



To Catch a Tartar: A Dissident in Lee Kuan Yew's Prison by Francis T. Seow

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BOOK REVIEW

Francis T. Seow, *To Catch a Tartar: A Dissident in Lee Kuan Yew's Prison* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, Monograph 42, 1994) 293 pp. \$22.00. Paperback.

This book provides a personal account of the circumstances that led to the arrest, mistreatment, and detention of a member of Singapore's elite class, Francis T. Seow, under the Internal Security Act (ISA) of Singapore. Through this narrative, Seow comments on executive interference in the Singapore judiciary, outlines the operations and philosophy of the Internal Security Department (ISD) and its officers, provides personal testimony on the political style of Lee Kuan Yew, describes the strategies employed by the People's Action Party (PAP) to neutralize its political opponents, supplements existing literature on Singapore's "Marxist Conspiracy," and reveals the state of civil and political rights in Singapore.

This book can be roughly divided into two parts. The first part sketches the author's early relationship and eventual fallout with Prime Minister Harry Lee Kuan Yew. The second part provides a detailed description of Seow's mistreatment during detention, the workings of the ISD, and the attempt by its officers to establish a US "connection."

The selection of early episodes describes how Seow's services as a public prosecutor were used to secure the criminal conviction of political opponents of the PAP such as trade unionist Jamit Singh. These events also reveal how

Lee's personal interference in the appointments within the judiciary secured for Seow his promotion to solicitor-general. However, these episodes take a sudden twist when the symbiotic relationship between the two deteriorates into a relationship of confrontation. Seow was elected President of the Law Society in 1986 after leaving the public service for private practice in 1980. The confrontation between Lee and Seow began when the Law Society, under the leadership of Seow, began to criticize parliamentary legislation, in particular the proposed Newspaper and Printing Press Amendment. The friction between Lee and Seow increased when the latter stood up to Lee during the Select Committee hearings on proposed amendments to the Legal Professions Act. These events were followed by Seow's involvement in securing the release of the alleged "Marxist Conspirators." The author suggests that the above incidents and his desire to contest the 1988 elections were responsible for his eventual detention under the ISA.

The remainder and bulk of the book describes in detail what the former President of Singapore, Devan Nair, summarizes in the foreword as the psychological torment that Seow endured during detention.

Systematic sleep deprivation, continuous interrogation over sixteen hours by strident, foul-mouthed intelligence officers, while standing barefoot in flimsy clothing on a cold cement floor in a freezing room under the skin-blistering and eye de-moisturising glare of spotlights, unlimited solitary confinement. . . .

Seow also tells the reader in this part of the narrative that, in order to legitimize the PAP government's detention of the author in the eyes of the public, an attempt was made to erect a connection between Seow and certain US diplomats. By establishing that Seow had been subjected to foreign manipulation, a case could be made for Seow's detention to protect the integrity of Singapore's political system. A similar theme of foreign intervention by US human rights groups and media is currently being pursued by the PAP against Dr. Chee Soon Juan, Secretary General of the Singapore Democratic Party.

As personal memoirs, this book has posed some difficult questions as to the veracity of its contents. Some reviewers have criticized the book for being one-sided. Other reviewers have embraced the book as a poignant critique of Singapore politics. It is evident from the text that the author has attempted to cross-reference many points, especially where he rebuts the claims of the Singapore government. Nevertheless, only the author can verify a substantial amount of information contained in the text. The question of verifiability is a difficult one to resolve given the special case of Francis Seow and his confrontation with the PAP government. However, the circumstances of Seow's case, the related testimonies contained in Devan Nair's foreword, and the declarations of the detainees and of the human rights reports, make the book more convincing and essential reading on Singapore politics.

I distance myself from the issue of verifiability and part company with the rest of the reviewers to address what I regard as the essence of the book: a statement on the status of civil and political rights in Singapore. This book brings into focus the question of human

rights in Singapore, in particular civil and political rights. It is the civil and political rights of individuals and groups, more than any other rights, that are most affected by the PAP government's responses towards citizens' involvement in Singapore's political system. Take for instance the case of Singapore's well-known short-story writer Catherine Lim whose two commentaries in the *Straits Times* led to censure by the current Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong. Goh said that those who comment on politics should join political parties and be prepared to be held accountable for their statements. More recently he has said that if professionals want to comment on politics they should form political clubs. Goh's comments do not seem to recognize that the citizens have the right to engage in political discourses because they are members of the political system. Instead, the Singapore government continuously attempts to confine the individual's political expression and participation. The right to differ politically, outside the formal political forum, is not tolerated.

