S. Rajaratnam
The Authorised Biography

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S. Rajaratnam

The Authorised Biography
Volume Two: The Lion's Roar

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To those not yet born
when these battles were waged

and in memory of
S.R. Nathan and the pioneering foreign service officers
who braved them all

Contents

Foreword

The Lion's Roar is the second volume of Irene Ng's biography of Mr S. Rajaratnam, covering his life and work after 1963. Younger Singaporeans would not have known him in person, and may not even have heard of him. But he was an exceptional leader, one of the core group of founding fathers who shared a fierce conviction of what Singapore should be, and defied the odds to build a united, successful and confident nation.

Raja, as his friends called him, played many roles over the course of his extraordinary life. He was a journalist, anti-colonialist, philosopher, wordsmith, and diplomat – often several of these at once. Above all, he was a patriot who worked tirelessly to create a better future for Singaporeans.

He helped define Singapore's foundational ideals and values, framed principles and strategies to secure our place in the world, and fought with courage and conviction to make these words and ideas an enduring reality.

After Singapore merged with the Federation of Malaya, Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah) to form Malaysia, Raja campaigned for a "Malaysian Malaysia". Sadly, this proved incompatible with the race-based politics of the Federation.

After independence, in the aftermath of racial riots and the trauma of Separation, Raja crystallised his vision of a united, multiracial Singapore in the National Pledge.

As labour minister, he played a major role in transforming fractious labour management relations into our unique cooperative model of tripartism, where workers, employers and the government work together to expand the economic pie.

As our first foreign minister, Raja established the fundamental principles of Singapore's foreign policy. He advocated regional interdependence as the way forward for Southeast Asian countries, and negotiated the agreement that created ASEAN. He began Singapore's engagement of China. On his first visit there in 1975, he explained clearly to his hosts how Singapore, with its majority ethnic Chinese but multiracial population, intended to conduct its relations with China, cooperating on the basis of national interests and not ethnic affinity. When Vietnam attacked Cambodia in 1978, he rallied his ASEAN counterparts to oppose the invasion, emphasising the principle enshrined in the United Nations Charter – an existential one for Singapore – that international borders must not be violated.

Raja's responses to these long-term issues have stood the test of time. Dealing with similar issues decades later, I have often found myself following the lines that he laid out so long ago. We still uphold the same principles in our foreign policy. We still adopt a tripartite approach to industrial relations. And we will always strive to be, in the words of the National Pledge, "one united people, regardless of race, language or religion". Therefore, this book does not just recount facts and events from the distant past; it also explains rationales and realities that remain fresh and relevant today.

The book also conveys a vivid feel for Raja the person. I had the privilege of knowing Raja from different perspectives. First, as a boy growing up, I called him "Uncle Raja" – he was my father's genial comrade-in-arms and close friend. Years later when I decided to enter politics, he chaired the committee that interviewed me to be fielded as a PAP candidate. Then when we were colleagues in the Cabinet, he mentored me and the other young ministers, offering sage counsel but leaving us to find our own footing.

In all these different phases, I was always struck by how Raja could stay warm, affable and unflappable, getting along with all sorts of people. Perhaps this explained his remarkable ability to bridge conflicting perspectives and persuade others to his point of view, which won Singapore many friends and diplomatic successes.

Irene has done a service to Singapore with this biography. The fruit of years of thorough, painstaking research and countless interviews, this is a serious yet captivating account of the life of a pivotal character in Singapore's history. *The Lion's Roar* gives an insight into what Raja was like, what he believed in, and what he fought for. May it inspire present and future generations to build on his great legacy for Singapore while creating their own, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity, and progress for our nation.

Lee Hsien Loong
Prime Minister of Singapore
Singapore, 7 December 2023

Preface

When I approached the trustees of S. Rajaratnam's estate in 2004 suggesting an authorised biography of the founding leader, I did not realise that the project would take over my life. Altogether, I have spent close to two decades conducting research for this two-part biography, trying to understand Raja the thinker, the writer, the politician, and the man.

I had known Raja since my days as a journalist, and had interviewed him in the 1980s and 1990s, both at his home and in his office. Writing his biography was the furthest thing from my mind then, but those encounters gave me a sense of the kind of man he was – his thinking, his values, his mannerisms.

By the time I officially started on his biography in January 2005, Raja was already suffering from dementia. With the permission of his trustees, I began to browse his personal library and private papers in his old bungalow in Chancery Lane, a process that continued until some months after his death in February 2006. Other than his vast collection of books, there were boxes upon boxes of unsorted personal papers, files, notebooks and photographs, all gathering dust. From among them I found useful nuggets of information, hitherto never revealed, that I have woven into the narrative of this book.

One of them was a letter that Raja had written from his hospital bed in London to his wife, Piroska Feher, in 1983. I learnt much more about their married life from this single letter than all the other sources and interviews put together.

Yet the more I researched, the more I also found that Raja's life was full of carefully guarded secrets. He was a discreet man, a private man. He did not keep a personal diary with intimate details of his life and career, although he kept copious notebooks on ideas

or quotes he picked up from books and journals, and his thoughts on them.

He was firm about his decision not to write his memoirs. He gave many interviews and made many speeches, but, as a public figure with a deep abiding sense of privacy, he rarely revealed his personal feelings unless probed, and even then, he exhibited his reserve. Friends who had known Raja for years found him enigmatic and not easy to read. Though at the forefront of Singapore politics for decades, he drew no clique or claque around him, and did not try to.

While his many speeches, notes and books tell a great deal about his phenomenally wide-ranging interests, they do not offer much for the biographer looking for personal insights. While he was a very good propagandist for his party and country, he was no self-publicist.

His private papers are void of personal criticisms about his colleagues or juicy insider stories. This might seem unusual for such a prolific writer and storyteller, but Raja was first and foremost a decent and honourable man who practised self-discipline and self-restraint, almost as a religion.

All this made my job of providing a more intimate insight into his personality more challenging, but also more satisfying. The same went for my task of fleshing out Raja's long political career and driving motivations with concrete detail and descriptions. Given that his work was entwined in many areas of government, especially external affairs, I had to grapple with the inevitable political and diplomatic sensitivities involved.

To ensure that this biography would be as authoritative and definitive as possible, I sought the support of former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, then senior minister (SM), for the project at the outset in 2004. I am grateful that SM Lee, who had by then written his own memoirs, gave it, and granted me access to relevant Cabinet and other government papers. This permission continued under his political successors for this second volume.

Mr S.R. Nathan, who was then president of Singapore, facilitated my access to papers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Having once served Raja as MFA's permanent secretary, Mr Nathan needed no convincing that Raja's pioneering work in MFA should be recorded and not lost to future generations. He also happened to be one of the three trustees of Raja's estate, the other two being Professor Tommy Koh and Dr V.K. Pillay.

I was allowed access to records and papers in government archives with the understanding that citations be vetted for national security. I am glad to say that nothing has been redacted from the body of this work in this process. It must also be made clear that no government leader or official tried to exercise any sort of control over my interpretations or conclusions.

This point is important: this biography is official and authorised in the sense that I was given access to government papers and Raja's personal papers, and written with the support of the government, his estate's trustees and his close relatives. This should not be confused with presenting an "official" version of Rajaratnam's life and work. Rather, it is my version as his biographer.

It should be borne in mind that *The Lion's Roar*, volume 2 of S. Rajaratnam's biography, is focused on the story of one man – his character, his life and his legacy. Given his distinctive role as a founding leader of independent Singapore, the People's Action Party (PAP) and MFA, it is inevitable that most of his thoughts and actions were bound up with his country, his political party and the foreign ministry.

That said, this book is not intended as a history of Singapore, nor as an analysis of the PAP or MFA.

To be sure, learning how and why he made some of his most important decisions and policy choices is crucial to understanding Singapore's development, its political culture and its foreign policy principles. Beyond that, there are many lessons that can be drawn from his life and legacy, lessons that hold a deep relevance to the

current age, and lessons that could help a country and its people create their future.

While trying to get to the heart of Raja himself, I gradually realised that, almost without meaning to, I was building up a picture of what it was like to live and work in his time. It was a very different world from that of today, and probably unrecognisable for those in the future. In trying to get his work as well as his character into perspective, it seemed important to try to recreate this picture as faithfully as possible.

After living with the subject of Raja for so long, reading what he wrote, listening to his sound recordings, watching video footage of him and reflecting on his person day after day, I am mindful of the risk that my writing may suffer from unconscious biases. My background as a former member of parliament of the PAP might also predispose some to this view, perhaps even before they read this book. All I can say is that I have done my utmost to be as thorough and accurate as possible, while also empathetic.

Every attempt has been made to ensure that assertions made are supported by available evidence, and to present different views. Sensitive to the nuances of the evidence, I have worried over the drafts and re-written them thousands of times.

I cannot claim to know how it felt to be in Raja's size eight shoes, but to a certain extent, my previous experiences – as a journalist, as an MP (involved in the Government Parliamentary Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defence), as well as a director in the think-tank Singapore Institute of International Affairs, and then of the National Trades Union Congress, and now as a writer-in-residence of ISEAS – were useful to the biographer's task of understanding the background against which he worked, as he straddled the worlds of journalism, party politics, unionism and foreign policy.

Writers of biographies also have to be readers of biographies, and I have read many. The best biographers, it seemed to me, depend on

documents and data to flesh out their chronicles of another's life, but in the end they must rely on the art of storytelling to make history come alive.

And so, I have elected to take a narrative approach in this book. It aims to draw you into Raja's world and to take you back to his key turning points. This involves reconstructing the circumstances in which the political battles were waged, critical decisions were made and actions taken, while preserving the accuracy of historical events.

The narrative is drawn from more than a decade's worth of intensive and in-depth research. It includes interviews; Singapore government papers; parliamentary and official records; archival documents and audio-visual recordings; British, Australian and American records; Raja's private papers; and newspaper reports and photographs.

Besides interviewing more than 200 people, I have supplemented my research with oral history interviews from the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). They have provided me with different perspectives and colourful anecdotes. However, I have found that these varied accounts do not always accord with the facts, nor indeed with each other. After all, many of their recollections are of events that had happened many decades earlier, and therefore susceptible to lapses of memory and to the wisdom of hindsight.

My biggest challenge, therefore, has been to sort through the numerous accounts of events, cross-check with available records, sift through the evidence, and then craft a biography that is both accurate and authoritative. When stuck in a maze of contradictions, I relied on my journalistic compass, asking questions such as: What exactly do we know? How credible is it? What don't we know? How can we fill the gaps and provide a coherent, credible and convincing narrative?

The biographer's trade is never simply about chronicling facts and retelling received versions of events. As every historian knows, even the most data-driven research involves an element of interpretation. But the biographer faces the added challenge of fathoming the motives and emotions of the individuals involved.

There are many personal accounts of Singapore politics and diplomacy in the 1960s to the 1980s: memoirs and essays that offer significant insights into our understanding of the period. This being a biography of Raja, however, my narrative privileges his point of view.

Where disagreements and variances in recollection were integral to the story, I have set out the conflicting versions, hopefully without adding to the confusion. For minor unresolved issues not crucial to the story, I have abided by a guiding principle of good journalism: when in doubt, leave it out.

In describing key events, I took the precaution of not only reading newspaper reports (which can be inaccurate), but also listening to audio recordings of Raja's speeches and checking against his scripts and official records. Given his inimitable rhetorical style, I have tried to convey his worldview in his own authentic voice as far as possible.

It helped, of course, to have a rich resource in his voluminous speeches and writings, which can be found in the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute library and the NAS. Raja's intellectual life was profoundly diverse and closely intertwined with his personal and political life. But one should not rely exclusively on his published works, as they were written with public consumption in mind.

As for his letters and private journals, here too, one must be judicious about their use. After years of research, Raja's handwriting became as familiar to me as my own. From the size and shape of the letters in his copious handwritten notes, I learnt to recognise those written in his later years when he was suffering from dementia, and made judgments on their use accordingly.

After gathering all the material, a major task was to weave his thoughts, ideas and philosophies into the narrative fabric of this book without interrupting the flow. On the narrative structure: it is divided into six

parts – Trauma (1963–65), Beginnings (1965–68), Trials (1968–79), Shocks (1979–83), Transitions (1983–88) and Endings (1988–2006).

While the flow is broadly chronological, in real life, Raja often had to deal with completely disparate matters, all of a sudden and all at the same time. Apparently unrelated incidents could influence each other, and all of them, taken together, had an impact not only on the man, his attitudes and his decisions, but also on the country and the region as well.

Therefore, there are times when I pause from the main narrative to expand on a particular theme, such as the drafting of the Singapore Pledge, or to explore certain parallel episodes –the death of Raja's father in 1967, for example, which coincided with news of the accelerated withdrawal of British troops – to give readers a broader sense of the challenges that Raja faced.

There are also times when I turn the focus onto the people central to Raja's life, such as Piroska and Lee, to give a more rounded picture of the man. For similar reasons, there are occasions when I group together several related issues that preoccupied Raja over his lifetime rather than presenting them sequentially, such as the media and democracy.

This book dwells on the merger years from 1963 to 1965 in some detail, as that period most acutely defined Raja's position on some fundamental principles, such as a non-communal system, that were to guide him for the rest of his life. Much space is also devoted to Raja's campaign against Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Kampuchea (Cambodia) from 1979. This campaign not only consumed a decade of his life, but also brought out the spirit of the man and his dedication to a set of foreign policy principles that I believe remain relevant today.

When it came to using journalism and literary techniques to drive the narrative, I have proceeded cautiously, taking care to go only so far as the evidence gathered reasonably suggests. To describe Raja's expressions and mood at his first press conference as foreign minister in 1965, for example, I relied on audio recordings,

video footage and photographs. The same goes for scenes such as his tour to Kampong Glam after the race riots in 1964. And where conversations are reconstructed, they are based on reliable accounts of the people directly involved, or records such as verbatim transcripts of conversations.

