

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

MC.AP.19/68(ISTANA)

+ EMBARGOED TILL AFTER DELIVERY +
+ PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY +

TEXT OF SPEECH BY THE ACTING PRESIDENT, MR. P. COOMARASWAMY,
AT THE STATE BANQUET IN HONOUR OF HIS EXCELLENCY GENERAL NE
WIN, CHAIRMAN OF THE REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL OF BURMA, AND
MADAME NE WIN AT THE ISTANA ON SATURDAY, APRIL 20, AT 8 P.M.

May I extend to Your Excellency and Madame Ne Win a warm welcome to Singapore and say how honoured we are to be able to play host to so distinguished a leader and patriot from the Union of Burma. Your visit is all the more welcome as you are the first representative from your country to visit an independent Singapore.

We have tried to make your stay here as pleasant and memorable as possible. We have, as requested by Your Excellency, made your programme as informal as protocol decencies permit. In a way we were very delighted by your request as we in Singapore, too, are never quite at home with the pomp and circumstance of elaborate protocol.

Also out of deference to Your Excellency's request I do not propose to make my welcome address unnecessarily long but there are one or two observations I would like to make.

Your Excellency is visiting us at a time when the whole of South-East Asia is undergoing a new heart-searching. Many of the basic assumptions which governed our thinking about the region during the past two decades have been eroded by march of events. One of these is that the course of history in the region as a whole must be shaped, as it has been in the past, by great powers outside the region and in particular by the Western powers.

I think this phase of South-East Asian history is ending. One by one the colonial powers from the West are abandoning the traditional role they played in this region. In the years ahead history in South-East Asia will not be determined almost wholly, as in the past, by gathering of statesmen in Paris, London, the Hague or even New York.

This being so it will be necessary for us in South-East Asia to play a more active role in shaping not merely our national destinies but also the history of the region as a whole. This is not to suggest the creation of a self-contained and self-sufficient regional bloc but greater co-operation among South-East Asian nations with a view to giving us greater say in the affairs of the region as a whole and play a more effective role in world politics as well.

Direct contacts and exchange of views between the leaders of South-East Asia will help in the emergence of regional thinking and make us more aware of the fact that we are not strangers but close neighbours whose fate and fortunes are closely interwoven.

Your Excellency's ...2/-

Your Excellency's visit will therefore greatly help to make both our countries more aware that we are in fact close neighbours and that we have many problems in common arising out of our being units in a South-East Asian region.

Like your country, Singapore is dedicated to the proposition of friendliness towards all countries which want to be friends with us. All we ask is that we should be left alone to solve our problems our own way — alone if necessary but preferably in co-operation with other friendly countries.

Unfortunately this eminently sensible policy of being friendly towards all countries does occasionally get us into difficulties with friends and potential friends. This is because some of them have a somewhat different definition of friendship. They demand a monogamous friendship. They demand that as a test of our friendship we should not only become friends of their friends (which is not so bad) but that we should also become enemies of their enemies (which we think both pointless and even dangerous). This is because some of these friends are powerful friends who also have powerful enemies. So when countries like Singapore are asked to make powerful enemies just to oblige powerful friends we have no choice but to say "no".

There is yet another reason why we fight shy of monogamous friendship. As Your Excellency well knows some of our friends are not all that consistent about their friends and enemies. Friends have become enemies overnight and enemies — friends. Therefore a policy of making the enemies of our friends our enemies as well could end, for weak countries, in having enemies all around.

Not only powerful friends but even less powerful friends also demand that friendship should be based on having common enemies — and quite often some of these enemies are far more powerful than all of us put together.

Despite these practical difficulties we in Singapore are nevertheless of the view that our policy of friendship towards all countries is the soundest and safest course to follow in these uncertain times. We hope that powerful and not so powerful countries will not think our professions of friendship less sincere just because, for no rhyme or reason, we do not line-up against their, very often, temporary enemies. On the contrary we feel that it is in the long-term interest of the relatively small and weak countries in South-East Asia to soften enmities and conflicts in the region by not lining up with the combatants. This is not to suggest that we are indifferent to these conflicts because the longer these conflicts persist and grow in intensity the greater the danger of3/-

danger of our being drawn willy-nilly into them. We should take positive steps to take the heat out of these conflicts by supporting such measures as would help resolve the conflict and not by supporting one or the other of the combatants.

This, Your Excellency, I humbly suggest is where the leaders of South-East Asia can play a more active and constructive role in helping to bring peace and security to our region. Hitherto we in South-East Asia have tended to play a passive role in regard to the affairs of the region. Such regional view as we have had was no more than reactions and responses to regional politics played by forces outside the area.

Your visit is a step towards South-East Asian leaders thinking out and offering solutions in terms of South-East Asian interests. Because we have not been able to offer such solutions in the past it was perhaps inevitable that others from outside the region should attempt solutions of their own in terms which may not be relevant to our own wishes and aspirations.

Finally, may I express the wish that Your Excellency, Madame Ne Win and members of your party will have a pleasant stay in Singapore and that you will take back with you our high regard and warm friendship towards the people and Government of the Union of Burma.

Your Excellency, Madame Ne Win, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen: May I request you to join me in a toast to the good health and happiness of His Excellency, the Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of Burma and to the progress and prosperity of the peoples of Burma.

APRIL 20, 1968.

(Time issued: 1700 hours)
