–85). The next chapter in this section is about the foray of the People’s Action Party (PAP) into Malaysia. Headlined “The PAP Trounced”, it talks about the PAP’s loss at its first election attempt in the Malaysian General Elections of 1964. The Tunku was upset with Lee for breaking a pact which called for the PAP to stay out of peninsular Malaysia’s general elections. Lee felt he was duty-bound to enter the elections to save the Chinese votes from going to the pro-communist Socialist Front, since the MCA had lost its grip on the Chinese. The PAP won only one seat (pp. 91–94).

The next sub-section describes Syed Jaafar Albar’s continuing diatribe against Lee, many of which were carried in *Utusan Melayu*. Lee retaliated with a rally attended by 101 Malay organizations which pledged their allegiance to Lee over Albar. Two days later, on 21 July 1964, racial riots erupted in Singapore (pp. 101–3). The next sub-section talks about the events following the riots, of Razak’s visit to Singapore, the apprehensions of Singapore’s Chinese business community, Lee’s meeting with the Tunku in Kuala Lumpur, and Lee’s presence at the Budget Session in Parliament.

The next section, sub-section 5 of Section 2, is headlined “The Ultras”, which is largely devoted to Lee’s battles with the “ultras”, namely, Syed Albar, Syed Nasir, Senu bin Abdul Rahman, and Khir Johari. This section retells the trip Lee made to Australia and New Zealand, reaffirming his belief in Malaysia, which was told on p. 66. The only difference, this time, is that the section has commentaries from Australian and New Zealand newspapers on Lee’s speeches. The following sub-sections relate to Lee’s troubles with Syed Albar and UMNO’s resistance against Lee’s continuing crusade for a Malaysian Malaysia. It also describes Lee’s exception to the speech made by the Agong, during the Royal Address at the opening of Parliament,

to which Razak said, “the gulf between the People’s Action Party and the Alliance [is] now wide and clear”. The press hinted of a partition (p. 132).

The final section of the book is divided into eight sub-sections. The first three sections are primarily on Tan Siew Sin, his confrontation and episodial accounts with Lee Kuan Yew. The fourth and fifth sub-sections relate to the Tunku’s decision to expel Singapore, which he made on 29 June 1965 while recuperating in London. He blamed Lee for the decision, partly for the latter’s ambition to be Malaysia’s prime minister and also for revving up discontent among the students in the United Kingdom and the British press (p. 169).

The Tunku’s decision was not exactly shrouded in secrecy nor made in isolation. Dr Ismail had visited the Tunku at the London clinic; so did Lim Kim San, Singapore’s Minister for National Development to whom the Tunku had apparently “opened his heart” and to whom the Tunku said, “I took him into my confidence. No one can say that Singapore was not kept in the know” (p. 169). On 1 July the Tunku penned a letter to Razak and told him of his decision to expel Singapore and asked him for his concurrence. Razak’s reply of 22 July said his cabinet colleagues were in full agreement.

In the penultimate sub-section, it says the Tunku wrote to Razak on 25 July with instructions to draw up the legal papers for separation. Razak cabled back that he would table the separation bill on 9 August on a certificate of urgency. On the same day, Razak toured a Malay area in Singapore and did not let on what was to befall Singapore. He even offered a conciliatory overture to Lee that “the state and central governments work together ... for the people” (p. 184). It is possible that Lee knew as his rhetoric on Malaysian Malaysia had become more vitriolic, “we must say it openly and loudly — that all Malaysians are owners of Malaysia...” (p. 184). Lee probably thought there was still a chance to salvage the loss because he was still to meet the Tunku on 7 August in Kuala Lumpur, two days after the Tunku’s return. He held further hope also because the Tunku had told a group of well-wishers in Singapore, when his flight landed there en route to Kuala Lumpur on 5 August, that he would try to settle differences with Lee (p. 185).

The last sub-section of Section 3, appropriately titled “The Final Act’, retraced the Tunku’s movements to 5 August and his talks with senior cabinet colleagues on 6 August, the date the final decision was taken. It also has a reprint of the Tunku’s letter to Dr Toh Chin Chye, undated but highly likely written on 7 August. It also has a reprint of Dr Toh’s reply (pp. 188–89).

On 9 August 1965, Lee Kuan Yew stood on the steps of City Hall and announced the separation. Singapore would remember the historic moment when, later that day, he cried on television outpouring his anguish at being separated from Malaysia. A section on Alex Josey, a Lee confidante, has no relevance to the separation issue. It also talks about the expulsion of Josey from Malaysia for "... indulging in the internal politics of our country" (p. 178). It also talks about rumours alleging demand by the "ultras" for Lee's arrest.

### *Comments*

The book promised much but delivered little. The blurb at the back of the book promises a less-restrained account than previous studies, of "carefully-drawn sentiments", by academics. It is hardly a tell-all, and much has already been said elsewhere. The lack of references makes it difficult to separate commentary from fact. The absence of chronology also makes it difficult to follow the events. While the blurb says the "this book deals, even-handedly ...", it is injudiciously biased in several parts.

So, why review it? Firstly, it is the author, his near-hallowed position of being in the know and so close to the major actors. It makes for enticing reading. Book reviews often steer clear from material that has little or no academic merit and sit outside the conventional box of intellectual discourse. However, if we hold on to this rigid view, we would reject most autobiographies, first-person accounts, and oral histories. The author has not intended this book to be scholarly research.

Secondly, this book is different and not unimportant. It is not a book for readers unfamiliar with Malaysian and Singapore histories. Despite lacking in references, the book is factually correct and has an accurate account of events as they unfolded. What is particularly interesting in the book are snippets of information that have been given scant attention in other publications, for example, the episode on the "historical envelope" (p. 24), the Tunku's humiliation at the hands of the British (pp. 12–15), and the Tunku confiding his thoughts of separation to Lim Kim San (p. 169). It is a pity that the author did not reproduce his notes verbatim as this would have lent not only a primary historical source but also some sense of chronology of the events.

The greatest difficulty in reviewing the book is having to come to terms with the author's conclusions on some episodes. The difficulty stems from the lack of rational argument which seems to be the pattern

throughout the book. For instance, the author says Lee believed that UMNO and the PAP could work together (p. 49). He surmised too that Lee regarded himself and the Tunku as “two leaders meeting on equal terms” (p. 51), but he had on p. 54 quoted Lee as acknowledging the Tunku as leader. If the former is a commentary it would be helpful if the author had explained why Lee had thought himself as equal to the Tunku. Was it Lee’s ambition to be prime minister or was it his push for a Malaysian Malaysia the *raison d’être* for separation? He did not say.

The author was clearly sympathetic of Lee and of Singapore’s position. The very title of the book “Ousted” conveys an image of a Lee forced out. His copious praises of Lee include: ‘his dynamism could ignite bonfires of enthusiasm and support beyond Singapore (p. 41); ‘Lee’s oratory was matchless ... skilful use of words ... annihilate an opponent ... he could use words gently ... preach a sermon in solemn ringing tones ... employ a surgeon’s knife to dissect and analyse the most complex problem (p. 79); ‘he could often turn them to his advantage ... to produce pungent phrase ... the very nub of headlines’ (p. 80), and so forth. This contrasted with the less than kind account of Syed Albar and Tan Siew Sin, and in parts even condescending of the Tunku (p. 159).

With some restructuring and chronology, I think this book will be a much better read. This comment should, perhaps, be more appropriately directed to the publisher.

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