As I wrote this book, I came to realise that this is a historical account with significant contemporary resonance. Raja's story is not simply reducible to the Singapore story. It is a very human epic with lessons for us all.

Raja reminds us that, in most cases, the final determinant of outcomes rests not with fate, luck or blueprints, but with how individuals, and societies, respond at the moment of trial.

His story also speaks to the very core of human existence and identity in a globalised world. A world in which nations have become increasingly interconnected as one global community – and yet, are still divided by "destructive nationalisms" and "tribal wars" based on race, religion and language.

While Raja's work was primarily in service of Singapore and the region, his ideas and outlook were truly universal. Thus, while I did not conceive this biography as a commentary on the current events, many of the issues addressed in the book – nationalism, globalisation and the rise of populist leaders fanning tribal politics, to name a few – will sound familiar to readers today.

Raja's story tells us much about the human condition; about what individuals, given genius, courage and willpower, can achieve beyond what most thought is possible, and what people and nations will endure if they have inspirational and moral leadership.

His story is also a plea for the value of declaring ideals and hopes that are fragile, and of asking the important questions: What sort of nation to create? What kind of people to be? What values to cherish most? And even, how to create one united humanity?

Throughout his sentient life, his personal compulsion was to shape the future, and his passion was to communicate with people, educate them, and stir their imagination.

Once, as a young journalist in 1992, I asked Raja what had motivated him to sacrifice so much of his life in all his three decades in politics. His voice crackled with passion as he replied: "To create a decent society. We wanted to make Singapore something we can be proud of, and that other Singaporeans can be proud of."[1]

Today, many Singaporeans, particularly the older generation, still remember Raja. But many younger ones know little about him, or why he was such a towering figure in Singapore's history. This book is written for the younger generations of today and tomorrow.

Author's Note

While this is the second volume of my biography of S. Rajaratnam, it is written to stand by itself. As with the first volume, this book is intended for the general reader.

On the use of names: As there are many people with similar surnames – for example, Lee Kuan Yew and Lee Hsien Loong, or Goh Keng Swee and Goh Chok Tong – I have included their full names when they appear close to each other, and subsequently used their Chinese names to differentiate between them.

As for Tamil names, these follow the patronymic tradition, with the father's name preceding the personal name. Sinnathamby Rajaratnam's first name, Sinnathamby, is thus that of his father, while Rajaratnam is his given name. It is common for patronymic names to be reduced to an initial, hence S. Rajaratnam.

For easier reading, wherever possible, I have also opted for names that can be used more readily in conversation, after a proper introduction; hence the reference to Raja throughout the book. No disrespect is intended.

For compatibility with contemporaneous quotations, I have also retained place names and other names that were in use at the time. Hence, for example, the references to Kampuchea (and not Cambodia) from 1975 to 1989, and Peking (instead of Beijing) until 1979.

For the same reason, readers introduced to Teng Hsiao-ping and Chou En-lai in chapters relating to the period before 1979 (when the Chinese government began using the Pinyin spellings in all foreign language publications) would be reintroduced to the same personalities as Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai after that year. To avoid confusion, the narrative provides updated spellings in parentheses.

While I have opted for the preferred modern spelling in British English throughout the text, I have generally kept the spellings in direct quotes as they appear in the original sources. So, for example, while words with the prefix multi were not hyphenated – multiracial, multicultural, multilingual, multireligious – those hyphenated in direct quotes in the original documents have been left as they were. Similarly for American English spelling in direct quotes.

In an attempt not to overload the general reader, I have tried to reduce the volume of scholarly apparatus as far as I could to essential references. For the same reason, I have kept footnotes to the necessary minimum.

For those interested, I have listed the relevant sources at the end of this book. Supporting material is provided in the form of a selected bibliography.

Introduction

"You can make the tomorrow you want, provided you have the wisdom, the guts and the will to struggle for it."[1]

That sentence captures in a nutshell the guiding philosophy of S. Rajaratnam, who stands out among the founding leaders of Singapore as its chief national ideologue and foreign policy strategist.

This philosophy, with its emphasis on the future and the power of the human spirit, had been a basic premise of his political ideology long before he entered politics in 1959, and even longer before Singapore became independent in 1965. It was a dictum that was put to the test in his own eventful life. As a founding leader of the People's Action Party (PAP) who went on to hold multiple key ministerial portfolios, he lived out his faith in unfathomable circumstances. Heartbreak, anxiety and despair hovered constantly over his attempts to overcome them.

Yet his guiding belief in the power of the human will did not come naturally to him; neither did it come easily. Born on 25 February 1915 in Jaffna, Ceylon, he was a child of the colonial era, when Ceylon, India, Malaya and large swathes of the world were part of the British Empire. He was also a child of several identities not of his own making. In his original birth certificate, his name was registered in Tamil script as Rajendram (which can mean "God among Kings" in Sanskrit), thanks to his maternal grandfather in Ceylon. That changed after he turned six months old – his mother, Annammah, brought him to Seremban,

Malaya, to join his father, Sinnathamby, a supervisor in a rubber estate. There, his devout Hindu parents consulted the family priest and astrologer, and renamed him Rajaratnam ("Jewel among Kings").

In the rubber estate, Raja, as he was usually called, found himself the latest addition to the generations of Jaffna Tamil immigrants who had settled in the area. He grew up in an environment in which blood relations, tradition and tribe largely defined one's world. His religious elders believed that one's destiny was written in the stars, that one's fate was determined at birth, by one's horoscope, and could not be fully escaped. From young, he watched them consult the astrologer on anything and everything – be it choosing a marriage partner, starting a new job, or even determining an auspicious time to leave their house in the morning.

My first volume of Raja's biography, *The Singapore Lion*, describes how he struggled with this fundamental notion as a young man; how he had his political awakening in London as a law student in King's College from 1935, flirted with Marxist theory and found his gift as a writer as well as love with a Hungarian woman, Piroska Feher. It also relates how the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 changed everything for him. His real university was not King's College, from which he dropped out in 1940, but war-time Britain, where he learnt that politics was literally a matter of life and death.

At the age of 32, Raja returned to Malaya in 1947 with a new wife, Piroska, and a resolve to shape his own fate as well as that of his country, Malaya, of which Singapore was an inextricable part. He had found his calling: to fight for independence for his own country, and to usher in the post-colonial society to come.

He became a journalist, using the power of words and ideas to stir people to action and to bring about change. His main vehicles were the English-language newspapers *The Malayan Tribune* and *The Tiger Standard*, also known as the *Singapore Standard*.

His byline became a force in national politics as he crusaded against colonialism, communism and communalism. Besides writing for local radio and newspapers – which in those days were circulated in both

Malaya and Singapore – he also worked as a stringer for foreign news agencies such as the London Observer News Service, the Pan Asia Newspaper Alliance and *JANA*, the news magazine of resurgent Asia and Africa.

Raja fought for more than a decade for the independence of his people in Malaya. They had been dominated, divided and exploited by the British for more than a century, and he rebelled against this. In 1954, together with his anti-colonial allies, he formed the left-wing PAP, led by Lee Kuan Yew.

When the British gave Malaya – but not Singapore – its independence in 1957, he mounted another struggle – this time for Singapore's independence through merger with Malaya to form Malaysia. His entrance to politics was announced in a five-paragraph article in *The Sunday Times* on 29 March 1959. Headlined "Newsman quits job to work for PAP", it told readers simply that Raja, 44, the president of the Singapore Union of Journalists, had resigned from his job at *The Straits Times* to do "full time" work for the PAP.

When the PAP swept to power in self-governing Singapore in 1959, Raja, who became the country's first culture minister, stood out even among the most ideological leaders driving the merger campaign. He had long imagined Singapore and Malaya as one entity, as one "nation in the making" – to use the title of his 1957 radio play – and had considered their eventual union as necessary, if not inevitable. He was elated when the union finally materialised in 1963.

For Raja, at least at that point, nothing was more important than building a united Malaysia, where people of all races would be equal. That was his big dream, his lodestar. His abhorrence of colonialism, of the exploitation of man by man, of racial discrimination and prejudice, had a moral rather than a political motivation.

The Singapore Lion ended with the merger in 1963, with a glimpse of the troubles to come. This second volume, *The Lion's Roar*, covers the period from Singapore's merger with Malaya to form Malaysia in 1963, to his death in 2006.

It traces Raja's crusade for a "Malaysian Malaysia" during the merger years, and its tragic end. It charts his subsequent odyssey to fight for Singapore's survival as an independent country and to create the national ideology of a country born in turbulent times. It reveals the mistakes made along the way – from inexperience, miscalculation, and sheer desperation – and the efforts to overcome the dramatic reversals that threatened to destroy his dreams.

Raja came from a special generation of Singapore leaders – larger than life, tough, brilliant, complex people. Forged in life-and-death battles, they shared a fierce drive to succeed.

Besides Raja, the core leaders of the first-generation Cabinet were Lee, the country's prime minister; Goh Keng Swee, the finance minister; and Toh Chin Chye, the deputy prime minister. While there were other ministers pulling their weight, it was essentially these key leaders who made the critical decisions that decided Singapore's fate at its most vulnerable moments.

But Raja had some qualities that set him apart. The depth of his convictions, the breadth of his interests, and the length of his vision made him an exceptional figure, as did the power of his prose and polemics. But he had something more than that – an almost limitless imagination paired with fearless audacity. It was these qualities that helped to infuse his dispirited colleagues, including Lee, and a doubting nation with a sense of optimism and self-confidence in the most dire hours of independence, when they did not know whether Singapore was going to survive.

Of all the varied chapters in Raja's tumultuous life, the story of his struggle for a Malaysian Malaysia, and then a Singaporean Singapore, is one of the most insightful in terms of the clues it provides into his character and motivations.

Raja's abiding vision was to build a progressive society that was just and fair, and that provided equal opportunities and rights for

all, regardless of their race, language or religion. "Regardless of race, language or religion" had long been his leitmotif. By this he meant creating a new social and political order in which these factors did not enter into the country's economic and political calculations.

It counts as one of his most powerful ideas. It became his signature, his lifelong obsession. It was encapsulated in the Singapore Pledge, which he drafted in 1966. Among the founding fathers of Singapore, he occupies a special place in its history for pursuing this vision with a high heart.

His politics, however, came with an equally high price of personal hardship and pain. Like most visionaries ahead of their time, he found himself in many instances having to face the agonies of shattered hopes and unfulfilled dreams.

But unlike some others, after every obstruction, every catastrophe, Raja somehow reinvented himself and revivified his dreams. With his genial smile and contagious optimism, he was buoyed by the unshakeable conviction that someday, all that he had struggled for would come to fruition, even if it might not be in his lifetime.

Certainly, he was not alone in his desire to build a non-communal and meritocratic Singapore that was open to the world – a Singaporean Singapore, as he called it. But, more than anyone else in the early decades of Singapore's evolution, he became its symbol and its spokesman. Yet he was not typical of the times, nor was he the archetype of Singapore's national character – for that, too, was still a work in progress. What Raja was, was the *essential* Singaporean.

It might seem strange that such a person – a Jaffna Tamil born in Ceylon and raised in Seremban, a university drop-out who spent 12 years in London mixing with progressive Afro-Asian writers and radical thinkers – should have come to embody this. I would argue the opposite: only by standing outside of the conventional concepts that made up Singapore then, could someone reimagine and remake Singapore, as Raja sought to do.

As this book shows, only a man with his set of experiences, interests and ideas could have envisioned Singapore transforming

into a "global city" at a time when Lee was talking about building a "metropolis".

If anyone deserved the mantle of "Singapore's philosopher king", it was Raja. He was a man of ideas and action who combined moral philosophy with political power. A deeply philosophical thinker, he was equally at ease pontificating about the ills of a wealth-driven culture, ethnocentrism and xenophobia, as he was about the cures to the diseases that plague dysfunctional democracies and the international order.

As Singapore's first and longest-serving foreign minister, Raja also came to embody another aspect of Singapore – its distinctive views of the city-state's place in the world and of the role of small states in international relations.

His efforts to secure Singapore's sovereignty on the international stage set the direction for the vulnerable city-state's foreign policy and its approach to international relations for generations to come. He also played an important role in the defining events that shaped the region – the Indonesian Confrontation in the 1960s, the British military withdrawal in the early 1970s, and Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea in 1978. His work makes him a significant figure in the history of Southeast Asia.

At each step of his perilous journey, Raja found himself having to face unexpected dangers and to make critical decisions – some particularly contentious – that would decide the country's fate. My account of the early years of Singapore's independence reveals how powerfully "the past" sought to reassert itself, and how dreadful were the dilemmas which confronted the brave souls who took it upon themselves to represent the future. Far-sighted, patient and persistent, Raja forged alliances, sustained the spirits of those around him, and translated the meaning of their struggle into words of force on the international stage.

One would be hard put to invent a foreign minister who could have better guided Singapore's foreign policy through the dark days following its independence.

There was another vital role he played at a turning point in Singapore's history, a role which hitherto has been grossly underappreciated. It was his leadership as labour minister during another time of peril – the accelerated British withdrawal in the late 1960s to early 1970s. Raja oversaw the most far-reaching labour reform in the nation's history and, by doing so, ushered in a new era of industrial relations. He was the political linchpin of a new deal that laid the foundation for a unique tripartite alliance between unions, employers and the government; a system that would prove to be a key competitive advantage for Singapore.

Raja's story is thus one of trials and also of the triumph of the human spirit. Above all, it is a story of a faith in Singapore – or at least his idea of Singapore – a faith that he clung to until the end.

This is why the dictum in the epigraph to this introduction lurks behind almost every story in this book, even those stories that may not, at first glance, seem to have anything to do with it. Running through all of Raja's struggles was the common factor of faith: faith not in any god, but in man's ability to imagine, to create, and to overcome.

