

# Tunku Abdul Rahman Spills The Beans On The Dissolution Of Malaysia and Singapore

## What caused the history-changing rift?

BY [Abdullah Ahmad](#) | Esquire Singapore - Aug 7, 2017 | [Culture](#)

The land was swept through by the north-easterly and south-westerly winds and the myriad peoples who had set sail by them. By the time resource-rich Malaya won independence from the British in 1957, the country was a federation of nine Malay kingdoms with a 51 percent non-Malay multiracial population, many of whom were foreign workers turned citizens, imported to keep the colonial economy humming.

Taken on their own, these are not unusual facts of history. What is, is that the British were talked into giving up a Crown colony by a man of Siamese-Malay lineage. Some foreign correspondents, incredulous at the lack of violence, predicted Malaya would go down in flames. Tunku Abdul Rahman—the Tunku, the man who led negotiations for Malayan Merdeka—declared himself, “the happiest Prime Minister in the world, leading the happiest people in the world”. Gracious, popular and charming, the former playboy aristocrat had pulled it off: the postcolonial experiment, Malaya, was a success story for the world.

The Tunku would lead his country to defeat a communist insurgency, face down big neighbours Indonesia and the Philippines, and enlarge Malaya to include Singapore and the vast former colonial states of British Borneo, Sabah and Sarawak. Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak formed the Federation of Malaysia on September 16, 1963.

But Singapore split from Malaysia on August 9, 1965, after mounting racial tensions between the Alliance party led by the Tunku and the People’s Action Party of Lee Kuan Yew following a contentious general election in April the previous year, and two riots in Singapore in July and September. The repercussions did not end there; the withdrawal of Singapore had left Malaysia with a demographic majority of Malays on the peninsula, and Singapore with a strong Chinese one. Each became the other’s bogeyman.

The bloody race riots of May 13, 1969—a palace coup gone awry?—erupted in Kuala Lumpur and forced the Tunku from power. Among its *dramatis personae* was Abdullah Ahmad, long-time aide and political secretary to the Tunku’s successor, Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussain. (Two others, the “ultra” Malays Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Musa Hitam, became Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981.) And yet the Tunku granted Abdullah Ahmad privileged access to him between 1982 and 1984, the honeymoon years of the vaunted Mahathir-Musa administration.

That period was to prove the prelude to Malaysia’s political climate change. In a series of free-flowing, frank and surprisingly revealing conversations, taped but never before published, the Tunku takes on the challenge of being interrogated by Abdullah Ahmad on the episodes in Malaysia, Singapore and the region that continue to form the tropes of much of our daily lives

and political beliefs. The tapes on which *Conversations with Tunku Abdul Rahman* is based can be heard at the Malaysian National Archives.

Presented as when it was first written in 1986, this edited excerpt provides insight into how the Tunku dealt with Lee Kuan Yew, the formation of Malaysia and the eviction of Singapore from the Federation.—Jason Tan

### **The scene**

Japan's swift conquest of Malaya<sup>(1)</sup> and the fall of "fortress" Singapore during the Second World War in 1942 just as quickly destroyed the myth of the white man's superiority that the British had so carefully cultivated among Malaysians, especially the Malays. The Japanese had awakened the Malays, saying they were liberating them from the British. The effect was to hasten Malay political maturity and stimulate nascent, potent Malay nationalism.<sup>(2)</sup>

Following the Japanese Occupation, the majority of Chinese in Malaya, whether English or Chinese-educated, continued to identify themselves as Chinese, except perhaps for the Baba and Nyonya—the Straits-born Chinese also known as Peranakan<sup>(3)</sup> who have more or less assimilated. As one Baba put it, "The Baba are Chinese in spirit and tradition, but Malay in form."<sup>(4)</sup>

