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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SENIOR MINISTER  
(PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE), ON THE OCCASION OF  
THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF THE SINGAPORE  
CEYLON TAMILS' ASSOCIATION AT THE OBEROI IMPERIAL  
HOTEL ON SUNDAY, 10 FEBRUARY 1985 AT 7.30 PM

My wife and I are happy to join with you in celebrating tonight the 75th Anniversary of the Singapore Ceylon Tamils' Association. This is therefore an appropriate occasion as any to discuss a subject that must be in the forefront of the minds of Singapore Ceylon Tamils. What is our future going to be the next 75 years? There was a time not so long ago when a Singapore Ceylon Tamil could comfort himself with the thought that should life prove intolerable for him in Singapore he could, as his forefathers once did, pack up his bag and return to his ancestral land to reclaim his birth-right.

That option is no longer available. His birth-right is today in jeopardy. While the future of Singapore Ceylon Tamils who migrated to Singapore about the middle of the last century is promising that of the Tamils who chose to remain behind in the land of their forefathers is tragic and uncertain. It is not my purpose tonight to go into the rights and wrongs of the bitter conflict now raging between Sinhalese and Tamils. All I want to do tonight is to highlight for Singapore Tamils the single most important lesson they must draw from the tragedy in Ceylon. It is that racial, linguistic, cultural or religious conflicts and violence are the consequence of crooked politics and cowardly leadership. The tragedy becomes inevitable when avaricious, ignorant and totally unprincipled politicians play on the stupid prejudices and primitive emotions of a

people who allow themselves to be led to perdition by spurious messiahs. Racial, religious and language conflicts are not peculiar to Ceylon. They are taking place today in most of Asia - in the name of race, language, religion, culture or even economic justice. It is taking place in Africa where it has reached genocidal proportions. There are stirrings of it even in highly developed Western Europe - North Ireland and Spain are examples. Racial and religious conflicts are growing at an unprecedented rate in many parts of the world.

The persecution and attempted decimation of minorities is as old as history. Their causes are many and varied. Behind the patriotic posturings used to justify racial and communal violence stalks the politics of envy by the unsuccessful and the indolent of the hard working and the successful. They are often cover for looting and robbing of the successful by the unsuccessful. Communal politics more often than not flourishes in an environment of desperate poverty, inept and weak governments and corrupt politicians.

What is happening in Ceylon is therefore not an exception but the rule in contemporary politics.

Singapore is one of the few exceptions to the general rule about communal politics in Asia. I am not saying that there are no individual instances of communal and racial prejudice in Singapore. There have been and there are still such manifestations. But these have never assumed serious political proportions simply because over the past 25 years you have had in Singapore a government which has taken care not to make itself hostage to communal politics and has never hesitated to come down hard on communalists and chauvinists when they reared their heads even if this entailed high political costs.

So the simple answer to the question: "What future for Ceylon Tamils in Singapore?" is - make sure that the present form of government and leadership style and outlook persists in Singapore for the next 75 years. Our style of government may have other imperfections but in so far as the security, rights and general well being of minorities are concerned the kind of government style and approach to problems that has prevailed since independence has been the impregnable shield which has protected Singapore's minorities. In saying this I am not using this occasion to act as recruiting sergeant for the PAP. Of course it would be nice if I can get all Ceylon Tamils to become PAP stalwarts but that is irrelevant. Whether Ceylon Tamils are pro or anti-PAP will make no difference to the future of the PAP. In a population numbering about two and half million the Ceylon Tamils number no more that 30,000. In fact the total number of all Tamils in Singapore is not more than 100,000. So politically the government can if it wants to, totally ignore the Ceylon Tamils and for that matter all Tamils without suffering any political disability. It can - but over the past 25 years this government has shown extra concern for the rights and dignity of minorities. It has resisted the temptation to placate the majority at the expense of the minorities.

The point I am therefore trying to make tonight is something altogether different. It is that Ceylon Tamils and for that matter all Tamils need the present style of government more than the government needs them. I know that there are some Ceylonese who think that Singapore needs to be delivered from the kind of government Singapore has known the past 25 years but in my humble opinion they need to have their heads examined.

My concern tonight therefore is not with the future of the PAP Government. Its fate will in fact be decided by voters numbering over one million and not by 30,000 Ceylon Tamils. My concern is with our fate, our future.

Let me put our problem more starkly. If something should go wrong with Singapore's politics - and there is no written guarantee from the Creator that it cannot - then there is no escape hatch for Ceylon Tamils. We could be trapped in a communal fire. Indian Tamils can, if they are lucky, go back to the vast subcontinent they came from. There is an escape route for the Malays too. But there is no place for Ceylon Tamils to run to short of a miraculous return to sanity in their ancestral homeland.

I am putting our problem starkly simply because I am reaching the end of my political career and I have therefore nothing to gain politically or materially by bluffing you. My political future is behind me and I am satisfied. What I want to underline for you is that should the present style of government be changed then the future of Ceylon Tamils will indeed be bleak. You may or may not have good grounds for being critical on other aspects of its policies but one of this government's greatest achievements has been not only to spare minority communities the indignities and dangers to which minorities have been exposed in many Asian and African countries but it has in addition offered them opportunities for social, cultural and material advancement unavailable to them in their ancestral lands.

