Pressing for Openness in Singapore

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Replying to a letter from the Open Singapore Centre in 1999, the Singapore government declared that Singapore is "widely recognized as an open society which practices transparency and democratic accountabilities" and offered as evidence a survey by Transparency International (TI) 1. A year later, TI’s Malaysia chapter awarded its Global Integrity Medal to Singapore’s senior minister Lee Kuan Yew, stating, "In honouring him, we also honour integrity, transparency and accountability."2 Herein lies a most delicious contradiction: An authoritarian state that brooks no dissent from its citizens is given international recognition for transparency and accountability. The obvious question that arises is whether such a state of affairs makes sense.

When I took the issue up with the head of TI's Malaysia chapter at a conference, he replied that he had given Lee the award based not on the senior minister’s human rights record but on his stance against corruption. The bizarreness of this logic notwithstanding it is akin to giving an award to a teacher for helping students do well academically in spite of physically abusing some of them. Let us assume for a moment that we can separate a society’s politics from its economics. Even if we choose to completely ignore the dismal human rights record of Lee’s government, the fact remains that it manages Singapore’s finance in a way that only the very ill-informed or the very partisan would say is transparent and accountable.

The Singapore government runs a fund management firm, unpretentiously named the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC). The company invests the country's foreign reserves of US$80 billion all over the world in assets such as equities, bonds, money-market instruments, real estate and special investments.3 The public, however, knows little about the performance record of these reserves, which are derived mainly from accumulated budget surpluses and workers contributions to the Central Provident Fund (CPF), a pension savings scheme into which every Singaporean employee must pay. The GIC does not even account to parliament. The corporation is controlled by a board of directors whose chairman is Lee Kuan Yew, a post which he held since he was prime minister. The public receives no information about how these directors are appointed or what the criteria for their selections are. Curiously, the current prime minister isn't even on the board.

Given such a system, it is not surprising that in its financial accounts Singapore "habitually reports an “errors and omissions” number that is disproportionately large in relation to its gross domestic product." The financial analyst who wrote this in the New York Times pointed out that the statistic, used to account for financial discrepancies, should be relatively small in an economy of Singapore’s size. Yet in 1996 Singapore’s "errors and omissions" number amounted to 3.9 percent of GDP; by comparison, China, which is not exactly known for its transparency and has a much
larger economy, reports an "errors and omissions" number of only 3 percent. "If Singapore wants investors to believe in its financial integrity and transparency," the writer concluded, "it should address this glaring discrepancy in its national accounts."4

Experts seem to agree. Associate Professor Mukul Asher at the National University of Singapore noted with regard to the funds invested by the GIC, "There is little transparency or public accountability concerning where these funds are invested, and what has been the investment criteria and performance. These funds, however, are believed to be wholly invested abroad."5 An economist at the Asian Wall Street Journal expressed similar views: "Where do the CPF funds go? No one is exactly sure since the government, amazingly, won't give the public a precise accounting of how it uses the public's money."6

Then there is the problem of statistics on Singapore’s trade with Indonesia and they are simply not available. Garry Rodan, an academic and keen observer of Singapore’s political economy, noted that publication of such information would not only give a "more accurate picture of Singapore’s current account surplus and capital flows" but might also "lead in Indonesia to a more effective clamp on smuggling and a consequent drop in revenue to Singapore."7

In 1998, when Indonesia’s economy started to hyperventilate, Singapore wasted little time in sending its prime minister to Jakarta to prescribe a US$10 billion loan in an attempt to prevent the ailing economy from slipping into an unrecoverable coma.8 Yet Singaporeans were not told of the loan until the foreign media reported it. Why was a transaction involving such a huge amount and pledged to a regime as corrupt as that of Suharto’s not made a matter of public knowledge?

