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*Remembering SR Nathan*

## **A Man For All Seasons**

*By Kumar Ramakrishna*

### **Synopsis**

*SR Nathan's professional career was profoundly shaped by the Cold War and the long struggle with the Communist Party of Malaya. In a lifetime of many high-level achievements, though, he never lost his human touch.*

### **Commentary**

MY FIRST formal meeting with S R Nathan, then Director of the fledgling Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) was in 1998, when I was a postgraduate student on a Mindef scholarship in London. In June that year I had had a fortuitous meeting in Senate House, the University of London, with a historical figure: Chin Peng, the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM).

For four decades, from 1948 till 1989, the CPM had been technically at war with both Malaya (later Malaysia) and Singapore. The BBC had wanted to produce a documentary commemorating the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the so-called Malayan Emergency and its producers had tracked Chin Peng down in Thailand with a view to interviewing him. As a quid pro quo, the then 74-year old CPM leader had asked to visit the historical archives in London as well as meet eminent historians of the Emergency. One of the historians selected to meet Chin Peng had been my University of London supervisor, AJ Stockwell - and he had taken me along to meet the man. Shortly afterward I penned a report of the meeting with Chin Peng and sent it to my superiors back in Singapore.

### **SR Nathan's Probing Questions**

When I next got back home I was called up for a meeting with SR Nathan. Mr Nathan – “SR” to those who knew him best - was not exactly a stranger to me. He and my late father had been colleagues in the civil service and SR had known me since I was a child. The meeting I recall was, though cordial, very serious in tone. SR’s background in external intelligence came across strongly as I was asked many questions about my meeting with Chin Peng.

One detail I will never forget is when SR showed me the report I had written and circled in red one portion: that Chin Peng had intimated during the June 1998 London meeting that the 1997/98 Asian financial crisis had possibly created inclement domestic socioeconomic and political conditions that the CPM could exploit.

SR shared with me his assessment that this seemingly off-hand remark proved that the Communists had not changed. Eight years after the historic Haadyai peace accords that formally ended hostilities between the CPM and the Malaysian government, they were still seeking to upset the apple cart if the opportunity presented itself.

### **The Cold War’s Impact**

SR’s comment to me revealed how much his professional life had been shaped by the Cold War – the nearly five-decade long ideological conflict between the US-led Western democratic capitalist bloc and the Communist bloc led by the Soviet Union and China. The Cold War’s legacy in Europe had been a divided continent paradoxically stabilised by the threat of mutual assured destruction via nuclear weapons.

In East Asia on the other hand, the Cold War had witnessed several “hot” proxy wars in Korea in the 1950s, as well as Vietnam in the 1960s to 1970s. The CPM’s jungle war in the 1950s against the British colonial and later independent Malayan governments was very much part of the wider Cold War fabric, as was its campaign – from the mid-1950s till the early 1960s - of urban subversion in Singapore, where it penetrated the deeply anticolonial Chinese educated student and working classes.

SR – like the first generation PAP leaders led by Lee Kuan Yew – was very much immersed in this turbulent milieu. For them, their formative historical experiences had been dominated by what had seemed to them a long twilight struggle against a stubbornly resilient, determined, constantly shape-shifting foe. At one stage the CPM was waging an armed insurgency in the Malayan jungle and later it was infiltrating leftwing political parties, as well as student, labour unions and rural associations in Singapore itself.

The Communists moreover appeared patient and not above staging comebacks: against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution in China in the mid-1960s and Mao Zedong’s grand design to exploit the upheavals in Southeast Asia such as *Konfrontasi*, and the growing US military intervention in Vietnam, the CPM re-launched the armed struggle against Malaysia and Singapore in 1969.

## **CPM's Urban Terrorism**

By the 1970s, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore had to contend with CPM-inspired low-intensity urban terrorism, as well as a concerted radio propaganda campaign spearheaded by the notorious Voice of Malayan Revolution (VMR) radio station led by English-educated CPM cadres operating from Chinese territory till the early 1980s. In this connection SR once remarked to me how he had marveled at the ability of CPM propaganda like VMR to address extremely mundane issues – such as how women could cope with the inconveniences arising from their monthly periods! To him this was proof of the CPM's determination to go to any lengths to subvert Malaysia and Singapore and establish its Communist Republic.

Faced with this threat, SR – like his first generation peers – developed an equally dogged determination to ensure that the Communists would be crushed. SR was thus one of the last first-generation, staunchly anti-Communist Cold Warriors. He reminds one of the late great Malaysian Psychological Warfare expert C.C. Too, who like SR, never trusted the Communists.

Too warned Malaysian leaders not to be complacent - even after the end of the Cold War and the new Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's decision to cut support for "fraternal" Communist Parties in the region had forced Chin Peng to the negotiating table by the end of the 1980s.

## **SR Nathan the Man**

SR Nathan the Cold Warrior was, as it turned out, just one attribute – if an important one – of the man. He was to prove himself, in Lee Kuan Yew's words, the "indispensable man for all seasons", displaying great political acumen in a range of duties from running intelligence and security services and foreign ministry to newspapers and think tanks – as well as representing Singapore in key diplomatic assignments.

But he could be thoroughly down-to-earth too. About two years ago, my god-daughter asked me if he could speak at a secondary school event for ASEAN students. I knew by then that although he had relinquished the presidency, he was not in the best of health. I was thus uncertain if I should even raise the subject. I did so gingerly one day and to my surprise he indicated he would be happy to do so.

He kept his word as well, addressing the multi-national student audience at my god-daughter's school, gamely answering their questions and posing for numerous photographs with them, demonstrating once again the human touch many have remarked upon. This was a man who effortlessly operated at the level of heads of state as well as that of the ordinary man on the street. He modeled for me what a full and meaningful life looks like.

In Anfield stadium, home of Liverpool Football Club in England, there is a statue of Bill Shankly, the legendary Scot manager of that famous club. At the base of the statue there is a simple epitaph: "He made the people happy." SR Nathan was a man of many profound achievements. I suspect, however, that many Singaporeans

would agree that amongst his greatest was surely that, in his own inimitable way, he made the people happy.

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