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## Revisiting Operation Coldstore: Deconstructing the “Original Sin”

*By Kumar Ramakrishna*

### Synopsis

*A new book on the 1963 Operation Coldstore debunks attempts by revisionist writers to portray the operation as driven by political motives rather than security grounds.*

### Commentary

FIFTY-TWO years ago this month, on 2 February 1963, a historic internal security dragnet known as Operation Coldstore was conducted in Singapore. Mainstream accounts record that the sweep, authorised by the Internal Security Council comprising British, Singaporean and Malayan governmental representatives, approved the detention - under the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance (PPSO) – of ultimately 130 leftwing politicians, unionists, and other activists – that basically destroyed the Communist United Front in Singapore.

This development helped pave the way for Singapore’s political union or merger with the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia, in September that year. Coldstore was hence a defining moment in Singapore’s history. It is thus counterintuitive that a recent Institute of Policy Studies survey found that a paltry 16.6 percent of a sample of 1,516 Singaporeans were even aware of the operation.

### Why Coldstore matters

Certainly, the survey results suggest that more can be done to improve the general historical awareness of Singaporeans. Nevertheless, the results are also intriguing: they belie the ongoing controversy about Coldstore that has been going on for more than a year. The debate in this connection is not about whether Coldstore was a defining moment in Singapore’s history, but rather what it really meant.

As noted, while mainstream writers argue that the operation destroyed the CUF that had been destabilising Singapore’s political and industrial fabric since the mid-1950s, “revisionist” historians, former detainees and their online supporters maintain the real implication of Coldstore was that it destroyed not a Communist network but rather a legitimate progressive leftwing political opposition centered on the Barisan Sosialis Singapura (BSS).

Coldstore thus paved the way for the People’s Action Party (PAP) to win the general election in September 1963. Hence Coldstore was – as one revisionist historian puts it, the PAP government’s “original sin”. In other words, the Coldstore arrests were basically driven by opportunistic political

motives rather than national security grounds, and hence calls into question the “morality of how the PAP came to rule Singapore”.

The revisionist message is thus a potentially corrosive one. If it gains traction with the younger, well-educated and cosmopolitan Singaporeans who will one day become the business, civil society and even government elites of the next decade or more, the net effect could be to foster even greater levels of the general cynicism and anti-communitarian sentiments one routinely encounters on social media sites nowadays.

From a national security perspective, while diversity of views can broaden what political scientist Cass Sunstein calls a society’s “argument pools”, there are limits. Such anti-communitarian cynicism and excessive individualism would be utterly counterproductive for a society’s longer-term cohesion, stability and resilience – especially a society and polity as socially variegated and globalised as modern Singapore’s.

Little wonder that in 1979 the late former foreign minister, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, underscored the importance of what the great medieval Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun called *asabiyya* – a commodity blending robust group solidarity with the gumption to surmount challenges.

### **Revisionist sins**

What thickens the plot is that the revisionist message on Coldstore is deeply problematic for four basic reasons, as the writer attempts to argue in his new book *Original Sin? Revising the Revisionist Critique of the 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015).

Firstly, the book shows that rather than scholarly detachment, an anti-government ideological agenda seems to motivate at least some revisionist writers. Secondly, the revisionists as a whole seem to possess a very limited definition of what a threat “prejudicial” to public order was at the time of Coldstore, thereby skewing their analysis towards the notion that Coldstore was driven by politics rather than security considerations.

Thirdly, the book shows that the revisionists by and large harbour rather naïve expectations of how incumbent political leaders should behave. Revisionist expositions seem to suggest that even if the Communist United Front were employing all types of illegal stratagems to cynically exploit the constitutional route to power, the incumbent PAP government was supposed to sit back and play by the rules at all costs.

Fourthly and relatedly, the book shows that in general the revisionists as a whole do not seem to have fully grasped the Communist mindset, strategy and tactics that the PAP leaders of that era came to know only too well and were compelled to doggedly counter.

### **The Lim Chin Siong affair**

One of the key strands in the book is its analysis of the political career of the charismatic Barisan leader Lim Chin Siong, portrayed in revisionist analyses as a potential future Singapore prime minister who was purportedly unjustly arrested under Coldstore.

The book – employing both declassified and some still-classified sources - addresses the perennial question of whether Lim was indeed a Communist and why it mattered. In doing so certain relatively obscure facts about how Communism distorted Lim’s life are addressed, with due restraint and sensitivity.

Only by shedding light on these issues can inaccurate revisionist ideas about Lim be effectively debunked. The larger takeaway from the Lim Chin Siong affair incidentally, retains relevance for the current struggle with the violent extremism of the ISIS type: able men can be led grossly astray by evil ideologies.

### **Reading Original Sin?**

*Original Sin?* makes three general requests of readers. Firstly, be sceptical both ways: revisionist

writers and their supporters have every bit of an agenda as they claim that mainstream writers do - hence their arguments should be dissected with equal care. Secondly, Singaporeans should go beyond surface appearances and subject the latter-day complaints of seemingly grandfatherly former CUF activists and detainees to greater critical scrutiny. The advanced age and ostensibly sagely persona of such individuals is hardly reason to lower one's guard.

Thirdly and finally, the subtext of the book is that while Singapore is not perfect and improvements can be made across a range of policy domains, it is important to have the attitude of what Tommy Koh calls "a loving critic". One should hence avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Instead, a more systematic national effort should go into nurturing Singapore's *asabiyya*, to ensure that the next 50 years of nation-building is as progressive and productive as the previous half century. It would be unwise to be remiss in this obligation. In this 50th year of Singapore's unexpected independence, it behooves us to remember that in the end, Marx was right about one thing: every society contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction.

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