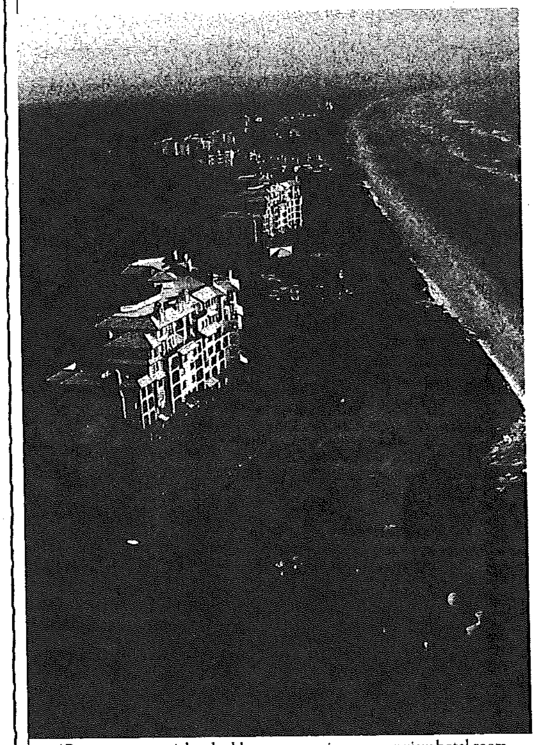
Most Singaporeans—eighty-seven per cent of them—live in the sterile government-built apartment towers, which in some areas stretch so far that there is bus service from one side of an apartment block to the other. From the outside, these apartment blocks could be taken for a New York City housing project: all buildings identical, each without a hint of architectural merit. But the resemblance to New York City ends at their doors, for inside they're immaculate—completely free of vandalism, graffiti, or litter. The explanation lies in the fact that ninety per cent of these units—and eighty per cent of Singapore's dwellings over all—are owned by the families who live in them, and people aren't going to let the value of their investment drop because the building isn't kept up. The Singapore government builds the towers and then offers the apartments for sale, allowing the buyers to use their Central Provident money for both the down payment and the monthly mortgage payment. A five-room apartment far away from the central city typically sells for around forty-five thousand dollars; a unit closer in costs at least fifty per cent more. An owner is free to sell the apartment after five years, and people who bought their apartments in the nineteen-seventies can now get somewhere between two and four times the original purchase price. Though the government has no love for those who depend on welfare, it isn't about to see impoverished people sleeping on Singapore's streets, so it rents some of the older, smaller apartments at heavily subsidized prices. Several hundred people—such as families in which the father has been arrested for drug peddling and the mother and children are left penniless—live in government housing free.

Creating a nation of homeowners has done more than keep the housing stock from deteriorating; it has also provided insurance against political or racial revolution, since those who rebel would be acting against their own economic interests. "Underneath everything is the housing policy," Mary Lee, a Singapore journalist, says. "An ordinary office worker can own his own apartment—a situation that would be the envy of anyone in the United States. The government decided that the way to keep the population quiet was to give everyone a stake." The housing situation isn't quite tidy enough,



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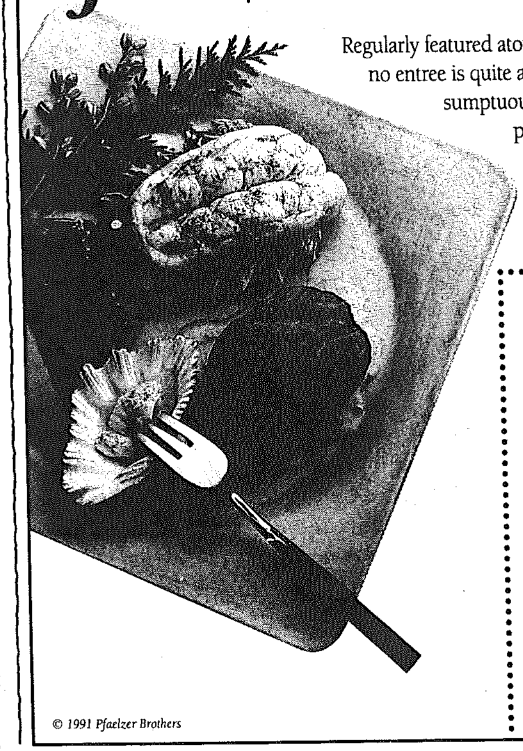

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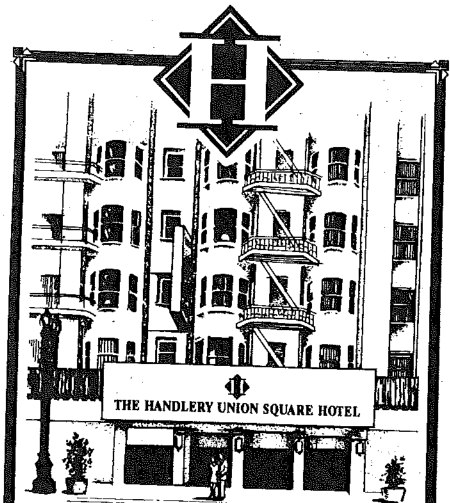
however, to deter the government's rulemakers from stepping in, as they do in almost every other aspect of Singapore life. A single person can buy only a small apartment, and in a less popular area, because "the government thinks if you make it easier for singles they won't get married, and we want to encourage them to have families," I was told by Lim Hng Kiang, then the chief executive officer of the Housing and Development Board. The government also sets size limits for dogs allowed to live in its apartment buildings. And, just in case the pride of homeownership is overwhelmed by an urgent situation, elevators in the apartment blocks are equipped with urine detectors. When the detector senses the ammonia in urine, it locks the elevator doors and activates a hidden camera. An alarm rings at the Housing and Development Board, and the police are dispatched. If the culprit is a child, the parents get a letter of warning. An adult finds himself faced with another of those stiff Singapore fines, and this one can amount to as much as twelve hundred and forty dollars. On occasion, moreover, the offender will discover his name, or even his picture, in the *Straits Times.* Perhaps fearing that the threat of a fine and unwanted publicity might not be enough, the government also tries to reason with its citizens. When I visited a housing project, I saw a large photographic exhibit on how to take proper care of elevators. One panel was captioned, "Urine causes the lift parts to corrode and makes the elevator smelly."