That said, Raja did not work alone. And his life, and indeed Singapore itself, would have turned out very differently had it not been for his key allies – most of all Lee, who got him into politics in the first place. As Raja himself said in 1990, he had been involved in many momentous events that he could not have conceived of without Lee in his life. Thus, while this is a book about Raja, it is also one about his closest colleagues, the decisions he made with them, and how he acted when things turned out wrong.

In this connection, one of the most common criticisms of Raja was that he was little more than Lee's mouthpiece and faithful follower.

This book makes clear that Raja was very much his own man with his own views and his own voice. It was perhaps a major contradiction of Raja's career that he was at once Lee's loyal lieutenant and a politician beating his own path. It is a tension that is present throughout much of this book.

This biography also brings out the tensions and contradictions that arose as he navigated the complexities of establishing non-communal politics in a multiracial society in an age of "tribal wars", developing a foreign policy that promoted national interest in a globalising world, and evolving a model of governance and democracy that worked for Singapore in a turbulent region. He was an ardent nationalist and yet a true internationalist who was ahead of his time.

Of course, Raja's legacy was not perfect. Both in foreign and domestic policy, many of his actions were controversial and remain so. While affable and gentlemanly in person, he could be merciless in combat. The force and clarity with which he expressed his views could crush more sensitive souls. But he always tried to do right by his people and his principles. And while his style of persuasion might not have suited every person or circumstance, it is worth comprehending.

In writing this book, there is one question that I was forced to consider time and again: would Singapore have succeeded without Raja's involvement in the struggle for its independence, survival and progress?

My answer can be found in the pages of this book.

Suffice to say here that it is extremely hard to see how Singapore would be what it is today without his profound and multifaceted contributions.

But the question has a wider importance, for it asks not only about Raja's place in Singapore's history, but also whether the ideas and principles that he championed still have a relevance now and in the future. The answer is not for me to give, but for the people of Singapore, particularly the younger and future generations, to decide.

In his many speeches to young Singaporeans, Raja often reminded them that a nation could determine its own fate, that its people could

create the type of society they wanted to belong to and the kind of future they desired for themselves and the nation. "A nation creates its own future – every time and all the time. Nothing is predestined," he asserted in 1982. "Everything is determined by the will or lack of will on the part of peoples composing a nation. In other words, it is in our hands to choose the kind of future we want."[2]

It is a great pity that he did not write a book to draw the separate strands of his ideas on nations, nationalism and globalisation; on race, religion and language; and on governance, leadership and democracy to provide a coherent and accessible foundation of his thought, or what might be called "Raja-ism".

A book was, in fact, on his to-do list. One of his announced plans after his political retirement in 1988 was to write a book tentatively titled *From Wanderers to Star-makers*. Unfortunately, for reasons explained within these pages, the book never materialised.

But, as its working title suggests, it would be about how transient migrants with their separate languages, religions, cultures and histories – the wanderers – struck roots in new lands and transformed into "star-makers", people who made their own destiny.

He might not have produced the last major work that many had hoped for, but he stands witness to the truth that, as American journalist Walter Lippman once said, men are mortal, but ideas are immortal. The name S. Rajaratnam will forever be linked to the resonant words in the Singapore Pledge as well as to the transformative concepts of a "Singaporean Singapore" and "global city".

In the body of his speeches, he left the basic tenets of Singapore's foreign policy. After his death, his speeches continued to be read. A good selection can be found in the anthologies *The Prophetic and the Political: Selected Speeches and Writings of S. Rajaratnam*, edited by Chan Heng Chee and Obaid ul Haq; and *S. Rajaratnam on Singapore: From Ideas to Reality*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan.

In honour of his contributions as Singapore's founding foreign minister, several institutions and initiatives were named after him. In 1998, a decade after his political retirement, the S. Rajaratnam Professorship in Strategic Studies was set up at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) at Nanyang Technological University. Then, in 2007, a year after Raja's death, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies was established as an autonomous graduate school and think tank, incorporating the IDSS.

The following year, in 2008, MFA launched the S. Rajaratnam Lecture series, an annual event that invites prominent people to speak to the foreign service on topics related to diplomacy and international relations. In 2014, a S$100 million S. Rajaratnam Endowment was set up by Temasek Holdings to support programmes that foster stronger ties in the region and internationally. And in 2022 – 50 years after Raja's "global city" speech – the vision, as he articulated it, became the focus of the annual flagship Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

And yet, in all the official and intellectual commemorations of Raja's life, in all the events and speeches, it is easy to overlook the fire that burned in him throughout his life: the unrelenting conviction that the future is what human beings make of the possible – and the seemingly impossible. It demands from them a creative act. And, like all acts of creation, it will take imagination and ingenuity; patience and pain; and an infinite faith in the power of the human will.

And so we come back to the book that Raja never wrote, about wanderers who become star-makers. My two-volume biography is, in essence, the story of how one wanderer became a star-maker. It is the story of the transformation of a wandering wordsmith into a political giant whose voice reverberates through time.

He was the true Singapore lion who roared, and roared till the end. In a way, it is a perfect metaphor for the life of Raja and the Singapore to which he had devoted that life.

PART ONE

Trauma

1

Riots

As he listened to the frantic voice on the phone, S. Rajaratnam realised that his greatest fear had come to pass. He tried not to give in to despair. It was difficult. As one of the chief architects of Singapore's independence, he had experienced some tough situations – but this was the worst tragedy to befall his country in his five years in politics.

It was 21 July 1964, barely a year after Singapore merged with Malaya and two Borneo states, Sabah and Sarawak, to form Malaysia in September 1963.

The voice on the phone that late afternoon was that of his close colleague Othman Wok, the social affairs minister. Othman had looked up to Raja, as the culture minister was usually known, since their journalism days in the 1950s. They had then worked for different newspapers – Raja was a famous columnist with the *Singapore Standard*, while Othman reported for the Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu* – but both were joined in a common cause in the Singapore Union of Journalists to fight for social justice. Raja had led the union as its president with Othman as his deputy.

After Raja, together with Lee Kuan Yew and others, formed the People's Action Party (PAP) in 1954, Othman had joined the new left-wing party. What bound them was a common vision: to build a non-communal society based on justice and equality. In working towards this vision, Raja and Othman, as minority political leaders

in a Chinese-dominated country, came to represent both the face and spirit of the party's multiracial ideology.

Now, on this hot, horrible day in July 1964, Othman bore news of a racial clash that threatened to tear apart the very fabric of society. "Some Malays are causing problems," he reported. "Beating up Chinese bystanders. Things are getting out of control."[1]

Othman, the only Malay minister in the Singapore Cabinet, was leading a PAP contingent as part of a 20,000-strong procession to mark Prophet Muhammad's birthday that day.

Over the phone, he told Raja the scenes he had just witnessed: Malay youths punching a Chinese policeman struggling to control the rowdy procession as it headed towards the Malay settlement of Geylang, then breaking off from the march to attack Chinese passers-by at random. Sensing danger, he and several others had slipped into the People's Association headquarters in Kallang. This was where he had rung Raja.

The day being a public holiday, Raja was catching up on his reading in his book-lined home, a bungalow in Chancery Lane. At 49, he was the oldest among the nine-man Cabinet, and often appeared unflappable in any crisis. "He was very cool," Othman recalled, "one who never got excited about anything."[2]

Raja might project an air of equanimity, but internally his thoughts were racing. He knew only too well how quickly racial and religious passions could boil over and lead to mass riots. In a series of phone calls, he quickly conferred with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and others on the dangerous situation. This was the first serious racial clash they had to deal with since taking charge of self-governing Singapore in 1959.

Gripped by urgency, he jumped into his sun-baked second-hand black Hillman and drove to his office at City Hall. As soon as he arrived and sat behind his desk, he began working the phone. Anxious reporters were clamouring for his views and the government's response. He was just as anxious to determine what was happening. As story after story came in of Malay groups attacking Chinese people, overturning their cars, scooters and hawker carts, and setting their homes and businesses

on fire, his alarm ratcheted up another notch. The mayhem was still spreading even as darkness began to descend.

The topmost priority of the PAP leaders was to contain the violence. To their frustration, however, they found their hands tied. Under the merger agreement between Singapore and Malaya, internal security did not come under Singapore's control but under the federal government in Kuala Lumpur (KL).

As reports of casualties poured in, the Singapore leaders urged KL to impose a curfew. Malaysian prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was away in America, leaving his deputy, Tun Abdul Razak, in charge. The curfew was finally called at 9:30 p.m. But still the streets seethed with savagery. Mob passions once roused could not be so easily doused.[3]

Disturbingly, reports began filtering in that the KL-controlled security forces, who were mainly Malay, were siding with Malays against Chinese. In turn, Chinese secret society gangs, having lost confidence in the police, led revenge attacks against Malays. The spiral of violence seemed unstoppable.

Lee and finance minister Goh Keng Swee kept in close touch with police commissioner John Le Cain and director of Special Branch George Bogaars. Raja took charge of crisis communication.

As the government's communications czar, he knew that the public needed assurance. The government must be seen to be in control, even if it might not be. The former newspaperman had long understood the power of words. In such a tinderbox atmosphere, just one wrong word, one insensitive phrase, could set off another cycle of violence.

Raja planted himself in the thick of action in the operations room at the police headquarters at Pearl's Hill. His old journalistic habits – checking and analysing the facts, drawing inferences and extrapolating patterns – kicked in. Accustomed to working under high pressure, he bent over his battered Adler portable typewriter and typed out a press

release on the spot. Even as he detailed the police update, he made sure to emphasise the government's key message to the people: stay calm.

He handed the draft to the police secretary, Tharumaratnam Chelliah, and said: "Chelliah, anything you can change as you think suitable."[4] More used to barked orders, Chelliah, who was coordinating police communications, was astonished by Raja's courtesy at this time of extreme stress.

Outside the station, wild stories of attacks and counter-attacks spread like wildfire across the island. Malay families fearing reprisals began fleeing from Chinese-dominated areas. Chinese families high-tailed it out of Malay areas.

It proved a formidable challenge for the leaders to keep the public informed amid the curfew and the chaos. To reach out to people in their homes, the government turned to radio and television, which Raja had introduced to Singapore just a year ago, in 1963.

Hours after the riots, at 10:45 p.m., Lee, with Raja standing by, made radio and television broadcasts in three languages – Malay, Mandarin and English – appealing for a return to sanity: "What or who started this situation is irrelevant at this moment," the Singapore premier said. "Right now our business is to stop this stupidity. Rumours and wild talk of revenge and retaliation will only inflame men's minds."[5]

Still the rampage raged on. By midnight on that first day, four people would be killed and 180 injured.

Raja was mortified to learn that the worst fighting was taking place near the Kallang Gas Works on the fringes of his own constituency of Kampong Glam, which was famous for its Malay heritage and notorious for its Chinese gangsters. To add to his horror, he received reports that at the Sultan Mosque – the heartbeat of the Muslim community in his ward – some federal security troops had passed their batons to Malay rioters to beat up the Chinese.

As the body count rose, so too his anguish and anger. Over the next four days, the toll would mount: 22 people killed and 461 injured. The scale of the communal clash was unprecedented in Singapore's post-war history.

For a man who had devoted his life to paving a non-communal path for his country, the racial clashes were especially hard to confront. Raja had often preached to all who would listen that building a non-communal foundation was the only effective defence against the racial and religious strife that had ravaged so many other newly independent countries. Yet the clashes erupted. They gave a hollow ring to his much-vaunted ambition for Singapore: to be an example to the world of a united multiracial society based on the principles of social justice and non-communalism.

It was a brutal time for Raja and his fellow leaders as they grasped that, without any control over the security forces, Singapore's stability – and, in fact, its very future – lay at the mercy of the Federation. Raja recounted later that, for the first time, he understood the reality of the famous saying by Mao Zedong, the communist revolutionary founder of the People's Republic of China: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." "We realised, to our horror, that with merger, an unarmed Singapore was looking into the barrel of a gun," said Raja. "We felt that, unwittingly, we had led the people of Singapore, not to freedom, but into a prison."[6]

As the days passed, this feeling of being trapped in a nightmarish scenario intensified. Behind the chaos, Raja sensed shadowy political predators on the prowl – the Malay ultras. These were the racial extremists within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the central party in Malaysia's ruling coalition, the Alliance Party.

Months before the riots, Raja had been sounding the alarm over the ultras' communal agitation. He singled out Dato Syed Ja'afar Albar, secretary-general of the Federation's UMNO, and Syed Esa Almenoar, secretary-general of the Singapore branch of UMNO.

The leaders of the Malay-based party, which was rooted in the concept of *ketuanan melayu* (Malay supremacy), had been in a foul mood since losing all three of its Malay-dominated seats to the PAP in

Singapore at the previous year's general election, in September 1963. It had been a devastating blow to UMNO's control of its traditional Malay base in Singapore.

Already unhappy over what they viewed as the PAP's insubordinate ways in the run-up to merger, the Alliance leaders were "even more angry" at the total evisceration of the Singapore UMNO-Alliance at the hands of the PAP, recalled Ghazali Shafie, a close aide and confidante of the Malaysian prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.[7] To them, it was yet another red flag, warning of the threat that the PAP could pose to their own political base in the Federation if left unchecked.

Day after day, the ultras had been portraying Malays in Singapore as victims of oppression, and the PAP government and the Chinese majority as their oppressors. They reserved their sharpest attacks for Lee with allegations that were by any standards incredible – that he was an agent of the communists and of the Jakarta regime, which was then engaged in a Confrontation campaign to destroy Malaysia. They also targeted PAP Malay legislative assemblymen, in particular Othman Wok, denouncing them as anti-Islam, infidels and traitors to their race.

