

09 Oct 2014

Launch of the Reprint of "The Battle for Merger" - Speech by Mr Teo Chee Hean, Deputy Prime Minister, Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs

Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

Introduction

I am pleased to be here today to launch the reprint of the *Battle for Merger* publication, which comprises a series of radio broadcasts by Mr Lee Kuan Yew in 1961. I am lucky to own a copy of the original *Battle for Merger* printed in 1962. It belonged to my father. I remember hearing these radio broadcasts as a child. Although I was too young then to understand them, I could sense the magnitude and gravity of the events that were swirling around us. But Singaporeans of my father's generation, and those just a little older than me, will certainly remember those tumultuous days, and Mr Lee's radio broadcasts.

2. It was a time when momentous decisions had to be made for Singapore. A wrong decision then would have been calamitous and Singapore might still be trying to shake off the dire effects today. Mr Lee's broadcasts electrified the population, and were crucial in making Singaporeans understand what the battle was about, and persuading them to support Merger with Malaysia.

The Battle for Merger

3. Some may wonder: Why should the *Battle for Merger* be reprinted now? In 2015, we celebrate Singapore's 50th anniversary. This is a significant milestone, especially when we consider our precarious and tumultuous beginnings. While we only became an independent nation in 1965, our road to independence began earlier, with our attempt to forge a shared destiny with the then Federation of Malaya. Our hard-fought attempt to gain independence by merging with Malaya was in fact a battle for the future of Singapore. On the surface, it was a battle for merger. But this was only on the surface. Below the surface was another deeper, more momentous, more dangerous battle – that between the communists and non-communists in Singapore.

4. At the heart of this battle were two contrasting visions of how society should be ordered and how we should govern ourselves. It was not simply a fight to get rid of British colonial rule; rather, the communists and their allies had a larger agenda. Their objective was to impose a communist regime in Malaya and Singapore through all means, including subversion, and ultimately, armed revolution. They never gave up on

this larger agenda. That is why the communists continued to pose a security threat to us long after both Malaya and Singapore had gained independence in 1957 and 1965, respectively; and even after all British forces had left in 1971. In one incident in June 1974, the Inspector-General of Police in Malaysia was gunned down in broad daylight by a Communist hit squad.

5. The events vividly described in the *Battle for Merger* bear testament to the resourcefulness, will and spirit of pioneer Singaporeans, led by Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues in the government and the PAP. Our pioneers were confronted with difficult challenges and dilemmas, and had to make critical choices not just for themselves, but for future generations of Singaporeans. This is why, despite the vast changes that have taken place in the world and in Singapore over the past 50 years, this crucial turning point in our history continues to be relevant to us today.

Singapore in 1961

6. What was Singapore like in 1961, when Mr Lee Kuan Yew made these radio broadcasts? What was the broader strategic environment? The Cold War between communism and the free world was at its height. The Berlin Wall, which for decades signified the divide between the two contending sides, had just been built. In fact, construction started on 13 Aug 1961, exactly a month before the first of Mr Lee's broadcasts on 13 Sep 1961. Proxy wars and ideological battles were being fought in many countries. Southeast Asia was a hot spot. Malaya and Singapore were not spared. There were grave security concerns over the growing communist influence in Malaya and Singapore.

7. In the 1950s and early 1960s, communism was in the ascendant in Singapore. The Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) had waged a violent armed insurgency since 1948 and fomented urban strife in its attempt to establish a communist Malaya (which included Singapore). The CPM targeted those who opposed them, including civilians, and security and police personnel. In Singapore, between 1950 and 1955, CPM hit squads carried out at least 19 known murders, as well as numerous acid attacks, arson and other acts of violence. When the CPM's violent, armed guerrilla war and their intimidation of the civilian population failed to turn Singapore and Malaya 'red', the communists switched strategy to place more emphasis on subversive Communist United Front (CUF) tactics instead. Through the CUF, the CPM intended first to drive out the British from Singapore, and then to topple the Malayan Government. From 1954 to 1963, the CPM penetrated student bodies, labour unions, political parties, and cultural and rural organisations in Singapore to spread their ideology and influence, attract supporters, and mobilise activists to mount a campaign to destabilise and take over Singapore.

