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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SENIOR MINISTER
(PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE) AT THE OPENING OF THE SEMINAR
ON "TAMIL LANGUAGE AND TAMIL SOCIETY" AT THE
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE, LECTURE THEATRE 11
ON SATURDAY, 18 JULY 1987 AT 2.30 PM

## TRIBAL WARS

What I propose to do this afternoon is to make a 100 per cent digression from the theme prescribed for this seminar - "Tamil language and Tamil society in Singapore" - and sketch out the larger perspective against which, I feel, your chosen theme can be more realistically explored.

The future of not only the Tamil language but also of the Tamil community itself will ultimately be decided by what happens to Singapore society as a whole and that in turn will be determined by regional and global developments.

In this day and age of an interdependent world that is how all human problems, big and small, take shape for better or for worse.

The digression, I believe, is relevant to your theme because it is part of a much larger problem which, in my opinion, is going to dog the footsteps of most of you here for the rest of your lives - at least for the rest of this century. It is not so much a new problem as an old problem which has acquired global dimensions and has therefore changed its shape and character in unrecognisable ways.

I touched on this a few weeks ago in connection with another matter which led to the arrest and detention of some 22 largely young men and women and four worldly priests who thought that striking matches in a gas-filled room was an arresting way of providing intellectual illumination and political hope for Singapore.

I drew attention then to the problem posed world-wide by what I called "The Unholy Trinity" - race, religion and communism. Communism is not directly relevant to what I have to say this afternoon because, of the three evils, communism, as an ideology, is not as compelling as the other two today. As an ideology its validity is being critically questioned by successful Communists who are discovering that running a country according to Communist tenets is a certain road to disaster.

Only among unsuccessful and mentally retarded Communists has this ante-Deluvian doctrine its intractable devotees.

Communism's role in the Unholy Trinity is that of scrawny scavengers who hope to wax fat on the carcasses that racialism and religious fanaticism is today leaving in its wake. This is not to underestimate the ability of Communism to emerge victorious should all its rivals exhaust themselves in wars. But that is another story.

Today I will confine my discourse to the two more powerful forces which direct politics today and which are displacing traditional political ideologies in most of the Third World countries.

Even in highly developed Western countries like Northern Ireland, Spain, Cyprus, Turkey, Yugoslavia and Belgium race and religion are back in business after many centuries - a business far bigger and more lethal because it is conducted with modern techniques of mass hysteria and modern military weapons.

For easier presentation I shall call the problems of racism and religious fanaticism the New Tribalism. This will save me from the tedious and confusing presentation of religious hysteria and racist mania as two separate problems.

There is some justification for lumping racist and religious delirium under the heading of tribalism because emotionally and intellectually they have their roots in ancient tribal instincts even though these may be articulated today in pseudo-scientific language. Both these emotions that constitute tribalism probably have their source in the older reptilian part of the human brain.

The psychologist William James writing some 80 years ago aptly defined the enigma of religion when he observed: "Piety is a mask; the inner force is tribal instinct."

Tribal wars differ in one important aspect from traditional wars promoted for conquest of land or trade or to further the ambitions of bored monarchs and pathological world conquerors.

Professor Roger Shinn of New York City's Union of Theological Seminary has this to say of tribal wars: "Religious wars tend to be extra furious. When people fight over territory for economic advantage, they reach a point where the battle isn't worth the cost and so compromise. When the cause is religious, when what is at stake are divine absolute values, compromise and conciliation are seen to be evil."

Once started tribal wars are irreversible. There is no detente in tribal wars. They stop only when the last corpse has been buried; the last building has been reduced to rubble; and the last member of an inferior race has been flung into the incinerator.

        The tribal wars, whether racial or religious, now
going on and spreading like a prairie fire bear witness to
the deadly accuracy of Professor Shinn's observation.

        There is another feature of modern tribal wars
which make them significantly different from non-tribal
wars.

        The savagery that characterises modern tribal wars
exceed anything that we have known, including Hitler's
war.  Traditional wars have adhered or at least tried to
adhere, to certain conventions of chivalry and humanity to
temper the grim business of human butchery.  You killed
only enemy soldiers.  The most you did with innocent
civilians was their rape and plunder.  This fortunately did
not last long in traditional wars because the satiated
conquerors moved on to the next village or city for a
repeat performance.