More recently, the Singapore government ended up on the wrong end of an investment debacle in China. A sum of US$20 billion was put aside to create a sprawling industrial park in the Chinese city of Suzhou.9 Singaporeans knew, and still know, little about the project and the extent of the commitment of public funds. Worse still, when the mammoth undertaking failed in its fifth year of operation, the government refused to conduct a parliamentary debate on its financing; according to the deputy prime minister, it was "not appropriate" to do so.10

In 1996, an Australia television network aired a documentary detailing how the Singaporean government was investing in projects with Burmese drug lords. The U.S. Department of State confirmed that "over half [of the investment in Burma] from Singapore have been tied to the family of narco-trafficker Lo Hsing-han."11 When I questioned the government on the matter, I was not given any answers but was instead called a traitor and accused of colluding with the Aussies to tarnish the good name of Singapore. The local media refused to publish the story or broadcast the documentary. These are just some of the cases that have surfaced on the Internet and in foreign publications. The fact that Singaporeans are largely ignorant of these goings-on (due in no small measure to the severe bouts of coyness that the local media suffers when it comes to investigative reporting on the government) makes the Singapore system as transparent as lead.

Ironically, the most serious indictments of the non-transparent system that Lee
Kuan Yew has constructed over the years have come from his own party colleagues. In 1984, former deputy prime minister, Toh Chin Chye, when asked of his views on economic data, remonstrated, "I don't believe the statistics put out by the Government. The man in the street doesn't know whether he's on thin ice or solid rock." More recently, Ong Teng Cheong, Singapore's first (and only) elected president (a post set up specifically to keep an eye on the financial reserves) and a former deputy prime minister, complained that he had difficulty obtaining information about the country’s financial reserves. When Ong initially asked the accountant-general for all the "information about the reserves" in 1993, he was told that it would take "52 man-years" to compile the list. Nonetheless, the president insisted on having the figures. It wasn’t until four years later that he was given a list of all the properties Singapore owned. When his term came to an end in 1999, Ong sought for a second one. But the government, which backed his first presidential bid, decided to support someone else.

**Launching the Open Singapore Centre**

In an effort to promote openness and democratic accountabilities in Singapore, Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam, secretary-general of the Workers’Party, and I decided in May 1999 to found the Open Singapore Centre (OSC). Its aim was to expand awareness through forums and seminar, as well as by publishing reports on various subjects of concern. We had no illusions that our task was going to be easy. going to be facile.

The harassment started even before the organization could be born. We had decided to list the Centre with the Registry of Companies and Businesses. This entailed submitting an application to register the name of the company, a process that normally takes only two days (one day to make the application and another to make the necessary payments and collect the business certificate. When I showed up on the second day, I was told that the name that we had applied for) Open Singapore Foundation could not be approved as the use of "foundation" was restricted. I proffered "institute", "forum", "association", "society", all of which were turned down. After several vexatious minutes, "centre" was finally accepted.

After the semantic joust, the officer suddenly dead-panned that the application could not be approved yet, as it had to be sent for screening. My primary response was why and whether this was standard procedure.

"Because you and Jeyaretnam are the applicants." He left the sentence dangling.

"Why can’t you register it just because Jeyaretnam and I are the applicants?" I asked, not expecting a reply. I didn’t get one. "How long will it take?" I pressed on.

The officer disappeared into a back office. Minutes later he appeared with a higher-ranked colleague who was just as parsimonious with his words.

"The application needs to be sent to the ISD [see box below] for vetting," he greeted.

"How long will it be before the application is approved?" I repeated.

"A few months."

"How many is a few?"

"Three, maybe more, I cannot give you a guarantee."
"Why does it need to be screened by the ISD?"
"We need to send it for security clearance," was the non-answer.
"If that's the case, then I want in writing what you are doing."
There was a pause before he responded: "What?"
"I want a letter from you or someone in your office stating that you are sending my application to the ISD for screening, I will not leave until I get it," I insisted.
There was another confused pause before the two of them disappeared into their office. After several more minutes, they returned and said that they would register the Open Singapore Centre without the ISD clearance.