Like the Chinese, the Indians, Pakistanis, Ceylonese and Bangladeshis also continued to identify themselves by their countries of origin. The Eurasians, with a veneer of Western culture and norms, either conformed to them and remained in Malaya, or migrated to countries that would accept them. However, a very small number of people from across all the races (including a few Malays) had begun to consider themselves Malayan first and foremost. The attitude of the Malays towards the immigrant races was at first one of indifference, and they were frequently amused by the festivals and customs of the Chinese and Indians. But by 1931, the Malays had found out that they were already a minority race in their own land,<sup>(5)</sup> and were no longer amused. They became even more alarmed as the Chinese and Indians began to identify more openly with the causes of the Chinese Fatherland and Mother India. As a result of Malay pressure, the British reluctantly stopped the indiscriminate mass immigration of non-Malays in 1933. However, incalculable damage to communal relations had by then been perpetrated by the British; the effects of their exploitative policy of importing foreign workers to drive the colonial economy continue to evolve in Malaysian politics until today. Even Purcell, the pro-Chinese scholar, agrees.<sup>(6)</sup>

The British managed to govern this default multiracial gathering of peoples—who were still feeling the political winds blowing in from their homelands—by using a system of divide and rule.

The Japanese borrowed from the British playbook. They told the Malays they were liberating them from the British, the Chinese that they were saving them from the communists, and the Indians that they were helping India win independence from the British.

"The Japanese," said Wang Gungwu, "like the British, played one race against the other... in fact, pan-Malay nationalism received only qualified support, and Indian nationalism was only nominally glorified, while the Chinese were isolated as the potential enemies of everyone else.

Within the Chinese community, the Japanese were also able to divide the ‘collaborators’ from the sullen majority.”(7)

This was British Malaya during the post-Japanese interregnum before Merdeka. It was also the scenario post-independence. In fact, to some extent, this uneasy harmony among the races (or racial polarisation, to use the current idiom) has remained an obstacle to nation-building and the inculcation of a feeling of oneness. Such is the indelible impact of the political imprint as a result of British machinations; they fostered racial compartmentalisation, and the people, awed by British power, let them flourish in their ways. It was the British who first sowed the seeds of the Malay-Chinese divide.

They favoured the Malays in government and pandered to the Chinese in economic matters.

Nationalism grew strong in Indonesia, India, China, Indochina, Burma and the Philippines before the Second World War, after which it gathered a rolling momentum, but reached Malaya more slowly. Mainly, this was because the races were sharply divided, and the Malays considered the non-Malays *orang asing* or aliens. They shared no similarities apart from the fact that they all lived in Malaya under the British colonial administration.

In 1946, keenly aware of the changed demographics and newly inchoate nature of the Malayan populace they had created, the British dashed back into Malaya after the Japanese Occupation to force upon the unnerved and bewildered Malays the Malayan Union.(8) In the words of the so-called pro-Malay scholar and administrator, Sir Richard Winstedt, the Malayan Union would transform Malaya from an aggregation of “protectorates into a protectorate.” In plain English, it merely meant that the Malay States had been turned into a single British colony ruled by the British governor, not the sultans.

Thanks to their mutual treaties, the Malays had thought of the British as friends and protectors, thus the Malayan Union came with the shock of a cold shower. It was a naked attempt to destroy the legitimacy of the Malays in their own country, and they reacted with speed, courage and wisdom the British did not foresee. The Malayan Union was replaced with the Federation of Malaya in 1948, which restored Malay rights while making generous allowances for the Chinese, Indians, Ceylonese and Pakistanis who wanted to make Malaya their home and give it their undivided loyalty as citizens. As much as the Malayan Union had opened wide the eyes of the Malays, it had also given the non-Malays a glimpse of emancipation. As Wang Gungwu writes:

The Malayan Union created for the first time for Indian and Chinese nationalists who had all been working for causes in India and China, the possibilities of local Malayan politics. And for the partially westernised leaders of both communities, the short period of the Union was like a door to full political participation which was for a fleeting moment opened and shut again.(9)

Less than six months after the Federation of Malaya was established in 1948, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP),(10) which remained Chinese-led, based, supported and financed, staged a revolt against the British, who immediately declared a state of emergency that would last for twelve years. The “Emergency”(11) was a euphemism for the war against the communist

guerrillas. Like the Indonesian Confrontation fifteen years later, it brought the country unprecedented worldwide media attention. The end of these traumatic episodes of being attacked from within and without was exhilarating.