WHILE Singapore is hardly the entertainment center of Asia, it does offer one pleasant distraction from making money and obeying rules. On days off, families can take an aerial tramway to nearby Sentosa Island, a large and beautiful theme park. Sentosa Island features a wax museum depicting pioneers of Singapore, an old fort from colonial times, nature walks, formal gardens, birds, and displays of coral and butterflies. A monorail circles the island; the stops are numbered, and visitors get a brochure listing the attractions at each stop. The brochure, however, won't inform them about Sentosa Island's one permanent resident, who lives at Stop No. 6, in a guardhouse next to the old fort. Singaporeans seem to have little sense of irony, but tourists who happen upon him and hear his story are astonished to find such a man in a theme park. His name is Chia Thye Poh, and he is currently Singapore's only political prisoner—a man whose life bears a remarkable resemblance to that of Nelson Mandela.

No one guards Chia Thye Poh these days. He is free to receive visitors; his room in the guardhouse, though it is sparsely furnished, has a telephone, and he is confined to Sentosa Island only from 9 P.M. to 6 A.M. For this degree of freedom, however, Chia Thye Poh has paid a very high price—more than twenty-two years in jail. It's hard to envision Chia as an enemy of anyone, and he certainly doesn't seem a threat to the powerful nation of Singapore. When I visited him, I found a rail-thin man wearing black-rimmed glasses, shower sandals, and white shorts, who was soft-spoken, almost meek, and extraordinarily deferential. He showed a constant concern about my comfort—going to the fort's snack bar to get me a drink, moving my chair so that I would be more directly under the fan. Chia's deeply rooted graciousness and a total absence of ego made his story all the more poignant.

From 1963 to 1966, Chia, a university lecturer in physics, was a Member of Parliament from the Barisan Sosialis Party (*barisan* is a Malay word for "front"), a left-leaning group that had split with Lee Kuan Yew's P.A.P. over the issue of Singapore's joining the Malaysian Federation. "We wanted a genuinely democratic Malaysia, including Singapore," Chia said. "We fought for genuine parliamentary democracy, for a rule of law, not rule by one or two ministers. The PAP branded this as toeing the line of the Communist Party of Malaya. After the 1963 elections, three opposition M.P.s were arrested, and two more in 1966. There were hundreds of other arrests over those years, because many people went out to demonstrate. The government used all means to try to suppress the opposition. In October of 1966, the Barisan M.P.s resigned because of government harassment. Important issues like Singapore's withdrawal from the federation were never debated in Parliament, since Parliament had become a rubber stamp."

Three weeks after the resignations, Chia was one of the organizers of a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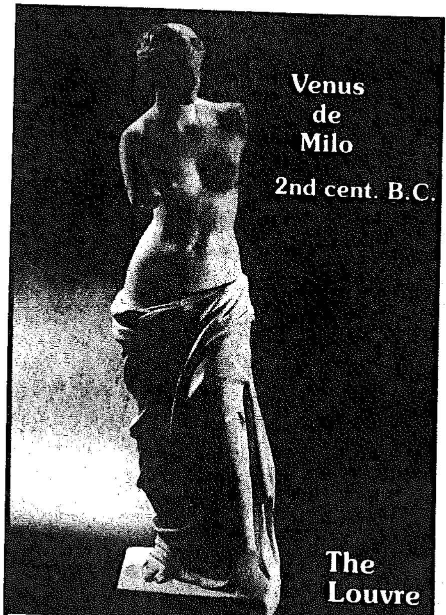

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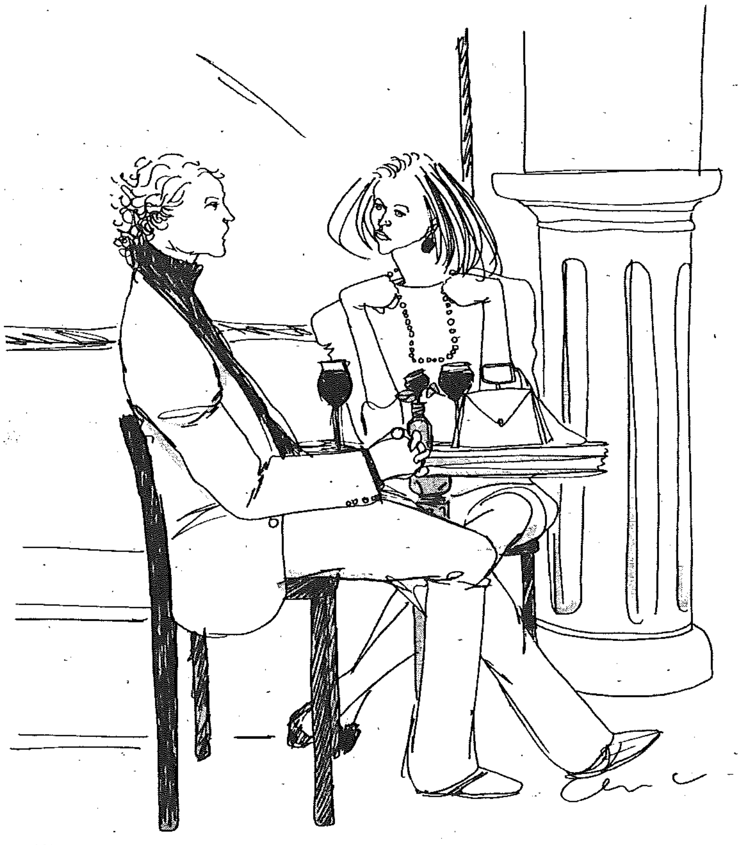
rally to protest the Vietnam War which took place on the eve of a visit to Singapore by President Lyndon Johnson. The rally marked Chia's last day of freedom. He was arrested in the course of the rally, under provisions of the Internal Security Act, which Singapore's government has used against hundreds of political opponents. The act, inherited from the British, allows detention for an unlimited number of two-year periods, without charges and without judicial review. "I was never charged, never brought to trial, never convicted of anything," Chia told me. Only nineteen years later, in 1985, did the government give its first official explanation for his arrest: the Minister of Home Affairs, in an address to Parliament, accused Chia of having infiltrated the Barisan Sosialis to destabilize the government through "Communist united-front activities." Chia told me, "They released no sort of documents. I have never been a member of any Communist Party; I was just performing my duties as an M.P. My activities were all legal, peaceful, and constitutional. I have never advocated violence, and have never been charged with any offense of violence, let alone convicted."