        The modern tribal warrior on the other hand is a
new kind of animal.  He is pure evil.  He enjoys murder for
its own sake.  Religious and racial causes are merely
excuses to satisfy his lust for murder - and plunder.  He
believes in mixing business with piety.

        He repudiates all accepted norms of morality,
compassion and decency.  He is also a coward.  He plants
bombs in crowded streets, shopping complexes or airplanes.
The modern tribal warrior is careful to pick out as his
victims those who are innocent and cannot hit back.  Only a
few days ago the Straits Times carried a report that Sikh
militants campaigning for an independent religious state of
Khalistan (Land of the Pure) blew up a bus and killed its
70 odd passengers who probably did not care one way or the
other about the Land of the Pure.  I would have understood
the Sikh militants or any other militants had they shot it
out with the army and the police for the greater glory of
Khalistan.

The point I am trying to impress on you is that tribal wars, while unable to solve the problems they profess to solve, transform their champions into cowardly murder addicts. They need murder as desperately as a junkie needs a shot to quiet his cravings.

For example, a few days after the killings by Sikh militants there was a report that a group of Hindus, aided and abetted by Ministers and their relatives, returned the compliment by massacring a number of innocent Sikh victims.

This highlights another terrible aspect of tribal wars. Once started the zealots trade killings in a kind of perpetual motion of slaughter.

The most depressing feature of all is the extent to which the same cowardliness has infected the so-called progressive intellectuals of the world - East and West. They are all too ready to bay ceaselessly and noisily about transgression of human rights in countries which do not conform to their standards of ideological propriety but relapse into terrified silence before the barbarities of racial, religious and other revolutionary zealots. These human rights zealots lick their lips nervously and maintain a conspiracy of craven silence before the ceaseless slaughter of innocents by racial and religious fanatics from the Third World.

I would have thought the indiscriminate slaughter of unarmed and innocent people by remote control is the most immoral and outrageous transgression of human rights especially as such victims vastly outnumber the favoured and not so innocent "prisoners of conscience" to whose needs or quirks the human rights buffs devote their noisy attention.

And now for the second part of my address and one which must be uppermost in your minds: "Can tribal politics emerge in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore?" Given the present circumstances, the present mood of the people and the nature of the existing administration, the answer is no.

Can these favourable circumstances change for the worse?

The answer is yes they can. If popular mood changes and you have a weak-kneed government prepared to go along with the popular tide or worse still you have groups and political parties which deliberately create a political and psychological climate favourable for sparking off tribal wars then there is no escaping what is happening in many states in Africa and Asia. Most of Asia from the Middle East to Bangladesh are today grappling with mutiplying and uncontrollable tribal wars. Tribal wars, in fact, are becoming the norm rather than the exception in Asia. The question that many observers of the Asian scene ask today is not will there be tribal wars but: "Who next?"

For example, a few days before the racially motivated coup took place a correspondent of the Far Eastern Economic Review described Fiji as "a model multi-racial society despite occasional hiccups in relations between Indians and ethnic Fijians." Some hiccups!

So my advice to you is: "Don't put your faith in hiccups. It might be your last hiccup."

Though Asean today is free from tribal wars those of us who are extra-sensitive can sense crackles in the political atmosphere that portend the distant thunder of possible tribal wars.

In support I would like to refer you to a report
in last week's Sunday Times.  Speaking at the MCA General
Assembly last Saturday it reported Dr Ling, MCA President,
as saying that "there was a trend towards racial polaris-
ation and indifference among some politicians and civil
servants to the sensitivities of others."

He went on more pointedly: "The creeping arrogance
of power and the never ending quest for power has made some
of our political leaders and civil servants strive to be
racial heroes in their own communities."

He concluded by warning all responsible leaders
"to nip in the bud racial problems before they flare into
conflict proportions."

He is warning his people that once politics slips
into the hands of men deaf to the violent and unending
thunder storms now raging in most of Asia then tribal wars
must sooner or later envelope South East Asia too.

Once again: "What of Singapore?  Can it happen in
Singapore too?"

Nothing is foreordained in history.  If the
people, through inner weakness, greed, malice or stupidity
make conditions ripe for tribal wars, then they will have
their fill of tribal wars which will end only when the last
Singaporean has been brought to his knees or has fled his
homeland.  Or the last Singaporean has brought his last
adversary to his knees.