Raja himself felt the heat. Resettlement issues in his ward of Kampong Glam, sited around the muddy banks of the Rochor and Kallang rivers, were being exploited by the ultras to foment more resentment among Malays.

Kampong Glam was home to, among other sites of cultural significance, the Istana Kampong Glam, which was once the royal seat of the Malay sultans in Singapore.[8] Despite the ward's grand past, however, many areas presently resembled little more than an overcrowded swamp. It was crammed with crumbling squatter huts and slum tenements, most without proper drainage or sanitation. The squalid grounds swarmed with Chinese triad gangsters specialising in extortion, and local mafia-type smugglers dealing with merchandise from trading boats that used Kampong Glam as a pier.

To improve the abysmal living conditions, the government had unveiled plans to resettle about 2,500 families from Raja's ward and its neighbouring areas, Crawford and Rochor, to new housing flats. This

was to make way for housing and industry under its urban renewal programme to carry the country into the modern era.

These plans were immediately seized upon by the UMNO ultras to accuse the PAP of driving Malays from their homes. Although only 200 of the 2,500 families affected were in fact Malays, *Utusan Melayu* – essentially an UMNO mouthpiece – claimed that about 3,000 Malay families had been issued quit notices, and painted a dark future for all Malays in Singapore.[9]

To rally them behind UMNO, the Malay-based party formed an "action committee" to defend their rights. To Raja's exasperation, his repeated clarifications on points of fact to the *Utusan*, which he made on behalf of the Singapore government, were routinely ignored.

In an effort to explain the situation directly to the Malays, Lee and Raja jointly toured the affected areas on 31 May. Together with other leaders, including Othman, they also held an intensive series of dialogues with Malay groups to address their concerns.[10] "Raja had a tough time in his ward," Othman recalled. "A lot of Malays were unhappy that the government wanted to develop that area, especially the houses near the Sultan Mosque. UMNO was telling the Malays that the PAP was chasing them away."[11]

All this was taking place in a highly charged atmosphere amid Indonesia's subversive efforts to break up Malaysia.[12] Raja, who had a taste for polemics, had been at the forefront of Singapore's propaganda war against the Indonesian "Crush Malaysia" campaign since it began in 1963. The latest developments threatened to tie the threads of the Federation's racial politics and the Indonesian Confrontation into a knot beyond undoing.

Filled with foreboding, he repeatedly warned of the consequences of being swayed by racial demagogues who were "ready to exploit racial fears and prejudices for personal, political or economic ends". In one of his most plaintive calls for caution, he stressed that these were "dangerous men for they will only succeed in bringing violence and hatred among our people".[13] Prophetically, he added: "Once racial conflict breaks out, it is not the demagogues who suffer but the ordinary

people." He had made this speech at a grassroots event in February, five months before the riots. All to no avail.

Now, in July, as the riots raged, he could not but fear for his core vision of a non-communal system. As he revealed later, "during the riots, I thought it would all collapse". He summoned every bit of his fighting spirit to press on. Raja would face several tests of his character, but none was more severe than the vicious season of 1964.

On the second day of the riots, Raja was made Singapore's point man for dealing with the Federation government on the racial troubles.

His KL-appointed counterpart was Federation minister Mohamed Khir Johari, who was close to the Tunku. Khir was designated the "director of operations" with full authority to work with the security forces in Singapore.

On arriving in Singapore the following day, Khir told the press that he would be in "constant touch" with Raja. While the two men had to coordinate their efforts, Khir certainly had the upper hand by virtue of the Federation's powers.

With security escort, Khir, who was also chairman of the Singapore UMNO branch, could go anywhere in Singapore even when the city was locked down in curfew. The Malaysian minister recalled later: "I was more or less like the 'uncrowned king of Singapore' … I had full freedom to travel everywhere."[14]

It struck Raja as reprehensible that, at this moment of high racial tension in Singapore, Khir would include in his delegation the very same communal demagogues whom the PAP leaders had fingered for the riots – Singapore UMNO leaders Syed Esa Almenoar and Syed Ali Redha Alsagoff.

The Singapore minister's suspicion was now thoroughly aroused: were the arsonists playing firemen? It was as clear as day that while Khir was ostensibly going about his duties to maintain peace on the island,

he was assiduously courting Malay support for UMNO. In a further display of his authority, his Malaysian party largely sidelined Lee.

As the American consul-general in Singapore, Arthur H. Rosen, reported to Washington, "for a few days, Central Government leaders virtually took over the Singapore Government … Kuala Lumpur's muscles were flexed for all to see."[15] Yap Chin Kwee, the Tunku's political secretary who accompanied Khir in Singapore then, recollected later: "Khir Johari had a job to do; he would get instructions from Tunku." He added: "Tunku wanted all the Malay problems in Singapore to be represented by UMNO through Khir Johari."[16]

Khir himself made no apologies for his efforts to rally the Malays behind UMNO and to position himself as protector of Malay interests in Singapore. His motivation, he said later, was to ensure peace in Malaysia. He maintained that he needed Syed Esa's help to calm the ground.

His relationship with Raja at this point was, on the face of it, friendly. Khir personally found Raja, despite his reputation as a feisty politician, to be affable and easy-going in person. The UMNO chieftain recalled later: "He was my main point of contact during the riots." At the same time, however, the Malaysian minister was deeply wary of Raja's zeal for the PAP's vision of a non-communal Malaysia. "Raja's views could cause trouble," he said.[17]

Still, it is a testament to the two men's belief in personal diplomacy that, despite their intense political rivalry, they were able to build a relationship that would outlast their political careers, meeting up for casual lunches well into their retirement years.

In public, Raja might wear the persona of a brash ideologue with a sharp tongue. In person, however, he was a mild soul with a sense of humour that could make people feel at ease, regardless of their culture or background. Standing five feet eight inches tall, he had a certain self-possessed dignity – it was something about the quiet, thoughtful look in his deep-set dark eyes and the good-humoured contours of his mouth. His movements, like his conversational voice, were measured,

completely unlike the impassioned tone of his diatribes against political opponents. He was a ferocious lion with the smile of a peacemaker.

In working with Khir during this precarious period, Raja's single-minded goal was to restore order and stability to the island. For this, a good working relationship at their level was essential. By this time, he was deep in the trenches dealing with a barrage of rumours and lies that could find a ready audience and trigger another outbreak of violence.

One pernicious rumour that sent shock waves across the island involved the alleged massacre of a Muslim religious teacher, Sheikh Osman, who was an imam at Joo Chiat mosque, and his family by Chinese rioters. Outraged by the "news", more than 1,000 Malays gathered at a mosque in Jalan Labu on 23 July, where they were incited to avenge the alleged killings.

When Raja learnt that, lo and behold, the imam and his family were in fact alive and well, he collared Khir immediately to make a television appearance with the religious leader to scotch the rumour. "So I did appear on TV to tell the truth together with that religious leader," Khir later recalled, "and therefore in one move, we managed to calm down the people."[18]

As Raja sought to pierce the fog of what would be called fake news today, the germ of suspicion began to grow in his mind that the riots were orchestrated. Reading through the *Utusan Melayu*'s reports, he found the paper's non-stop racist attacks on the PAP breathtaking in their audacity and malice. It fed UMNO secretary-general Ja'afar Albar's incendiary campaign. The Malay daily, written in Jawi script, was widely read by the Malays in Singapore's rural heartlands.

This, Raja believed, was the moment when UMNO showed its hand: on 24 July, the UMNO journal, *Merdeka,* made the outrageous claim that the incidents had happened because of the PAP government's treatment of the people "and of the minorities in particular who feel that they are being oppressed and victimised".

At the same time, UMNO's echo chambers gave all credit to the Alliance leaders in KL for bringing help to Malays and peace to Singapore during the riots, and portrayed the PAP leaders as weak and cowardly. The ultras, through *Merdeka* – which was controlled by Albar – began calling for a change in the top leadership of the PAP.

Over the following days and weeks, the KL narrative took an even more sinister turn: yes, Indonesian and communist agents could have been involved in the riots, but it was the PAP government's poor treatment of Malays in Singapore and their "insensitive" statements that had provoked the crisis.[19]

Given the volatility of the situation, Raja considered the provocative comments as nothing short of irresponsible. While pinning the blame on the PAP, the Alliance leaders were making excuses for UMNO hardliners who had turned the atmosphere toxic in Singapore. From Raja's vantage point, the campaign by Albar and his acolytes deserved nothing but harsh condemnation. None, however, was forthcoming from KL.

The wildly conflicting accounts of how the riots started were laying bare not only the deepening suspicion and mistrust between the two sides, but also their widening rift.

As they scrambled to get to the bottom of the riots, Raja and fellow PAP leaders started to wonder, uncomfortably, if the relentless anti-PAP and anti-Lee campaign in *Utusan* was sanctioned by the Tunku and his deputy premier, Tun Abdul Razak. They were not far wrong. Abdullah Ahmad, then aide and political secretary to Razak, would reveal decades later that the two most powerful leaders in Malaysia had, in fact, authorised the anti-PAP campaign in the *Utusan* and, far from being concerned, "chuckled every time" Lee hit the roof over the newspaper's reports.[20]

At the time, this was not apparent to the PAP leaders. In February 1963, just the previous year, Raja had in his tribute to the Tunku on

his 60th birthday declared that "an undeniable source of the Tunku's greatness is that he has steadfastly refused to win popularity by playing to racial and religious prejudices".[21] Raja had genuinely believed it. He had regarded the Tunku, born to a Thai mother as one of the 45 children of Kedah's Sultan Ahmad Hamid, as a tolerant and moderate leader who was open to the PAP's multiracial vision for Malaysia. In the run-up to merger, the Tunku himself had suggested as much to the PAP leaders. As far as Raja was concerned, it was on that basis that Singapore had joined Malaysia on 16 September 1963.

Except there was a problem. The Tunku and his Alliance Party leaders brought with them rival ideologies and political cultures that flew directly in the face of Raja's own and that of the PAP's. The path that the Tunku took to achieve power in Malaya was by effecting the alliance of UMNO with the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) in 1951 and with the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in 1955. The structure of the Alliance reflected its race-based approach, which was premised on Malay dominance with UMNO as the central party in the coalition. Despite the Tunku's expressions of enthusiasm for merger, Raja had glimpsed the contradictions and the potential conflicts in the unfolding.

Now, they were fast coming into sharp focus as the Tunku faced pressure from UMNO hardliners to take tougher action against the PAP. Albar, who wanted Lee put in jail, had made no secret of his views that the Tunku was weak in his handling of the Singapore premier. His campaign appeared to have the full backing of Razak, who was poised to succeed the Tunku when the paternalistic premier left the scene. As Razak himself told foreign correspondent Dennis Bloodworth at the time, he welcomed Albar's role in ensuring that "a firm front will be preserved against Lee", and in putting the Singapore premier in his place "if Lee did not cooperate fully with Kuala Lumpur". Confirming the collusion, Khir said approvingly: "Albar was known as the 'lion of UMNO'. I think Albar did his part well in keeping with his name the lion of UMNO."

The PAP had a lion, too – Raja. But, against every instinct, he had to keep his claws sheathed – just barely – in the interest of calming tempers all round.

On 24 July at 3:30 p.m., the minute the day's curfew ended, Raja and deputy prime minister Toh Chin Chye visited the riot-stricken areas in their wards in a long convoy of Land Rovers, cars and vans carrying security men and the press. Theirs was among the first high-profile tours by Singapore leaders aimed at showing their ability to get things done and to restore peace.[22]

The duo, dressed in white short-sleeved shirts, looked sombre as they stood in an open-top Land Rover, which they had commandeered from the government's veterinary division. They surveyed the sorry scene as their convoy rumbled slowly through every dusty *lorong* and street in Kampong Glam, Rochor and Crawford. Shards of broken glass here, burnt wooden carts there, stones and debris everywhere – all reminders of the recent horrors. The sheltered corridors of the two-storey shophouses that used to throng with merchants of different races selling goods side by side – spices, flowers, textiles, rattan ware – were eerily silent. The aromas of camphor and perfumed flowers that used to fill the streets were replaced with the smell of terror. Overhead, jutting from upstairs casement windows, washing hung on long bamboo poles like banners of mourning.

Raja and Toh took turns on the microphone to announce their presence. Through the loudspeakers on their Land Rover, their voices boomed out a central message: keep calm and help restore order; don't allow rumours to disrupt the peace.

Hearing blaring voices and roaring vehicles in the streets, a straggle of residents emerged cautiously from their homes onto the five-foot ways. Others clambered onto their clay-tiled roofs, and perched like nervous sparrows on the alert. Those who chose the indoor safety of

locked doors peered out from their iron window grilles as the ministers' convoy rolled past.

As the leaders reached the towering Sultan Mosque, where many Malays had taken refuge, all was quiet. Some came out to cluster behind the cast-iron railings of the mosque's low boundary walls. Their expressions were guarded, even closed. As with the other Malays he had met, Raja found them petrified by the violence. He addressed them in bazaar Malay. Most of the Chinese attackers, he told them, came from outside the area. "They are not your neighbours," he said.

Raja would recall later that the ordinary Malays "didn't strike me as the people who were seething with hatred for the Chinese or anything. They were terrified." This was one of the observations that led him to conclude that the riots were not spontaneous, but "planned and with a purpose". He tried to reach out to them with more assurances. But when he left them, it was with a disconcerting sense that a distance had opened up between them and the PAP leaders, for reasons that he did not grasp in their full subtleties until later.

As their Land Rover turned into the Chinese quarter, the ministers found the mood disturbingly sullen. Some residents sulked with arms crossed, while others skulked in the shadows of the five-foot ways. Their faces were cold, and their eyes burned with anger. As the convoy reached them, they erupted into a chorus of taunts. As Toh recalled later, "we were rebuffed with jeers from our Chinese constituents when we urged them to keep the peace and remain calm".[23] As the leaders would discover later, the Chinese anger stemmed from talk that the Singapore government had failed to protect them during the riots, thus forcing them to depend on Chinese secret society members.

