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A CHRONOLOGY OF THREE MONTHS OF UNREST IN SINGAPORE

A Report from A. Doak Barnett

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I first arrived in Singapore on March 31. The day before I arrived, the students of seven Chinese middle schools went out on strike. Two days after I arrived, Singapore held its first elections. The political situation since then has been fast-moving, often hectic, sometimes alarming. The first three months of experimental self-rule in the colony have been a period of unrest. Here is a brief chronology of major developments during this period.

March 30-April 1: Student Strike and Agitation

On the eve of Singapore's elections, leaders of the Chinese middle school students in the colony decided to protest about the government's refusal to register their Middle School Students' Union. The government agreed to discuss the issue with student representatives on March 30, but the students decided that morning to strike instead of talk. Pickets were posted at the campuses of seven schools; over 9,000 students stayed away from classes, while only 600 ignored the strike and went to school.

During this period, students were actively campaigning for the People's Action Party (PAP), and the strike was widely regarded— as it was probably meant to be— as a show of students' strength, an attempt to influence the elections. PAP posters at the schools urged students to attend a party rally that night. The government learned that the students were planning a mass demonstration on election day. The Governor issued a stern warning to the students, and the entire police force was put on alert. School directors and principals, who had met with student representatives on March 31, advised against demonstrating. Remembering the riots of May 13, 1954, Singapore was uneasy. At the last minute, on the night of April 1, the students canceled plans for an organized demonstration the following day— although they did get out and electioneer, taking people to the polls,

After the elections were over, the students continued agitation for registration of their Students' Union. On April 5,

they sent a petition to the Governor, Later they took the matter up with Chew Swee-kee, Chinese Education Minister in the new government, and on April 29 they sent representatives to talk with Chew. Chew told the students their organization would be registered, but only on condition that its constitution stated that the Students' Union would not take part in politics. The students refused to accept this condition. The issue is still up in the air, unresolved.

April 2: Singapore Elections

Over 160,000 voters cast their votes. The election was orderly and without incident. That night there was considerable excitement as election returns were reported over the radio, in English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. The victory of the moderate Left-wing Labor Front was almost totally unexpected by the public and by the Labor Front itself. The showing made by the radical PAP was impressive.

April 6: Formation of the New Government

David Marshall, Labor Front leader, established a coalition with the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), both of them minor parties in Singapore even though they dominate politics in the Federation of Malaya. Government appointments for two of the nominative seats in the Assembly, plus the three "officials" (colonial administrators) automatically members of that body, added to Marshall's coalition of ten Labor-Front men and three UMNO-MCA representatives, and gave the new government an 18-vote majority (of a total of 32).

On April 7, the nine-man Council of Ministers was sworn in. Apart from three British colonial administrators (Chief Secretary, Attorney General and Financial Secretary), this new cabinet's elected members included, besides the Chief Minister himself, two "Straits Chinese" (holding the key Ministries of Education and Labor), one Malay, one Eurasian, and one Englishman. The most pressing problem facing the new government from April 7 onward was the labor situation. Labor Minister Lim Yew-hock, former TUC head, found himself facing the threat of three major strikes: one by the Harbor Board Staff Association, one by the Bus Workers' Union at the Hock Lee Bus Co., and one by the City Council Labor Union's Federation. The first two of these took place in due time and were the focus of two major crises in May and June,

April 6: Wanyang University Staff Resigns

After weeks of dispute between the newly-recruited faculty and the board of Nanyang University, Chancellor Lin Yutang and the whole staff resigned. The Nanyang project had been

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started in 1953, on the initiative of Tan Lark-sye and a group of wealthy Chinese businessmen, with the aim of establishing in Singapore the first institution of higher learning in Southeast Asia for Overseas Chinese. Lin had been invited to head it. The motive for setting up the university was not political. Tan had written Lin: "If we do not take steps to preserve our culture now, ten years from now we may find that the education of our people here will be on shaky ground. Twenty or thirty years from now our language and literature may perish. In forty or fifty years we shall no longer call ourselves Chinese." Most of the Chinese community had rallied around the project; contributions came in from dance-hall girls and trisha men.