Equally, if people behave rationally, resist the
seductive wooing and promises of tribal warriors and elect
a government which is not afraid to deal firmly with
racialists and religious fanatics well before they have
dangerously infected the political system, then tribal wars
need not erupt in Singapore.

What is the proof for this bold assertion?

Well the 28-year record of the present government
since 1959.  This is not to say that there were no attempts
by racialists, religious extremists and chauvinists to
spark off tribal wars.  There were religious riots (in
Singapore they were also racial) in 1964 and 1969.  In
1971, the Managing Director of Nanyang Siang Pau aided and
abetted by his brother and two journalist employees
deliberately started a campaign to whip up Chinese racial
emotions by playing up issues of language and culture.  The
expectation was that in a predominantly Chinese state the
government would wilt before propaganda accusing it of
selling out Chinese language and culture.

Earlier the same year a newspaper the "Eastern
Sun," in return for financial assistance from Chinese
Communist sources, had also got itself involved in black
operations against the government by using race and
language as the big sticks.

Far from flinching in the face of chauvinistic
blackmail the government moved as decisively against
Nanyang Siang Pau's personnel as it had against Malay
extremists.

In every case the government used the Internal
Security Act to nip the danger in the bud.  Racial and
religious conspirators, because they take care not to leave
incriminating evidence conveniently behind, cannot ever be
convicted through the normal procedures of an open court.

The "smoking gun" proof can be adduced only when
the conspiracy has succeeded.  In that eventuality only a
suicidal judge would accept the success of the conspiracy
as irrefutable proof that there was a conspiracy.

Predictably, the arrest and detention of Nanyang Siang Pau's personnel resulted in a vigorous international press campaign against the government charging it with killing press freedom.  There were also attacks on the Internal Security Act and demands for its abolition.

As one who has been associated with the government since 1959, I am absolutely convinced that without ISA it would be virtually impossible to preserve a multi-racial and multi-religious society against the danger of tribal wars.

With the prophylactic properties of ISA the outbreak of tribal wars can be quickly contained.

There are two other reasons why racial and religious extremism have so far failed to take deep roots in Singapore.

First is that the government has taken care not to discriminate against its citizens on the basis of race or religion.  It may well be that the ensuing prosperity that flowed from its non-racialist and non-religious policies may not have been distributed satisfactorily among all communities but this is a consequence not of racial and religious discrimination but the result of a free enterprise system that rewards all people on the basis of enterprise, ability and the contributions they make.

The uneven distribution of prosperity would have been about the same had Singapore society been made up totally of people of one race and one religion.

The other reason is that since 1965 the Singapore electorate has consistently refused to vote into parliament candidates from communally and racially organised parties. Whether this will always be the case I don't know.  I can

visualise new circumstances which could result,
intentionally or unintentionally, in a 100 per cent Chinese
parliament.

Anyway here I am entering into the speculative
realms of horror fiction.

But so long as the people of Singapore are, as
they have done since independence, prepared to put in the
effort and the self-restraint to ensure the continuance of
a multi-racial and multi-religious society then Singapore
need not go the way of many other Asian societies.

We are not likely to go wrong so long as we define
a multi-racial society as one where equality of
opportunities is afforded every citizen regardless of race
and religion.  However it is not a doctrine of free rides.
It is not enforced inequality of opportunities.  It is not
discrimination on the basis of race and religion or
discrimination on grounds of ability and hard work.

We should not equate equality of opportunities
with the handicapping of horses where the name of the game
is to make sure that the fastest horse runs as slowly as
the slowest horse.  A more rational way is to motivate the
slowest horse to run as fast as the fastest horse - or
thereabouts.

Handicapping may make bookies prosperous but would
be politically and economically disastrous if translated
into government policy.

I am not saying that adherence to multi-racial and
multi-religious policies will necessarily wipe out tribal
instincts within the foreseeable future.  They will lie
dormant for a long, long time and reassert themselves when
conditions are favourable.  All we can hope to do is to

contain them by judicious and effective political, economic
and psychological measures.

All I know is that to abandon multi-racial and
multi-religious policies just because tribal instincts
cannot ever be eradicated is to make inevitable the
outbreak of tribal wars and the total and irreversible
destruction of Singapore as we know it.

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