As the fissure between the Malays and Chinese threatened to widen to an unbridgeable chasm, Raja called on his fearful community leaders to regroup. At the constituency centre, he said: "Let us stop this madness while there is still time, while the desire for friendship between communities is still strong." With his encouragement, the community leaders began forming groups to keep order in each street and to restore racial harmony.

These efforts marked the beginning of "goodwill committees", or *jawatankuasa muhibah* in Malay, that would soon be set up in every constituency to help keep the peace between the races. To be effective, each committee had to be drawn from the different races. Raja's Kampong Glam set the early gold standard: its goodwill committee was made up of four Malays, four Chinese and two Indians.

Lee Khoon Choy, then political secretary to the prime minister, had one word for Raja's leadership during the riots: "Inspirational". "He was our political strategist in managing racial issues, urging all the PAP wards to form their own goodwill committees and guiding us," he recalled.[24] The start of the goodwill committees gave something concrete and positive for Lee to announce in his regular radio and TV broadcast on 24 July. By 27 July, all 51 constituencies had set up their own goodwill committees.

Determined to show visible progress, Raja made repeated rounds to his ward accompanied by his goodwill committee. It was a frenetic period, as he also often joined the other key ministers fanning out to their own wards.

At the same time, he sought the cooperation of the local press to report responsibly.[25] As culture minister, he had a measure of influence, if not control, over the national media in Singapore, particularly the radio and television. He kept his ear close to the ground. He monitored UMNO's activities in Singapore, constantly analysing its propaganda, calculating, and trying to think a few steps ahead.

To rally the beleaguered PAP assemblymen and keep them updated, Raja and the other ministers held several secret meetings with them. Khoon Choy recalled one crucial meeting on 3 August – this was a day after the curfew was lifted completely on 2 August. Their key concern was to prevent a recurrence of the riots.

Raja, in his role as director of the PAP political bureau, girded the assemblymen with key lines on national unity to keep them on message, and also to counter the anti-PAP sentiments on the ground. Convince your residents, he told them, that it was the state government – and not the central government – which had helped those affected by the

riots. His thinking was that, as Khoon Choy explained, "if we could convince the Malay base, they would be less susceptible to anti-PAP propaganda in the future".[26]

Throughout this dangerous period, Raja did not underestimate the strain that Lee was under. The extremists showed no let-up in calling for the prime minister's head. When Lee visited the trouble spot of Geylang Serai, he was jeered by UMNO extremists and, together with Rahmat Kenap, the assemblyman for the area, vilified as "pigs".

During such times of acute crises, the PM drew succour from Raja's dauntless spirit. Both had offices in City Hall – Lee's on the second floor and Raja's on the first – and they met almost daily for discussions even when utterly exhausted, physically and emotionally. Raja acted as Lee's political confidant and morale booster, as he had done earlier in their gruelling battle against the communists.

Herman Hochstadt, then secretary to the prime minister,[27] was a witness to Lee's reliance on Raja, and one of the very few privy to the PM's pressures at this critical period. "The situation was getting quite hot and I could see it in PM's office, all the action that was going on," he recalled. "The PM very frequently asked Raja to see him." It was clear why. Raja came with ideas on vision and strategy, and an irrepressible can-do attitude. "He developed his own ideas. What drove him was his own philosophy," Hochstadt added. "He was influenced by PM, and the two of them influenced each other."[28]

The two leaders' joint sense of mission was evident as they trudged from kampong to kampong around the island, under the blazing sun and frequent heavy downpours. It both relieved and inspired Raja when, at each stop, Lee showed again his trademark brash determination that promised to meet all challenges and his charisma that could move crowds.

Apart from worrying about Lee's situation, Raja was also concerned about the unremitting pressure on the PAP Malay assemblymen. They were "under great strain", he recalled later. For being associated with the PAP, they had suffered from UMNO's systematic undermining of their position among the Malays to the point of danger to their lives.

Raja's respect for them shot up when they came out fighting. "They toured the areas with PM. They assured the PM. But it must have been a psychologically very tense moment for them," he said later.[29] This was the standard by which Raja judged the moral fibre of individuals. Those who showed courage and loyalty to the cause, despite the risks to oneself, won his esteem.

Yet while the PAP leaders were rising to the challenge, their political stock was falling. Ground reports they received indicated that the government was losing public support. If it were to be weakened further, Singapore could well fall into the hands of the communalists, the communists or the Indonesians, all of whom were eager to seize the strategic prize of Singapore. As he thought through the implications, he became even more convinced that this was a battle that the UMNO demagogues could not be allowed to win.

Within the Cabinet, Raja and Toh were the most resolute in pressing for a firm strategy to halt UMNO's communal politicking. They wanted an open inquiry into the riots, arguing that it would force the issue and clear the PAP of blame. Without a formal inquiry, they contended, the party would be unable to regain the support of those angered by the PAP's failure to stop the riots.

While agreeing broadly with their assessment, Goh Keng Swee urged caution to avoid worsening relations further. He suggested talks with Razak to discuss a way forward. Goh had known Razak since their student days in Raffles College and enjoyed a degree of rapport that allowed for open communication. Lee gave the green light. What emerged from their talks on 28 and 29 July, however, gave Raja little reason to stand down.

2

Choices

To say that Raja found Razak's proposals jarring would be an understatement. They came with a demand that was loaded with political dynamite: UMNO must have the monopoly of leadership over the Malays – including those in Singapore.

Raja recoiled at the very idea of it. To submit to them would be tantamount to surrendering the PAP's non-communal vision, and risking Singapore's future. He was not alone in recognising the dangerous implications for the party and Singapore. Toh Chin Chye was as vehemently opposed.

The two leaders voiced their concerns to Lee when he consulted them on the urgent matter on 28 July 1964, almost immediately after Goh Keng Swee's phone update on his ongoing talks with Razak in KL that same day. It was a live situation, with the Goh-Razak negotiations still being conducted in KL.

According to Goh, the Malaysian deputy premier had made two offers. The first was "cooperation": a coalition government, with the PAP represented in the Malaysian Cabinet, but on condition that Lee step down as prime minister. Razak, who deeply distrusted Lee, had stressed that "Lee was unacceptable to the central government in any basic settlement."[1]

Goh had asked if, as a quid pro quo for Lee's departure, Albar would be removed, but Razak dismissed the idea, saying that he had complete control over Albar and the *Utusan Melayu*. This admission was hardly assuring to Goh; in fact, it appeared to point to Razak's

complicity in the riots. Goh concluded: "He was involved in it, and it was clearly his intention to remove Mr Lee from office. That was the purpose of Albar's campaign."[2]

The other option was "co-existence" – no Cabinet seat for the PAP, no political interference in each other's territories, and no propaganda campaigns for the time being, but on the condition that the PAP deal with Malays only through Khir Johari, who also led the UMNO liaison committee in Singapore.

Goh recorded: "As a condition either of co-existence or cooperation, it was a fundamental condition that the PAP would not move into the Malay world. UMNO must have the monopoly of leadership in the Malay world and no non-Malay party should compete with it."[3] He duly conveyed Razak's propositions to Lee over the phone.

As the frustrated premier explored the options with Raja and Toh in his office, both argued strenuously that neither option would enable the PAP to retain the confidence of Singapore's Chinese and other non-Malays, who were already shaken by the riots. Any suggestion of surrender by the PAP on these lines would cause the population to swing to the left-wing Barisan Sosialis, the main opposition party. This would expose Singapore to the threat of being taken over by communists.[4] Moreover, they added, it went against the grain of the PAP's long-held belief that no party could be truly national without the support of all races, including the Malays.

Certainly, for Raja, upholding and protecting Singapore's multiracial creed was always the most fundamental matter. This was a red line that could not be crossed. Given his conviction that Singapore's survival depended on a non-communal foundation, he perceived any attempt to undermine it as an assault on the state's vital interests. And without the PAP's and Lee's leadership – two items that seemed inextricably connected in his own mind – the government, and inevitably Singapore itself, must collapse.

Inauspiciously, Goh's negotiations with Razak for a political settlement was taking place against a most unpromising backdrop. By this time, the air between the two sides was smog-thick with mutual

mistrust and suspicion. The Tunku and his close allies believed that the PAP wanted to displace the MCA and UMNO with a view to eventually installing Lee as the prime minister of Malaysia. The Singapore leaders, meanwhile, believed that the Tunku wanted to neuter the PAP and take over Singapore, perhaps subversively.

Their relations reached a new level of dysfunction as the PAP leaders came to the conclusion, drawn from the trail of evidence so far, that the race riots had been engineered as part of the UMNO campaign to gain control over Singapore's Malays, cow the PAP into submission, and discredit the party in Malaysia.[5]

To Raja's mind at least, the conditions that Razak attached to his proposals appeared as yet another effort to weaken the PAP.

Despite Razak's unpalatable offers, Lee was prepared to continue talks with the Malaysian deputy premier in the hope of preventing further riots. Factoring in the objections raised by Raja and Toh, however, the Singapore PM ruled out the first option, noting that it was "a clear surrender to communal violence". But he indicated that he was prepared to explore the second, which called for his resignation.

The next day, on 29 July, Razak backtracked on his proposals. He told Goh he wanted to spend more time thinking about a possible solution and discussing it with Lee as well as Goh. Thus, no conceptual agreements were achieved during this round of informal negotiations, held a week after the riots. But, in retrospect, that Goh-Razak meeting was a major inflection point – it launched a process of private talks between the two towards a "rearrangements of relations" that would ultimately lead to an outcome that shocked many, not least Raja.

It is telling that neither Raja nor Toh was involved in these July talks in KL – Razak did not want them there, although on his side he involved Khir Johari, Ja'afar Albar and V.T. Sambanthan, who led the MIC, a partner of the Alliance representing ethnic Indians.

Goh had earlier proposed to Razak that the duo join them in their talks in KL "so that we could all do the thinking together". Razak, however, had demurred. He did not know them well enough, he told Goh, to "open his mind to them".[6]

There was probably another reason for Razak's reluctance: the chatter in Alliance circles had them down as the non-communal hardliners within the PAP. The pair were, after all, the prime movers behind the PAP's controversial decision to field a token slate for the April 1964 Malaysian general election. It was a decision with repercussions that went far beyond what the Singapore leaders ever imagined.

The PAP's tentative foray into the Malaysian elections was essentially a tactical move to test the ground. At least that was one of Raja's expressed aims when he pushed for it. The other was a bid to position the Singapore party as a partner to UMNO in helping to fight the pro-Indonesia Socialist Front.[7] But underneath it was also a long-term goal: to "make it quite clear that we had not given up our ultimate aim of a Malaysian political entity", he said. After all, the PAP, like any other legitimate political party, had a right to take part in Malaysian general elections in a nation that declared itself a democracy.

Audaciously, Raja and Toh had swung the party's central executive committee (CEC) over to their point of view while Lee was away. The PM was then leading a 35-day "truth mission" tour in Africa to counter Indonesian propaganda. When he returned on 26 January, it was presented as a fait accompli.[8] Raja recalled that Lee was "unhappy" when he first found out about it. He was worried about the Tunku's reaction and their own lack of preparation, but "once we explained the reasoning behind it, he accepted it".[9]

Burying his reservations, Lee allowed himself to be persuaded by their logic as well as their enthusiasm. He said later: "They were keen to spread the message and get a foothold in Malaysia. It made sense once we are in Malaysia, that we must have a foothold, at least a toehold in Malaysia, and build on it."[10]

Observers noted the strength of the PAP as a formidable opposition voice in Malaysia, as well as its potential to threaten

the MCA. In a report in March 1964, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had noted that the PAP was the "most significant opposition group" in the Malaysian Parliament. "Man for man, its 12 representatives from Singapore, including all nine members of the state cabinet, are the most able and articulate group there," it observed.[11] It analysed that, given the PAP's strength and the quality of its leaders, "it would be politically logical to replace the fading MCA with the PAP in the Alliance" – but, it added, the Tunku would not agree to it because he feared Lee's ambition, and the reaction of the rural Malays if a "strong Chinese political leader like Lee rises in importance".[12]

During the 1964 election campaign, Raja had sought to capitalise on Lee's rising popularity in Malaysia. While Lee drew in the large crowds at the rallies, it was Raja who had largely pulled together the campaign under tight time pressure. He chose the date and occasion for Toh's bombshell announcement, drafted and unveiled the PAP manifesto, briefed party activists, and helped to mobilise grassroots support in Malaya. Together with Toh, he also identified some PAP candidates. In his hometown of Seremban, he roped in his younger brother, S. Seevaratnam, a doctor, to stand for election. Othman Wok and education minister Ong Pang Boon also played active roles in getting the campaign off the ground.

The odd man out was Goh, whose priority was to secure the still-elusive common market with Malaya, much of which hinged on a cooperative relationship with KL. In any case, he did not see himself as a political animal, and saw no appeal in campaigning in the Federation. Besides, although he was born in Malacca, he did not feel the same depth of emotional ties as Raja or Toh did to the peninsula, and perhaps also to the concept of Malaysia itself.

Raja and Toh had grown up regarding both territories as one. Raja had left Seremban at the age of 19 to study for a year in Raffles Institution in Singapore in 1934, before leaving for London to read law at King's College. It was only at the age of 33, upon his return from the UK, that he moved to Singapore to work as a journalist.

Similarly, Toh had obtained a diploma from Raffles College in Singapore in 1946 before pursuing his doctorate in London. Toh was 32 when he came to the island to work as a university lecturer.