In October 1954, Lin arrived to organize the university. Before he left the U.S., where for years he has been a popular writer, Lin was quoted--misquoted, he says--as making anticommunist statements; there was no doubt, in any case, that he was anti-communist. Almost immediately after Lin's arrival, trouble began between him and the university executive council. At first, there were squabbles over administrative matters, buildings, and the budget. Then politics came into the picture. Lin Yu-tang has since stated publicly: "I was forced to resign, and Nanyang was destroyed as a free institution, by direct communist sabotage." He says that Tan Kah-kee wrote several letters to Singapore suggesting his ouster, and that Lee Kong-chian stepped in and organized the opposition that forced him to resign. I have found that many excellent sources here in Singapore confirm, in essentials, Lin's account of direct Peking intervention to oust him, in order to prevent a well-known anticommunist's heading Nanyang. Lin says he fought back but could not hope to win against such powerful forces. Before he left Singapore he received threatening letters and moved around the city under the protection of plain-clothes policemen.

Immediately after the resignations on April 6, the executive council of the university appointed a seven-man committee to recruit a new Chancellor and staff. This committee has been contacting people, but no appointments have been announced. On June 15, however, preparatory classes for about 400 prospective students began; these classes end in January 1956, and present plans call for starting some sort of university then. Nanyang is likely to be far different, however, from what Lin had hoped. Instead of a well-endowed, first-rate, noncommunist university, it may rather be small, second-rate and politically dubious. There is a definite possibility that it will be infiltrated by procommunist elements and become merely a continuation school for the radicalism of students from Singapore's Chinese middle schools. If this happens, and if its graduates stay in Singapore, this might be worse for the colony than if these sane students returned to Communist China for their education.

April 17: Student Assassination

A 21-year-old Chinese high school student was shot dead

by two unknown gunmen. The assassination was linked to undercurrents of dispute within the student movement. It was also an indication of the kind of lawlessness that creates the uneasiness and fear now permeating Singapore's Chinese community. It does not take many unpunished incidents of violent political retribution to make the majority of people respond to intimidation by anonymous threats.

April 22-27: Legislative Assembly's First Meeting

At the first sessions of Singapore's new representative body, on April 22, 26, and 27, the policies of the new government were described, and PAP leader Lee Kuan-yew made it clear that his party would take an aggressive role in the **opposition**. Government plans, as outlined during these sessions, included experimental introduction of multilingualism in the proposed new City and Island Council, "**Malayanization**" of the civil service, steps to achieve complete self-government in the next four years, and a future union between Singapore and the Federation of Malaya. Lee Kuan-yew attacked Singapore's present constitution as "**phony**," "**a sham**," and "**colonialism in disguise**." Then there was a heated clash between Lee and Marshall over the Emergency Regulations. Marshall, who is on record as opposing these regulations, asked for approval of a three-months' extension of them, during which time revision or repeal could be carefully studied. He said the extension was necessary because of a "**continuing danger**" to the "**internal security**" of Singapore. Lee attacked Marshall for violating campaign pledges to repeal the regulations,

April 24-27: Trouble at the Hock Lee Bus Co.

At the Hock Lee Bus Co., in a dispute over working conditions a strike notice for early May had been issued. The situation suddenly became serious when the company dismissed over 200 members of the Bus Workers' Union and kept on workers of its own company union. On April 25 and 26, workers tried to block buses leaving the company grounds, but they were dispersed by the police. On the following day, over 2,000 students, carried to the site of the strike in trucks, began agitating among the workers, making speeches, singing songs, and giving out cash donations. On April 27, over 100 strikers again tried to block the buses, and again they were stopped by the police, with minor violence. During the day, a four-hour "**protest**" strike was called in other bus companies, involving 1,500 workers. A campaign to break bus windows and slash bus seats was started. Agitation among the bus workers, with students playing a major role, grew steadily thereafter, while negotiations continued for some sort of settlement between the union and the company.

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April 30: Beginning of the Harbor Board Staff Association Strike

This **strike** of 1,300 workers, long brewing, finally started after the union refused their employers' suggestion to submit the dispute to arbitration. The most important issue involved backdating of pay increases. The strike had no political implications.

May 1: May Day

Large May Day demonstrations were conducted by rival labor groups. One was the Trades Union Congress, whose leaders support the Labor Front Congress. The other was the group of **unions** linked to the PAP which already was trying to challenge the leadership of the older TUC. The most important union in the group was the Singapore Factory and Shop Workers' Union, and Lim Chin-seong was chairman of the PAP-led rally. The tone of the meeting was ominous. One Bus Workers' Union leader, Fong Sweet-suan, shouted: "**Workers** must know there is bound to be some bloodshed in the course of our amalgamation and they must rise and unite..."

