

@CHAPTER = SINGAPORE

Serious human rights problems continued to plague Singapore in 1989. Although some political detainees were released, the virtually one-party parliament passed amendments to the Internal Security Act ("ISA") which effectively removed from judicial scrutiny government powers to detain political opponents indefinitely without trial. ISA detention orders against two political opponents were extended and a third was moved to a form of house arrest. And the government continued its campaign to silence and harass critics of its policies.

The Bush administration responded to these developments with watered-down commentary, generally in the form of broad statements of policy that avoided criticizing Singapore directly in connection with any particular case. State Department officials also claimed that they raised human rights concerns privately with the Singapore government, but there was no indication that these concerns were expressed in any more pointed fashion. Congress, by contrast, publicly and explicitly raised concerns about particular Singaporean rights violations on several occasions.

The failure of the administration to highlight human rights issues can be attributed to its reluctance to offend a valuable ally whose long-standing relationship with the United States is based on mutual economic and security considerations. Staunchly anti-communist, Singapore strongly supports the U.S. military presence in the Philippines and Southeast Asia. Singapore's harbor, airfields and maintenance facilities are open to U.S. military craft with minimal restrictions. The administration also sees Singapore as a key ally because of its active role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and because of its respected voice of moderation in the United Nations, the non-aligned movement and GATT. Singapore is also seen as playing a crucial role in obtaining a "comprehensive peace settlement" in Cambodia. U.S. Ambassador to Singapore Bob Orr characterized Singapore as "a friend whose importance to the U.S. far outweighs its size."

The human rights situation in Singapore today continues to be shaped by the government crackdown on political dissent in May and June 1987, when the government detained 22 activists without trial under the ISA and accused them of being part of a "Marxist" conspiracy to undermine the government. After releasing 21 of the 22 by the end of 1987, subject to restrictions on their freedom of movement and association, the Singapore authorities rearrested eight in April 1988 after they had signed a public statement denying the accusations against them and describing their mistreatment in detention. The government also arrested two lawyers who had defended the detainees, as well as another former detainee who had not signed the April statement but was accused of helping to draft and distribute it.

The Reagan administration's response to these violations was meak. For example, the State Department responded to a congressional inquiry in September 1988 by noting:

@QUOTENOIND = We share Congressional concern about detentions without trial because as a matter of principle the United States Government opposes prolonged detention without trial throughout the world. We have urged the Government of Singapore to either release or try fairly all persons detained under the Internal Security Act and will continue to do so in the future.

@NOIND = This formulation -- which, as noted, avoids linking the critical statement of principle to any of the particular detainees -- became the operative phraseology used by the Reagan administration in late 1988. When four of the detainees were rearrested immediately after the Singapore Court of Appeal had ordered their release on technical grounds on December 8, 1988, the

State Department reacted with a similarly indirect formulation.

The Bush administration continued this understated approach in 1989. In January, in response to language in the Court of Appeal's December 8, 1988 opinion suggesting that Singapore courts had the power to review the substantive grounds for ISA detention, the Singapore parliament amended the ISA to limit judicial scrutiny to purely technical grounds. The right of appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London was also abolished for ISA cases, removing the last possibility of independent judicial review. The State Department again reacted with a broad statement of principle: "We also regard as serious the subordination of fundamental liberties for whatever reason just as we are opposed to detention without trial."

At the end of 1989, lawyer Teo Soh Lung and social activist Vincent Cheng remained in prison without ever having been charged or tried in a court of law. They are the only remaining detainees of the original 22 detained in the May-June 1987 government crackdown. Both Teo and Cheng have challenged the legality of their detention in *habeas corpus* proceedings, which have yet to be resolved. Given the amendments to the ISA limiting judicial review, however, their continued detention is virtually assured.

The Bush administration has articulated no public response to these cases. When Teo's and Cheng's detention orders were extended in June for an additional 12 months, and when Teo's lawyer, Anthony Lester, Q.C., was barred from representing his client in her April *habeas corpus* petition -- on grounds of "interfering in Singapore's domestic politics" -- the administration was silent. The State Department's Singapore desk officer told Asia Watch, however, that the State Department was working privately to obtain the release of Cheng and Teo, and an embassy official observed most of Cheng's and Teo's hearings.