Their experience of the Japanese Occupation and disillusionment with the British forced the gentle Malays to become political animals of a kind with their backs to the wall. Before the Malayan Union, the Malays were neither political animals nor economic men but merely impoverished “nature’s gentlemen” subject to British political manipulation. The British built the myth that the Malays were indolent and not acquisitive. Of course, it was heresy that the Malays scoffed at the idea of being wealthy, and it still is.

Although disenchanted with the British, the Malays were unlike other newly independent peoples in Africa and Asia in that they remained friendly with their former metropolitan power(12) and exploiter. How could they not, when they had needed help to fight the communist rebellion, the Indonesian Confrontation and the Philippines’ claim to Sabah. The presence of British and Commonwealth troops was the best possible insurance for newly born Malaysia’s stable existence and, more importantly, its continued independence and sovereignty.(13) The Malays made no effort to take pointless vengeance against the British by squeezing them out of the country or nationalising their huge investments(14) in plantations, tin mines, land, banking, insurance, shipping and manufacturing.

On the contrary, British and Commonwealth officers commanded the Malaysian Armed Forces and the police until after the mid-1960s. A number of British civil servants held key positions, especially in Sarawak and Sabah. Despite the formation of Malaysia, the British continued to have large, if reducing, investments in banking, oil, insurance, manufacturing, plantations, mining and other economic activities, repatriating hundreds of thousands of pounds in profit yearly.

Indeed, many Britons felt they were much better off under the Tunku than when they were running the country themselves. But they did not reciprocate Malay political kindness,(15) leaving the Malays disappointed but, as is their wont, not bitter. Such is the potted history of the British in Malaysia and their relationship with the Malays.

The Chinese and Indians were happy under British rule, when they prospered and grew. They outstripped the Malays economically, educationally and socially. In spite of this, the Chinese staged a revolt against the British when the latter yielded to Malay demands to abandon the Malayan Union. The British had apparently secretly pledged to the Chinese to form the Malayan Union as a reward for their support in the guerrilla war against the Japanese. It seemed the British had wanted to punish the Malays for what they saw as their “collaboration” with the Japanese. Winstedt commented disapprovingly:

“But instead of showing consideration for an unnerved people, Whitehall dashed into the recovered Malaya as Mr Birch dashed into Perak in 1874, as if it were an Augean stable instead of a country that for a half a century had been a model for the smooth administration of mixed races. The attempt to cleanse it was made in haste and with a measure of ignorant prejudice.”

Whitehall felt, quite groundlessly, that with the example of Belgium, Holland, Denmark and Norway before it, a strong central government might have done more than a patchwork federation to halt the Japanese conquest. The new deed aimed, therefore, at bureaucratic efficiency, ignoring Malay sentiment altogether and tending to favour the Chinese, who still, except for the communists, respected the ancient sage Shun as a mirror of a good administrator and who did nothing but govern well.(16) And underlying the Malayan Union proposal was a mistaken notion that the Malays, disappointed at Britain's failure to protect them, had helped the invader.

In the '80s, Malaysia and Britain have changed course internationally, but tens of thousands of Malaysians visit Britain annually for holidays, and 20,000 young Malaysians are studying at British universities and places of higher learning, including several hundred in British public schools. Many Malaysians have second homes in London. When Dr Mahathir became the country's fourth Prime Minister in 1981, he was the first who was not a product of a British university or an inns of court.(17) Like his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Ali, he attended the British-run University of Malaya in Singapore, and graduated with a medical degree.

