



**LIM DEFYING
KIT THE ODDS
SIANG**

5092

OOI KEE BENG

I call on all Malaysians to unite on the basis of a common Malaysian nationalism, and not on the basis of race, to join forces to make democracy work.

The DAP wants all political parties and individuals to dedicate themselves to work with the parliamentary democratic process and renounce force and violence as a means of political struggle, to be one of the fundamental principles of the Rukun Negara.

*Speech by Lim Kit Siang,
Penang, November 22, 1970*

Lim Kit Siang was born in February 1941. He became the organizing secretary of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in 1966 at the age of 25. In 1969, he was elected Member of Parliament for Kota Melaka and promoted to Secretary-General of the DAP. He was arrested and detained under the Internal Security Act twice, in 1969 and 1987. He has been Member of Parliament and State Assemblyman for various seats and at various times in his long political career. In 2013, he contested and won in the parliamentary seat of Gelang Patah in Johor, his home state.

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PUSTAKA PERDANA



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*This book is lovingly dedicated
to a great fan
of Lim Kit Siang,
my mother Choo Lay Choon,
from whom I learned more
than she will ever know.*





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Introduction

No one in Malaysia deserves the title of Mr. Opposition as much as Lim Kit Siang. Being jailed twice without trial under the country's colonial-style Internal Security Act merely strengthened his resolve to steer Malaysia towards official acceptance of its population's cultural diversity and religious plurality.

Since entering politics in the mid-1960s, he has been a permanent fixture in the public mind, railing against abuse of power and standing up to the powerful. But throughout his existence as the eternal opposition, he stayed loyal to the ideal of parliamentarianism, even when parliament cut its own tongue—to use his imagery—in 1971 as the price for being allowed to continue existing. Following deadly ethnic riots in the streets of Kuala Lumpur in 1969, parliament was suspended and democracy declared dead. Revived 22 months later, it was not allowed, through constitutional amendments, to debate certain sensitive issues.

Unlike many left-leaning politicians of that period, Kit did not lose his belief in parliamentarianism and democratic elections as the necessary pillars of the modern state. Against the odds, he survived endless battles and remains till this day the nail in the eye of the powerful, of those who refuse to adhere to principles of open debate, and who consider power a God-given right.

He participated at the forefront of all elections in Malaysia held since 1969, strategizing and surviving, triumphing and failing, but always in the thick of things. Malaysian elections seem to follow a certain pattern. A good election for the federal government is practically always followed by a bad one. This seemed to change in the 21st century. The landslide of 2004 won by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi was followed by the catastrophe he suffered in 2008, which led to his retirement in 2009. However, his successor Najib Razak failed to change the trend in 2013.

The break in this trend is seen by many to signal the rise of a new society, one where the majority Malays are urban, one where social media and the Internet have broken the monopoly on information flow that the government had always had, and one where governments can be changed if the people so will it.

The story of Malaysia cannot be told separately from the biography of Lim Kit Siang. He was born of very humble parents in very humble circumstances, and could not as a child boast of having social capital, to use a modern overused term. He rose from that, not so much in station as in reputation. He may remain an opposition politician to this day, but in reputation, he rises above most others in a country where draconian laws are used freely.

What he has is personal will—will nurtured by a belief in the right of all individuals to live a dignified life. Unable to stand bullies, he suffered—and his family with him—the powerful hand of the ethnocentric state, which over time got heavier and heavier. Although the opposition parties have been enjoying victories in recent times, they have yet to take power at the centre. Be that as it may, a two-party system has come into being in Malaysia, and few will refute the claim that much of that is thanks to the moral conviction of Lim Kit Siang.

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VANTAGE POINT ONE





Heading for Jail

The year is 1969. The plane drones over southern Johor, monotone propellers lulling its few passengers to sleep. A thin film of clouds hides the lush-green of the rubber plantations from their view, revealing nothing of the fear and foreboding people below had been living through the past week.

Violent rioting had broken out in Kuala Lumpur on the same evening that Kit, as he is affectionately known, had left for the Sabahan city of Kota Kinabalu.