Chia, unlike most other political detainees in Singapore, resisted all attempts to extract a confession. "They tried very hard to break prisoners, to extract confessions from them, to have them confess on television," Chia said. "They made me pay a very high price for not kowtowing to them. In 1966, they put me in a dark cell and said some people had gone insane under such conditions. Sometimes you could hear people kicking the doors as if they had gone insane. I went from one prison to another, and was in solitary confinement several times. Sometimes I was deprived of reading material for months at a stretch. They said that there's no end to this, that it will go on year after year if I don't confess, that even if I'm made of steel they have means to break me. I told them that I had nothing to confess, and that if the government had evidence it should try me in open court, where I could see the evidence against me and defend myself. There were daylong interrogations in a freezing-cold room. They pressured my family. But I always thought, No matter how long they keep me this way, someday they will have to release me, because I'm innocent and I have support. It's part of the broad struggle for democracy all over the world. When you are in solitary, there is nothing in the cell. But you can explore, and see faint scribblings from previous prisoners. I still remember one of them. It was a poem in Chinese: 'Ten years behind bars /Never too late /Thousands of ordeals /My spirit steeled.' When you were alone and helpless, and you saw things like that, you were encouraged."

The parallel between Chia Thye Poh and Nelson Mandela, two prisoners of conscience accused of Communist subversion, is striking. Each was in jail for more than twenty years, at least part of the time confined to an island. Each had the opportunity to go free if he would abandon his political goals, and each refused. Chia said that the similarity wasn't lost on his interrogators. "They were telling me that Mandela remained in jail because he had lots of outside support," Chia said. "But they said there's no point in my remaining in jail, because no one remembers me. Mandela at least got a chance to defend himself in court, and now he's a free man. He can travel all over the world. He can take part in politics in South Africa, where the situation is far more tense than in Singapore. But I'm still not free. I don't know why the government should keep me here."

Singapore is clearly different from South Africa: the denial of rights is much more arbitrary, and has never been aimed exclusively at the Malay and Indian minorities. Nor is Singapore—as even some former political detainees pointed out when I interviewed them—like Argentina under the generals. "The government knows where to stop," I was told by one of these detainees, who asked not to be identified. "They don't shoot us. They don't maim us. They allow you rehabilitation after you're out." This man said that while he was in jail he was "stripped on and off, blindfolded for three days, kept in an underground windowless room that was very cold." He added, "They had an interrogator who could shout into my ears for twelve hours straight. But on the tenth day, when I was hyperventilating from the cold and the pressure, they rushed me to the hospital."

Yet, short of physical torture and disappearances at night, the human-rights record of the Singapore government much more resembles that of a Third World dictatorship than that of an industrial and technological powerhouse whose economy is intertwined with that of the West. Singapore is a prosperous nation with little racial animosity, no external threat, and a government that is genuinely popular, because of the economic growth it has brought. In the eyes



*"I wish we could hang out more, too. But, as you know, in addition to the earth, the sun, and the moon, there is now also Rhoda."*

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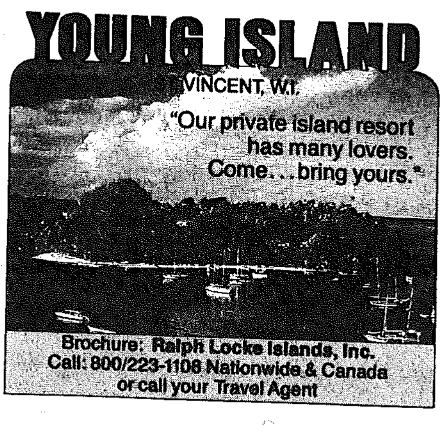

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of many Westerners, Singapore should have achieved political, cultural, and social freedom as an inevitable companion to the high level of economic development. But Singapore's record lags not only in contrast to the records of Western democracies but also when it is compared with the records of its neighbors, who have their own problems with human rights. Singapore manages to control its citizens more pervasively than does Indonesia, a country that has known bloody repression. It allows its press less freedom than does Thailand, even now, almost a year after that nation's democratically elected government fell to a military coup. The city of Penang, in Malaysia—a nation that has its own Internal Security Act and whose government frequently takes heavy-handed action against political opponents—is filled with public-interest groups that freely criticize the government, but such groups have never been allowed to exist in Singapore.

Several studies of human rights in Singapore have produced substantial evidence that the rule of law has on many occasions fallen victim to the whim of government. In July of 1989, the Committee on International Human Rights of the New York City Bar Association visited Singapore to prepare a report financed by the Ford Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation. The report, released in December of 1990, amounts to a devastating indictment. "What emerges from this review is a government that has been willing to decimate the rule of law for the benefit of its political interests," the report states. "Lawyers have been cowed to passivity, judges are kept on a short leash, and the law has been manipulated so that gaping holes exist in the system of restraints on government action toward the individual. Singapore is not a country in which individual rights have significant meaning." The United States government, although it is a close ally of Singapore, has also sharply criticized its human-rights record. The State Department's latest human-rights report, issued in March of 1991, presents an extensive catalogue of abuses. It speaks of "political control of the press, courts, and religion," and points to "credible reports" of mistreatment of detainees and "surveillance of opposition or dissident figures as well a some religious leaders."