In contrast, Goh was just two when his family moved from Malacca to Singapore, where his maternal grandparents owned several properties. His early formative years were spent in Singapore. Goh said later: "My guess is that Dr Toh and Rajaratnam were genuinely Malaysians and they wanted a Malaysian Malaysia." Noting that both had relatives in Malaysia, he added: "They wanted, for Singapore and for the PAP, to make a major contribution to the political development of Malaysia. And therefore, they were very keen to take part in the general election of 1964."[13]

The rewards for their efforts would prove a bitter harvest. Although the PAP fielded only nine candidates, skirted UMNO's turf[14] and wrested only one seat in Bungsar, the Alliance leaders saw its incursion as a frontal challenge to their power base and a Chinese challenge to Malay political supremacy. This they repaid with a campaign to undermine the multiracial basis of the PAP's political support and to bring the Singapore government down.

While the Alliance leaders aimed their fire at Lee, their aides had more than an inkling of the roles that Raja and Toh played in that fateful election. Abdullah Ahmad, who was then the political and press secretary to Razak, said: "I knew it was Raja who was running PAP propaganda, the man behind it."[15] But the KL leaders, he added, "thought that Lee Kuan Yew was better to hit out at. They thought Raja was just his mouthpiece."[16]

Yap Chin Kwee, the Tunku's political secretary from 1961 to 1970, too, described the Singapore culture minister as "the guy who told Lee Kuan Yew to come in and fight the election in Malaysia". The Tunku, Yap said, was uneasy with Raja's radical non-communal views and considered him Lee's lackey.[17]

Ghazali Shafie, the Tunku's close aide, was yet another who astutely assessed that the PAP's intervention in the 1964 election had come as a result of "pressure" from Raja and Toh.[18] For a long time, however, the

Tunku believed that Lee was the real mastermind behind the debacle and distrusted him all the more for it.[19]

A diplomat in contact with the Singapore leaders at the time, Australian deputy high commissioner W.B. Pritchett, gathered that the PAP had "two wings" – "one, represented by Rajaratnam, envisaging a role of active opposition, the other, represented by Goh Keng Swee, much preferring to avoid a close involvement in federal politics and to concentrate on affairs in Singapore".[20]

In a despatch dated 15 May 1964, written shortly after the 25 April election, Pritchett observed that Raja, although shocked by the results, was still optimistic about the PAP's ability to draw support in Malaysia given the "discontents" in the country. Raja related how Malayan-based groups had asked the PAP to push for social reform in the Malaysian Parliament. "Such approaches," he said, "might be 'trivial' yet but were a pointer to the trend."

To Pritchett's point that the Alliance was in a very strong position "to exercise the federal government's powers to damage Singapore's interests", Raja's riposte was that this would be mitigated since Singapore was in a position to react politically in Malaya with "disastrous" results to the Alliance government. Pritchett reported: "This surely much exaggerates the extent to which Singapore will be able to hit back – within the polity as now established anyway. Goh Keng Swee commented to me that Rajaratnam should be 'Minister for Talk'."

Evidently, Goh himself talked a lot to Pritchett, insisting that there was no consensus within the PAP on playing a national role. In his report, the diplomat cast doubt on Goh's assertion on the issue: "No others I have talked with take this view, though none share Rajaratnam's enthusiasm for the role of active opposition."

Looking back four years later, Raja regarded the PAP's participation in the 1964 general election as "a great disaster". "We became really a kind of opposition, without wanting to," he mused in an interview with political scientist Raj Vasil in 1968. "In Singapore, we tried, within the limits of being a part of Malaysia, to show that our basic philosophies

could work, even multi-racialism and multi-lingualism. And this, of course, made for friction because the Malaysian leaders, in fact the Malay leaders, were following a different policy – we are all equal but the Malays are more equal."[21]

And what about Lee, the man in the eye of the storm? He was of course disappointed with the results. Lee recalled in an interview with this author in 2005: "I knew we had made a serious miscalculation of how the ground there reacted, because we did not live there." Asked if he had any regrets about taking part in the Malaysian elections, he replied cautiously: "Toh and Raja – they were overenthusiastic. We went in with our eyes wide open. The time to disagree was before that." But on this issue, he acknowledged, "we disagreed. Keng Swee was in the minority. I went with them (Toh and Raja), but he (Goh) had to live with the results."[22] So did Lee.

The ins and outs of these incidents, among others, shine a vivid light on the complex and evolving relationship between Raja and the other three core leaders of the PAP – Lee, Goh and Toh. Within this inner circle, Lee might be the first among equals. But this did not mean that the premier could lord over the others. All were high-calibre intellectuals. Each was a strong character. None was a pushover.

They brought their different perspectives to bear at their robust deliberations. It was not unusual for them to clash as they searched for the best way forward. Lee said of Raja's arguments with him: "He'll win some, I will win some. He would not concede just because I was prime minister."[23]

Although united in their political cause, they had different temperaments. Raja's emphasis on rational thinking and problem-solving, not to mention his aversion to political tomfoolery, sat well with Lee's temperament. Lee, a Cambridge-trained lawyer, was known for his penchant for putting problems in completely cold and dispassionate terms.

At the same time, however, Raja's visionary mien, rhetorical flourishes and seemingly unlimited capacity for abstract thinking could at times try the patience of his colleagues – particularly Goh with his gruff and hard-nosed temperament. Goh, a former civil servant who described himself as a technocrat, once said: "If you've vision, that means you're a dreamer. I'm not a dreamer!"[24]

Lee saw himself and Goh, an economist with a doctorate from the London School of Economics, as the "pragmatists" in the Cabinet; Raja was the "ideologue". On his part, Raja characterised their partnership as such: Lee was "leading the group as a whole … Keng Swee was more of the civil servant, and I, the ideas man."[25]

Toh, a former university lecturer of physiology, meanwhile, was known as much for his sharp mind as for his short fuse. Like Raja, he was a pugnacious fighter, and ferociously committed to their non-communal vision. Raja once described Toh as "a man who does not look for a fight, but once in a fight, where honour is at stake, he fights unto death". Unlike Raja, Toh had organisational talent. The PAP chairman, who was considered Lee's second-in-command, was a popular figure among the party rank and file. What Toh might have perhaps lacked, however, was what would today be termed emotional intelligence. Lee revealed that he sometimes left Toh out of some key discussions "because he's very sensitive and bristles in the exchange; the atmosphere would go sour". In contrast, "Raja would be bland even if he opposes it. He would smile and put it in a non-combative way", said Lee.[26]

Certainly, the Cabinet consensus was that Raja possessed the most even-tempered disposition of them all. He was not one to nurse petty grievances or submit to wounded pride. Yong Nyuk Lin, the health minister at the time, testified to his "cool mind" and his graceful ability to smooth things over. "I have never seen Raja angry," related Yong, who served in the Cabinet until 1975.[27] This did not mean, however, that Raja lacked strong emotion.

He did not give his loyalty lightly, but once given, it would be unwavering. Whatever their differences behind closed doors, in public the core leaders closed ranks and presented a solid front, united,

determined and apparently ready for any challenge that might come their way. Yet his role in the inner circle had its tensions. While already accustomed to chaos, the riots and the aftermath thrust Raja and his colleagues into a new level of tumult. It was one that would soon test their bonds to breaking point.

In the fraught and fractured time, Raja funnelled his energy into repairing the damage done to race relations. The wounds of the riots were still raw, and the causes still pressing.

On 29 July, a day after the futile Razak-Goh talks, he visited various wards with several other PAP leaders. In what would be a constant refrain, he appealed to "every responsible citizen in Malaysia" to check any mischief before it started, and to report those who tried to create trouble. If the riots were allowed to happen a second time, it would make it easier for "irresponsible elements" to organise a disturbance a third or fourth time, he warned. In such a situation, a lot of innocent people would suffer.[28]

Then on 6 August, in what was perhaps his most passionate speech in the wake of the riots, he exhorted all to put aside racial prejudice, and break the ignorance and suspicion that accompanied it. People must stop voicing "stupid, racialist sentiments such as 'Malays must unite,' 'Chinese must unite, or 'Indians must unite,'" he said, stressing, "it is the Malaysians who must unite".

A day later, on 7 August, he directed his culture ministry to give urgent publicity through radio, TV, posters and all other available channels "calling on people not to listen to insidious rumours". He pressed for more programmes to build communal cohesion and to counter publicity that worked against it. He even told them how: by "positive approaches" such as book exhibitions on topics that were Malaysian or which contributed towards interracial harmony, and in subtle ways such as playing down the publicity on communal activities and avoiding making distinctions between races.[29]

But, to his despair, even the best intentions and the best propaganda he could mastermind could not prevent the worst from happening.

On 17 August, Indonesia dramatically escalated its Confrontation campaign by landing guerrillas in peninsular Malaysia for the first time. They dropped on the beaches in Johor, just north of Singapore. Another wave of Indonesian troops entered Johor on 2 September. On that same day, a series of racial incidents culminated in the mysterious killing of a Malay trishaw rider at Geylang Serai by a group alleged to be Chinese. Suddenly, all hell broke loose as groups of Malays began attacking Chinese in the area.

Raja and his colleagues were stunned for a moment, uncertain if this was a sporadic event. Eventually, the awful realisation sank in: race riots had struck Singapore a second time. By 4 September, the rioting had become widespread. An island-wide curfew was imposed from 2 p.m. Again, the terror of rampaging mobs and killings. And again, Raja was left with the duty of coordinating with Federation leaders. He had to rely very much on his own instincts, as this time Lee was away in Brussels attending the centenary celebrations of the Socialist International.[30]

That same day, Malaysian minister of information and broadcasting Senu bin Abdul Rahman, an UMNO stalwart and close friend of the Tunku, flew to Singapore to assess the situation. Raja accompanied him on a three-hour tour of the troubled areas, where they spoke to villagers. At the Singapore airport before his departure for KL, Senu said he was convinced that the latest riot was largely the work of "our enemies who range from the pro-communist front elements to agents of the Indonesian regime".

Raja echoed this line to present the image of unity, despite his own sense that continued agitation from the Malay ultras was largely to blame. He had good reason to do so: beneath the smiling photo-ops, the two sides shared a hard-nosed, mutual appreciation of their common interest to defeat Indonesian aggression.

Exercising remarkable discipline, Raja sought to keep the public spotlight on uniting in the face of their common enemies – the Malayan

Communist Party with their united front supporters and Sukarno's Indonesia. In his public statements on the riots, he was extra careful not to create propaganda opportunities for Jakarta to exploit.

Instead, he directed his fire at the pro-communist parties, Singapore's Barisan Sosialis and the peninsula-based Socialist Front, for not condemning Indonesia. Speaking on 10 September in the Dewan Rakyat, the house of representatives in the federal parliament in KL, he accused both parties of being Indonesian "stooges" and, more colourfully, as their "scruffy political pimps". Supporting the state of emergency called in Malaysia, he warned them that they were "no longer playing with political marbles" but with their lives. "This should be made clear not only to the communists," he added, "but also to the racialists who have been persuaded by the Indonesians into believing that they are fighting for the supremacy of the Malay race."

Raja's efforts to close ranks with KL, at least on this point, did not go unnoticed. Western diplomats noted a marked improvement in the cooperation between Singapore and Malaysia in coping with the troubles compared to the July riots. As the Australian High Commissioner to KL, T.K. Critchley, put it, "their public statements shared a welcome harmony – restraint by Singapore leaders – in blaming the incidents on pro-Indonesian elements and linking them with Indonesian confrontation".

Critchley also made an ominous observation that the September disturbances had a patently organised character, "with rioting set off by arbitrary attacks on innocent victims by hooligans and criminal elements intent on provoking retaliation and stirring up communal feeling". Added the diplomat: "Special Branch in Singapore was urging action against the Malay extremists for several days before the disturbances began again, but the authorities in KL, including apparently Tun Razak, would not give permission for the arrests." During this period, Toh was acting prime minister. According to Lee's account, Toh was nervous in handling the situation in his absence.

For a week, Singapore was again gripped with fear. By the time the curfew was lifted on 11 September, the carnage had left 13 dead, 109 injured, and countless others traumatised.

By this point, Raja had become thoroughly disillusioned with the Alliance leaders for their failure to deal with the communal extremists and their agitation. He was not convinced that they were taking the threat of yet another recurrence seriously enough. In fact, he now considered the communal extremists even more dangerous than the Indonesian Confrontation in seeking to break up Malaysia. His experiences reinforced his growing conviction that the PAP had to respond, as it was UMNO that was "supplying fuel" and setting the stage for "the extremists to light the match" in both riots.[31]

The weaponising of racial outrage created a dilemma for politicians like Raja still operating within the conventional parameters of debate. If offensive and mendacious statements were ignored, bigotry and lies would have a field day. But if they were chased down and challenged, temperatures could rise further.

Raja hoped that while good sense could save Singapore from the scourge of more racial violence, the power of the PAP's grit and ingenuity could be made to bear against UMNO's aggression.

To put together the Singapore government's case against the UMNO extremists, Raja proceeded to gather evidence, which he would compile in a memorandum on the riots. In over 200 pages, he set out the chain of events that led to the riots, highlighting the systematic agitation from UMNO leaders and their mouthpieces such as the *Utusan* newspaper.