Anglo-Malaysian relations were at their worst in a century during the first two years of Dr Mahathir's leadership. He resented, with justification, the fact that the British took Malaysia and the Malays for granted,(18) even after 25 years of independence. The British admitted their error, and in the spring of 1983, Dr Mahathir and Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, met in London over dinner, symbolising an end to estranged Anglo-Malaysian relations. In the spring of 1985, Thatcher visited Malaysia. The British and the Malays agreed it was time to begin the relations anew.(19) It is pleasant to be able to praise and to welcome this friendship between Malaysia and Britain. The Malays had once respected and even felt affection for the British.(20)

If other Malays have changed their attitude towards the British as a result of the changing times, the Tunku, the Malay Anglophile, recalled Anglo-Malaysian connections with fondness.(21) In the following excerpts, he tells me what he felt about the British, whom he defended and tricked, and stoutly denied that they had pressured him to take Lee Kuan Yew and his PAP (People's Action Party) into the Malaysian central government in 1964 and 1965. He says it was Lee who had begged for Singapore to be admitted into Malaysia.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Some scholars and researchers have said Malaysia was not your idea—it was planted in you by the British. Is this true?

**The Tunku:** It is completely untrue. The British had wanted to federate Brunei, Sarawak and Sabah, but the Sultan of Brunei rejected the British idea. He wanted a federation with us, though in the end, Brunei, as you know, did not join us. Even if the idea was British, it would not have become a reality if I had not implemented it. The suggestion is malicious and untrue. They, of course, cooperated with us to make Malaysia a success.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Why did you give Carcosa(22) as a gift to the British Government in 1957?

**The Tunku:** The simple reason is that I was grateful to the British for what they did for us, because we were in a fix. When we got our independence, they could have easily walked out on us... but instead they stayed on and provided all the help in our war against communist terrorism. The loyalty of the people of Malaya then was not undivided...

I could have said “get out”, like some of those countries that became independent. In our case, we worked our independence in such a way that we wanted to make sure it would provide us security and benefit; there was no point in Merdeka if we were going to be starved, have economic depression and what not—revolution and insurrection.

So that was why I asked the British to stay on. I told them if they gave us independence, I would like to keep some of the British personnel—civil servants, the technical and military people and the specialists—behind, to help us to run the country. The Malaysians could run the administration but I needed help in other fields. The British were kind enough to stay for a period of time, three years, I think. If only our people today were a little bit grateful, they might recall what we learnt and gained from the British by way of education. They made us conscious of education, or rather, our lack of it...

**Dato’ Abdullah Ahmad:** But the British also benefited enormously from being in our country. Don’t you think so? It would be fairer to say it was a two-way process! Some people would even say we were the losers.

**The Tunku:** Yes, yes. They had been good to us, you know. They helped us during the Indonesian Confrontation and against the Philippines claim to Sabah. At one time we had much trouble on our hands, and the British were with us.

**Dato’ Abdullah Ahmad:** That was because they were obligated to do so under the Anglo-Malayan Defence Treaty Agreement, was it not?

**The Tunku:** Yes, and they gave us Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore and so many other things in 1963. The British could have given Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak independence, but they did not. Instead, they handed them to us. So all this should have been taken into consideration before we talk loosely. *Hutang mas boleh di-bayar, hutang budi di-bawa mati.*(23) What the saying says is true. Budi (gratitude) is the core of the Malay character. If a Malay threw that away, he would be very weak; they are weak already in this respect.

**Dato’ Abdullah Ahmad:** Tunku, I would like to ask you about Singapore and the British. As I informed you in Sarawak when we met there during the Merdeka celebrations in 1983, Sir Douglas-Home, now Lord Douglas-Home, had agreed to see me in October. I would like to ask you because at least one book has stated that Douglas-Home tried to pressure you, following the Singapore riots in 1964, to take Lee Kuan Yew and PAP into the central government. You were in London then. Perhaps that fuelled the speculation because you did meet Douglas-Home, and Lee Kuan Yew rushed up to Kuala Lumpur upon your return. I would like to know whether what the book said was true, and if it was, what was your reply?

