

# Singapore Swing

## Is Democracy an Asian Value?

By G. Pascal Zachary

SINGAPORE

**O**n a steamy afternoon, Chee Soon Juan stands in front of one of the busiest subway entrances in this Southeast Asian city-state, peddling his latest book, a study of dissidents and human-rights activists in the region. By selling the book without a permit, Chee is violating the law. At any moment, the police may swoop down on him.

Though his book isn't banned, no bookstore will carry it, so Chee is forced to take to the streets. He has been fined by the government for doing so, and for giving speeches without a permit, another law he routinely has flouted. On this afternoon, people greet Chee warmly, which in itself is remarkable since Chee is probably under surveillance and the well-wishers risk being photographed. Some know of Chee—the leading critic of the ruling People's Action Party—despite a virtual media blackout here of his activities. "Best of luck to you," one says. Another buys a book and asks Chee to sign it. A third thanks him. "We want to hear the other side of the story," he says.

Political reform is sweeping Asia, and Chee is betting that it will come to Singapore too. Indonesia held its freest national election in 30 years this spring. A former dissident is now president of South Korea. Thailand is in the grip of an anti-corruption drive. In Malaysia, Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir, after jailing his top deputy, faces his toughest challenge since assuming power in 1981.

Compared to the tectonic shifts elsewhere in Asia, Chee's dissident movement is decidedly modest. But Singapore's importance always has dwarfed its size. Founded in 1965, this former British trading colony has been perhaps the most vocal proponent of the so-called "Asian values" philosophy as well as the biggest hub for multinational corporations in Southeast Asia. The "Asian-values" credo was first unabashedly articulated by Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister who is still a behind-the-scenes powerbroker here. Yew, now known as the senior minister, has long argued that Western conceptions of human rights and democracy



Leading government critic Chee Soon Juan

don't apply to Asia, and that greater openness would result in chaos, jeopardizing hard-won prosperity. Though the philosophy was dismissed at first by westerners, it was picked up by China's communist leaders, who still act as if they can achieve Western-style prosperity without the human rights and wide-ranging social and political freedoms that Westerners say go along with it.

While the Asian financial crisis silenced the bravado that once accompanied talk of "Asian values," Lee and Goh Chok Tong, prime minister since 1990, still hold this philosophy dear. Since Singapore came through the Asian crisis relatively unscathed, the People's Action Party seems entrenched. It won the last national election, which took place before the financial crisis in 1997, with 65 percent of the vote. But Chee challenges the centerpiece of "Asian values," the presumption that Asians don't want political freedom. "This is a racist remark," he says, "as if because we're Asian, we don't really understand the principles of democracy."

**I**ncredibly, merely noting the absence of basic freedoms makes him a pariah in Singapore. Despite a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Georgia, he can't get a job. He lives with his wife and newborn baby in his parents' home, surviving on donations, book sales and occasional support from foreign foundations. He doesn't own a house or a car because one of the government's favorite practices to quiet its opponents is to bankrupt them through spurious lawsuits. In recent years, Singapore has bankrupted a number of government critics, forcing them to leave the country. Chee is

PHOTO: REUTERS/SIMON THONG

determined to stay, but feels the sting of the government's lash. "They don't have to drag us off and shoot us," he says, "but they might as well."

Chee, 36, is outwardly calm, handsome and well spoken. But his isolation and the government's repeated attacks have taken their toll. In May, he narrowly avoided incurring a fine that would have made him ineligible to stand in an election. Singapore's Supreme Court sustained a conviction against him for making a speech without permission, but the court reduced the fine below the ineligibility level.

