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Separation 1965: The Tunku's "agonised decision"

By Mushahid Ali

Synopsis

Was Singapore's exit from Malaysia in 1965 a "coup" by Singapore leaders, or an eviction imposed on it by Malaysian leaders? Records show it was Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman who made the tough decision that the two go their separate ways.

Commentary

DID SINGAPORE ask to leave Malaysia of its own accord or was it forced out against its will? Fifty years after Singapore's separation from Malaysia the question is still moot. A review of the events leading to the separation seeks to throw more light on the conundrum.

Singapore separated from Malaysia on 9 August 1965 by a constitutional fiat that formalised an agreed settlement between the state of Singapore and the federal government. The act of separation was effected by the Malaysian Parliament adopting an Amendment to the Malaysian Constitution and ratifying an Agreement on Separation signed by the governments of Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. It was put into action by a Proclamation of Independence of Singapore by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew that was read over Radio Singapore.

Tunku's surgical solution

That agreement was negotiated by leading members of the two governments to bring about an amicable solution to an increasingly bitter and intractable conflict between their ruling parties. However it was Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman who initiated the move to "hive off" Singapore from Malaysia. As he explained at a press conference after the passage of the Separation Act: "It was my idea that Singapore should leave the federation and be independent. The differences between the state government of Singapore and the central government of Malaysia had become so acrimonious that I decided that it was best that Singapore went its own way. Otherwise there was no hope for peace."

This confirms that Singapore was forced to leave Malaysia at the Tunku's behest. It was not Singapore that sought to secede or initiated the negotiation to separate from Malaysia, as some scholars seek to argue.

Indeed in the months leading to its constitutional eviction, Singapore had been warned by Malaysian leaders against seeking secession or a partition of Malaysia between the former states of Malaya and the new states - Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah, as well as Penang.

That partition had been proposed by Singapore as an alternative constitutional arrangement for a looser confederation. That proposal had developed from the call made by political parties grouped in the Malaysian Solidarity Convention for a "Malaysian Malaysia" that would ensure equality among all the states and ethnic groups in the country.

This dual demand infuriated the ruling Alliance in Malaysia, especially the dominant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Sections of the ruling parties called for strong retaliation against Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) which they accused of treason for seeking secession. Some "ultra nationalists" called for the arrest of PM Lee and even imposing direct central rule on Singapore.

As the conflict of words raged and Malay passions were roused, Malaysia's senior leaders feared that violence might break out leading to racial clashes across the whole country. It was against this deteriorating political situation that the Tunku began to consider a surgical solution to this intractable problem, to cut the Gordian knot, as it were.

Decision post-London

The Tunku had left for London in mid-June for a Commonwealth Prime Ministers conference. In London, the Tunku was hospitalised with shingles and he thought long and hard about the problems with Singapore. His conclusion: "There would be no end to the bickering with Singapore except perhaps if Mr Lee Kuan Yew is made Prime Minister in the real sense of the word."

Indeed the Tunku asked Minister Lim Kim San, who had gone to London with him, to tell Mr Lee ('your PM') "he can attend the next Prime Ministers Conference on his own". That was the first indication by the Tunku that he would give Singapore independence, Mr Lim later said, though he missed the implication of the Tunku's cryptic remark at the time.

The Tunku wrote to his Deputy, Tun Abdul Razak, telling him how he felt about the relations with Singapore and to talk things over with Mr Lee. Razak met Lee on 29 June but found it impossible to reach any meeting of minds. In Lee's recounting of the meeting in his memoirs *The Singapore Story*, Razak went back on his previous agreement to consider a looser arrangement for Singapore and insisted on total capitulation in political activity, defence, foreign affairs, security and finance.

However, as narrated by Dr Goh Keng Swee, when he met with Razak and Dr Ismail, the Home Affairs Minister, in Kuala Lumpur on 13 July, he proposed that Singapore leave Malaysia to become an independent state. This proposal jived with the Tunku's idea for Singapore to leave the federation.