8. The CUF organisations instigated unrest and dissatisfaction among the population by exploiting unhappiness over socio-economic issues and particular government policies. Singapore went through a period of great upheaval and civil unrest. Protests, sit-ins, strikes and demonstrations were frequent. The trade unions

and student bodies were the front organisations for these confrontations. But they were controlled and manipulated from behind-the-scenes by communist hands. Some of these events resulted in the deaths of innocent Singaporeans and security personnel. The result, which was intended, was tension, anxiety and instability in Singapore.

9. Why did the CPM and their pro-communist allies operating in the CUF organisations decide to oppose Merger? When Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues in the People's Action Party (PAP) were elected to form the government in June 1959, it was on a pro-merger platform. Merger was also supported by the communists and pro-communists who at that time were in the PAP¹. Other political parties also had similar pro-merger agendas. Merger was deemed essential for Singapore's economic survival. People travelled across the Causeway frequently and co-mingled freely. Even the CPM considered Singapore a part of Malaya – there was no “Communist Party of Singapore”, because in their eyes, Singapore was an integral part of Malaya. There was only the Singapore Town Committee of the CPM.

10. Yet, when the PAP announced its support for merger and the concept of Malaysia to attain full independence from the British, the communists and pro-communists opposed it and tried to capture the PAP and the Singapore Government in July 1961. Merger was against the communists' interest, for two reasons. First, it would result in the quick end of British rule in Singapore and make it harder for the CUF to disguise its agenda to establish a communist regime as an anti-colonial struggle. Second, the CPM expected the anti-communist Federation Government to clamp down on them as internal security would come under the Central Government in Kuala Lumpur once merger was achieved.

11. The CPM never believed that Singapore should be independent of Malaya. Indeed, much later, when Singapore separated from Malaysia in August 1965, the CPM denounced Singapore's independence as “phoney”². The Barisan Sosialis took the same line, when it decided to boycott and later withdraw from Parliament and take to the streets instead³. But in 1961, the communists wanted to capture power in a self-governing Singapore and use that as a base to subvert the Federation and in due course establish communist rule over the entire Malayan peninsula.

12. As Mr Lee said in his preface, the *Battle for Merger* broadcasts were pivotal in lifting the curtain on the communists and exposing their hidden manoeuvres. It was necessary for Mr Lee to make public the communist threat and reveal key CPM personalities, as well as how the communists operated, including their objectives and methods. Singaporeans, whether they were for or against merger, needed to know the real communist agenda in order to make their choice.

13. This was why Mr Lee decided to speak to Singaporeans directly on the matter. He gave three talks a week, each one delivered in English, Mandarin and Malay, totalling 36 broadcasts in less than a month. This gruelling effort left him thoroughly exhausted. But he got his message across. The talks played a vital part in defeating the

anti-merger campaign of the communists and pro-communists. In the referendum on merger held in September 1962, 71% supported the PAP's position while 25% cast blank votes as advocated by the anti-merger group.

14. Although public support for merger was unequivocal in 1962, and Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia on 16 Sep 1963, the differences in views between the Singaporean and Malaysian governments as to how a multi-racial, multi-religious nation should govern itself caused merger to fail. In 1965 when independence was thrust upon Singapore, we were struggling with poor economic prospects, fraught communal relations, and a continuing communist threat. The Cold War raged on, and the Vietnam War was intensifying. The Gulf of Tonkin incident, which led the US to engage in Vietnam, had occurred in 1964. The Cultural Revolution which brought turmoil to China for a decade started the next year, in 1966.

15. Even after independence, the communists persisted in their violent attempts to destabilise Singapore. The CPM revived their armed struggle in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1970, a seven-year-old girl was killed by a booby-trapped bomb in Changi planted by a CPM unit. In 1974, three communists were on their way to plant home-made bombs in Telok Kurau when one bomb exploded prematurely in Katong, killing two of the bombers. The third bomber was injured, but escaped, and eventually fled to Johor with the help of CPM supporters. The following year, in 1975, the security authorities recovered two caches of 298 hand grenades in Loyang and Tampines accumulated by another CPM unit which had carried out vicious attacks in Singapore in the 1950s. Indeed, the Voice of Malayan Revolution, the CPM radio station, was broadcasting up till 1981, preaching revolution and communism. Several Singaporeans worked at this radio station.