**The Tunku:** No, he did not do anything like that because the British felt that Singapore could deal with the riots or any situation like that themselves. Singapore is small. People are concentrated in one city. It is not difficult to deal with troublemakers there. No, Sir Alec did not say anything; didn't try to persuade, much less pressure me to do what the book claimed he did. But one thing, of course: the British idea as well as mine, was that on independence in 1957, we should remain good friends, and we were good friends. Well, they had a very good friend in Malaya. We had been working closely with them and they thought if they had to decolonise Brunei, Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore, they wanted the independence of those territories to be achieved through Malaysia so that the friendship of those territories could be sustained and they would, like Malaya, be their true friends.

Neither Sir Alec nor anybody else tried to persuade me at any time to take over Singapore or to invite Lee Kuan Yew into the central government.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Sorry, Tunku, not to take over Singapore. Rather, did Sir Alec try to make you take Lee Kuan Yew and PAP into the central government?

**The Tunku:** No, he did not.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** But Noordin Sopiee said he did. He wrote as much in this book, *Malayan Union to Singapore Separation*, and he said he interviewed you. Don't you recall it?

**The Tunku:** No, he did not interview me. That was the whole trouble with some people.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Think, please! This is important, Tunku. Are you sure that Douglas-Home never tried to persuade or even hint to you that you should take Lee Kuan Yew into the central government in 1964–65?

**The Tunku:** No.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Did Douglas-Home or any member of his Cabinet, Duncan Sandys or Thorneycroft (Peter Thorneycroft, British Secretary of Defence), try to persuade you, either following appeals from Singapore, merely acting on their own, or as a result of Singapore British lobbying in London, to take Lee Kuan Yew into the central government—to put him under your wing?

**The Tunku:** Nothing like that. The British, say what you like about them, are very correct people. What actually happened was that Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues themselves made this request to me. It had nothing to do with the British. The trouble came about when Lee Kuan Yew asked me if we and the PAP could form a national coalition government so that we could jointly tackle the racial problems. I refused because there was no point; we (the Alliance Party) were strong, with more than enough majority in parliament. Lee Kuan Yew seemed to have forgotten that the Alliance itself was a coalition. I didn't want to enlarge the coalition because there was no need to do so.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Sorry, Tunku, for the umpteenth time. Did Douglas-Home not try to persuade you to take Lee Kuan Yew under your wing?

**The Tunku:** No.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** But Noordin Sopiee said that he did!

**The Tunku:** No, he did not. It was Lee Kuan Yew who wanted it, not Douglas-Home. Yes, he wanted it badly, but I refused to let him in. On one occasion, Kuan Yew came up to Cameron Highlands with me. But I still said no to him.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** So it was Lee Kuan Yew's idea, not British pressure?

**The Tunku:** Yes, it was Kuan Yew's idea. I didn't want him in the Alliance or in the coalition. I told him if he wanted to stay on, he could stay in parliament as a friend of the Alliance but I could not take him into the government. The first reason was that we ourselves were a coalition, the Alliance; the second reason was that he wanted to continue calling himself Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. There just cannot be two Prime Ministers in one nation. That was why I said he could not join the coalition.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Would you have accepted him into the Alliance or PAP as a coalition partner, if he had agreed to call himself Chief Minister instead of Prime Minister? Or if Singapore had agreed to be a state in the federation, like Penang or Malacca?

**The Tunku:** Yes. But that was up to him. But he and I couldn't be Prime Ministers simultaneously. As I said, there couldn't be two Prime Ministers in a nation. That was impossible.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** But Lee Kuan Yew persevered, didn't he? Not the British?