It was only six years ago that the former British colony of Sabah had, through a referendum, agreed along with its North Borneo neighbour Sarawak, to join Malaya and Singapore to form a new federation. And it was only two years earlier, in 1967, that its main urban centre of Jesselton had changed its name to Kota Kinabalu. As he had discovered on earlier trips to Sabah and again during his two-day stay there earlier that week, a climate of fear pervaded the place. The chief minister of the state then, Tun Mustapha Harun, wielded power with little restraint, and Sabahans quickly developed a habit of looking over their shoulder, especially when having a rendezvous with opposition figures from the peninsula like Lim Kit Siang.

While election results had already been announced on the peninsula on May 11, polling in the sparsely populated East Malaysian states was staggered and took many days to complete. And so, after winning in the constituency of Bandar Malacca, Kit had flown off to Sabah to provide support for political allies there and to start up branches of the Democratic Action Party (DAP)—of which he was organizing secretary—if he could.

On the evening of May 13, while speaking at a rally in Kota Kinabalu, Kit heard whispers about trouble breaking out back in the federal capital. He had bad forebodings already before leaving Kuala Lumpur. In fact, given the split vote in Selangor, he had called for new elections to be held for that state.

Early the next morning, immigration officers doing the bidding of Mustapha paid him a visit. It was no courtesy call. Just after he had finished his breakfast of Teochew porridge downed with thick coffee, two burly guys in uniform turned up at the Winner Hotel where he was staying, with orders for him to leave the state on the next flight out. Being a brash young man of 28, he found it quite impossible to give in to such pressure, and so spent the day visiting acquaintances in the town, making sure that he would arrive at the airport too late for the 2.45 p.m. flight to Kuala Lumpur.

Police officers, including a Special Branch officer, were waiting for him at the terminal and were kind enough to offer him the information that some men who were obviously Bajau—an ethnic group from the Southern Philippines who had begun settling in Sabah, some of whom were known to do the chief minister's dirty work—had appeared just before his plane was to depart, looking for him. The police had sent them away.

For a change, Kit's natural defiance of authority had kept him out of serious trouble. To be on the safe side, he thought it best to check out of the hotel and stay with a friend instead. This was William Lai,



Kit Siang's wife, Mdm Neo Yok Tee, with their children in a photo taken in 1969.

From left to right: Hui Ying, Hui Ming, Guan Choon and Guan Eng.

an ex-policeman who had gone into politics and who would in the late 1970s become a deputy minister representing the United Sabah People's Party.

Early that evening, Kit phoned his wife who, aside from giving him the latest news from home, also pleaded with him not to return home for fear of his life. Phone calls between them were common whenever he travelled and were always a comfort. But now, he was anxious about her. She was on her own in Kuala Lumpur and with four young children to manage. Their parents were all in Johor and could not assist her in any way.

Later that evening, safely lodged in the back room at Lai's house, Kit finally had some time to reflect on events since nomination day on April 5, 1969. His mind could not help but peer further back in time though, to dwell upon how radically the political situation had changed after Singapore left the federation in 1965, and how his own life had been changing along with it.



The opposition was quite a disunited bunch. The Malaysian Solidarity Council, formed by a coalition of opposition parties in July 1965 to champion the idea of a Malaysian Malaysia, had precipitated the departure of Singapore from the federation. Later attempts to revive the Council without Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) were doomed from the start, and the Penang-based United Democratic Party—another key member of the Council, which was led by Lim Chong Eu, the former president of the Malayan Chinese Association—was soon dissolved.

Lim Chong Eu and his supporters returned to the fray in April 1968 through their founding of Partai Gerakan Rakyat (People's Movement Party), or Gerakan for short. The new party had a broad and impressive base. It included highly respected and prominent figures like Tan Chee Khoon and V. David, both of whom had left the Labour Party in protest against its ongoing radicalization by the extreme left. Others behind Gerakan included Yeoh Teck Chye, the president of the Malaysian National Trades Union Congress, and top academicians like Syed Hussein Alatas and Wang Gungwu. As one can imagine, taken together, these men exuded great presence and enjoyed public credibility. The party's founding had been hastened by the impending general elections, and its focus was therefore on immediate electoral gains. Such a grouping had too many prominent people. Impressive though it was, that set-up could not possibly last, Kit had thought.

