Tan Wah Piow, *Smokescreens & Mirrors: Tracing the "Marxist Conspiracy."* Singapore: Function 8 Limited, 2012. 172 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-2104-6.

On May 21, 1987, in an operation code named "Spectrum," Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) detained 16 Singaporeans under the International Security Act (ISA). Six more people were arrested the very next month. The government accused these 22-English educated Singaporeans of being involved in a Marxist plot under the leadership of Tan Wah Piow, a self-styled Maoist, and a dissident Singaporean student leader living in the United Kingdom (UK). He was released from prison in 1976 after serving out a jail term of two years for rioting. As soon as he was released from jail, Tan Wah Piow was served with the call-up notice for National Service (NS), which is compulsory for all male Singapore citizens of 18 years and above. But instead of joining the NS, he fled to the UK in 1976, and sought and given political asylum. He has remained there ever since and is now a British citizen. On 26 May, 1987, Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) released a 41-page press statement justifying the detention without trial of the original 16. They were accused of knowing Catholic Church social worker Vincent Cheng, who in turn was alleged to be receiving orders from Tan Wah Piow to organise a network of young people who were inclined towards Marxism, with the objective of capturing political power after Lee Kuan Yew was no longer the prime minister (Lai To 205). The news of their arrests, of course, created a sensation in the country. How could a Marxist conspiracy be hatched in a country which has always been pictured as one of the best success stories of capitalism? Did the interned Singaporeans really engage in such a conspiracy as the government alleged? Or, was it a ruse by the government to remind Singaporeans of the uncertainty they could face when the second generation of leaders led by Goh Chong Tong take over the reins of country's power from Lee Kuan Yew?

These questions have hung over Singapore political scene since 1987. There are two views regarding the authenticity of the existence of the Marxist conspiracy. One view is that there was *indeed* such a conspiracy. For example, Jon Quah is convinced of the existence of the Marxist conspiracy (1988). Therefore, he had no hesitation in pointing out that the Marxist conspiracy had ushered in yet another phase of communist subversion in Singapore. He argued that the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) had successfully infiltrated student groups, the Workers' Party and an English-language drama group known as the Third Stage (Quah 245). On the other hand, Michael Barr casts doubt on the existence of a Marxist conspiracy. Quoting a visitor to Singapore Internal Security Department (ISD) Heritage Centre, Barr states that the comprehensive

display there makes no mention of Operation Spectrum (Barr 335-36). According to him, if any visitor asks about the smashing up of the Marxist conspiracy in 1987, the visitors are directed to an out-of-the way display. Barr, therefore, suggests that Singapore ISD deliberately downplays Operation Spectrum (336). So, what is the truth about the 1987 Marxist conspiracy in Singapore?

Tan Wah Piow's book *Smokescreens & Mirrors: Tracing the "Marxist Conspiracy"* is his own answer to the government's "spurious" charges against him (5). The book consists of the following four sections: i) a foreword, written by Dr. G. Raman, Tan Wah Piow's defence lawyer when he was tried and convicted for rioting at the Pioneer Industries Employees' Union in Jurong in 1974; ii) a short introduction; iii) Smokescreens and Mirrors; and iv) Let the People Judge, a book originally published in 1987. The volume under review also includes letters written by Tan Wah Piow to now-defunct *The Far Eastern Economic Review,* newsweekly published from Hong Komg, in which he tried to respond to Singapore government's charges against him.

The author's use of metaphors like "Smokescreens" and "Mirrors" is interesting and relevant to his discussions in the book. These two are essential tools used by magicians to razzle and dazzle the audience and hide the truth from them. The author argues that like a magician, the Singapore government led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had used lies and half-truths as smokescreens and mirrors to hide the truth of his case from the people of Singapore. Does Tan Wah Piow succeed in revealing the truth in his book? This may be questionable as the facts and figures are open to interpretations. It is often said that truth is a victim of history. So is in this case. After 25 years, to use the metaphors of the book, neither the smokescreens nor the number of mirrors surrounding the Marxist conspiracy case have crumbled. In fact, as the author has admitted, for ordinary members of the public, inundated with wall to wall propaganda in the print, audio and visual media, and without the time, resources and discipline to reflect on and analyse this information, it is difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff (24-25).

If that is the case, then what is the importance of a book like the one under review here? It serves three important purposes. First, it provides an alternative narrative of a key incident in the history of Singapore. By studying the present book, the current generation of Singaporeans will get to hear openly the voice of the key accused in the Marxist conspiracy case. One has to leave it to them to decide whether the arguments and facts presented in this book are true. Second, the fact that Tan Wah Piow's book could be published in Singapore says a lot about the country's progress towards opening up of the public space. Such a scenario was practically impossible to fathom in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, the point should be made that Singapore is not yet a society with a completely free public space. Third, the publication of Tan Wah

Piow's book should encourage other Singaporeans who have alternative views to pen their experiences for others to share. These are the building blocks for creating an open society with free flow of opinions.

Tan Wah Piow's book is not only about the Marxist conspiracy, but it contains references to the kind of political system he would like to see in Singapore. He is in support of a parliamentary form of government (100), but calls for a debate to look into the possibility of introduction of a proportional representation system (102) to replace the current first-past-the-post voting system without taking into account the unsuitability of such a system for a small state like Singapore. According to the author, the Arab Spring teaches one lesson to the oppressed and disenfranchised people of the world: the power of organised public opinion can trump the juggernaut of unfair and undemocratic state machinery (72). He goes on to state that how this struggle will evolve in Singapore is yet to be seen (72). This is where he shows his lack of understanding of the Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia in 2010. There is no doubt that the Arab masses' yearning for freedom was an important contributory factor. But equally important were lack of governance, absence of rule of law affecting every section of the Arab society, high unemployment rate, and mistreatment of women etc. Even a critic like Tan Wah Piow of Singapore would have to admit that these factors are absent in Singapore.

Works Cited

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