May 9-13: Buildup and Explosion at Hock Lee

Tension and the unruliness of growing crowds, made up of both students and workers, at the bus company pushed the negotiations over the dispute into the background. Actually, a solution proposed by a magistrate dealing with the case, that rehiring should be carried out on the basis of a set ratio between men of the Bus Workers' Union and men of the company union, was accepted **by** both sides at one point, then repudiated by the Bus Workers' Union. From then on, the strike clearly turned from a labor dispute, in **which** legitimate grievances had been involved, into a mass demonstration whipped up by political agitators. For several days, emotional "**indignation meetings**" were held by workers and students, who deliberately fomented hostility toward the police. Secret-society thugs, as well as students, joined the **meetings**, but students were more active than anyone else, handing out sizable sums of **money** to the workers, singing, dancing, propagandizing individual workers, making speeches. The police stood by, trying to keep things under control, but **large** numbers of people came and went, avoiding the police barriers which had been set up around the area.

On May 12, the eve of last year's student "**May 13th Incident**," agitation came to a head. There were minor clashes between police and workers, and the crowds grew. Finally, the situation exploded. All **Singapore's** police were called out, but they tried to avoid using firearms, and the crowds could not be controlled. Hit-and-run attacks were made on the police (most of the policemen in Singapore are Malays), cars were overturned and burned. and mobs roamed the streets. It was, in the words of

an official report, a "night of confused fighting* and of mob violence against authority, law and order. The final casualty list of those killed was: two policemen, one student (who was carried around by the crowds as a martyr before he was taken to a hospital), and one American newsman. Many others, including 14 policemen, were injured. On the next day, May 13, and for two days thereafter, Singapore was paralyzed by fear, and the uneasiness caused by violence on the night of May 12 pervades the city even today, making people frightened that small incidents may lead to major explosions. "Thursday, May 12th, is a black day in Singapore's history," said the top British official, summarizing the riots at the next meeting of the Legislative Assembly, on May 16. "The PAP and their covert communist supporters and back-seat drivers wanted violence and bloodshed and industrial unrest. They saw that they would be discredited if the Government succeeded in settling these strikes without disorder." Actually, the strike was settled almost immediately after the riots, on May 14; the company union was dissolved, the Bus Workers' Union men who, had been dismissed were reinstated, and other issues were submitted to arbitration.

May 13-22: School Closing--Student Defiance and Government Retreat

On May 13, the day following the riots, the government closed down the two largest Chinese schools, Chung Cheng High School and Chinese High School, from which the majority of rioting students had come. It ordered the schools to expel certain students and restore discipline, and demanded that the schools' management committees prove their fitness to manage. The students reacted to this quickly and strongly. From Monday, May 16, until the night of Sunday, May 22, 4,000 students took over the schools, camped out, and locked themselves in, defying the government. The government did nothing to bring them under control. Instead, it accepted on May 21 the recommendation of a special all-party committee of the Legislative Assembly that drastic action should not be taken. It was decided that the schools should be allowed to re-open, even though the government's orders had not yet been carried out. News of this decision reached the students at 6:00 p.m. on May 21, and for almost 24 hours thereafter they carried out enthusiastic celebrations, with meetings, at both schools, which passed many resolutions condemning the government's closing of the schools and presenting new demands. At Chung Cheng High School, they set up a Students-Parents Association and chose 22-year-old Lim Chin-seong of the PAP to head it! Then, to the accompaniment of firecrackers and drums, they paraded, before finally going home.

May 25: The Problem of Chinese Education

When the Legislative Assembly met on May 16, immediately after the riots, the top colonial administrator spoke to that body, saying: "It is, I say, the students of these Chinese schools who have done much to cause bloodshed in Singapore....The situation in

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these Chinese middle schools is the most serious problem that faces Singapore....I attribute the rioting on Thursday night to irresponsible political leaders and to Chinese students." But when the Legislative Assembly met again on May 25, after the **backdown** decided upon by Chief Minister Marshall the previous Saturday, the issue had shifted. Instead of a simple issue of law and order, the problem had become confused with the broader problems of Chinese education in Singapore. Talking about the Chinese students, Marshall said, "Our son is as one who is ill. This is not the time for the whip and the knife." He referred to the arousing of "strong racial emotions" by the communists and said, "The task is to win the confidence of our Chinese people-- a people who have had considerable cause for complaint in the past....It is our firm desire to bring to our Chinese people the realization of their great role in the independent Malaya of tomorrow." He proposed that the nine-man all-party committee of the Legislative Assembly, which had been set up to consider the student problem, be authorized to examine the over-all position of Chinese education in Singapore.

