

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

A Singapore Founding Father: An Appreciation of S Rajaratnam

By Joshua Ng

Synopsis

S Rajaratnam's contributions in various fields, like those of other founding fathers, have allowed his successors to build upon a robust legacy. Going forward, his clarity of ideas, principles and purpose will be a guide post for Singaporeans to problem-solve and to manage change and challenges.

Commentary

SINNATHAMBY RAJARATNAM (1915-2006) has been described as an intellectual, a thinker, a writer, a nationalist, an idealist, and an anti-colonial fighter. While he was of Sri Lankan heritage, he was raised in Seremban, Malaya and came to Singapore to attend Raffles Institution.

Raja's studies in King's College London were interrupted by World War II. Returning to Singapore with an anti-colonial outlook in 1948, he worked as a journalist and gained renown as a commentator in the colony's main English-language papers. He was a founding member of the People's Action Party (PAP) with Lee Kuan Yew, Toh Chin Chye, and Goh Keng Swee. Rajaratnam's enduring influence can be seen in several areas.

Culture

In the General Election of 1959, Raja won the Kampong Glam Legislative Assembly seat and was appointed as Minister for Culture. Projects such as the National Theatre at River Valley Road and the National Library (Stamford Road) were among the developments he oversaw. While the buildings of both the National Theatre and

the old National Library are no longer part of Singapore's physical landscape, their legacies continue.

The demolished National Theatre is often remembered as a precursor of today's Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. Both projects have cumulatively brought many global artists to Singapore, while helping develop the local arts scene. The National Library on Stamford Road, which was originally criticised for having "forbidding", and "monumental but clumsy" architecture, is now remembered fondly for having served the needs of nation building as a repository of knowledge, learning and technology. This spurs the management at the modern 11-storey National Library Central Building on Victoria Street to redouble efforts to live up to public expectation and succeed in their mission.

Multiracialism

In 1966, Raja wrote the National Pledge. It contained the phrase, "one united people, regardless of race, language or religion". As Minister for Culture, he entrenched a core value – a multi-racial, multi-cultural society for Singapore. As Minister of Foreign Affairs, Raja further positioned multiracialism and multiculturalism as keys to Singapore's foreign policy. Singapore did not want to appear as a "third China" within a Malay Archipelago, while having a significant Malay population.

Raja was quoted in 1984 to have said: "If you think of yourself as Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Sri Lankans, then Singapore will collapse. You must think of Singapore: 'This is my country'. I fight and die for Singapore if necessary." He recognised that the potential problems a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural society would face could be mitigated through a common overarching identity of Singaporeanness. In the Straits Times in 1990 he argued that Singaporeanness was not a matter of ancestry but of "conviction and choice".

While some may argue that Singapore's strict 'Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others' (CMIO) ethnic categorisation of its citizens has sat somewhat uneasily with Raja's vision of a common civic Singaporeanness, this need not be an insurmountable issue: creative blending is possible. While the CMIO schema helps the population retain an essential cultural ballast in the face of globalisation, the active promotion of an overarching layer of Singaporeanness, in tandem with the efflorescence of inter-ethnic friendships and marriage, have mitigated any tendency toward hermetic racial silos.

To this day, the policies of multiracialism and multiculturalism continue to have a unifying effect on Singapore's population, making it a safe place to raise families, to conduct business, and to connect the local and the global. While "race" continues to be seen as a faultline, it is clear that Singapore society continues to enjoy a degree of inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony that many countries around the world envy.

Foreign Policy

Singapore's fundamental geopolitical characteristics have not changed since Raja's time. He always retained an astute appreciation of what Singapore needed to do to

safeguard its independence from external threats and constraints. Raja viscerally understood that its small size meant that Singapore had little strategic depth and simply had to keep abreast of geopolitical ebbs and flows very seriously. Besides drawing attention to the fragility of small states like Singapore as a basic feature in global politics, one of Raja's enduring legacies has been a keen sensitivity to regional and global trends.

As Singapore's Foreign Minister from 1965 to 1980, Raja involved Singapore in the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement. Furthermore, he asserted Singapore's independence from Malaysia in the midst of the Indonesian confrontation and the British military withdrawal. As one of the founders of ASEAN in 1967, he mobilised the regional grouping in opposing Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia.

Importantly, Singapore's strategic geographical location at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans positions it to play an important role in both regional and global affairs, disproportionate to its size. This was not lost on Raja. He famously argued in 1972 that "once you see Singapore as a global city, the world is its hinterland".

Raja's template of Singapore foreign policy retains its relevance, creating the continuity necessary for effective diplomacy in an era of constant change. The ties he helped establish with the United States and with China have benefitted Singapore's security and economic position. Singapore's friendly ties with Malaysia and Indonesia can also be attributed in no small way to Raja's clear thinking on external relations.

The Future

S. Rajaratnam was Labour Minister from 1968 to 1971. He went on to become Second Deputy Prime Minister and Senior Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, and left politics in 1988, writing commentaries on regional and international affairs at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Raja passed away in February 2006, three days before his 91st birthday. The renaming of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in January 2007 as the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) remains a fitting memorial to the legacy of one of Singapore's Founding Fathers.

As RSIS celebrates its 20th anniversary, Rajaratnam's contributions in the areas of culture, multiracialism and foreign policy are reiterated as they help to explain Singapore's accomplishments and ability to manage change and challenges. Policymakers should continue as Rajaratnam did, to enable a flourishing cultural scene and a multi-racial society that characterise a mature nation contributing to regional peace and stability and a working global order.

Joshua Ng is a Senior Analyst with the National Security Studies Programme, in the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg