

Separation 1965: The Tunku's 'agonised decision'
The Straits Times
August 21, 2015
By Mushahid Ali

Did Singapore ask to leave Malaysia of its own accord or was it forced out against its will?

Fifty years after Singapore's separation from Malaysia, the question is still moot. This review of the events leading to the separation seeks to throw light on the conundrum.

Singapore separated from Malaysia on Aug 9, 1965, by a constitutional fiat that formalised an agreed settlement between the state of Singapore and the federal government.

The act of separation was effected by the Malaysian Parliament adopting an Amendment to the Malaysian Constitution and ratifying an Agreement on Separation signed by the governments of Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. It was put into action by a Proclamation of Independence of Singapore by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew that was read over Radio Singapore.

That agreement was negotiated by leading members of the two governments to bring about an amicable solution to an increasingly bitter and intractable conflict between their ruling parties.

However, it was then Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman who initiated the move to "hive off" Singapore from Malaysia.

As he explained at a press conference after the passage of the Separation Act: "It was my idea that Singapore should leave the federation and be independent. The differences between the state government of Singapore and the central government of Malaysia had become so acrimonious that I decided that it was best that Singapore went its own way. Otherwise, there was no hope for peace."

This confirms that Singapore was forced to leave Malaysia at the Tunku's behest. It was not Singapore that sought to secede or initiated the negotiation to separate from Malaysia, as some scholars seek to argue.

Indeed, in the months leading to its constitutional eviction, Singapore had been warned by Malaysian leaders against seeking secession or a partition of Malaysia between the former states of Malaya and the new states - Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah, as well as Penang.

That partition had been proposed by Singapore as an alternative constitutional arrangement for a looser confederation. The proposal had developed from the call made by political parties grouped in the Malaysian Solidarity Convention for a

"Malaysian Malaysia" that would ensure equality among all the states and ethnic groups in the country.

This dual demand infuriated the ruling Alliance in Malaysia, especially the dominant Umno. Sections of the ruling parties called for strong retaliation against Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP), which they accused of treason for seeking secession. Some "ultra nationalists" called for the arrest of Mr Lee and even imposing direct central rule on Singapore.

As the conflict of words raged and Malay passions were roused, Malaysia's senior leaders feared that violence might break out, leading to racial clashes across the whole country.

Tunku's surgical solution

It was against this deteriorating political situation that the Tunku began to consider a surgical solution to this intractable problem, to cut the Gordian knot, as it were.

The Tunku had left for London in mid-June for a Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference.

I interviewed him on behalf of Radio Television Singapore (RTS) before his departure at the Paya Lebar International Airport, but he declined to say anything about the altercations between Malaysian politicians and Singapore leaders.

In London, the Tunku was hospitalised with shingles and he thought long and hard about the problems with Singapore. His conclusion: "There would be no end to the bickering with Singapore except perhaps if Mr Lee Kuan Yew is made prime minister in the real sense of the word."

Indeed, the Tunku asked Minister Lim Kim San, who had gone to London with him, to tell Mr Lee ("your PM") that "he can attend the next Prime Ministers' Conference on his own".

That was the first indication by the Tunku that he would give Singapore independence, Mr Lim later said, although he missed the implication of the Tunku's cryptic remark at the time.

The Tunku wrote to his deputy, Tun Abdul Razak, telling him how he felt about the relations with Singapore and to talk things over with Mr Lee. Tun Razak met Mr Lee on June 29, but found it impossible to reach any meeting of minds. In Mr Lee's recounting of the meeting in his memoirs *The Singapore Story*, Tun Razak went back on his previous agreement to consider a looser arrangement for Singapore and insisted on total capitulation in political activity, defence, foreign affairs, security and finance.

However, as recounted by Dr Goh Keng Swee, when he met Tun Razak and Dr Ismail (Abdul Rahman), the Home Affairs Minister, in Kuala Lumpur on July 13, Dr Goh proposed that Singapore leave Malaysia to become an independent state. This proposal jived with the Tunku's idea for Singapore to leave the federation.

At a second meeting on July 20, Dr Goh told Tun Razak and Dr Ismail that Mr Lee was in favour of secession of Singapore and it should be done quickly, by Aug 9 when Parliament was to reconvene.

On his return from London on Aug 5, the Tunku was asked by pressmen at the airport, including me, if he would be meeting Mr Lee to discuss the political differences raging between the two sides.

His reply was non-committal, almost nonchalant, saying he would meet Mr Lee if there was anything to discuss. Little did we know that serious talks between Tun Razak, Dr Ismail and Dr Goh were going on in Kuala Lumpur, with Mr Lee in the Cameron Highlands consulted, on the total hiving off of Singapore from Malaysia.

Tun Razak gave a full report to the Tunku on his return home. After Tun Razak and Dr Ismail had negotiated the terms of separation with Dr Goh and Mr E.W. Barker, the Tunku held an emergency meeting of his core Cabinet members on Aug 6, and approved the draft Bills to amend the Constitution and get Singapore to withdraw from the federation.

On Aug 7, the Tunku said, the "big shots" of the PAP (meaning Mr Lee), called at his residency and signed the Separation Agreement, while other members of the Singapore Cabinet signed it in Singapore or at Singapore House in KL.

Even at the last minute, Mr Lee asked the Tunku if he really wanted to break up Malaysia, which they had spent years to bring about. Would it not be wiser to go back to their original plan for a looser federation or confederation?

But the Tunku demurred. "There is no other way out. I have made up my mind. You go your way and we go our own way," Mr Lee recalled him saying.

Secrecy had to be of the essence on both sides of the Causeway for fear of opponents of the separation reacting with violence to the agreement.

Special Parliament session

The first inkling we in RTS had that something was happening was the departure of several ministers from Singapore to KL on Aug 7. I was instructed to fly to KL on Aug 8 to cover the special session of Parliament on Aug 9, a Monday.

I was joined in KL by fellow reporters Lim Kit Siang and Fuad Salim. In Parliament, we found only Mr Devan Nair, PAP MP for Bungsar, present. Some of the Singapore MPs were at Singapore House. Mr Nair and I listened to the Tunku's speech moving

the Separation of Singapore Bill on a certificate of urgency, via the in-house sound system in his office.

When the session was adjourned, we learnt the Bill had been passed without opposition, although Umno Secretary-General Syed Jaafar Albar had left the chamber before the vote and expressed his disagreement with the separation. He, like the other ultras, wanted to maintain Malay rule over Singapore, forcibly if need be.

When Separation was announced by the Tunku over Radio Television Malaya and the Proclamation of Singapore's Independence read over Radio Singapore at 10am, Singaporeans received the news with a mixture of relief, regret and foreboding, although some quarters in Chinatown let off firecrackers in celebration.

And when Mr Lee went on Radio Television Singapore to explain the circumstances leading to the separation, it was clear that he had been forced to accept Singapore's eviction from Malaysia.

It was, he said, a moment of anguish for him, having devoted his whole life to bringing about a united Malaysia, whose people were bound by ties of kinship, geography and history.

He and Dr Goh had negotiated the terms of Separation to ensure that Singapore would be truly independent while continuing to have access to the water supply from Johor for its survival.

And Singapore would be on its own for all its multiracial population, living in peaceful amity with the rest of Malaysia. Thus did Singapore achieve independence while avoiding a forcible integration in a Malaysia riven by interracial tension and hostility from a communal political system.

That is the "coup" that Mr Lee and his PAP colleagues carried out for the people of Singapore, to achieve an independent and sovereign Singapore.

However, it was the Tunku who played the decisive role in this saga.

It was his agonised decision to let Singapore go that tipped the scales in favour of separation. Otherwise, the fracas between the state and central governments could well have become more intense and impossible to resolve, with no way out but an inevitable forceful denouement, that is, the arrest of Mr Lee and his senior lieutenants and the imposition of direct federal rule by the central government on Singapore.

The Tunku was magnanimous in telling Mr Lee to leave Malaysia. If there is one person that Singapore should thank for its independence, it is Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the first prime minister of Malaysia.

•The writer, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, was a reporter with Radio Television Singapore from 1963 to 1966 and later with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1970 to 2001.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on August 21, 2015, with the headline 'Separation 1965: The Tunku's 'agonised decision''.

SPH Digital News / Copyright © 2015 Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Co. Regn. No. 198402868E. All rights reserved | Terms & Conditions | Data Protection Policy

Source: <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/separation-1965-the-tunkus-agonised-decision>