June 6: The Chinese Community's Recommendations on Chinese Education

As early as April 25, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, as spokesman for the Chinese community in Singapore, had sent a memorandum to the new government requesting it to grant aid to Chinese schools equal to that given English-language schools. The government was considering the problem before the riots, then the all-party committee set up during the school strikes decided, on May 22, to invite the public to send in their views on the problem of Chinese schools. (When the Legislative Assembly met on May 25, Marshall publicly stated his support of the principle of equal treatment of all schools.) The deadline set by the committee to receive memoranda was June 10. On May 27, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce held a meeting with representatives of the high schools and decided to invite over 1,000 organizations and 300 schools to submit recommendations and send representatives to a joint meeting on Chinese education. In the days that followed, many recommendations flowed into the Chamber. It soon became clear, however, that a group of students and unionists, with Lim Chin-seong and Fong Swee-suan leading them, were trying to determine the decisions of the Chinese community as a whole.

The meeting of representatives of the community was scheduled for June 6. On June 3, the Chamber's special committee of 15 met and drew up a list of seven resolutions which it hoped to have approved. To control the June 6 meeting, it decided that the head of the Chamber would preside and that the meeting would simply vote on the resolutions without discussion. When the June 6 meeting took place as scheduled, representatives of over 500 organizations showed up, but the hall was also carefully packed with students. The first noncontroversial resolutions passed easily. But midway through the meeting, Lim, Fong, and

their young supporters demanded discussion, created disorder, and in effect took over the meeting. In the midst of confusion, the rules forbidding discussion were changed. As a result, resolutions six and seven were voted down. Number seven was the key one: **it** recommended that students should not take part in politics. The performance was a test of strength between the elder, traditional leaders of the Chinese community and the young organized students and unionists. The latter won and determined the memorandum to be sent to the all-party committee in the name of the Chamber of Commerce. On June **11**, after **it** had received the Chamber's memorandum and many others, the all-party committee began its meetings on the problem of Chinese education. These meetings are still continuing in private.

June 6-11: Threat of a General Strike

Throughout May and early June, labor unrest in Singapore steadily grew until **it** reached a point far more serious than at any time since open communist revolt and declaration of an Emergency in June 1948. Many of the labor disputes which arose were legitimate ones. But a trio of PAP men were working hard to take advantage of the situation. Lim Chin-seong, secretary of the Factory and Shop Workers' Union, was the key leader. Working with him were two Indians, S. Woodhull, secretary of the large Naval Base Labor Union, and C. V. Devan Nair, an ex-teacher who had once been jailed under the Emergency Regulations. They decided to use the unsettled Harbor Board Staff Association (HBSA) strike as an excuse to organize a general strike against the government. The situation was momentarily complicated on June 6, when another workers' group, composed of **13** water-front unions, served an ultimatum on the government that they would organize a general strike **if** the HBSA dispute was not solved. Lim and his PAP colleagues went into action. On June 7, nearly 2,000 Factory and Shop Workers' Union members suddenly went on strike at two foreign-owned factories, Hume Industries and Firestone. On the **following** day, Lim called together the leaders of over 20 unions; they decided that they too would serve an ultimatum on the government, threatening a general strike **if** the HBSA dispute continued. (The threat by the water-front unions soon slipped into the background.) On the following day, the TUC, which supports the government, made a countermove: **it** offered to mediate the HBSA dispute.

Events then moved rapidly. The "ultimatum to the Government" from the PAP group was delivered on June **10**. Reports of PAP intimidation of unions to compel them to join the threatened illegal "sympathy **strike**," as well as reports that there was a "strong possibility that organized violence might flare up," reached the government. Marshall concluded that the strike **was** designed "**openly** to coerce the **government**"; he decided to **take** strong action under the Emergency Regulations and to arrest those believed to be fomenting violence. At this point, **Lim** and his colleagues decided to back down; they visited Marshall on the evening of June **11** and agreed to convene a meeting the **following**

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day to call off the general strike. But the machinery to make the arrests was already rolling.