Singapore abolished trial by jury in 1969, and judges, according to the State Department report, "have close ties to the Government and its leaders" and "are beholden to the Government for their appointments." In December of 1988, a Singapore appellate court ruled against the government, ordering the release of four prisoners detained under the Internal Security Act. The next month, Parliament amended the constitution to eliminate judicial review of Internal Security Act detentions, and the amendment was made retroactive to 1971. In 1990, Parliament passed what is called the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, giving the government power to arrest religious workers who it feels are engaging in politics; this act also barred judicial review of their cases. Persons caught breaking into a house or stealing a car, and perpetrators of several other crimes, are subject to lashes with a cane as well as prison; in 1989, the government also decided to cane illegal immigrants. The Bar Association report describes the procedure: "When the rattan hits the bared buttocks, the skin disintegrates, leaving initially a white line and then a flow of blood. The victim must lie on his front for three weeks to a month because the buttocks are so sore."

The feeling of intimidation is increased by laws that are kept on the books but are not enforced, since they could be at any time. During the Vietnam War years, when long hair was connected with drugs and dissent, Singapore police would pull long-haired youths off the streets for involuntary haircuts. Though the regulation against "hair reaching below an ordinary shirt collar" remains, it is now violated by many young Malays. Though homosexuality can be punished by anything up to life imprisonment, one of the largest discothèques becomes male-only every Sunday night, and hundreds of young gay Chinese men gather there to dance and to flirt—but such activities are kept discreet. Though prostitution is illegal, three streets are lined with brothels, and the government requires all prostitutes to get a venereal-disease check every two weeks and an HIV test every three months. Many Singaporean men, however, prefer to violate Thailand's prostitution laws.

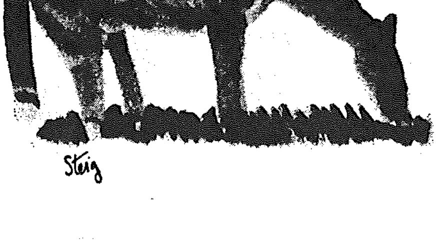
Opponents of the government have a difficult life in Singapore. The State Department report charges that in the universities "tenure and renewal of appointments can be, and have been, refused to academics whose work deviates from government views." It also points to "substantial evidence that the authorities conduct clandestine searches of the baggage of opposition figures in the airport baggage-handling area." Demonstrations, except for those supporting the government, almost never occur in Singapore. In fact, except for social gatherings, assemblies of more than five people in public must have police permission. When I interviewed Prime Minister Goh, the government had just announced sharp tuition increases for the universities. I asked him why students wouldn't be allowed to unfurl a banner requesting that the increases be scaled back. "If you allow students to do so, then workers will begin to do so over the slightest grievance," Goh replied. "And if you have several such demonstrations, right away the impression is created that government is not in control of the situation—that the place may became unstable. That will have an impact on foreign investors."

In the area of human rights, the Bar Association committee sees a design resembling that of the former Marxist governments of Eastern Europe. "A basic strategy of the totalitarian governments that were recently toppled in Eastern Europe was to keep society atomized, to keep discontent something that can be whispered among friends but that cannot be transformed into a social movement because people are too fearful to join together as a political force," the report says. "This effort to prevent the formation of a civil society has been the principal strategy of the Singapore government."

When I interviewed a member of the political opposition, he called Singapore "a city of fear." There is much evidence to support this characterization. For instance, in 1990 Russell Heng, who is now a researcher for the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, wrote a study on Singapore which was called "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Wealth" and was financed by the Rockefeller Foundation. "Two years ago, a Cabinet Minister urged academics and professionals to speak up," he noted in the study. "But when two reporters tried to get the reaction of eighteen of them to the Minister's encouragement, six preferred to keep their views to themselves. Of the remaining twelve, six spoke only on condition of anonymity." Heng also observed that "talking to people for this essay brought some firsthand experience of the irrational fear which exists even among the best-educated Singaporeans," and noted, "One example would be those who rejected phone interviews. Yet others spoke in measured tones and then sent word in a roundabout way to say that they would have said things differently if they were not speaking on the phone."

I asked a high-ranking Singapore official about this climate of fear. The official seemed to have been anointed the house critic of the Singapore government, for he had frequently offered criticisms without repercussion, and in reply to my questions he characterized the attitude of Singaporeans as "Play it safe," and explained, "If you're not sure, don't do it. This syndrome breeds sycophancy. Our friends point out to us that all critics of government are not treated as generously as I am." But, later, the official in effect confirmed his own observation by asking that his name not be used in the article.

I saw several examples of the pervasive fear in my month in Singapore. On two occasions, when I met opponents of the government at hotels for lunch they pointed to people in the lobby and said they were agents of the I.S.D. who were watching us. (I doubted it, figuring that the Singapore government was too competent to allow its security agents to be detected so easily.) Another time, I interviewed an American in the publishing business in Singapore. He later called back, apologizing profusely, to say that he was about to buy an apartment, but first he wanted to know if I was planning to quote him as saying anything critical, because he feared that any such remark would result in his expulsion from the country. And one day, when I beeped my answering machine in Berkeley from my Singapore hotel room, I found a message giving me a phone number in Singapore to call. "Don't identify yourself in any way," the message said. "Just make an appointment to have lunch." I followed the instructions, and found myself meeting an establishment journalist. All during lunch, as this journalist described repression in Singapore, he kept glancing nervously over his shoulder, as if he thought he was about to be snatched away. "I never ask questions at press conferences, because if you do they take note of you," he told me. "A number of journalists have lost their jobs." This man held such a negative view of Lee Kuan Yew that he predicted, "There will be a Nuremberg trial in Singapore if Lee loses power—I'm absolutely convinced of it. I see him in no different position from the Shah of Iran or Marcos. Each and every 'Communist' he has detained is not a Communist but an effective political opponent."