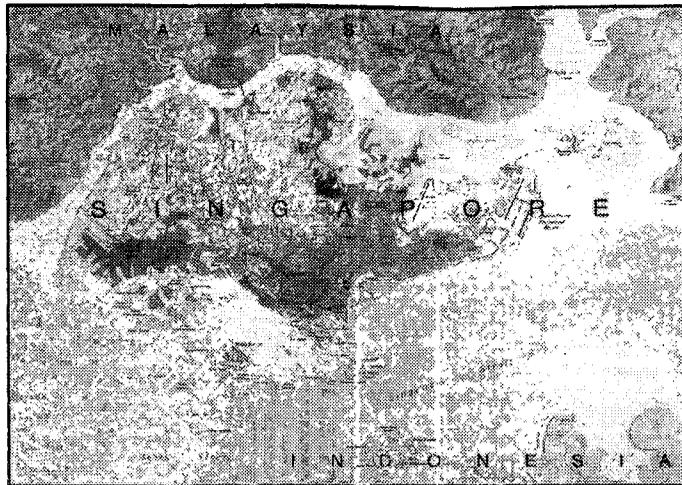
Chee's criticisms of Singapore center on the government's history of intimidating critics and its harsh penalties for those who step out of line, such as the American teenager who was caned a few years back for graffiti. A key tool is the Internal Security Act, inherited from Britain's colonial administration, which permits the government to arrest and jail people without charge. Chee wants the law scrapped, independent courts and a freer media. "Rule of law doesn't exist," he says. "It is rule by law."

With these constraints removed, Chee thinks ordinary Singaporeans would give lie to the idea that they're satisfied with full bellies but no rights. He says the passivity of his fellow citizens is "learned helplessness," resulting from "no matter what you do you can't change anything."

Why are Singaporeans so complacent? It's a combination of the country's economic record—the best in Asia save Japan—selective but stern political repression, and a Confucian culture that steers people toward obeying their elders and settling differences out of the public eye. Thus, mainstream observers of Singapore give Chee scant chance of breaking the hammerlock on opinion here.

But the government may be giving its critics an unprecedented opening by promoting more self-reliance among its notoriously safety-conscious citizens. Concerned about flagging economic growth, the government has unleashed a variety of efforts to make people more questioning, creative and independent-minded: at least within the business world. In an interview late last year, Prime Minister Goh explained the loosening by citing the demands of global competition. "In the new world when you have to compete against others in terms of ideas ... you just can't be looking toward a paternalistic government all the time," he told *The Far Eastern Economic Review*. "So this is the kind of dilemma which we are in: How paternalist should we be, and how much room can we give to the people?"

Quite a bit without jeopardizing one-party rule, say people close to the government. Chee disagrees, arguing that greater openness in one sphere will lead to greater openness in poli-



Singapore's importance always has dwarfed its size.

tics unless the government "comes down like a sledgehammer on people who question their authority."

Indeed, Singapore has come long way from the days when one critic dubbed it "Disneyland with a death penalty." A younger generation of artists and writers are breaking new ground. Hwee Hwee Tan, a 24-year-old woman, wrote *Foreign Bodies*, the first Singaporean novel in English to win critical acclaim in Britain and the United States. Local filmmaker Erik Khoo created a searing drama, *12 Storeys*, about the anguish of Singapore's middle class. Even artists who once crossed swords with the government now get a viewing, no small feat in a country that has stiff censorship rules. "Creatively, there's been a complete turn," says Kirpal Singh, a leading poet and writer in Singapore. "The change in climate is astonishing. The attitude now is that we have to be more open, that we can't afford to be a censorious society."

Some artists remain wary, saying the government would do better by just stepping aside, letting individuals define creativity for themselves. "It's not a problem to be solved," says Tan, who lives in New York. "That the government thinks so is itself the problem."

Still, the new openness plays out in different ways. The numbers of Born-again Christians are rising sharply in Singapore. This worries the government because Christians are generally

educated, well organized and successful. One church has grown so rapidly that on Sundays it attracts 10,000 worshippers. That many people gathering for any reason worries authoritarian governments in Asia, as China's ongoing crackdown against the Falun Gong spiritual movement shows.

For now, reformers are laying low, privately pushing for more creative space and working within the system. Less patient, Chee says that any sort of unexpected turbulence could flush more dissidents into the open: "I can tell you that if the system opens up, these disconnected critics will coalesce."