The Bush administration has also said nothing on the continued restrictions of the civil and political rights of most of the ex-detainees from the 1987 and 1988 arrests. These restrictions were extended for an additional two years in June and July 1989. Nor has the administration commented on the continuing house arrest of Chia Thye Poh, one of the world's longest-serving political prisoners, who was transferred from prison after 22 years and confined to the small island of Sentosa. Chia has never been charged or tried.

The failure to criticize the Singapore government's human rights policy was not for want of opportunity. Vice President Dan Quayle visited Singapore in May. He brought with him a letter from 26 members of Congress urging him to raise human rights concerns, particularly the continued detention without trial of Teo and Cheng, and the Singapore government's strict controls on the press, including restrictions on the distribution of such foreign publications as *Asiaweek*, *The Far East Economic Review* and *The Asian Wall Street Journal*. In Singapore, Quayle vowed to "continue to monitor human rights practices, and to register our concern when we think fundamental freedoms, including the open press, are violated," but his actions fell short of this vow.

In talks with Singapore officials, the Vice President was said to have raised the subject of Singapore's restrictions on the circulation of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and the *Far East Economic Review*. According to a Singapore spokesman, First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong told Quayle that the United States had no right to question the Singapore government's decision, since the *Journal* and the *Review* "are not even U.S. publications but merely Hong Kong publications which happen to be owned by American companies." Quayle's lack of a public retort to the view that international monitoring of human rights must be limited to restrictions affecting a country's own nationals can hardly be characterized as a vigorous defense of press freedoms. (On December 19, the Singapore government brought criminal contempt of court

charges against the editor, publishers, printers, and distributors of the *Journal* after a statement appeared there by the president of Dow Jones regretting Prime Minister Lee's victory in a libel suit against the *Review*. The Bush administration has publicly ignored the action.) Moreover, the Vice President proclaimed that "old traditions of authoritarian government are fading fast from the scene" in Asia, without even mentioning the detainees. Instead, Vice President Quayle, as well as Ambassador Orr, stressed the importance of good bilateral relations between Singapore and the United States -- particularly on trade and commercial issues -- with the apparent implicit message that public protests over human rights violations should take a back seat.

@PAGE = Another important opportunity to address Singapore rights practices was missed when Trade and Industry Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the son of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, visited Washington in May to meet with top administration officials. During his visit the junior Lee stressed the ascendant feeling in Singapore government circles that the U.S. should take a "hands-off" approach on human rights in Singapore. In a well-publicized speech, he said:

@QUOTENOIND = It therefore puzzles us that the U.S. human rights groups and government officials should so confidently prescribe for us, as a panacea for progress and stability, U.S.-style press freedoms and "human rights" <-%-20> <%0>.<-%-20> <%0>.<-%-20> <%0>.<-%-20> <%0>.<-%-20> <%0>[I]t is best for the U.S. to leave well alone and not interfere in the internal development of countries, particularly when they are working well and making progress. This is especially so with those countries where the U.S. has had no historical involvement. And when, like Singapore, they have democratically elected governments, the U.S., of all countries, should respect the freely expressed choice of the people.

@NOIND = With this statement Lee rejected the universal application of human rights, but this fundamental attack on the system of international protection of human rights did not draw a public administration response.

In light of the State Department's reluctance to initiate public criticisms of rights violations in Singapore, members of Congress have attempted to publicize abuses on a number of occasions. In addition to the congressional letter requesting Vice President Quayle to raise human rights concerns on his trip to Singapore, 30 members of the House sent a letter to Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in early August expressing opposition to the issuance of new detention orders for Teo and Cheng. Forty-eight members of Congress also joined an international appeal signed by 150 legislators from seven nations calling on the Singapore government to release or grant fair trials to Teo and Cheng.

The Bush administration's weak reaction to human rights violations in Singapore is in contrast to the substantial influence that the U.S. enjoys. While Singapore receives no U.S. foreign assistance, the United States is Singapore's largest trading partner and the second-largest source of Singapore's imports. Instead of using this influence and close ties to promote human rights, the Bush administration has treated human rights as at best an after-thought, if not an unpleasant and undesirable irritant to otherwise harmonious relations.