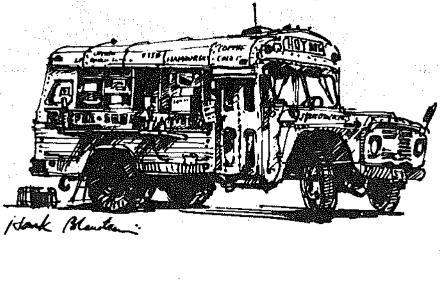


The climate of intimidation in Singapore was fuelled by a series of events that began in 1987, when the government initiated a crackdown that eventually included actions against Catholic church workers, a prominent attorney who had been Solicitor General of Singapore, and a diplomat at the American Embassy, who was summarily expelled from the country. These actions seemed to Westerners, at least, to make little sense, because they came at a time when the government appeared to be under no threat whatsoever, from either domestic or foreign opponents; few people could imagine that the political opposition would win more than four or five of the eighty-one seats in Parliament in the September, 1988, elections, since it then held only two seats. The crackdown began in May and June of 1987, when the government arrested and detained under the Internal Security Act twenty-two young social activists, several of them Catholic lay workers. The alleged local ringleader was Vincent Cheng, a former seminarian who had been involved in church-related activities for more than a decade; at the time of his detention, Cheng was helping Filipino women who had been brought to Singapore as maids and then mistreated. The government contended that the twenty-two were part of a "Marxist conspiracy to subvert the existing social and political system in Singapore through Communist united-front tactics to establish a Communist state." The New York City Bar Association committee investigated these arrests, and its report charges that the detainees were subjected to prolonged sleep deprivation and extended exposure to cold, and that at least seven suffered physical abuse in the form of blows and slaps. By the end of 1987, Singapore's television viewers had been treated to their videotaped confessions, which the Bar Association contends were heavily edited, and all but Vincent Cheng had been freed. The terms of their release included a provision that they would not associate with one another in the future. When a British lawyer active in defending Singapore dissidents took some of them to a restaurant, the Bar Association report states, each had to sit at a separate table, and he rotated among them.

In April of 1988, nine of the original detainees released a public statement describing their mistreatment in prison and declaring that they had been advocating more democracy and freedom, not a Communist state. Eight of the signers of that statement were rearrested the same day; the ninth was out of the country. The government, which loves to pounce on its victims with the claws of convoluted logic, said that it made these arrests because the former detainees were now claiming innocence, and therefore they hadn't been properly rehabilitated and might still be a danger to the state. This time, the government also put Patrick Seong, one of the lawyers for the detainees, in jail for a month; Seong had been handling his first case outside his usual field, commercial litigation, having agreed to represent several of the defendants because they couldn't find an experienced lawyer willing to take the risk. Seven of the eight who were rearrested quickly agreed to repudiate their public statement, and they signed the equivalent of affidavits reaffirming the truth of their previous confessions. According to the Bar Association's report, the affidavits meant that they would be in criminal jeopardy if they ever tried to issue a contrary statement in the future. But the eighth, a lawyer named Teo Soh Lung, who had founded a legal-aid group for criminal defendants, refused. Instead, she filed a writ of habeas corpus, and for her rebellion she had to stay in jail two more years. Teo and Vincent Cheng were finally released in June of 1990.

Cheng, rehabilitated, now works in Singapore as a foot reflexologist; foot massage, many Singaporeans believe, promotes healing and relieves stress. I wanted to interview Cheng but found that there was a Catch-22. A vaguely worded clause in his release agreement indicated that he would have to get permission from the Internal Security Department for any interview. But the mere act of applying to the I.S.D. could mean that he hadn't been sufficiently rehabilitated, since he still wanted to talk about the past. Consequently, he could be sent back to jail.

Instead, I set about trying to see a videotape of Cheng's confession, which had been televised by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation in 1987. The response I got to this request illustrated the observation about Singapore's climate of fear. An SBC producer informed me that permission would have to come from the Prime Minister's press secretary; the press secretary, however, said that he would have to take it to the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Information and the Arts, who was the agency's highest-ranking civil servant. Finally, permission was granted, and one journalist told me privately that he was certain Lee Kuan Yew himself had actually made the decision. Several days later, I sat in a room of the SBC building witnessing an astonishing event. On the tape, four journalists, including a Malay and an Indian, asked Cheng a series of questions about Marxist connections. Although they had pens and notebooks, and the camera switched to them frequently, I never saw any of them taking a note. The sound quality and the picture sequence constantly changed, as if pieces of tape had been spliced, and at one point Cheng's voice wasn't synchronized with his lips. Cheng, thin and frail-looking and soft-spoken, readily confessed to a series of connections with various leftist groups. Some of his answers sounded ludicrously stilted. At one point, he said, "My leftist thinking always left me biased against multinationals. What I didn't understand was whether Singapore can exist without multinationals' contributing to our economy. . . . During my detention, I was given the opportunity to understand Singapore better. I realized I needed to be more positive, to contribute to Singapore." At another point, he noted, "I realize it is very important I take into account the reality of Singapore—Singapore's vulnerability, for example." A friend of Cheng's told me later, "The only way he could protest against this forced interview was to comb his hair in the opposite direction, as a sign it wasn't him."



After seeing the tape, I interviewed a man who, years before Cheng, had also had to make a confession on television about his leftist connections. I mentioned the eerie feeling I'd had in watching Cheng's confession—the feeling that I could just as easily have been in Berlin in 1938, or in Moscow in 1952. The man, who had agreed to the interview on the condition that I not identify him, bridled. "The public confession is very Chinese," he said. "Not to get at the offender but to give a lesson to the audience. It would be a grave insult to Singaporeans if you took the form of these detentions and confessions and simplistically looked at it in your own cultural context. Then it becomes almost Nazi-like behavior; you lump it with North Korea. But when you live here, you realize that Singapore is authoritarian but not by any means totalitarian. The idea is to humiliate people. It's the act of humiliation, not the content of the confession, that is important, to serve as a warning to others."