In the eyes of Malaysians, the DAP, a rump party of the PAP, was far from being as impressive. Devan Nair, the only PAP candidate to have won a constituency on the peninsula in the 1964 general elections, had decided to move back to Singapore, and Kit, who was his political secretary, was left as the party's firebrand before the elections. Under such conditions, it was natural for the party to think more from a longer perspective than Gerakan was prone to do at that time.

And then there was the Partai Rakyat (People's Party), but this Malay-led socialist group had fallen on hard times after it failed miserably in the 1964 elections. There was, of course, also the People's Progressive Party (PPP) in the running. But the PPP, led by the Sreenivasagam brothers, was only interested in the state of Perak and was quite happy to stay out of the Klang Valley.

It did not look as if the opposition would cooperate in the 1969 election, until it was taught a lesson in the Serdang by-election held on January 7 of that year. That was also Kit's first real electoral experience—and it did not turn out well. Serdang was an opposition stronghold run by the Labour Party. It was when the party suddenly decided to turn its back on the parliamentary electoral system in favour of extra-parliamentary measures that a by-election had to be called.

It turned out to be a three-cornered fight between Kit, Gerakan's Tan Han Swee, and the Alliance Party¹ candidate, Thuan Paik Phok. This being the DAP's first electoral battle, Kit saw the by-election as a chance for the party to gain a foothold and establish a presence outside of Bangsar, where Devan Nair had won in 1964.

Feeling a tinge of excitement, Kit remembered how he had gained 5,928 votes on his first time out. This was not enough though, and the seat fell to Thuan who won with a margin of 607 votes. What was galling for the opposition Gerakan and DAP was that it was their failure to agree not to compete against each other which had caused them defeat. Tan had taken 1,330 opposition votes, just enough for the government candidate, Thuan, to bypass both his opponents. The opposition split proved to be fatal.

¹ The Alliance Party was a coalition of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). Formally registered as a political organization in October 1957, it was the ruling coalition until 1973 when it became the Barisan Nasional.



Kit Siang (third from right) at the Serdang by-election of 1968 speaking to constituents. In the centre with arms crossed is Fong Kui Lun, now the DAP MP for Bukit Bintang.



Kit Siang (front) with supporters at the Serdang by-election.

This setback was enough to convince Gerakan and DAP to agree to avoid three-cornered fights in the coming general elections. And so Kit ended up contesting in Malacca in the general elections, moved from the Damansara seat to which he had been shifted from the earlier-slated Bukit Bintang seat in Kuala Lumpur. He knew no one in Malacca, but followed party orders to contest there.

The narrow loss in Serdang may have drawn national attention to this young unknown from Johor, but it was a widely covered and heated debate held about six weeks earlier between him and fellow Johorean Dr. Syed Naguib Alatas which established Kit's reputation as a formidable political thinker and debater. Kit was the DAP's organizing secretary at that time, while the 38-year-old Syed Naguib, the younger brother of Syed Hussein, was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Universiti Malaya and also head of the Literature Division at the Department of Malay Studies. He was one of Gerakan's star academicians.

On November 24, 1968, the two crossed verbal swords at the MARA Auditorium in Kuala Lumpur's Batu Road, and for six and a half hours that day, from 10 o'clock in the morning until 4.30 in the afternoon, they argued over the essence of Malaysian national culture.

Looking out the side window onto the quiet dimly lit street from William Lai's house that warm evening in May, Kit could not help smiling, thinking about that day. He took one last swig of beer, switched off the table lamp, and slipped slowly into bed.

