

# S R Nathan

## *in Conversation*

with TIMOTHY AUGER



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Few people have watched the development of today's Singapore as closely as S. R. Nathan. Born into humble circumstances, he experienced destitution and the Japanese Occupation. After the war he embarked on a lifetime of public service. Having earned a university diploma as an adult student, he worked as a seaman's welfare officer, and then as a trade union mediator. There followed a very distinguished career as a civil servant, notably in the foreign affairs and defence ministries, and as a diplomat - not to mention a spell as executive chairman of Straits Times Press. At an age when most people contemplate retirement, he served two full terms as President of Singapore.

In a series of informal wide-ranging interviews conducted especially for this book, Mr. Nathan reflects on modern Singapore, its history, and its extraordinary development. His vivid recollections of the post-war nation builders, and what he perceives as the real challenges that he sees confronting both government and people today.

Untuk,

Ya Bhg. Um Di Mahathir

Ya Bhg. Um Di Anji Hasmi

Dengan ingatan ilahi,



5.2.2015

# **S R Nathan** *in Conversation*

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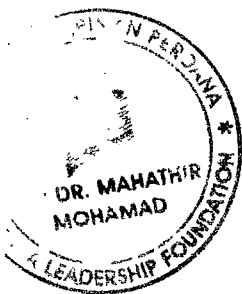
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DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

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# Preface

Over the years gone by, I have served in many different capacities, and worn many different hats. In conversations with friends and associates, my memory may occasionally have let me down, but my recollections of the past have got many a conversation going and – I hope – kept some listeners entertained. I have always enjoyed reminiscing about my past experiences, often moving from one topic to another in no particular order.

It was in this informal spirit that over several weeks I had a number of conversations with Tim Auger, my co-author, on topics ranging from serious geopolitics to more personal, even trivial matters. The result is this book. It is not a serious work of history, nor is it intended to be systematic. It is an informal collection of personal impressions of people and events, a series of snapshots, if you like. It is not comprehensive – there are many topics referred to in my earlier memoirs, *An Unexpected Journey*, that I have not revisited here.

I make no apology for the fact that this book is a rambling, unrehearsed conversation. All I have done is let my memory loose. I hope the result is readable, and that at least some people will find it interesting. The views that I have expressed are personal, and they could well be mistaken. But in my 91st year, I claim the privilege of expressing them, and I hope that my critics will be indulgent!

I'm sure some readers will open this book hoping to find comments on current Singapore politics. I have spoken a little about, for example, the influence of social media, and the challenges facing Singapore government and society today; but as a former president, I feel an obligation to avoid engagement in domestic politics. I have never been involved in party politics, and I have never stood for parliament. Moreover, my election to the presidency was uncontested on both occasions. Therefore, I hope I you will forgive me if I keep away from specific domestic political issues.

My concern is not political debate, but simply the future growth, prosperity and wellbeing of Singapore and its people.

## Political awareness

- *Let me take you back to your youth, in Singapore and in Malaya during the Occupation. When you were a young man, how did you become politically aware? Where did you get your information from?*

Well, during the war years under the Japanese, there were very few newspapers, a couple of pages, with not much information. One had doubts about the information that did come out, because I met friends who passed on contrary rumours. So I had to strike a balance between news, rumours and reality.

- *How did the rumours spread – coffee-shop gossip basically?*

Yes and no. I'd meet a friend and he'd say, 'You know, there was a ship bombed in the harbour yesterday.' 'How do you know?' 'Some people told me.' And then you talk to somebody else, they also heard. Some of it was exaggerated, some of it doubtful. I still remember hearing the Japanese talking among themselves about a man who'd been parachuted into northern Malaya, suggesting that he was the son of someone working in the Treasury building in Johor Bahru for the Japanese administration. As it happened, I knew the State Treasurer (a Malay) very well, because I used to interpret for him. I said to him, 'I've heard that a Malay was dropped, arrested, and that his relatives are here.' He told me to keep quiet: 'That's my son, that's my son, I

know about it, don't talk to anyone, keep quiet.' Much later in life, I learnt that the man who had been parachuted had become the Chief of Malaysian Defence Forces.

So that's how political information got around in those days. Of course, when I went to university and later into the trade union movement, I was exposed to the more ideological side of politics.

- *You described in your memoirs the effectiveness of Chandra Bose's public speeches. What was their role in spreading political awareness?*

These meetings were organised events. Behind them were Japanese agencies in charge of propaganda. During the war there were no free media to speak of. The papers essentially carried Japanese propaganda, and maybe brief references to concerts or some cultural show. Only political information supporting the Japanese was publicly available. Political information that was hostile to the Japanese was private. You could get arrested if you said the wrong thing in public.

- *In 1956, when Chinese school students engaged in protests, were the media a factor? Where did the students get their ideas from?*

I think that they were being indoctrinated by individuals, rather than through public media.

The students were raising two issues. One was national service. The British were planning to mobilise young people into national service, and the young Chinese feared they would be called upon to fight the communists in the jungle – this was still the time of the Emergency. The other issue was the alleged neglect of those who went through Chinese-medium education. They felt they were deprived of good job opportunities. Whatever their qualifications, all they could do was to become shop assistants or contract labourers or whatever. They had some support within the establishment class – some Chinese businessmen, Indian lawyers.

I could sympathise with their grievances, but they were getting

them mixed up with the communist cause. Mao Zedong had come to power in China, and everybody was very proud of the unification of China under communist rule. So young people, especially those with a knowledge of Chinese history, being idealistic, felt they had a sense of mission to help rebuild China. They were proud that China had risen.

- *Did PRC newspapers have any significant readership in Singapore at the time?*

I don't think they were in circulation here; and anyway I was not interested. We only read English newspapers. There were two Chinese newspapers – the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*, but I don't know to what extent they carried Chinese news. We lived in separate worlds.

- *What line did the English-language press take?*

They gave coverage to the student agitation either by way of photographs, or by reporting police efforts to disperse and government efforts to disabuse them. The papers were not necessarily very pro-government. But there was a limit – you knew that the press would not go beyond a certain point. The top people in the media were very close to the governor.

# The road to Independence

- *Did the British have a vision for a fully independent Singapore?*

From the end of the Second World War, I sensed that the British were not thinking in terms of an independent Singapore, least of all one with a rebellious, left-leaning Chinese population. I think that, to begin with, in their approach to Malaya as a whole, some people in the British establishment favoured Malay nationalism. They believed in it. It was quite evident. Before the war, all the Malay states, the Federated and ‘unfederated’ Malay states, had a fully functioning Malay administration. So the British built on it.

But there was an unanswered question. What was the place in Malaya for local-born non-Malays? There was not much public debate about that, nor any indications on the matter from the British establishment. I suppose they thought they had some use for us.

For Singapore, the British were thinking more in terms of a city administration, followed later by constitutional change under continuing British control. The view was, ‘Yes, we must give them some right to manage their internal affairs, but a colony they will remain.’

During the 1950s, everyone was aware of the move towards Malayan independence. Indian independence had already had an impact on all the countries in the region. After the war, the British tried to implement direct rule over Malaya without the sultans, in the form of the Malayan Union, with eventual independence for Malaya in mind. A move to

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