**The Tunku:** The British, I am saying this for the umpteenth time to you, had nothing to do with Lee Kuan Yew's efforts to join us in the central government. One thing you have got to give them credit for: they never interfered. No, the British did not try to pressure me. At one time, I tell you, when we had financial discussions over the pound sterling matter, exchange rates and so on, the British insisted on the value of our dollar to be at two shillings, three dimes. I said no to them. We had to look at the way things went. We could not fix the rate of exchange. Let it float. And Tan Siew Sin (Malaysia's Minister of Finance) came to see me and said that the British did not want to give in. I said, all right, we would get out of the sterling area. So he went and told them that I said we would get out of the sterling area. The British backed down. They had to agree with me. They never tried to pressure us to do anything, really.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Lee Kuan Yew is on record as saying that he lobbied Lord Mountbatten, Harold Wilson (leader of the UK Labour Party), Duncan Sandys (the Commonwealth Secretary), Peter Thorneycroft and Arthur Bottomley (Shadow Commonwealth Secretary) to put pressure on you or, if you like, to talk to you on his behalf. Did any of these people talk to you or not?

**The Tunku:** None of them talked to me. They knew I would not have agreed. I was the Prime Minister of an independent country.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** But he tried. Well, he said so anyway.

**The Tunku:** Well, he might have tried with them, but no one spoke to me.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** I think these people were wise; they listened to him and said they would do something about it but did nothing. How some people thought you would succumb to such pressures baffles me.

**The Tunku:** They did nothing.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Did the British government ever make any attempt to stop you from evicting Singapore from Malaysia in 1965?

**The Tunku:** They never interfered. The British are gentlemen. They might not have been nice people when they were our colonial masters,(24) but when we became independent, they were on terms of friendship with us. They were real gentlemen.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** But Lord Head (British High Commissioner in Malaysia) did try, didn't he? Well, I recall he gate-crashed your party at Lee Yan Lian's penthouse on Jalan Tun Perak with a personal message from Harold Wilson pleading for you to postpone the separation for a day so that Wilson could talk with you. Tun Razak and other senior ministers were there, and I was there too. Of course, you remember it, Tunku, don't you?

**The Tunku:** The British wanted to know why we were splitting. We, of course, never told them we were going to separate Singapore from Malaysia. I was a bit naughty then; I never told them. I just decided about the separation while playing golf with Goh Keng Swee (Singapore Finance Minister) at the Royal Selangor Golf Club. I told Keng Swee, "I don't want any more trouble. If you want independence and Kuan Yew wants it, take it. I want no fuss; I want no terms, just take it."

And then when I decided on the day, and only on that day, the news leaked out and Lord Head was trying to get hold of me. He wanted to find out about the news. I went to hide myself at Lee Yan Lian's penthouse and there was a party organised in my honour to celebrate the separation of Singapore the next morning. When he found out where I was, he came about midnight, I can't remember exactly, it could have been even one or two o'clock in the morning. There was a party going on there and I slipped away, ran away from him. I did not want to see him because I didn't want to talk about it.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Why did you keep it a secret from the British? Were you afraid the British might try to do something to stop it?

**The Tunku:** Yes. They might have objected because, I must confess to you, I did promise them that when Singapore joined us, we would hold on to Singapore, to keep it from the communists,

that we would look after the well-being of Singapore. So they gave us Singapore on that understanding. When I asked Singapore to leave us without informing the British, I felt that I had been rather disloyal to them. But I had no choice. Lee Kuan Yew gave me no choice. He broke his promise to me.

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Lee Kuan Yew, according to the Tunku, worked hard to help form Malaysia, but alas, worked harder to break it. He was an impatient man in a great hurry to be the leader of Malaysia, conveniently forgetting that none could become the leader of the country without the goodwill and support of the Malays. There was no way the Malays would have supported him then. Three months before the separation, Lee Kuan Yew formed the Malaysian Solidarity Convention comprising all non-Malay opposition political parties, the aim of which was to win the next election and form the central government (presumably without Malay participation) whose policy was to make all citizens equal. It was impossible for the Malaysian Solidarity Convention to win enough seats in parliament to form the government without Malay support. He nevertheless wanted to try. As a result, he enraged the Malays. The Tunku was never stronger and more popular among the majority of UMNO members for a long time than when he decided to evict Singapore, which caused no anguish for most Malays. But I was unhappy about the separation because I had rejoiced at the reunification of Singapore and Malaya on September 16, 1963. I was at the Istana in Singapore that evening to celebrate the occasion. But I still remember that evening, the happy but alien faces at the reception, unlike at similar receptions being held simultaneously in Kuala Lumpur, Kuching, Jesselton (Kota Kinabalu) and other state capitals. There appeared a certain shine about them and yet, at the same time, a certain unhappiness.