16. The spectre of communism receded only after the People's Republic of China abandoned its support for the CPM in the 1980s. The CPM finally ceased hostilities and signed the Peace Agreements in Haadyai with the Malaysian government and the Thai authorities. The date, 2 December 1989, when the CPM finally laid down its arms, was barely a month after the Berlin Wall was breached on 9 November 1989 – that same Berlin Wall, the symbol of the Cold War, whose construction began in 1961, just a month before the first *Battle for Merger* broadcast.

Significance of the *Battle for Merger* Today

17. Today, the events surrounding Merger are no longer at the forefront of the minds of Singaporeans. For the older ones, the tumultuous years described in the *Battle for Merger* are a receding, distant memory. The younger ones, especially those born after 1965, would have no personal memory of these events. They would only know of these years through history books, or from their parents and grandparents.

18. The *Battle for Merger* provides a powerful contemporaneous account of the events at that time. It captures the flavour and the intensity of the exchanges, the battle for the hearts and minds of Singaporeans over merger; and more fundamentally, the

fierce struggle between the communists and the non-communists over the future of Singapore.

19. As we approach our 50th year of independence, some revisionist writers have attempted to recast the role played by the communists and their supporters on the merger issue. They portray the fight as merely a peaceful and democratic disagreement over the type of merger⁴. They ignore the more fundamental agenda of the communists to seize power by subversion and armed revolution⁵. The CPM's armed struggle and the CUF's efforts to destabilise Singapore before, during and after the *Battle for Merger*, have been well-documented by various academics and writers, including top leaders of the CPM such as Chin Peng and Fong Chong Pik⁶.

20. These multiple sources support the argument that Mr Lee Kuan Yew made in the *Battle for Merger* more than five decades ago: namely, that there was a communist conspiracy to take power being played out over the merger issue, which he felt compelled to expose in his broadcasts. The re-publication of the book will provide a reality check to the revisionist views. I hope it will awaken interest among younger Singaporeans in the events of this crucial period in our history, educate them into what actually happened, what the battle was about, and why it was so crucial that the right side won.

21. Indeed, one might ask: what if the communists and their pro-communist CUF allies had won, and Singapore had fallen under communist rule in the 1960s? We would have gone on a completely different path. Where would we be today? Singapore would probably not have survived, as a small communist outcast in South East Asia, as the Cold War raged in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Even if Singapore had survived, life would have been harsh and miserable. We need only look at the communist world since the Russian Revolution of 1917, and countries that continue to subscribe to communism today. The more successful ones have made major adaptations in recent decades, and adopted drastic reforms and policies to make themselves more competitive and to enable the standard of living of their citizens to catch up with the free market economies.

22. The 1960s were tumultuous times. We should respect the personal conviction and determination of those who held different views then and fought on the side of the communists. As Mr Lee said in his broadcast, "they are not crooks or opportunists. These are men with great resolve, dedicated to the Communist revolution and to the establishment of the Communist state believing that it is the best thing in the world for mankind"⁷.

23. But we should, even more, acknowledge and give our respect and appreciation to the Singaporeans who had the courage and wisdom to reject the CPM's ideology and tactics, including its violent methods, and those of its pro-communist supporters. Singaporeans who rallied to support the non-Communist cause under the leadership of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, who fortunately mustered a majority to defeat the Communist side in a democratic contest.

24. Among those who have contributed to our nation building are some who initially joined or supported the communists. It took special courage for them to turn away from the communist cause after recognising its serious flaws and inadequacies. They made a brave choice in the face of intimidation and threats to their lives and their families. They had the courage to acknowledge that the path advocated by the CPM was the wrong one, and to join the majority of Singaporeans who had made that critical choice for a non-communist, democratic, peaceful and constructive path forward.

25. There were others, including several senior CPM figures, who had fled Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s, but returned home with their families after the CPM laid down its arms in 1989. They made no pretence about their past activities and beliefs, and were reconciled to the fact that theirs was not a cause shared by the majority of Singaporeans. They had seen the road that communism had travelled and admitted that it had failed. After providing an account of their communist activities to the security authorities, they and their families settled back into Singapore as loyal citizens, and contributed to our country's progress.