Others warn that the crowd running Singapore is quite clever and may yet co-opt the younger, reform-minded generation. "My theory is that Singapore wants to be America run by Chinese people," says Tan, the novelist. "They want the symbols of America: Starbucks, McDonalds, Borders. But you go into a Borders and it's all Chinese. The power structure is still the same." ■

G. Pascal Zachary is writing a book about identity, diversity and the future of nations. He lives in London.

Singapore intimidates its critics and exacts harsh penalties on those who step out of line.

An Open Letter to Members of the Board of the  
**PACIFICA FOUNDATION**  
and Mary Frances Berry, Chair

DEAR DR. BERRY AND MEMBERS OF THE PACIFICA BOARD,

The present crisis at KPFA and throughout the Pacifica network regrettably compels us to write the following. Under your direction, a unique institution meant to serve as an island of free speech in a sea of commercialized broadcasting has abandoned and betrayed that mission.

Your administration's actions in locking out union workers, community volunteers, and the hundreds of people who regularly use KPFA to speak out on social, political, and artistic causes has proven intolerable to the community which supports and depends on the station.

Your administration's use of armed guards and anti-labor consultants, its insistence on the arrest and prosecution of more than one hundred non-violent staff and protesters, its imposition of a "gag order" to silence those who speak their conscience or even to report on the crisis is antithetical to the network's mission. Under your direction, Pacifica has violated U.S. citizens' rights to free speech, peaceful public assembly, and freedom of the press.

You have made your board self-appointing and impervious to outside input. You have kept its deliberations and its financial records secret. You have squandered the contributions of KPFA's donors on security and public relations firms. While claiming that this conflict is about "diversity," you have ignored three written requests signed by all people of color at KPFA to abandon your racially divisive tactics.

Intentionally or not, you have done what decades of right-wing attacks failed to accomplish: You have weakened Pacifica to the point of collapse.

We the undersigned academics, elected officials, labor leaders, artists, writers and activists find these actions and events both reprehensible and ominous in light of the rapid monopolization of mass media. We demand that all staff fired in the present crisis be reinstated, that censorship throughout the Pacifica network be lifted, that donor funds be accounted for, and that democratic governance be instituted in a network founded fifty years ago to encourage open discussion and active participation by those whom it serves. In addition, we demand that Board Chair Mary Frances Berry, Executive Director Lynn Chadwick, and those members of the Pacifica Board who have led us into this crisis resign immediately.

**Adrienne Rich**  
Poet, Essayist

**Alice Walker**  
Novelist, Poet and Essayist

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Executive Director, Media Alliance

**Angela Davis**  
Professor, History of  
Consciousness, UC Santa Cruz

**Arthur Kinoy**  
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Publisher, The Black World Today

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Co-founder, United Farm Workers

**Doze Green**  
Zulu Nation, RSC, GMS

**Dorothy Thigpen**  
Executive Director,  
Third World Newsreel

**Elihu Harris**  
Mayor of Oakland, 1990-1999

**Elizabeth Martinez**  
Activist and Author,  
*500 Years of Chicano History*

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Founder, School of Americas Watch

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**Gary Webb**  
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Mayor of Berkeley, 1979-1986

**Hari Dillon**  
President, Vanguard Public Foundation

**Helen Caldicott**  
Founder,  
Physicians for Social Responsibility

**Holly Near**  
Singer, Songwriter and Activist

**Howard Zinn**  
Historian

**Jack Sheinkman**  
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**Jerry Brown**  
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Musician, Activist

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**Josephine Moreno**  
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**Lydia Sargent**  
Z Magazine

**Margaret Ratner Kunstler**  
Founder, William Moses Kunstler  
Fund for Racial Justice

**Melanie Kaye-Kantrowitz**  
Jews for Economic and Racial Justice

**Melissa Nelson**  
Executive Director,  
The Cultural Conservancy

**Michael Albert**  
Z Magazine

**Michael Franti**  
Singer, Poet

**Michael Moore**  
Author and Filmmaker

**Michael Parenti**  
Author and Lecturer

**Michael Tarif Warren**  
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**Michelle Cliff**  
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**Vinnie Burrows**  
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**William Harrell**  
Vice-President of the National Lawyer's  
Guild and Executive Director of the  
National Police Accountability Project