The event had been titled The Great Cultural Debate. The crowd was enthusiastic, and the press was well represented. Kit was so young then, filled with the vigour of his convictions and excited by the opportunity to speak his mind on a subject he felt so strongly about. To debate with one of the giants of Malaysian academia was for him, a small-town boy who could not pursue a university degree despite his scholarly interests, quite

a challenge. He never doubted that he would manage the professor, and what he lacked in finesse he would make up for with passion.

His opponent had insisted on a five-hour marathon, which surprised him. Academics really love to talk, don't they? The professor seems to want a talkathon more than a debate, he had thought. But he went along with it, actually happy for the chance to have his own views refined in a contest and at the same time have them disseminated by the national mass media. He knew that Syed Naguib's views on Malaysian culture and literature were somewhat extreme and too Malay-centric to be representative of anything that could be called the official Gerakan line. But that was exactly his personal viewpoint about Gerakan back then. Its unity was more show than substance.

And so, for the debate, Kit decided to target Syed Naguib's views as being essentially a reflection of his party's ideology. It was, after all, an argument between two new parties trying to profile themselves more clearly in the mind of an eager electorate that was feeling that things were coming to a head. With the left so severely weakened, the issue of ethnocentrism versus cultural pluralism was bound to become the main platform for future political battles in the country.

He did not realize it then, but his arguments in the debate would soon come to define the ideology of his budding party. No doubt, as editor of the party organ *The Rocket* he already had a key role in formulating the party's line of thought. For later members of the DAP, the debate also marked the party's birth as a post-1965 Malaysian party. The new political situation no longer included the economic might of Singapore, and the inter-ethnic equation was now a totally new one that warranted new strategic approaches.

Syed Naguib, on the other hand, did not appear that easily as a legitimate voice for Gerakan. Being a prominent scholar of Muslim

metaphysics, it was doubtful to many that his ideas were in any way representative of the new multi-ethnic party which was still trying to find its way in the quagmire of Malaysian political discourse.

A challenge had been thrown to Kit for the DAP to participate in a public debate with Gerakan over national cultural policy. While he eagerly picked up the gauntlet, he had been anxious that such an event could deepen the divide between the two parties and make an electoral agreement between them more difficult. But, as things then stood, Gerakan had not been forthcoming on that score, not only with the DAP but with other opposition parties as well. And so, he finally agreed to the match, realizing that there was a public demand for these parties to state their cultural policy directions more clearly.

On November 5, 1968, his party released a notice asking that the event take place during the December school holidays so that as many interested persons throughout the country as possible could attend. For that same reason, it should be held in Kuala Lumpur. Kit demanded further that the original agenda be changed: instead of four speakers from each party, only he and Syed Naguib would speak (although the allocated duration of five hours could remain unchanged). Cheekily, he couldn't help adding: "If, however, Dr. Syed Naguib must have the assistance, both in advice and speaking, from his Gerakan colleagues at the debate, I have no objection. I am prepared to take on all comers from Gerakan, whether Dr. Syed Hussein Alatas, Dr. Lim Chong Eu, Dr. Tan Chee Khoon or Mr. V. David."

It was also agreed that D.R. Seenivasagam, the leader of the PPP, Perak state's main opposition party, would be the chairman.

Having these stirring thoughts banished sleep from his eyes. He got up from bed and paced the room, ideas racing in his head. He was on a roll after that debate, he remembered.



LIM KIT SIANG

has been fighting on the forefront of Malaysian politics since the late 1960s. Uncompromising in his mission to pull the country away from systemic race-based politics and all the ills that stem from the sustainment of these, he was jailed twice without trial. His persistence saw him and his followers well placed to participate in the surprising resurgence of political opposition over the last 15 years. Since 2008, his Democratic Action Party has grown greatly in strength, and together with its allies has been able to seriously challenge the ruling coalition.

This book captures the spirit of Lim's life, and describes the grim yet gratifying journey that his refusal to compromise on his political convictions forced him to take. It is the tale of a man who felt he had no choice and, consequently, whose impact on his country's history is great. In that sense, his story is also a narrative about a country that has yet to fulfil the great promise that it holds.

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