Cheng and the other social activists were not the only victims of the 1987-1988 crackdown. Another was Francis Seow, who ended up in the United States, his career in Singapore shattered. Seow had been a close associate of Lee, serving as Solicitor General from 1969 to 1972, and, starting in 1985, as the president of the Law Society, Singapore's equivalent of the American Bar Association. Under Seow's leadership, the Law Society assumed an increasingly independent role, commenting on proposed legislation—a function that the government then outlawed, in 1986. Early in 1988, Seow broke with the government and planned to run for Parliament as an opposition candidate. In May of that year, however, he appeared in court to represent Teo Soh Lung, the one dissident who wouldn't bow to the government, and Patrick Seong, the lawyer for the eight dissidents who himself had been arrested. Hours after his court appearance, Seow was arrested, charged with being in "close contact" with an American Embassy diplomat, the political officer E. Mason Hendrickson. Singapore's government expelled Hendrickson from the country, alleging that he had been meeting with anti-government lawyers "to manipulate and instigate Singaporeans, in order to bring about a particular political outcome." (Seow says that his first meeting with Hendrickson was actually to arrange a cocktail party for visiting American judges.) The government released Seow after seventy-two days, in time for him to run for Parliament but not to organize a broad opposition movement. In the September elections, the P.A.P. took all but one seat, the sole elected opposition member being a lawyer named Chiam See Tong. Seow, however, finished high enough to win a "non-constituency seat"—a special seat with limited voting rights. (To make sure that Parliament had the window dressing of at least a token opposition, the government had created these special seats for opposition candidates who came closest to winning. They would be doled out as necessary to bring the number of opposition members to three.) The government then delayed the opening of Parliament for five months, saying that its building needed renovation. By the time Parliament finally opened, Seow, who was in the United States for treatment of a heart problem, had been convicted in absentia for tax evasion and fined an amount sufficient to bar him under the law from taking his seat.

"The moment I stepped back into Singapore, I would probably be getting off the plane and into prison," Seow told me from his current home, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Lee Kuan Yew is extremely clever. I was definitely a political prisoner; the attention of human-rights groups all over the world could be riveted on my case. But if he could shift it onto the criminal plane, tax evasion, he could say that it had nothing to do with human rights. They say I evaded paying my taxes, in that I submitted a false return. That is completely untrue."

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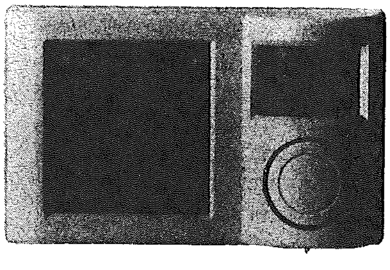

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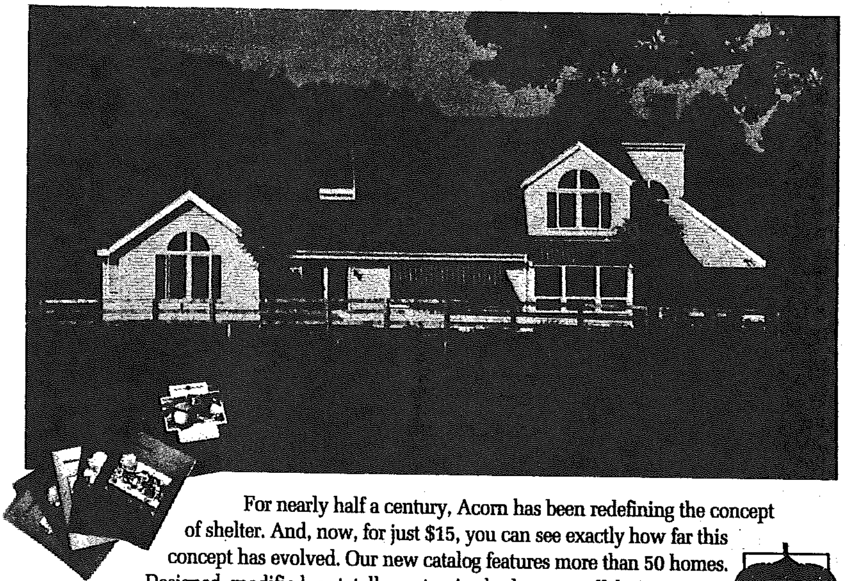

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tions as a result of its treatment of dissidents, hired private detectives to follow Seow in the United States for seven weeks, beginning in December of 1988. The *Straits Times* dutifully reported that Seow "travelled to Bloomington, Indiana, and stayed there over Christmas," and went on, "His stay there was confirmed by purchases of liquor, paid for with his American Express Gold Card. Seow moved on to Seattle on the West Coast of the U.S., five hours by air from Indiana. He was spotted at a house there and photographed sightseeing with 'an unknown Asian lady' in downtown Seattle." While no direct connection was ever proved, the month after Seow's arrest the *Asian Wall Street Journal* reported that the Banque National de Paris had abruptly cancelled a three-hundred-and-forty-seven-thousand-dollar line of credit to a Malaysian businesswoman in Singapore whom Seow had been engaged to. Ashleigh Seow, Francis Seow's son and the secretary of one of Singapore's town councils, told me that the woman, a permanent resident of Singapore, was given two weeks to leave the country and never told the reason. "I was there when they served the documents on her," he said.

As for the Hendrickson expulsion, Singapore's government directed a torrent of abuse at the United States in announcing it. Reminiscent of the old *Pravda*, the *Straits Times* reported, on May 11, 1988, the number of demonstrators at a protest rally before the rally had taken place. "More than 4,000 unionists and workers are staging a protest rally today to show their anger at American interference in Singapore's domestic policies," the paper, which comes out before dawn, said. On May 31st, Goh Chok Tong, who was then deputy prime minister, told Parliament that "the American Constitution—and here I am quoting one Dr. Freeman Dyson—'The American Constitution is designed to be operated by crooks, just as the British constitution is designed to be operated by gentlemen.'" Britain's *Financial Times* wrote of the controversy, "The fracas between tiny Singapore and the mighty U.S. looks set to go down as one of the more improbable, even bizarre, diplomatic clashes. . . . All this is directed against a country which absorbs a quarter of Singapore's total exports, provides about a third of its foreign investment and whose companies are among the biggest private-sector employers on the island. In addition, it is a country whose defence role in the region Singapore strongly supports."