At a second meeting on 20 July Dr Goh told Razak and Ismail that Mr Lee was in favour of secession of Singapore and it should be done quickly, by 9 August when Parliament was to reconvene.

On his return from London on 5 August the Tunku was asked by pressmen at the airport if he would be meeting PM Lee to discuss the political differences raging between the two sides. His reply was non-committal, almost nonchalant, saying he would meet Lee if there was anything to discuss. Little did we know that serious talks between Razak, Ismail and Dr Goh were going on in Kuala Lumpur, with PM Lee in the Cameron Highlands consulted, on the total hiving off of Singapore from Malaysia.

Tunku's emergency meeting

Razak gave a full report to the Tunku on his return home. After Razak and Ismail had negotiated the terms of separation with Dr Goh and E W Barker, the Tunku held an emergency meeting of his core Cabinet members on 6 August and approved the draft Bills to amend the Constitution and get Singapore to withdraw from the federation.

On 7 August, the Tunku said, the "big shots" of the PAP (meaning Mr Lee), called at his Residency and signed the Separation Agreement, while other members of the Singapore cabinet signed it in Singapore or at Singapore House, KL.

Even at the last minute Mr Lee asked the Tunku if he really wanted to break up Malaysia which they had spent years to bring about. Wouldn't it be wiser to go back to their original plan for a looser federation or confederation? But the Tunku demurred. "There is no other way out. I have made up my mind. You go your way and we go our own way," Mr Lee recalled him saying.

Secrecy had to be of the essence on both sides of the causeway for fear of opponents of separation reacting with violence to the agreement. The first inkling we in RTS had that something was happening was the departure of several ministers from Singapore to KL on 7 August. I was instructed to fly to KL on 8 Aug. to cover the special session of Parliament on Monday 9 Aug. I was joined in KL by fellow reporters Lim Kit Siang and Fuad Salim.

In Parliament we found only Mr Devan Nair, PAP Member for Bangsar, present. Some of the Singapore MPs were at Singapore House. Mr Nair and I listened to the Tunku's speech moving the Separation of Singapore Bill on a certificate of urgency, via the in-house sound system in his office.

When the session was adjourned we learned that the Bill was passed without opposition, though UMNO Secretary-General Syed Jaafar Albar had left the chamber before the vote and expressed his disagreement with the separation. He like the other Ultras wanted to maintain Malay rule over Singapore, forcibly if need be.

Tunku's agonised decision

When Separation was announced by the Tunku over Radio Television Malaya and the Proclamation of Singapore's Independence read over Radio Singapore at 10 a.m. Singaporeans received the news with a mixture of relief, regret and foreboding, though some quarters in Chinatown let off firecrackers in celebration.

And when Mr Lee went on Television Singapore to explain the circumstances leading to the separation, it was clear that he was forced to accept Singapore's eviction from Malaysia. It was, he said, a moment of anguish for him, having devoted his whole life to bring about a united Malaysia whose people were bound by ties of kinship, geography and history.

He and Dr Goh had negotiated the terms of Separation to ensure that Singapore would be truly independent while continuing to have access to the water supply from Johor for its survival. And Singapore would be on its own for all its multi-racial population, living in peaceful amity with the rest of Malaysia.

Thus did Singapore achieve independence while avoiding a forcible integration in a Malaysia riven by inter-racial tension and hostility from a communal political system. That is the "coup" that PM Lee and his PAP colleagues carried out for the people of Singapore, to achieve an independent and sovereign Singapore.

However, it was the Tunku who played the decisive role in this saga of Singapore's separation. It was his agonised decision to let Singapore go that tipped the scale in favour of separation. Otherwise the fracas between the state and central governments could well have become more intense and impossible to resolve, with no way out but an inevitable forceful denouement - the arrest of Lee Kuan Yew and his senior lieutenants and the imposition of direct federal rule by the central government in Singapore.

The Tunku was magnanimous in telling Lee to leave Malaysia. If there's one person that Singapore should thank for its independence it is Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia.

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