SINGAPORE’S ISD

The ISD (Internal Security Department) is Singapore’s answer to the KGB. It is empowered under the Internal Security Act (ISA) to arrest citizens and detain them without trial. In 1963, under Operation Cold Store, more than a hundred opposition leaders and trade unionists were detained, many for as long as 20 years. In 1966, another group of oppositionists were arrested. One of them, Chia Thye Poh, was imprisoned for 23 years without ever being given a trial. It was not until 19 years into his incarceration that he was accused of being a communist. He was released in 1989 and immediately placed under city arrest for another nine years, before finally being released unconditionally in 1998. In 1987, the government ordered another ISA crackdown, this time under Operation Spectrum. Twenty-two young social activists, including lawyers, social workers, and members of a Catholic church, were accused of engaging in "communist united front tactics with a view to establishing a Marxist state." As it turned out, some of them had been quietly helping the opposition Workers Party. After they were released, several of the detainees issued a statement countering government denials that they had been tortured. They were promptly rearrested. They were later released only on condition that they sign statutory declarations denying everything they had said in their earlier press statement. An intrepid lawyer, former solicitor-general Francis Seow, stepped in to represent one of the detainees who had sought his legal assistance. When Seow arrived at the detention center, he himself was detained by the ISD and was not released for more than two months. He was later charged and convicted in absentia for tax evasion. Seow now lives in exile in the United States. In 1997, six more people were arrested by the ISD, four of whom were subsequently released in 1998.

Weeks later I organized a gathering at the Centre’s office to acquaint friends and interested parties about the work which Jeyaretnam and I had planned. I was later told that a few suspicious-looking individuals were milling around the bus-stop below my office casting glances at the entrance, presumably to note who was coming and going.

A year later, the OSC finally managed to obtain some funding for its work from an international foundation, hitherto a perfectly legitimate exercise. Days later, the government introduced the Political Donations Bill which among other things banned political organizations in Singapore from obtaining funding from overseas bodies. In exemplary autocratic style, the bill was pushed through parliament in less than two weeks. Of course, the question of what constitutes a "political organization" was left entirely up to the discretion of the Minister for Home Affairs. Furthermore, the bill
prohibited anonymous donations for any one year that exceed US$2,900. The regime
knew that Singaporeans would be too afraid to give financial support openly to the
OSC. The already constricted space within which political NGOs are allowed to
operate has thus been tightened even further. But if the PAP thinks that this step is
going to discouraged the Centre from turning up the volume of the voice of
democracy in Singapore. It is terribly mistaken.

Permits and More Permits

Since then the OSC has organized a couple of public forums. The first, on the
topic "Political Openness and Democratic Accountability in Asia: Nicety or
Necessity?" proceeded uneventfully. The featured speakers were Martin Lee,
chairman of the Democratic Party (Hong Kong); Lim Guan Eng, vice-chairman of the
Democratic Action Party (Malaysia); and Wilson Tien, director of international affairs
of the Democratic Progressive Party (Taiwan). As the second forum approached,
however, we were suddenly informed that we had to obtain separate permits for the
speakers from the immigration registry because they were foreigners. I argued that the
speakers at the first forum, who were also foreigners, had not required such permits.

"They are different," the immigrations official replied, reverting to the infuriating
bureaucratic habit of not giving any reasons for decisions. We were told to bring in
the speakers?passports, as they had to be stamped. Given the fact that our guests were
scheduled to arrive the day before the forum, we had only one morning to collect their
passports, complete all the necessary documentation, and bring it to the registry for
approval. In characteristic fashion, the officer to whom I spoke at the immigrations
office refused to assure me that the permits would be processed and granted in time
for the forum. On being informed of the situation, the speakers were resigned to the
fact that they might need to have their presentations read by others on their behalf.
Following some anxious waiting and several phone calls, however, we finally
received word that the permits had been issued a half-hour before the forum was to
begin.