Did the Singapore government lose all sense of reality in 1987 and 1988, finding itself so embarrassed by bad publicity over the arrest of the twenty-two activists that it kept digging a deeper hole for itself in an effort to get out? I asked Lee Kuan Yew about these events, and about why he appeared in general so contemptuous of the concept of human rights. Lee's answers seem rooted in an era when many countries saw a monolithic Communist conspiracy poised to take over at any sign of weakness, but his words were delivered with such passion and such determination that they also began to resemble something else: to me they sounded for all the world like a father talking about protecting the chastity of his daughter. The only problem, of course, is that in this instance the daughter has by now turned thirty-two.

"We did not arrest them because they were church people," Lee began. "We have a professional organization called the Internal Security Department. Its job is to make sure that the subversion of the Communist Party of Malaya does not swing into the English-educated world. This particular man, Vincent Cheng, tried to use the church as his cover." The activists, Lee said, were trying to create unrest, which was a necessary precursor to the second stage, bombings and assassinations. "It makes no sense otherwise," he continued. "Because, first of all, they were no threat to us, right? None of the twenty-two were any threat to us politically. They were not known public figures. They couldn't have beaten us in any election. You do this, you're bound to have a public reaction which must be adverse, because it comes out of the blue. So why do you want to undertake something with adverse electoral consequences a year before the elections, when these people were no threat to us in the coming elections? Ask yourself that. The Western press spoke as if we were in danger of losing our seats and our majority. But we knew we were in no danger at all, either before or after the action. I told the younger ministers, 'Look, as I see it, this takes about five years before it gets going. You can wait for it to mature and you might find out the ramifications. But you'll run the risk of many more innocent people being drawn in.'"

I also asked Lee about Chia Thye Poh—how a man so modest and considerate could be seen as a threat. As I described Chia's qualities, Lee interrupted, saying, "Chinese Communist style. That is the ideal Communist. You must be humble, you must be very frugal and Spartan, not flashy, not trying to awe or impress people. They impress people by their humility and self-sacrificing manner, a certain exaggerated understatement of themselves, but a steely determination."

While many leaders around the world violate human rights, few won't at least pay lip service to them in interviews with Western correspondents. Paying lip service, however, is not Lee Kuan Yew's style. "I'm not sure human rights are a traditional value, even in Christian societies," he told me. "It's the answer of the West in countering Communism. Democracy countered Communism by sponsoring what has been advanced as the axiomatic truths of free society, which includes freedom of the press and human rights. But are they universal values? Can you prove their universality? If they are in fact of universal relevance, will they not win just by a process of Darwinian evolution?"

EVEN as Lee Kuan Yew continues to fear a Communist conspiracy, the tattered remains of Asian Communist Parties are looking to Singapore as a model of how to maintain tight control over a nation's government and over its people's lives while simultaneously quelling discontent by freeing its economy. Academicians in China have named the movement "neo-authoritarianism"—a system that allows the leaders to keep their Party firmly in power yet preside over a booming economy. In his study of Singapore, Russell Heng, the Singaporean researcher, speculates that neo-authoritarianism could emerge as the next ideological challenge to democratic capitalism. The leaders of Vietnam are already speaking openly of their admiration for Singapore, but their ardor might cool when they discover that a major component of Singapore's success is the absence of corruption.

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In Singapore, the People's Action Party serves as the basic vehicle for control. Formed in 1954, at a time when Lee Kuan Yew was in alliance with local Communists, the P.A.P. still bears a striking resemblance to Communist Parties in its structure. Lee no doubt saw that Communist Parties were organized to promote tight discipline and control, two qualities he values, and he has never hesitated to borrow attractive ideas no matter what their source. Accordingly, the P.A.P.'s members have no role in choosing the Party leaders or the candidates for Parliament. Instead, Lee screens the members carefully and selects from them several hundred "cadres"—their exact number and their names are secret. The cadres, in turn, elect a twelve-member central Executive Committee. "In the past," the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported in 1990, "Lee has unapologetically compared the system to that of the Roman Catholic Church, where 'the Pope appoints the cardinals and the cardinals then elect the Pope.' Others have described the cadre-based system as 'Leninist.' Ironically, it was actually imposed on the party by Lee in 1957 against the strenuous objections of the party's left, on the grounds that it would provide an iron curtain to prevent the PAP from being infiltrated by Communists." In remaining secretary-general of the P.A.P. after giving up the Prime Ministership to Goh Chok Tong, Lee still holds the ultimate reins of power. "Goh is perhaps the only head of state in the world who doesn't control his political party," a European diplomat in Singapore noted recently.

Singapore has the trappings of a democracy: its people elect a Parliament, and opposition candidates are free to contest any seat. It is even possible that if the P.A.P. imposed disastrous policies on Singapore—and at the same time chose not to tamper with the electoral system—the opposition could win control. But the opposition has a long way to go. From 1966, when the Barisan Sosialis delegates walked out, until 1981, when Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam won a seat for the Workers' Party, Parliament did not have a single opposition member, and in the nineteen-eighties there were never more than two full-voting opposition members. The most recent election took place this past August, and although the opposition parties did better than at any time since 1963, the P.A.P. still retained all but four of the eighty-one seats.

Jeyaretnam, who was born in Sri Lanka, is the only opposition figure in Singapore with almost as forceful a presence as Lee himself. Like Lee, he trained for the law in Britain, and his command of the Queen's English is impeccable. When I called on Jeyaretnam in his office, a cramped space he shares with a secretary, and he spoke about what he believes are the injustices in Singapore's society, his powerful voice resounded mightily. Although Jeyaretnam was the lone representative of the opposition in Parliament, the government launched an extraordinary series of actions against him. "Until I got elected in 1981, the P.A.P. was paying lip service to some kind of opposition in Parliament," Jeyaretnam told me. "The moment I got into Parliament, the members were completely stunned, though this was the sixth election in which I had contested a seat. Often, when I asked a question in Parliament, they said I was abusing my privileges. I had to go before the Committee on Privileges four times, accused of making improper allegations against the government. Outside Parliament, the P.A.P. began a systematic campaign to isolate me."