26. But it was a close call. Then as now, Singapore has little room to manoeuvre. The wrong decision, and it would have gone the other way, and Singapore would have turned out very differently.

27. Our pioneers' spirit and their determination to rise above the hardships of the moment, including the dire threat of communism, and to focus on making Singapore a better country for the next generation is an inspiration for all Singaporeans. This spirit, epitomised in the *Battle for Merger*, is a precious heritage which we all as Singaporeans should honour, recognise and emulate.

28. Thank you.

1 Lim Chin Siong, the leading figure in the communist and pro-communist camp in the PAP, himself had supported merger when he was released from detention following the PAP's victory in the 1959 General Election.

2 The political wing of the CPM, the Malayan National Liberation League (MNLL), issued a statement dated 10 Aug 1965, titled "Malayan National Liberation League Re Separation of Singapore from 'Malaysia'", which described the declaration of Singapore's Independence as an "emergency" move of the British to remove the contradictions between Tunku Abdul Rahman and Mr Lee Kuan Yew and to prevent them from toppling each other. It emphasised that Singapore was still a colony but "in

a new style” and the Prime Minister remained a faithful British puppet. It stated that the “British imperialists and their lackeys” were still the target of the people’s struggle until full independence was obtained, and Singapore re-united with Malaya. The statement reiterated the MNLL’s 8-point programme (i.e. the MNLL manifesto issued in March 1965 on the “Struggle to Crush ‘Malaysia’ and for the genuine independence of Malaya”) and stated that the present situation favoured the unarmed as well as armed struggle to crush Malaysia.

3 Barisan Sosialis Singapura (BSS) and the Partai Rakyat Singapura issued a joint statement on 9 Aug 1965 which branded Singapore’s independence as a “British plot” and declared that they would not give it recognition. On 14 Aug 1965, Dr Lee Siew Choh reiterated the BSS’s stand that Singapore’s independence was “phoney” and attributed the “breakaway” to British inability to hold Malaysia together. The BSS was the political party formed by communist and pro-communist elements in August 1961 when they broke away from the PAP.

4 These writers often argue that the pro-communist left’s opposition was based on what they deemed to be the unfair terms of merger as negotiated by Mr Lee Kuan Yew, e.g. on the issue of citizenship and voting rights of Singaporeans upon merger. These writers include Geoff Wade (“Operation Coldstore: A Key Event in the creation of modern Singapore’ in *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore: Commemorating 50 Years* [Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, Malaysia and Pusat Sejarah Rakyat Bhd, 2013]) and Thum Ping Tjin (“The Fundamental Issue is Anti-colonialism, Not Merger”, Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series No. 211).

5 For example, Thum Ping Tjin’s Asia Research Institute paper claims that there was no significant communist threat, citing materials from the British archives. In fact, there are ample documents in the British archives showing that the Communists posed a serious security threat to Singapore and Malaya, as manifested for example in the CPM’s support for an armed insurrection in Brunei. Top CPM leaders like Chin Peng and Fong Chong Pik had also discussed about communist plans and activities in Singapore as well as attempts to sabotage merger or delay its implementation.

6 The following is a sampling of the more credible books on the CPM and the communist struggles between the 1940s to 1960s: Yeo Kim Wah, *Political Development in Singapore, 1945-55* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1973); Dennis Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1986); John Drysdale, *Singapore, Struggle for Success* (Singapore: Times Books

International, 1984); Aloysius Chin, *The Communist Party of Malaya: The Inside Story* (Kuala Lumpur: Vinpress, 1995); and Lee Ting Hui, *The Open United Front: The Communist Struggle in Singapore 1954-1966* (Singapore: South Seas Society, 1996) . The following are accounts by major/leading communists, pro-communists and sympathisers: Chin Peng, *Alias Chin Peng: My Side of History* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003); Fong Chong Pik. *Fong Chong Pik: The Memoirs of a Malayan Communist Revolutionary* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2008); and Li Ya Jiu (ed.), *Di Zhu Zhi Zhong Liu – Xing Zhou Ren Min Kang Ying Tong Meng Hui Chuan Qi Ren Wu* (The Legendary Figures of the Singapore People's Anti-British League (Hong Kong: Footprints Pub. Co., 2013).

7 The quotation is found on page 17 of the *Battle for Merger* publication.

National Archives of Singapore