More recently, the OSC and the Think Centre (another Singaporean
nongovernmental organization) organized a marathon run on 10 December 2000 to
commemorate International Human Rights Day. The run was scheduled to start at the
detention center where ISA prisoners are incarcerated. We decided on a marathon
because it consists of 26 miles— one mile each to mark the 23 years Chia Thye Poh
was imprisoned, one for Operation Cold Store, one for Operation Spectrum, and the
last mile for those presently detained under the ISA (see the box on p.161). The
participants would run through neighborhoods throughout the island wearing bolish
ISA! T-shirts and finish at Speakers Corner, where speeches and songs were planned.
(The speaker Corner was set up in September 2000 to allow Singaporeans to make
speeches in public, an activity not allowed elsewhere in the country. Speakers have to
give their names to the police at a nearby station before delivering their speeches,
which are recorded by the government and kept for six years. Microphones and other
voice-enhancement instruments are not allowed.) Twenty runners had registered with
the OSC to take part in the marathon, and more were expected to show up
unannounced on the day itself.
Not surprisingly, we received a note from the police stating that a permit would be needed for the run because, under Singaporean law, five or more persons walking or running together with common intent constitutes a public procession, which requires police permission. We duly put in an application. It was duly rejected. This effectively ended our plans to stage the run, which we believe would have made a significant impact on the public’s awareness. I was determined not to allow the authorities to thwart our efforts. It was the first time that Human Rights Day was going to be commemorated in such a public manner, and we could not allow it to be stymied. I proceeded to run the marathon myself, accompanied by one other runner for moral support.

At the end of my run, a group of activists and supporters gathered at the venue where the speeches were to be made. Before the program started, however, some of the activists raised their clenched fists and, in unison, shouted 'bolish ISA!' This act of defiance was repeated following the conclusion of the speeches. A few days later, a letter was published in the local newspaper demanding that the police take action against the protesters for raising their fists and chanting slogans. The police complied, and called two activists who participated in the event in for questioning. They also issued a warning that the police take action against the protesters for raising their fists and chanting slogans. The police complied, and called two activists who participated in the event in for questioning. They also issued a warning that the police take action against the protesters for raising their fists and chanting slogans. The police complied, and called two activists who participated in the event in for questioning. They also issued a warning that the police take action against the protesters for raising their fists and chanting slogans.

Pressuring the Media and the Opposition

Of course, much of the Centre’s work, like most other activities that directly challenge the ruling party on human rights and related issues, receives little attention from the local media. Throughout the early period of Singapore’s post-independence development, the print media came under attack by the government, often resulting in political action being taken to curtail their circulation, and in some cases leading to the complete demise of the publications. In the early 1970s, Said Zahari, editor of the Malay-language *Utusan Melayu*, was imprisoned without trial for 15 years. Four senior staff members of the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, a Chinese daily, were accused of "stirring up racial issues and glamorizing communism." They were arrested, and the newspaper was closed down. The English-language *Singapore Herald* and *Eastern Sun* were likewise banned for engaging in "covert subversion." Editors of another independent Malay newspaper, *Berita Harian*, were also arrested. Today all Singaporean newspapers are published by government-controlled bodies such as Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) an organization whose chairman, Lim Kim San, is a former cabinet minister and whose president, Tjong Yik Min, is a former director of the ISD. The broadcast media have had a less chequered past; it came under government control right from the outset. Recently, the government agreed to "liberalise" the local media industry. It allowed the SPH to set up a television station and permitted the Media Corporation of Singapore, a broadcast company, to publish its own newspaper.
With the local press well trained, the government turned on the foreign media. *Newsweek, Time*, the *Asian Wall Street Journal, Asiaweek*, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and the *Economist, International Herald Tribune* all were either sued for defamation or had their circulations drastically reduced for their unfriendly reporting. In 1999, after I was interviewed by several foreign news networks, including CNBC and the BBC (both of which broadcast from Singapore), the minister of information and the arts promptly warned the foreign media not to engage in Singapore’s domestic politics: “Just look at the way foreign channels have become part of the domestic politics in Malaysia and Indonesia. We should worry for ourselves.” He added that the government wanted the foreign media to follow the same rules as the local one with regard to coverage of the opposition.19 A member of parliament from the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) came right to the point: “We have witnessed many interviews on CNBC and BBC with some populist politicians in Singapore of late for frivolous causes.”20 The vice-president of CNBC Asia retorted that the charge that opposition politicians can use his station as a mouthpiece is “totally unfair and inaccurate.”21 Months later, a journalist formerly with CNBC intimated to me that, for a period, the station was worried that the Singaporean government would revoke its license.