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**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Tunku, was the decision to separate Singapore entirely yours?

**The Tunku:** Yes, entirely mine and if there is any blame, I accept it. But in my mind, deep in my heart, that was the correct policy. Otherwise the Chinese would dominate our country, completely dominate this country of ours with their population of two million more than the Malays.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** When you were in hospital in England with shingles, Tun Razak wrote you a letter telling you that things were getting worse at home; that the Malays were getting impatient with Lee Kuan Yew and the latter was mocking the Malays. You replied to him, and he read part of it to me. You said, "Lee Kuan Yew is the devil incarnate." You also said something had to be done quickly about Singapore. Now, you yourself say it was your decision and Tun Razak also told me that you indeed wanted Singapore to be separated.

**The Tunku:** You can ask Ismail Ali (former Governor of Bank Negara, the central bank, and baron of the Malayan economy). Many years ago, when I was in London studying law, I wrote a little article in which I said, "In the end, if Malaya becomes independent, it has got to be separated. We can't have it as one country because the Chinese would be predominant and would be in a very much stronger position than the Malays. And so there was no choice; like a bad leg, it had to be amputated." I did not mention Singapore or any state. That was long before I was even thinking of getting into politics. I gave Ismail Ali a copy of the article to read. I've lost mine. You can ask him. But that was many years ago.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Of course, Tunku, I am convinced by what you say. There's no doubt about you wanting Singapore out of Malaysia. However, a lot of people who disliked Tun Razak said that he planned the separation of Singapore because he was so scared of Lee Kuan Yew and the idea of a "Malaysian Malaysia"; that he might not succeed you. There was no truth in this, was there?

**The Tunku:** No. Political power was still with the Malays at that stage. The principal voters were the Malay voters. You wouldn't think Malays would support Lee Kuan Yew instead of Tun Razak. Impossible.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** But Tun Razak was not a fighter like you. Lee Kuan Yew and I used to say that the Chinese appeared to favour a certain Malay (Khair Johari), though not him (Tun Razak). We were not worried because we knew the Chinese were a pragmatic people.

**The Tunku:** But he could fight in his own cunning way.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Was he cunning?

**The Tunku:** He had his way of doing things. I am just open, straightforward. I never say things or do things which I don't believe in. Sometimes, too open. Everybody knows almost everything I have in mind.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Not quite, Tunku. There were things with which you surprised people. Did you ever consider arresting Lee Kuan Yew? This was the impression Singapore liked to give to the foreigners; not of you personally, but your government.

**The Tunku:** Quite true; that part is true, about surprising people. No, I never considered arresting Lee Kuan Yew. There was no point in doing so. Instead, I gave him independence when he wanted so much to be called Prime Minister. You know fully well no one country can have two Prime Ministers. But I allowed it for two years because I never intended to keep Singapore anyway.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Did you ever consider making him an ambassador to the United Nations or making him our Foreign Minister before the separation? There were lots of rumours flying around then, of course. Not altogether surprising, because some people were indeed badly informed.

**The Tunku:** No, it was not true. I never offered him either the ambassadorship or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. How could I? He might have entertained the idea, I don't know. But it never crossed my mind to even send him to the United Nations, let alone make him a minister. He was in the opposition, though he was pro-Malaysia.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** This was the propaganda Lee Kuan Yew's men, admirers and minions created. But the arrest—was it true or not?

**The Tunku:** They made up all these stories. I never wanted to arrest him. I mentioned in my column (in *The Star* newspaper) and speeches that if I wanted to arrest him, nothing would save him. If I had wanted to suspend the Singapore Constitution, I could have done so but I didn't want to do that either. I told him to get out.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Another thing, Tunku. Some people said that Lee Kuan Yew, like you, had all along planned first to get into Malaysia and then do something such that you would have to kick him out, so that Singapore could become independent and he the Prime Minister of a separate nation. He did not think that the British would have given him Singapore independence on its own. What do you think of this?