This nonrecognition of civil and political rights represents the most flagrant abuse of human rights in Singapore. Although groups like Amnesty International have criticized the hanging of drug traffickers and murder convicts (the most recent controversy being the Flor Contemplacion case) and the flogging of American teenager Michael Fay, most Singaporeans would not consider these actions to be human rights abuses. Instead, they would consider the detention of political activists under the ISA to be the most pressing human rights abuse in Singapore. Most Singaporeans would perceive hanging of drug traffickers and murder convicts as punishment commensurate with the crimes. The caning of Michael Fay also would be seen in

this light, especially because the local press highlighted US support of the Singapore government's caning of the teenager. Further, most people in Singapore would agree that any of the rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially economic rights, have been fulfilled. However, it is the arrest and detention of those who engage in political activities against the PAP, as was the case with Francis Seow, that reveal the abuse of civil and political rights. This type of abuse has recently upset many Singaporeans.

Nonetheless, issues like the death penalty, caning, and violations of other rights in Singapore do fall within the rubric of human rights theory. However, the issue of civil and political rights must be addressed immediately in Singapore. Thus, the use of the term human rights, as the collation of different rights, must be applied to Singapore properly. The term has to indicate that the free expression of civil and political rights is currently the most relevant issue for the people of Singapore. In this respect, civil and political rights, and not human rights, would be the most appropriate label to explain the focus of individual rights in Singapore.

Lately, the whole notion of civil and political rights, embedded within the liberal rights tradition, has become obscured, because the discourse of Asian values has come to dominate the discussion on rights in Singapore. The current argument is that the right to political participation falls under the Western liberal discourse and as such is not part of the Asian tradition. Thus, by extension, Western interpretation of rights as being universal can be duly ignored on the basis of cultural difference.

Such an understanding of rights calls into question whether the Singapore government can continue to justify the de-

nial of civil and political rights by using the argument of Asian values. Even if it can be shown that sections of Singapore society do agree with the PAP government and subscribe to Asian values when it comes to human rights, there are nevertheless some others who claim otherwise. This is evidenced by the increasing number of opposition votes in the last three general elections. Other evidence includes the existence of opposition in the face of adversity under the PAP government. Further, it overlooks the fact that, in the case of Singapore, Asian values have been very much a political construction. It is interesting to note that countries like Singapore that subscribe to the notion of nation-state (which is not an Asian tradition) choose to repress civil and political rights on the basis of Asian values. In this way Singapore's practices do not form part of any tradition. Finally, it also overlooks the philosophical debate that human rights are universal and can be consistent with communitarian, national, group, or cultural alternatives to social and political orders. If the notion of human rights is denied because it is "Western," then the only alternative that remains is to accept that the restrictions of civil and political rights are actually the practice of Asian values. This prompts us to ask the question: Does political repression make Asian societies better or is it just an excuse for incumbents to remain in power? If Asian values are used to deny human or civil and political rights, such denial does not reflect cultural values, but a selective practice of political philosophy.

Seow now lives in the United States, yet the Singapore government and Lee Yew still have him very much on their mind. Recently, the local media renewed its interest in Seow after he spoke at the Williams College debate about his

continued reservation on the independence of the judiciary in Singapore. However, the presence of Dr. Chee Soon Juan at the same debate has invoked a constant barrage by the PAP to get Dr. Chee to admit that he does not support Seow's viewpoint. Chee's silence on the issue has made the PAP government claim that Chee has endorsed Seow's viewpoints and is anti-Singaporean. This strategy against Chee seems to point towards inscribing onto Chee the very denial of political rights that Seow faced and narrates in this book.

Although the book under review is not readily available in Singapore bookshops as it has been "classified" by the Ministry of Information and the Arts, it sells well across the causeway. Many Singaporeans have uncharacteristically braved buying the book and bringing it into Singapore, while others, in spite of copyright laws, have made photocopies of the whole book. Most interested Singaporeans know the general existence of the book even through they might not have read it. People in Singapore are

more aware of Seow's book than two other books, also not available in Singapore bookshops, James Minchin's *No Man is an Island* and T. S. Selvan's, *The Ultimate Island (Lee Kuan Yew's Untold Story)*. These two books (published much earlier than Seow's book) give an insight into Lee's personality to suggest how he affects the state of civil and political rights in Singapore.

In conclusion, the high level of interest in Seow's book shows, in spite of the verifiability factor mentioned earlier, Singaporeans are attracted to those whose civil and political rights have been seen to be compromised by the PAP government. The book, judging from the interest the public has shown, has become a marker for the denial of civil and political rights in Singapore. It also reveals that the subject of human rights abuses in Singapore concerns primarily the non-recognition of civil and political rights of the citizenry.

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