All this pressure has had a lasting impact on the way the foreign media tend to report about Singapore. Derek Davies, former editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and a victim of the quarrel between the magazine and the Singaporean government, wrote that Lee Kuan Yew believed that hitting the foreign media in their wallets would be extremely effective in curtailing unflattering reports about his government. Initially, Davies did not think that the international press could be intimidated so easily. In the end, however, he concluded, “I was wholly wrong and Lee largely right.”22

The foreign media were not the only ones hit by lawsuits. Several opposition leaders have been hauled into court and forced to pay life-draining amounts of money in legal costs and damages. Jeyaretnam has paid more than a million dollars to Lee Kuan Yew and other PAP litigants. A former judge, Jeyaretnam has already sold his houses and almost all his possessions to make good on the payments. In January 2001, he was declared bankrupt because he could not pay the hundreds of thousands of dollars he still owed his opponents. Under the law he will lose his seat in parliament and be barred from future elections.

Tang Liang Hong, a successful corporate lawyer and a Workers Party candidate in the 1997 elections, was sued for defamation for remarks he made about PAP leaders during a public rally. Following the elections, Tang fled the country. His wife’s passport was quickly impounded and she was made a co-defendant in the lawsuit. Their assets were seized. Months later, a high court judge awarded the 11 PAP plaintiffs US$4.7 million, later reduced to US$2.1 million.23 Tang was subsequently declared bankrupt when he failed to pay the money. He and his wife lost everything they owned in Singapore. The story would have been less wretched had it ended there. During his exile, the government charged him with 33 counts of tax evasion. There is presently an outstanding warrant for his arrest.
I have also met with similar dire circumstances. In 1993, after I joined the opposition Singapore Democratic Party, I was dismissed from the National University of Singapore, where I had been teaching and doing research as a neuropsychologist. I was accused of misusing US$130 of my research funds. When I disputed the sacking, the head of the department (who is also a PAP member of parliament) and two other members of the university staff sued me. The plaintiffs were awarded approximately US$300,000 in costs and damages. My wife and I had to sell our house and other possessions in order to be able to pay. The chilling effect that such lawsuits have on voices of dissent cannot be exaggerated.

**Probusiness and Antidemocratic**

One can justifiably say that Singapore has pristinely manicured parks and roads, a wonderful airport, and even an efficient bureaucracy. But to say that the system is transparent and accountable, as Transparency International and other like-minded business-oriented organizations and think-tanks have done, is to do an egregious disservice to those Singaporeans who have sacrificed their lives and liberty to foster democratic values in our country.

The Singaporean government is unabashedly probusiness and antidemocratic, a combination that appeals to transnational companies looking for cheap and compliant labor. While Singapore was hailed as the world’s most competitive economy by the World Economic Forum in 1999, its workers, especially those in manual jobs, are among the worst paid, in relative terms, anywhere in the world. The median wage of an office cleaner or driver, adjusted for productivity, "is among the lowest in 59 countries worldwide." Only in Russia, Ukraine and Ecuador are workers paid less.24 There is no independent trade union in Singapore the umbrella labor organization, the National Trades Union Congress, is headed by a cabinet minister. To laud the Singaporean system without decrying its authoritarian practices smacks of an attitude that is at best obscurantist and at worst dishonest.

Given the widespread misunderstanding of the Singaporean system abroad, it is clear that the OSC’s work cannot be targeted sorely at our fellow citizens. The international community also needs to be better informed. The Centre is determined to persevere and to make sure that its message is spread on the internet, at conferences, via the media, and in discussions with international policy makers.

**Notes**

1. This statement was made by the private secretary of Singapore’s prime minister, Goh ChokTong, in a reply to a letter from the Open Singapore Centre requesting government funding.
7. Garry Rodan, "Asian crisis, Transparency and the International Media in
8. The first half of the loan was disbursed, but the second US$5 billion was cancelled when Suharto was toppled and the IMF stepped in. See "The Singapore Sling," Sydney Morning Herald, 30 October 1997.
17. "Police Call for Order at Speakers’ Corner," South China Morning Post (Hong Kong), 14 February 2001.
18. Asia Watch, Silencing All Critics.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.

Source: http://www.sfdonline.org/chee/jdem.html, 04/2001