**The Tunku:** True, the British would not give him independence. I gave him independence. When I gave him independence, there was nothing to stop Singapore's asking to rejoin Malaysia. Somebody else different from Kuan Yew might one day do just that, but it is up to the government of Malaysia whether to accept Singapore or not. If you accept Singapore, the one danger will always be present, that the Chinese will dominate the nation with a surplus population of two million, and later on three million or even four million.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** And aggressive (and industrious), too.

**The Tunku:** Yes.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Singapore was in a dilemma then. If it did not join Malaysia, the British would not give it independence and the people there wanted independence. Tunku, what is your view of Singapore after the separation?

**The Tunku:** I think Singapore is working all right now. We say nothing against Kuan Yew, and Kuan Yew says nothing about us. But, before, he talked about Malaysian Malaysia. It was a very dangerous statement to make; it was a very provoking statement to make because it tended to break racial harmony and antagonise one race against the other. The Chinese, after listening to what Lee Kuan Yew had been saying about Malaysian Malaysia, felt they should have equal rights with the Malays. What equal rights can there be? Because they had all rights; we had nothing at all. And what we had, Kuan Yew wanted to share; what he had, he wanted to keep. So how can there be equal rights? So that was why I said to him, "It is better that you go your way."

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** You wanted Singapore in Malaysia. I think, to me, it was a smart move on your part.

**The Tunku:** In actual fact, I wanted only Sarawak and North Borneo (now Sabah) at the time. But the British made a condition that if I wanted Sarawak and North Borneo, I must also have Singapore as well, because we would be the influence that could keep Singapore from the communist menace. I said that that was all right; if that was their condition, I would take Singapore in.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** So your speech about your fear of Singapore becoming a Southeast Asian "Cuba" was merely an excuse, wasn't it?

**The Tunku:** Yes.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Over the years, have you regretted evicting Singapore?

**The Tunku:** No, far from it. That was what I had in mind all the time. I don't know whether you remember about the "envelope agreement". We were having a celebration after signing the Malaysia Agreement at the Ritz in Piccadilly and Kuan Yew took an envelope, wrote something, and asked me to initial it. I initialled; I didn't even read what he had written on it. (See Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story*, Singapore, 1998, pp. 481–483, where a photo of the "envelope agreement" is reproduced.)

So when Ghazali Shafie (Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) came to me and said, "*Tunku, apa ta' bacha, apa ta' bacha dahulu, Tunku sign itu?*" ("Tunku, why didn't you read it before signing it?") I said, "*Saya ta' peduli-lah, pasai saya mau dia.*" ("I didn't read it because we needed him as part of the agreement.") It was so necessary for us to have him before we could have the other two states in Borneo. So I agreed to what he wanted. Why waste time with him? I wanted to get on with the party. Anyway, I didn't intend to keep Singapore all the time.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** In spite of what Lee Kuan Yew said, that Singapore is no pushover?

**The Tunku:** Yes. Kuan Yew talked nonsense! They would not get their independence without Malaysia.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** That was it. Joined Malaysia, created trouble, and finally wrecked it.

**The Tunku:** But the British could have gone the other way; joined Singapore with Sarawak and Sabah. I was grateful to them that they didn't. They respected my wishes.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Why did you not entertain Lee Kuan Yew's plea for a looser federation instead of separation?

**The Tunku:** If I had agreed to what he wanted, he would be a good boy for a while. Then he would go back to his old ways of trying to create ill will between the Malays and the Chinese through the Malaysian Malaysia campaign. I thought for a long time, you know, and I was in close touch with Razak, that the best way was to go on our separate ways but remain good friends. I simply could no longer work with nor trust Lee Kuan Yew.

**Dato' Abdullah Ahmad:** Well, Tunku, thank you very much for your courtesy and hospitality.

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