June 12-17: "General Strike"ⁿ

During the night of June 11-12, several groups of police raided the headquarters of the Factory and Shop Workers' Union, and in various places throughout the city they arrested five unionists, the most important of whom was Fong Swee-suan. This, in a sense, was a direct challenge to the PAP labor group. They changed their plans and immediately circulated "whispered orders" for the general strike to begin. The HESA dispute was forgotten; the aim of the strike now was to force the release of the five men (three more were arrested later). June 12 was Sunday, so not many workers were on the job, but the city's entire bus system came to a halt almost immediately. The situation at the Hume and Firestone factories became tense. Union leaders sent representatives all over the city during the day to pressure workers to go along with the strike. The colony's entire police force of 4,500 men was placed on armed "standby." Singapore, remembering May's violence, was gripped with fear. In touring the city, I had the feeling that it was like a room filled with gas; there was little visible sign of anything amiss, except that there were few people on the streets, but one sensed that a spark could cause a major explosion. Gurkha troops from the Federation stood by to the north, ready to move in if an explosion did take place. During the next two days, June 13 and 14, Lim's men got an increasing number of workers to walk out. It was significant that most of them were Chinese in the transport and manufacturing industries. Very few Indians joined the strike. Some Indians in a water-front union stayed on the job even though their Chinese union members walked out. Woodhull's own Naval Base Labor Union refused to join the strike. The TUC opposed the strike. But, still it grew, until roughly 17,000 workers in almost 100 factories or organizations had joined the illegal walkouts.

The explosive tension in the city began to worry even some of PAP's own leaders--those associated with Lee Kuan-yew rather than Lim Chin-seong. They advised caution. Lee himself was out of the city and decided not to return during the strike. By midweek the key test of strength between the government and workers took place. In an attempt to paralyze transportation completely, on June 14 Lim's men forced all the taxis off the streets by intimidation. The government made firm promises to protect them, and by the next day they were operating again. At the same time the government began organizing emergency truck transport for schoolchildren.

Thereafter, the tide began slowly to turn. Small groups of workers decided to go back to work, and the control of Lim's group began to break down. Finally, on the night of June 17, Lim's triumvirate told the workers to suspend the strike for two weeks to see what the government would do with the arrested men.

The government refused to be intimidated, however, by this threat of a renewal of the strike, (It still holds two of the arrested men, including Fong, under the Emergency Regulations, while four have been released and two others have been charged in open court with possession of Malayan Communist Party documents.) The two-week deadline passed without the strike starting again. In short, the strike failed to develop into a real "general strike." The government definitely won a victory, But it is doubtful if Lim and his unionists actually suffered a defeat. The strike showed the strength which they have developed in just a few short months, and it provided an opportunity to widen and improve their organization. Their failure to bring the students into the strike, as they did last May, was undoubtedly based on a decision to avoid violence, in view of the government's strong stand. Some people in the government would have liked a seal showdown, which violence would have caused. Lim and the PAP labor group decided to sidestep it,

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A LULL

Since June 17; there has been a lull in the situation in Singapore. It is an uneasy lull, however, and most of the problems which have been highlighted by events of the past three months are still unresolved. Despite a setback in their attempted general strike, the PAP-union-student forces have not retreated. They continue to organize and prepare for the future. It still looks to many, in fact, as though they are riding the wave of the future.

A few days ago, on June 29, I sat in the Legislative Assembly and watched the proceedings. Everything conformed to the best traditions of British parliamentary government. The speaker, in a traditional wig, enforced strict rules of order. During the proceedings, Chief Minister Marshall got up and made an emotional speech. Looking directly at the PAP representatives sitting opposite him, he charged them with "an open effort to substitute mob government for government by the people's elected representatives." In the front row of the opposition seats, Lee Kuan-yew smiled. Behind him, young Lim Chin-seong sat impassive. Lim looked out of place in the Assembly. He was a good ten years younger than anyone else in the room. He wore rumpled cotton pants and a white shirt with the sleeves carelessly rolled up, while everyone else (except Marshall himself, who wears a bush jacket as a political trade-mark) was dressed conservatively in jackets and ties. Lim paid little attention to the debates and took no part in them; it is possible that he did not understand all the speeches, since his English is probably inferior to that of every other man in the Assembly. Yet this 22-year-old boy, more than anyone else there, represented the powerful political forces that have challenged the authority of the government and undoubtedly will continue

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to do so.

The forces which Lim represents have created an atmosphere of peculiar uneasiness which still pervades Singapore. People wonder when the next violent challenge to law and order will come. Some, including people in high places in the government, believe that it will not be long in coming.

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