For that matter even the majority community realises that life for them the past 25 years has been better in every way in Singapore than what they could have enjoyed in the land of their forefathers.

At the risk of embarrassing myself by appearing to be unjustifiably immodest I have often wondered whether I

could have attained the position I now hold in the Singapore Cabinet had I stayed on in Ceylon and ventured its politics. Let me hasten to add that I would be very distressed indeed were I made to understand that I am holding the position I now do in the Cabinet simply because I am a Ceylon Tamil. I like to think I am where I am purely on basis of merit. If I have to be modest then it may be that I fooled the Prime Minister into believing that I had great merits.

It is only in a communally oriented government that meritocracy is suspect and demonstration of merit on the part of members of a minority severely punished - by beating them up, by discrimination in jobs, by persecution, by burning, looting and even by patriotic murders.

How has this government succeeded in containing communalism? The answer is simple. It has dealt toughly and courageously with every manifestation of communalism whether from minorities or from the majority community. When Singapore was a part of Malaysia, Muslim extremists tested the will and nerves of the Singapore government which then controlled neither the police nor the army. The extremists believed that by fomenting racial riots they could compel the Singapore government to depart from its multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural policies. The extremists pressed for their form of multi-racialism. It was that while all races and all languages were theoretically equal in practice a particular race and a particular language had to be officially designated more equal than the rest.

A bigger test of the government's adherence to multi-racialism came after independence in 1965. A group of Chinese chauvinists, aware that their community constituted some 75 per cent of the population, wanted a multi-racialism and multi-lingualism which while nominally conceding equality for all wanted Chinese language and culture to be the dominant consideration. Prior to this

the local Communists had under the guise of promoting Marxism in fact promoted Chinese chauvinism by trying to make Singapore an outpost of the Chinese Communist revolution.

After 1965 the cause of Chinese chauvinism was picked up by a group of politically ambitious non-Communist chauvinists. They charged the PAP government with betraying Chinese language and culture. They believed that in a predominantly Chinese Singapore, where the Chinese had overwhelming voting strength, the government could be panicked into opting for Chinese chauvinism. Some of you may remember that the battle on behalf of Chinese chauvinism was led by a Chinese newspaper and its millionaire owner. Had the PAP been led by unprincipled leaders concerned only with holding political office then the obvious thing would have been to play along with the chauvinists. The PAP could win every election hands down for a while at least. The price it would have to pay in return was betrayal of its multiracial principles and the sacrifice of the minorities who made up 25 per cent of the population. Had the PAP taken this easy path to political power the plight of the Ceylon Tamils and for that matter all minorities would today be as desperate as that of the Tamils in Ceylon.

Fortunately for the minorities of Singapore the PAP leadership and in particular the Prime Minister chose not the easy solution but the most difficult and most courageous solution simply because it was, from his point of view, the most honourable solution. He detained both the proprietor and senior editors of the paper. You may recollect the hue and cry that was then raised world wide by so called liberals. They accused an allegedly autocratic Mr Lee Kuan Yew of trampling democracy, human rights and free speech. The pressure to release the three chauvinistic detainees was relentless and unusually

sustained. Had the Prime Minister succumbed I am certain that communalism and racialism would be as much a part of Singapore's politics as it is in Ceylon and elsewhere today. That is why you should be cautious of forcing critics who claim to be more mindful of the rights and welfare of Singaporeans than the elected leaders of Singapore.

If as a member of minority community I were asked to name the most outstanding of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's policy achievements I would point to the courageous way in which he put through language and cultural policies which have been fair to both minorities and majority alike and, more important, effectively ensured that there would be no discrimination by the majority against the minority. His language policy is a measure of his wisdom and his far sightedness. By making English the link language in Singapore while allowing each community freely to learn its own language and culture, he has ensured that the minorities have a proper and secure place in Singapore. In addition to English being the conduit pipe for modern science and technology, all communities have a fair and equal chance of acquiring proficiency in a language that gives them ready access to unhampered economic and political participation.

The only discrimination the government recognises and encourages is discrimination which rewards talent and hard work. Unlike in a communally oriented society, in Singapore talent and merit are encouraged and rewarded regardless of whether these manifest themselves in a Chinese, Malay, Indian, Ceylonese or an Eurasian Singaporean. In a communal society talent is presumed to exist only in a privileged community and manifestation of it in other communities should be treated as an affront to national honour and dignity deserving of the severest punishment.

So my advice to Ceylon Tamils in Singapore is two-fold. Make sure, to the best of your ability that Singapore is ruled by a government which is single-mindedly non-communal and secondly cultivate among our community meaningful talent and zest for hard work.

If you bear these two objectives in mind then there will be a bright future for Ceylon Tamils 75 years from now even if - which I fervently hope will not happen - they become extinct in Ceylon.

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