Partial List, Organizational  
Affiliation for Identification only

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# Ulster Right or Wrong

By Carl Bromley

**R**eading *Loyalists* brought back memories of a few Julys past when I was in a heated exchange with a speechwriter for James Molyneux, then leader of Northern Ireland's Ulster Unionist Party. The UUP was presenting itself (as it does today) as the modern face of unionism, a world away from the hectoring, bigoted, backward-looking

**Loyalists: War and Peace in Northern Ireland**

By Peter Taylor

TV Books

278 pages, \$27.50

demagoguery so often vilified and lampooned in Britain's liberal media. But the speechwriter did not enthuse about the peace process, complaining—among other things—that claims by Northern Ireland's Catholic community of discrimination and injustice over the decades were “entirely imagined.” When I suggested otherwise, she brazenly said that if Catholics didn't like the set-up, they could move to the Irish Republic.

So much for modern unionism. As the mad month of July continued, the Protestant-supremacist Orange order insisted again on marching through Catholic areas to celebrate Protestant “liberties” secured by William of Orange over a Catholic King in 1690. Everyone from UUP Member of Parliament David Trimble, now a Nobel laureate and the Northern Ireland Assembly's first minister-designate, to Billy Wright, a notorious leader of a local loyalist murder gang, defended the local Orange lodges' “right” to celebrate their traditions and culture by besieging Catholic communities. The old joke about the Protestant who converts to Catholicism on his deathbed to ensure that “there would be one less of the bastards” was as relevant as ever.

In Peter Taylor's superb book and documentary series *Loyalists*, a sequel to his groundbreaking book and documentary *Behind the Mask: Sinn Fein and the IRA*, he explains why such entrenched views still exist in Northern Ireland yet also presents the fuller complexity of



DAVID BARKER

Ulster unionism. Loyalism is the allegiance to the Protestant faith, queen and country that, as the book dust jacket reveals, “runs through the veins of just about every Protestant in Northern Ireland.” Yet as Taylor gently probes 30 years of war and violence—getting almost every major figure in the varying unionist groups to talk frankly and some to admit to the most chilling acts of violence—one begins to detect political and class tensions within unionism's big tent. Trimble and Wright represent two aspects of unionism, the former of the pinstriped, “big house” kind, the latter an ugly, lumpen, ghetto variety.

The “loyalists” of the title are the shadowy paramilitary organizations—chiefly the Ulster Defense Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force (of which Wright was a member before being expelled)—who fought a brutal war against what they saw as an attempt by the IRA to impose a united Ireland on the Northern Protestants. Their relationship with official unionism was foggy—mainstream unionists dismissed them as “hoodlums” and “ruffians,” but needed them from time to time. As one leading UUP politician uncomfortably admits, “The loyalist paramilitaries achieved something, which perhaps the [British] security forces would never have achieved, and that was they were a significant contri-

bution to the IRA finally accepting that they couldn't win.”

**T**aylor tells a story unfamiliar to these shores. The rebel traditions of Irish republicanism always have had the best songs and stories, fitting well with a certain romantic American attachment to the underdog as well as the real exile experience of Irish America. Loyalism is much less photogenic: very violent, often race- and hate-inspired and sharing certain affinities with white supremacists in the United States. It's no surprise that PBS has procrastinated broadcasting the film version here (it has been shown in Britain and Canada).

Tim Pat Coogan, Ireland's leading chronicler of the recent troubles, once said that in a normal European society Northern Ireland's Protestant workers would provide the bedrock of a social democracy. What is it then that makes sectarianism such a potent force among them?

*Loyalists* opens with the story of Billy Giles, born in 1957 to a working-class Protestant family from the loyalist heartland of East Belfast. Billy says he came from a quiet, hard-working family. This is a story repeated by many of Taylor's interviewees. Hard work and membership in Ulster's Masonic-like Orange orders were a norm that bound Protestants down the centuries. But as much as some observers