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## Remembering K. J. Ratnam: Indigenising Political Solutions and Structural Challenges in Postcolonial Southeast Asia

*By Alan Chong and Bilveer Singh\**

### SYNOPSIS

*Professor K. J. Ratnam was an iconic scholar who left behind an indelible mark on his staff and students during his tenure as Head of the Department of Political Science at the University of Singapore. Critical in this regard were his thoughts on managing plural, multiracial entities such as Malaysia and Singapore.*

### COMMENTARY

As a connected and concerned intellectual, Professor K. J. Ratnam wanted to indigenise political science education by getting his students and interested members of the public to comprehend the complicated layers of *text* and *context* in ethnic relations. In his opinion, this was the fundamental challenge to constructing constitutional governments in Malaysia and Singapore. In his many published works, he would always scrutinise both Western and indigenous scholars of Asia as to whether they appreciated the peculiar problems of “transitional societies”.

In Professor Ratnam’s mind, the Third World “developing countries” (or today’s Global South) were transitioning away from the deep scars, even lingering traumas, of having been colonised. Having lived through the divisive years in which Singapore and Malaysia had been federated territories under British colonial administration and having experienced the shared tragedies of several ethnic riots in the 1960s, he published a book *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya*, in the year he became Head of the erstwhile University of Singapore’s Department of Political Science.

The book was a significant contribution in developing a better understanding of post-colonial Singapore and Malaysian societies, which was understood primarily through Western lens. More importantly, it was to signal to all stakeholders that despite the challenges of deep racial and religious fault lines, Malaysia and Singapore need to understand these realities and address them to survive, which both countries, to their credit, have.

### **The Burden of History in Race Relations in Malaysia and Singapore**

Professor Ratnam devoted considerable word space to account for what he termed the problem of national unity. There was social distance between Malays and non-Malays exacerbated by the effects of uneven urbanisation and development under colonial rule. This translated easily into widespread perceptions of political distance and uneven possession of economic power by ethnic groups.

British policy since the 1870s cumulatively bred the perception that Chinese and Indians were economic “birds of passage” while the indigenous Malays were accustomed by colonial authority to reconcile themselves to an artificial distinction between conflated local village and “state interests” governed at the level of the Sultans, coexisting awkwardly with some early version of centralised authority reposing in Kuala Lumpur with a Colonial Governor.

After the Japanese Occupation during the Second World War ended, the British shocked all ethnic communities by proposing a Malayan Union that proposed graduated citizenship rights to all communities governed directly from Kuala Lumpur. This stoked intense communal nationalism, as Professor Ratnam called it, because the three main ethnic groups had not been psychologically prepared by the British to think of their relations with each other in terms of common citizenship. The effects of the Japanese Occupation aggravated matters since the Japanese authorities pitted each ethnic group against the other as part of their wider Pacific War campaign strategy against China and the Allied Powers.

As most students and scholars of Malaysian and Singaporean nation-building understand it, the British were forced to concede that the road to peaceful constitutional government following independence required the careful calibration of safeguards for the different ethnic groups before a harmonious body politic can be consolidated. The new post-colonial society had to be created, one step at a time, with give and take by all sides. It is unfortunate that present day tensions from the ongoing Israel-Hamas War indicate that much of the world has yet to digest what Southeast Asia’s multiracial postcolonial states have had to undergo to attain their existing harmony.

### **Keeping Multiracial Societies Together**

In this regard, Professor Ratnam has left us hard-nosed words of wisdom in managing multi-ethnic societies, which he also dubs “plural societies”, in the spirit of J.S. Furnivall, where each ethnic group was an aggregate of individuals and not an organic whole. For Professor Ratnam, “In a [plural society](#), a constitution is faced with the vital task of convincing each community that it can be assured of a certain minimum for itself, and that other communities will be prevented from going beyond a certain

maximum. The real difficulty, however, rests not on this alone but on the fact that the 'minimums' and 'maximums' demanded by the different communities seldom if ever coincide. In fact, it is even possible that certain communities may be interested only in safeguards while others may concentrate on the opportunities provided for advancement, or even domination”.

This passage was first published in a journal article in 1961, when an independent Malaya was four years old, and Singapore had only tasted six years of tumultuous limited self-government under British overlordship. It remains valid and relevant today for ensuring that no ethnic group should be alienated from a multispectral and inclusive nation-building exercise that will remain existentially positive if one is prepared to take a leap of faith in embracing the spirit of *Majulah* in step with equitable economic prosperity and sharing of common public spaces.

### **Lessons Learnt**

Professor Ratnam’s analyses and observations underscore his belief that intellectuals can and have an important role to play in society. In 2010, he wrote that ultimately intellectuals should serve as [articulators of critical opinion](#) to “demonstrate their independence and courage”, but their value to society will degrade “if they behave as habitual cynics whose opposition is based on reflex and not on knowledge, careful thought and objective analysis”.

This work stemmed from several thought experiments he conducted, reflecting upon the contributions of Omar Khayyam, Charles Darwin, C.P. Snow, F.R. Leavis, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, Stephen Jay Gould, and Richard Dawkins, with nods towards Isaac Newton and George Orwell, and was published as a book titled *Intellectuals, Creativity and Intolerance*. This insight still rings true today.

\* Authors’ reflections: Alan and Bilveer remember the late Professor K. J. Ratnam, the first local head of political science at the University of Singapore, the predecessor institution to NUS, from very different contexts. Bilveer had joined the University of Singapore in mid-1977, by which time Professor Ratnam had left for Malaysia even though *Ratnamism* was very much alive through his thoughts and works which students like Bilveer were exposed to. Alan had sought out Professor Ratnam in Kuala Lumpur for an interview to compose a review of the teaching of International Relations in Singapore between 1956 and 2008. As a freshly minted Assistant Professor, Alan was intimidated by the prospect of meeting someone who had lived through what he analysed – communal politics in Malaya and Singapore. To Alan, he was both an academic observer and a witness to living history, and Alan felt he had to both engage with Professor Ratnam’s level of experience as well as his intellectual heft.

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