His report quoted passages of their hate speech verbatim, some transcribed from tape recordings. They included Albar's chants on 12 July 1964, complete with the crowd's responses (in parentheses): "I am very happy that today, we Malays and Muslims in Singapore have shown unity and are prepared to live or die together for our race and our future generation (hand-clapping, cheers). If there is unity, no force in this world can trample us down, no force can humiliate us, no force can belittle us. Not one Lee Kuan Yew. A thousand Lee Kuan Yew (shouts) we finish them off … (Hand clapping, shouts. 'Kill him

… Kill him … Othman Wok and Lee Kuan Yew... Lee Kuan Yew… Lee Kuan Yew… Othman Wok.')"[32]

The report concluded that the riots were willed by "irresponsible and reckless propaganda based on falsehoods and distortion of facts". Their purpose, Raja wrote, was principally to re-establish the political influence of UMNO among Singapore Malays. An even more important objective of the UMNO extremists, the report added, was to "use the Singapore Malays as pawns to consolidate Malay support for UMNO in Malaya. By placing the blame for the riots on the Singapore government and depicting it as oppressing and persecuting the Malays of Singapore, they could terrify the Malays outside Singapore into rallying around UMNO for protection."[33]

No doubt, Raja's analysis was informed by the fundamental condition laid down by Razak to Goh in July, that the PAP stay out of the Malay world. Raja also knew that, in August, the Tunku had told Lee that, given the PAP's rejection of that condition, UMNO would never accept a coalition with the PAP.[34]

The communal campaign against the Singapore government, Raja concluded in the report, was a "Hands Off Malays" warning. But it was one that the PAP could not bow to. There was no mistaking his voice in the following words: "For a non-communal party to accede to such a demand is to abandon its multi-racial philosophy."

The government later published his report as its official memorandum to be submitted to a commission of inquiry once it was formed by the Federal government. Its findings would not see light of day, for reasons that Raja could not foresee.

Cumulatively, the two riots were calamitous. Their impact went far beyond the country's national security. They ruptured the national psyche. They divided a generation.

For a cerebral man like Raja, who attempted to order his life according to rational thinking, the madness of the slaughter and the mob violence laid bare everything he found reprehensible about racial politics. In one of his reflections on the subject at the time, he wrote: "For no rhyme or reason, people who had lived together in peace

and tolerance for years found themselves suspecting and fearing one another. And what was the basis of this fear? Nothing more than that the other fellow had a different colour of skin, shape of eyes and nose. This determines whether you are friend or foe, whether you are a good man or a bad man. This is the basic fallacy on which communalism rests."[35]

To Raja, the riots were but proof of what could happen when influential leaders made this fallacy their political ideology, with the press reinforcing it. Of this he was convinced: "Communalism by its very nature must break up Malaysia."[36] Driven by this belief, his instinct was to re-enter the Malayan political fray, fight the communalists, flay their ideology – anything rather than be silent and be mistaken for compliance, or worse, cowardice.

Once again, however, Raja had to stand down. On 25 September, Lee – accompanied by Goh, Toh and national development minister Lim Kim San – met the Tunku for peace talks in Cameron Highlands. They emerged with a two-year truce to avoid sensitive issues related to the respective positions of the communities in Malaysia. Both sides would also abstain from expanding their party branches and activities.

The basic agreement, as Toh put it then, was that Singapore leaders would refrain from speeches likely to exacerbate communal relations; in return, the Malay leaders would control their extremists and end their campaign against the PAP. But, as the Singapore DPM told the Australian deputy high commissioner W.B. Pritchett on 2 October, the UMNO press attack was still continuing, although the PAP had refrained from public comment.[37]

As it turned out, the truce barely lasted a month. On 17 October, MCA leader Tan Siew Sin, who was also the Federation's finance minister, came to Singapore to gather support from the Chinese business community. A week later, on 25 October, it was Khir Johari's turn. He opened five new UMNO branches and unveiled plans for the

Singapore Alliance to contest the next election in 1967 with a view of forming the next government.

Raja was most aggrieved, as were his colleagues. The PAP had "as a token of its sincerity" abided by the truce, he wrote in a letter to the press. "We did this because of the confrontation and to give the new Malaysian Federation time to adjust itself to the new situation."[38] Yet this good faith was breached.

The pattern was wearyingly familiar. In the Singapore general election the previous year, the Tunku had canvassed for the Alliance in its bid to topple the PAP in Singapore, despite giving a personal undertaking to Lee that he would not do so. Yet when the PAP fielded a token team for the Malayan 1964 election, the Tunku took umbrage, saying that he had a gentleman's agreement with Lee to keep out of each other's political turf.

It dawned on Raja and his colleagues that these disputes were but manifestations of the Federation's *abang-adik* (elder brother–younger brother in Malay) attitude towards Singapore. As Lim Kim San put it, the Federation followed its own rules despite agreements made, and expected Singapore to give way to it. "If you are good *adik*, you must follow what the *abang* says. It was that kind of situation that I found most irksome."[39]

While the PAP leaders were keen to make Malaysia work, it was not in their temperament to kowtow. Moreover, they did not believe it was in Singapore's interest to be subservient. Making policy on bended knees, after all, risked the long view.

For Raja, the latest breach of the truce was all the excuse he needed to leap into action. Given the Tunku's clarification that the truce did not preclude the reorganisation of the Alliance, he stepped up the PAP's branch activities in Malaya. Toh, Ong and Khoon Choy were willing accomplices, reaching out to their friends and relatives in the peninsula to build up grassroots support.

One of the volunteers helping Raja in the Seremban branch was Chen Man Hin, a doctor in Seremban. He was so inspired by Raja's vision for Malaysia that he became its founding branch secretary. "Good and clean government, a just and fair society. That coincided with what I wanted, as at that time, politics was very corrupt," he recalled. His first impression of Raja: "A gentleman politician, very articulate, logical and analytical."[40]

The branch started with about 50 members from various walks of life, from teachers to businessmen and manual workers. "Raja guided us. We didn't know anything about politics," said Chen. Raja's assurance that the PAP would play a national role as a national party lifted their spirits. There was a mood of expectancy for a "good alternative political party, efficient and honest", said the doctor.[41]

The branch chairman was Raja's only brother, Seevaratnam, two years his junior. He gave up half his private medical practice, taking on a locum, so that he could devote time to branch work. However, he did not overly impress the PAP activists sent from Singapore to help him. One of them, M. Subramaniam, observed: "He's not a politician. I think Mr Rajaratnam talked him into it."[42] He was right. The brothers' uncle, V.K. Pillay, confirmed: "Raja hated to ask anyone for favours, but for the PAP, he persuaded Seeva to join politics."[43]

As siblings, Raja and Seevaratnam naturally shared the same family roots: born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and raised in Seremban, where two generations of their Jaffna Tamil clan had already settled. In that rural corner of Malaya, their strict father, Sinnathamby, rose from a conductor in a rubber estate to become a rubber planter and a respected businessman with several properties to his name. Their mild-mannered mother, Annammah, a temple devotee, raised them in the traditional Hindu ways.

But there their similarity ended. In personality, the brothers were as night and day. Seevaratnam's wife, Vijayalakshimi Thambiah, said: "Raja was gentle and caring, compared to Seeva who was hot tempered."[44]

Raja was a man of frugal taste – there was nothing flashy about him. Seevaratnam, on the other hand, was notoriously flamboyant

and extravagant. As the latter's son Vijayaratnam related, "his choice of clothes was loud, bright red, designer suits, not the best of taste".[45] Seevaratnam hankered after "huge cars" and, at various stages of his life, zoomed around in Rolls Royce, Buick, Holden and Jaguar models.

In contrast, Raja was content with his second-hand Hillman, despite complaints from his wife that it was battered and smelt of stale perspiration from his badminton sessions. He drove it until it broke down. He then bought a Toyota Cressida. Once, in the 1970s, his branch secretary Low Yong Nguan, who later became a PAP MP, tried to persuade Raja to switch to a BMW. "I had contacts with people in BMW. I told him I could get him a good deal," Low recalled. "He told me immediately, no, I don't drive such cars. He changed to another Toyota."[46]

Raja's belief in the virtue of thrift was to some extent influenced by the Scottish reformer Samuel Smiles, who wrote the classics *Self-Help* (1859), *Character* (1871) and *Thrift* (1875), and who preached the gospel of thrift, hard work and self-improvement. These precepts had become a meaningful habit for Raja during his student years of privation in wartime London.

As working adults, the brothers had trodden very different paths in life. While Seevaratnam stayed behind in his parents' sprawling house in Seremban and worked in the lucrative field of medicine, Raja took his chances in Singapore. He picked up a scrappy living as a journalist, and roughed it out with Piroska in a rented room in a rundown house.

When Raja joined the rough-and-tumble world of politics in 1959, his father had sighed with disappointment. His mother prayed to the Hindu gods to protect her son. However they felt about his decision, Raja took comfort from the thought that, should anything happen to him, his brother could support his parents. Politics, everyone knew, was dangerous business.

Now, after decades apart, the paths of the brothers intersected in the most unexpected way. Their lives became intertwined as PAP politicians sharing a common vision for Malaysia. Alas, their alliance would prove all too brief.

3

Politics and Piroska

Perched on the front bench in the Singapore Legislative Assembly, Raja fidgeted in his seat as the debate over Malaysia stretched deeper into the evening of 13 November 1964. He was shortly due to open a high-profile international festival along Orchard Road, yet leaving the chamber was increasingly not an option.

It was a rancorous debate, with one opposition MP after another accusing the prime minister of breaking his promise of delivering a more prosperous and happy future for Singapore as part of Malaysia. Barisan Sosialis MP Kow Kee Seng typified their assault: "Malaysia has come about and what happens to the people of Singapore?" Only "difficulties, misery and unemployment all round".[1]

Lee was constantly on his feet, stressing the need to confront the new realities and to make Malaysia work. At one point, after repeated attacks for giving too much power to KL, he brought home the reality of it all: "If perchance things do not go right, and they go wrong, and Singapore does go south, then I concede to them the possibility in that situation of Malaysia breaking off."

Grave-faced, Raja looked on with folded arms. He had no illusions about the political hazards ahead. The pro-communist Barisan, which had won 33.2 per cent of the national vote in the last general election in 1963, wanted Malaysia to fail, and the PAP to fall.

Raja, a strategist behind the merger campaign now being maligned, had only contempt for the Barisan's antics, and was not above heckling from his seat. But at this debate, he was taken aback by the PM's

concession of a "break-off" possibility. It was an idea that, to Raja, was beyond ludicrous: it was unthinkable.

As he sat grimly through the debate, he knew he could not make it to the international festival at the Thai Consulate on Orchard Road. So, as he would whenever circumstances demanded it, he pressed his long-suffering wife, Piroska, into service.

It has to be said that not many ministers could count on their wives to so gracefully stand in for them at such short notice. It was certainly not an occasion for the diffident. The opening of the two-day public event – which featured cultures from Canada, Switzerland, Austria, the United Kingdom and India – thronged with people.

With her golden blonde curls and brown eyes, petite Piroska cut an elegant figure in a classic houndstooth-print dress. She had a sweet voice, but her words packed a punch. More important than the variety of festivals was that "we enjoy participating in other people's festivals as much as we do celebrating our own", she told them. "The more the various communities participate in each other's festivals, the more quickly will we break down such barriers that exist between the different communities," she asserted.[2]

It was a message that she believed in passionately, and not only because she had heard her husband preach it ad nauseum.[3] Piroska, who fled to London in the 1930s to escape the fascist regime in her Hungarian homeland, was herself as anti-racist as Raja was, if not more so. When they first met in socialist circles in 1938, she was a confident au pair with strong views, and he a reserved law student still finding his footing. She was then 27, three years his senior. The independent-minded woman, so different from the traditional Hindu women he knew back home, made a great impact on his maturing sensibilities.

But of all the influences that shaped their thinking on race, it was probably their exposure to radical thinkers and their critical study of racist ideology in general, and of the evils of Hitler's Aryanism

in particular. That had instilled in both Raja and Piroska a lifelong revulsion against racial demagogues and their political vehicles. They grew to reject all political ideologies based on genealogical purity and racial superiority as, first, irrational and false; and, second, as immoral, since they were often used to justify cruelty, inhumanity and repressive intolerance.

When the couple vowed "until death do us part" in London in 1943 during the Second World War, it was to the echoes of Nazi bombing raids in the city, and to the wails of shock and mourning. The newly-wed couple had endured much, suffered much, and grieved much. They emerged from the rubble at the war's end well grounded in their socialist ideals of equality, social justice and humanism, and well aware of the brutal realities of life.

Now, two decades on in Singapore, the intensity of their ideals had not faded. In fact, quite the opposite.

From the first moment in 1959 when Raja became the country's first culture minister, he had made it his mission to build a non-communal nation. From the acorn of his small culture ministry quickly grew the vast oak of his proselytising activity. He turned into a high-octane evangelist for the new national faith.

In the initial stages, many around him – including his own prime minister – wondered if his political vision required too large a leap of faith. Not Piroska. No one believed in Raja more than she did, or appreciated his motivations better. As Raja would say later, "she understood me most".[4]

Piroska also supported him the most – regardless of the invective swirling around her husband and his political party, regardless of her gnawing doubts about the political company he kept, and regardless of her constant fears over his personal safety.

Significantly, for both, the struggle to tear down racial barriers was perhaps as personal as it was political and ideological. They lived

in an era when interracial unions were generally frowned upon in conventional circles.

Raja's own family in Seremban had lost no time in registering their disapproval of Piroska the minute he arrived home from London with her in 1947. In marrying a Hungarian Lutheran without his family's prior blessings, he had defied the traditional practice of not only his high-caste Jaffna Tamil family but also of his wider extended Hindu clan, with their culture of arranged marriages within the caste and community. It would take decades before Piroska was fully accepted into the fold. It was the way she took care of Raja that would change the family's attitudes towards her.

It had not been easy for her to cope. The couple did not have children. In the beginning, it was because Raja's mother had once told Piroska in front of several relatives – but in Raja's absence – that, while the family could accept her in time, they could not accept progeny who were half-caste and did not carry the caste's pure bloodline. Not wanting to upset Raja's close ties with his family, Piroska swallowed her hurt. By the time she felt sufficiently accepted by the clan to try for a baby, however, she could not conceive, given her age and health. She had once suffered a miscarriage, a source of grief for the couple.

Despite these rocky beginnings, or perhaps because of them, she grew into a practical housewife, proving herself to be an able helpmate. She was an accomplished cook, adding Indian curries to her repertoire, and expended much effort hosting Raja's myriad friends and relatives. All these were part and parcel of life for her in a strange new land.