In 1984, Jeyaretnam was accused by the government of misusing Workers' Party funds, and the case went to trial. He was acquitted on three counts and fined a thousand Singapore dollars on a fourth. Under the law, it would have taken a fine of twice that amount to deprive him of his seat in Parliament. Seven months later, the judge who presided over his case was transferred out of the courts and into the Attorney General's office. The government then appealed the case, and in 1986 the appeals court fined Jeyaretnam the necessary two thousand dollars, disbarred him, and sentenced him to a month in jail. Jeyaretnam had the right to appeal his disbarment, although not the conviction itself, to the Privy Council in England, the highest court in the Commonwealth, and he did so. In 1988, the Privy Council delivered a sharply worded verdict restoring Jeyaretnam to the practice of law. The Privy Council Law Lords declared that Jeyaretnam and a co-defendant from the Workers' Party "have suffered a grievous injustice," and went on, "They have been fined, imprisoned, and publicly disgraced for offenses of which they were not guilty." The Singapore government then abolished the right of appeal to the Privy Council in such cases. But this still wasn't the end of the story. Lee sued Jeyaretnam for libel and, in 1990, won vast damages, which forced Jeyaretnam to put his house up for sale. "Lee won't let you go," Jeyaretnam told me. "He said several times in Parliament that I had to be destroyed."

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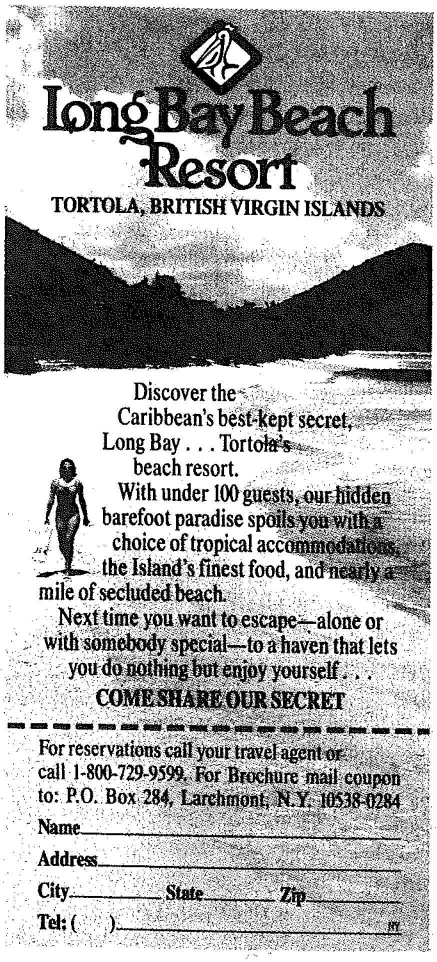

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attention accorded to Jeyaretnam, his experience does illustrate the perils of being in the political opposition in Singapore. On a subtler level, political opponents face a number of potential obstacles. Even when the government does nothing, opposition candidates can experience substantial setbacks to their careers; for instance, many Singaporeans are unlikely to relish the idea of being represented in court by a lawyer identified with the opposition. "Whether you're a lawyer or an architect or a businessman, your clients want you to get things done," one Singapore professional told me. "A few remarks from the government, and they'll go away. We have a very cautious public, having grown up in these conditions." Opposition candidates have complained about restrictions on their rallies, and about distortion of their views in the government-controlled press. Because trade unions and universities are dominated by the government, they're unlikely to serve as fertile breeding grounds for opposition parties.

In part because of gerrymandering, the percentage of seats in Parliament won by the opposition bears no relation to the percentage of votes it gets. In August's election, for instance, the opposition parties took almost forty per cent of the vote but won only four of the eighty-one seats. "The PAP has succeeded in preventing this opposition vote from translating into a comparable percentage of seats in Parliament through such techniques as . . . changing the constitutional ground rules at will and combining constituencies and redrawing electoral boundaries for the benefit of the ruling party," the New York City Bar Association report stated. "Following the 1988 general elections, the government imposed percentage limitations on the number of minorities who can live in particular housing complexes. . . . The Singapore government has started to impose quotas on each apartment block and on each neighborhood."

Thus, Singapore is effectively a one-party-state, with the ruling party organized on the cadre system. The government has weakened religious institutions, dominated the press, and introduced pervasive censorship. It owns many major businesses and controls the one big labor union. If this has a familiar ring, it is because these conditions—despite the fervent anti-Communism of Lee Kuan Yew—are indistinguishable from those normally identified with a Communist state. Universal employment, good housing for everyone, and the absence of poverty are also part of the Communist rhetoric, the only difference being that in Singapore they have become reality. The analogy can obviously be carried too far—no Communist nation would turn to multinational corporations for investment capital, for example. But it raises a fascinating question: Did Communism die because of its inherent deficiencies or because its governments were too corrupt and too incompetent—because there were no Lee Kuan Yews?

HIDDEN away on the third floor of the Tanglin Shopping Center, in the Orchard Road tourist area, is a little store called D & O Film & Video. Here, Albert Odell holds court, to talk about movies the way a football fan might talk about the greatest Superbowls. Odell, once British and now a Singaporean, came from Hong Kong in 1948 to represent film companies that wanted to distribute their movies in Southeast Asia. Today, he runs his video store in conjunction with a silent partner—the government's Board of Film Censors, which has the first crack at all videotapes that enter Singapore legally. "I get a parcel every week, but it's delivered directly to the censors," he told me. "I open it in their presence. The censors have a yardstick to go by: certain words are one hundred per cent taboo. They allow 'fuck' but never 'motherfucker.' If 'mother' is involved, it goes. Any frontal bare breast is out, but a side view is O.K. All references to Allah go. In 'Young Guns,' a guy might be shot twelve times, and they'll say, 'Reduce it so he's shot only five times.' " Singapore's officials are nothing if not methodical, and they duly type up on a sheet of paper every excision and alteration they require in a film. ("Reduce to minimum the sequence of couple embracing passionately and woman in ecstasy," one alteration reads.) Odell tapes the relevant sheet to the inside of each videocassette box, so the customer can know exactly what is missing. Browsing through the shelves of D & O Film & Video becomes an exercise in X-rated hilarity.

Singapore imposes censorship not only on movies but also on books, magazines, and music. The United