Knowing that discretion was paramount given Raja's public position, she cultivated only a few personal friends in Singapore. One of them, Nina Cohen, a Polish engineer married to a Jewish surgeon working in Singapore, recalled that Piroska often reminisced about life in her village Békéscsaba in Hungary. "She was quite sentimental about her sister whom she had not seen for many years," said Nina.[5] Piroska's only sister, Klara, six years her junior, lived in the village of Gyula. They had been cut off from each other since Hungary came under communist control after the Second World War.

Engrossed in his consuming work, Raja had little inkling of how much Piroska pined for the comforting familiarity of her loved ones. She carried her burdens, fears and sense of dislocation with stoicism. Had she been a selfish and vain type of woman who demanded his time at home, he could not have functioned as effectively as he did. But she was not that way.

Instead, she adjusted to the demands of his high-profile position as best she could. A high pain threshold proved necessary. She suffered from a chronic lung ailment and a persistent back pain. Despite that, she accompanied Raja to events at home or abroad when required.

Nalini Nair, then a close neighbour, was struck by Piroska's devotion to Raja. Nair, who knew her as a strong woman with her own mind, said: "I thought that, for a European, she was an unusually submissive wife."[6] At heart, Piroska was basically a homebody whose greatest pleasures were gardening and listening to classical music. As a politician's wife, she had to expand her interests as she was thrust into a new world of diplomacy and politics. A woman of candour, she had to learn to curb her tongue in conversations. Foreign correspondent Dennis Bloodworth, who had known the couple since the mid-50s, described her as "completely loyal" to Raja. The British journalist was a frequent guest at the dinner parties in their home. He recalled: "She tended to keep out of political discussions with friends like me or everyone in general. Raja's public life was his own. She behaved as a completely apolitical wife."[7]

Given the anti-colonial temper of those days, however, Piroska's European background could at times pose a political liability for her husband. Among conservative circles, particularly the Chinese-educated with anti-West sentiments, it added to their sense that Raja was something of an outsider. He was a Ceylon-born Jaffna Tamil married to a white foreigner. He was an urbane cosmopolitan whose English bore the crisp diction of one who had spent 12 years in London. He was a Hindu-turned-atheist who believed in the potential of man rather than the great plan of a god. To the traditional types, all these made him somewhat suspect as a

standard-bearer of national identity. That cloud of prejudice would follow him for many years.

In their public behaviour, the couple followed Asian cultural norms scrupulously, avoiding any display of affection. Raja's closest nephew, Jothiratnam, observed: "They were a very private couple. They didn't hold hands in public." Yet, for all their public reserve, there was a fleeting moment, on the night of 29 November 1963, when it left them.

It was the night that Raja returned to Singapore after his first official mission to the United Nations (UN) in New York. He had been away for six whole weeks since 17 October 1963. During that time, he had worked flat out to help win international recognition for Malaysia in the face of an Indonesian-led campaign against it.

Raja was Singapore's sole representative in the 13-member Malaysian delegation led by MCA founder leader Ong Yoke Lin, the Malayan permanent representative to the UN and ambassador to Washington. It was a role he relished, for it showed Singapore's right to be involved in determining the course of the new country, including its foreign policy.[8] His key contribution came in his deep understanding of Afro-Asian affairs, having served his political apprenticeship among radical Afro-Asian nationalists in London in the 1930s and 1940s. The 56-nation Afro-Asian bloc accounted for about half the votes in the UN Assembly, so their support was indispensable.

To his dismay, however, he found that Malaysia, with its markedly pro-West and anti-communist foreign policy, was way behind Indonesia in projecting its case to the Afro-Asian and communist blocs. Malaysia had only a single embassy in all of Africa – in Cairo – and no permanent diplomatic representation in any of the Latin American countries. Indonesia, by contrast, had seven embassies in Africa and three in Latin America.[9]

Conversations with some delegates confirmed his fears: Sukarno's reputation as an anti-imperialist hero had preceded him, lending

credence to his conspiracy theory that Malaysia was a neo-colonialist plot to maintain British presence in the region.

In an effort to help buttress Malaysia's credentials, Raja made two speeches in his debut at the UN to highlight Malaysia's alignment with Afro-Asian interests. Both speeches, made before the UN Fourth Committee,[10] focused on issues close to their heart, and also his: the apartheid policy of the white-dominated South African government, and South Africa's illegal occupation of then South West Africa, which was also subjected to the apartheid policy.[11] Both speeches – one on 31 October 1963 and the other three weeks later, on 21 November – crackled with anger and disdain. Anger at South Africa for persisting with its "Stone Age" politics of white supremacy, and disdain for the major powers that had taken a soft line towards it.[12]

Amid the procession of speeches on the issues, Raja's drew attention for his bold language.[13] But, given the late stage of the game, Malaysia continued to face stiff diplomatic headwinds right up to the day it received the UN's stamp of recognition.

From the frustrating experience, Raja picked up lessons that later became the subject of a talk aired over radio in January 1964. He reproached the central government for its "insular approach" to foreign affairs, lamenting that "there was no systematic and sustained effort to mobilise international opinion on behalf of our national interests".[14] He pressed for a more neutral and nimble foreign policy that placed greater focus on Afro-Asian countries and the communist bloc, and called for more embassies in Asia, Africa and Latin America "whose importance lies in the fact that their voting strength in the UN today can be, on many occasions, decisive". These lessons drawn from his maiden foray to the UN would later prove invaluable to him in ways that he could not have imagined then.

Given the national significance of his UN mission, Raja returned home on 29 November 1963 to some fanfare. Waiting for him at the Singapore airport was a posse of reporters and supporters.

And, of course, Piroska. Although exhausted, no thanks to a hitch in connecting flights that left him stranded overnight in Tokyo, Raja

mustered a megawatt smile for all. Triumphantly, he told the press: "As far as the United Nations is concerned, Malaysia is now an accepted fact and a legal entity."[15] Then, ignoring the crowd, he turned to his beaming wife and gave her a tender kiss on her cheek.

Many a time, Raja seemed to draw strength and comfort from his wife's presence. This was perhaps most visible when she accompanied him to the myriad grassroots events in his constituency – not at all glamorous, often humid and hot and out of her comfort zone, but hugely important for his political career.

One memorable occasion was the Chinese New Year and Hari Raya double celebration in Kampong Glam on 22 February 1964. The two major cultural festivals, by a rare lunar coincidence, fell in the same month that year. That balmy evening, hundreds of residents from the diverse races milled about the dusty field in their *lunghi, sarongs,* pantaloons, *qipaos* and other assorted casual wear. It was a night of multicultural performances, children's games and fellowship.

Towards the end of the event, the grassroots organisers invited Piroska to present prizes. As she stood under a bare spotlight on the makeshift wooden stage, wide-eyed children clustered around, straining their necks for a better view of the European woman. She brought a swish of sophistication to the kampong activities. Raja's grassroots supporters initially found her unusual, if a little intimidating, but over time, warmed to her.

True to form, the minister used the occasion to trumpet his pet message on the oneness of the human race. He exhorted the people to inculcate in the young, "by our deeds as well as by our words", a sense of unity – "a complete disregard for differences of colour, race or religion". He asked them to think of one another as "a united people of one race – the human race". Poignantly, he uttered these words merely five months before the first riots broke out in July.

Yet despite the riots, he never wavered in his conviction. In November 1964, two months after the second outbreak of riots, he expressed a personal philosophy that came out as a paean for ethical idealistic humanism, fuelled by a vision of the unity of humanity. "If I

am asked what is the one single aspiration behind human civilisation as against savagery, it is this: To learn to love one's neighbour," he said on 8 November 1964 at a conference on Thirukkural, a 2000-year-old Tamil literary and philosophical text. The history of civilisation, he said, was the "history of man's effort to learn to love his neighbour, whether his neighbour is the man who lives next door, or in the next street, in the next country, or in the next continent". In language reminiscent of Biblical verses, which he knew inside out, he said: "If there is fear in the world, if there is oppression of man by man, if we end one war only to live in dread of another, if there are people who incite one race or one community to hate and despise another community, if there is poverty and injustice in the world today, it is because we have not yet learnt the art of how to love our neighbour."[16]

These were poetic words one would tend to associate with a spiritual sage, not an irreligious, hard-bitten politician. But they rolled off Raja's tongue as if they had been hidden in his heart for years. The disasters of late seemed to have turned his mind deeper towards the ageless wisdom of great religions and ancient philosophy. In a world rent by violent racial and religious divisions, he yearned for some universal truths to anchor his belief in the potential of humanity to rise above base instincts and to create a better mankind.

For more storms were brewing. By early November 1964, the period when Raja spoke about loving one's neighbour, Lee was full of foreboding that the UMNO ultras would instigate yet another race riot – one that could plunge Singapore into uncontrollable chaos, thus providing a pretext for a government takeover. Some Alliance leaders were openly branding the PAP as a "communal party" out to incite racial tensions. They were agitating for the arrest of its leaders. Lee was their main target. Unless the Alliance government reined in the ultras, more violence – perhaps on an even greater scale than before – seemed inevitable.

As often was the case, in such moments of despair, Lee poured out his fears to Raja. Raja's response would change the course of their battle in Malaysia.

4

Face Off

An overwhelming sense of gloom pervaded Lee's office as he unburdened his fears of an imminent communal bloodbath to Raja. The way things looked now to Lee, there seemed no way to prevent the UMNO ultras from fomenting further race riots. He saw the future, and feared it. Raja could see the toll that this was all taking on the PM – he looked more despondent than ever. Summoning the courage they seemed to need, Raja told Lee, whom he called "Harry": "Harry, they want us to be fearful and give in."[1] It was imperative, he said, not to give in.

In the whirl of despair, Raja saw another future, one in which the extremists would not win. "You know we can peacefully rally the races together not just in Singapore but also in peninsular Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak," he said steadily. "Then the ultras will have to think again. Can they engineer trouble across Malaysia? Can they do that without harming themselves?"[2]

Lee found Raja's optimistic streak contagious. "He injected an upbeat mood by painting a more positive outcome," the PM recalled later. Remarkably quickly, Lee swivelled his attention to the bold proposal. He related: "He assured me that he, Toh Chin Chye and the PAP leaders who came from Malaya would get their friends together and muster support. I felt reassured."[3] Bolstered by Raja's calm counsel and confidence, Lee snapped back to his old self again. His spirits revived as he considered this course of action, although he still worried what the consequences might be.

This was the angst-ridden background for the PAP's ambitious plan to lead a political movement to gather Malaysia-wide support for a Malaysian Malaysia. It was a transformative moment, not only of Lee's morale, but also of his leadership on Malaysia, and therefore the fate of Singapore.

At this point, it is impossible to understand Raja's actions as a politician without appreciating the nature of the relationship between him and Lee. Raja saw Lee as Singapore's best hope for its survival, and his own best hope for achieving his vision of a multiracial nation based on equality for all. It was a vision that, since merger, had extended beyond Singapore to the whole of Malaysia.

Over the years, he had seen Lee stand up against pressure from the Chinese-educated masses in Singapore who had been swept up by the revolutionary fervour in China. That was hard for any Chinese politician, but for a struggling premier who needed the Chinese vote to lead his party to power against China-backed pro-communists, it was perhaps the hardest of all. Raja respected him for it, and, as a member of a minority community, drew confidence from it.

The two men also went back a long way. Their political partnership had begun in 1952 when Lee, then a relatively unknown legal advisor to several unions, sought Raja's help as a prominent anti-colonial journalist to win public support for a risky postal strike campaign. The latter's crusading articles had vaulted Lee into the public eye. From that moment, Lee came to rely on Raja's fighting grit, political analysis and masterful communication skills.

Even more significantly, the success of their campaign had set the foundation for them and their like-minded friends to form their left-wing, anti-colonial political party, the PAP.

Almost certainly, Raja would not have plunged into active politics had it not been for Lee. As Lee himself observed of his friend: "He was not politically ambitious. What drove him were deep convictions of what he thinks Singapore and Malaya should be."[4]

Now, after all their toil to reach this point, Raja was not prepared to see Lee and their multiracial vision cut down or carted out. So he

threw himself into protecting Lee's position. But Raja himself was to later suffer the consequences.

Despite their broad meeting of minds on the plan for a Malaysia-wide movement for a Malaysian Malaysia, there were moments when Raja's implacable fight-to-the-death attitude sat uneasily with Lee's more circumspect approach. To be sure, there was no question in their minds that the situation would just get more dangerous. The plan, which was hashed out essentially between Lee, Raja and Toh, was riddled with great risks, not least to themselves as the prime movers.

Raja's hope was that "by broadening the united front for Malaysian-Malaysia, we would inhibit the Alliance from succumbing to these pressures to take strong action" against them.

He was undoubtedly emboldened by his knowledge that there were Malaysian opposition politicians who sympathised with the PAP's position. If the PAP could prove that it could muster Malaysia-wide political support for a Malaysian Malaysia, Raja thought, then the moderate Alliance leaders might yet work with the PAP. This hope might be described as almost recklessly optimistic. It was as grand a plan as they come.

Their strategy was basically this: isolate the communal extremists and unite the moderate leaders around their ideal of a "Malaysian Malaysia". But, to be effective, they needed to translate the fervent rallies of the Malayan election campaign into real support for the PAP, and also form alliances with like-minded political parties in Malaysia.

If successful over time, this would demonstrate that the PAP's call for political equality and non-communalism had wide resonance in Malaysia. Then, perhaps the Alliance – or at least the moderate leaders within UMNO – could be persuaded that there was a better and more rational way to improve the lot of all races, including the Malays, rather than playing on racial divisions. Even if they could not be persuaded for the current time, perhaps the voters could be in the future.