



*By Lim Kean Chye*

*Foreword to the Fajar Generation*

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On 10 May 1954 Fajar, the organ of the University Socialist Club (UCS), published an article entitled 'Aggression in Asia'. It condemned Western imperialism.

And it criticised the so-called Emergency Regulations which had established a police state and introduced the South African terror weapon of the concentration camp into Malaya disguised as the 'New Village'.

The revealing article reflected the influence of the British Labour Party, with quotations from Aneurin Bevan, the former minister and leader of the party's left wing, and his wife Jennie Lee, presented with respectful admiration.

But 'Aggression in Asia' enraged the colonial bosses of Singapore. If the likes of Aneurin Bevan were tolerated at home, his ideology was most certainly not for export.

It had to be shown, in that faraway outpost of empire, that it was sedition to plead the cause of independence and to deny the benefits of colonial rule.

The Fajar boys had to be taught a lesson. They were brought to court in a sensational case which had the unhappy consequence of creating a false reputation as a progressive fighting cock for a lawyer called Harry Lee Kuan Yew.

The boys were lucky. It was a time when the independence of the judiciary had not yet become a joke. The magistrate trying the case threw it out.

He was Freddie Chua, whose polite exterior masked a man with a will of his own, one who treasured the independence of a judge, however low in the court hierarchy. It was this same judge who was chairman of the appeals tribunal (in the days before the same Harry Lee abolished such appeals) which heard my application to quash the 1957 order for my detention.

After abruptly refusing the colonial secretary's application to be heard, the tribunal ordered my release, though in compromised terms which confined me to the island of Singapore.

**Bold pioneers**

The bold pioneers of the UCS proved to be no ordinary run-of-the-mill college graduates. They disdained safe jobs and instead chose careers that made no promises and were decidedly risky: Sydney Woodhull went to the Naval Base Labour Union, James Puthuchearry to the Singapore Shop and Factory Workers Union, Jamit Singh to the Singapore Harbour Board Workers' Union, A. Mahadeva to the Singapore Journalists' Union, Lim Shee Ping to the Business Houses Union, Ho Piow to the Seamen's Union, Kua Boo Sun to the Teachers' Union, Linda Chen got involved with women's organisations and the women's rights movement.

USC members were also the organisers of the Pan Malayan Students Federation (PMSF).

These people did not fade out after graduation. Poh Soo Kai went on to become the executive secretary and treasurer of the Malayan Socialist Conference.

They became co-executives of the pro-colonial Lee Kuan Yew in the People's Action Party (PAP) - which included the right wingers of the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) such as Goh Keng Swee, Yong Nyuk Lin (now brother-in-law of Lee Kuan Yew) and Lim Kim San — only to be detained and then released in a game of cat and mouse by the pre-independence government of Lee, then jailed once more, this time by their former ally.

Undaunted, these indefatigable young men marched on to form the Barisan Sosialis (Woodhull was vice-chairman, Lim Shee Ping on the committee, Lim Hock Siew was editor of the party magazine Plebeian) and would have taken over the government had they not been once again imprisoned: Lim Hock Siew for 16 years; Poh Soo Kai for 15 years until 1973 and again three years later; others included Jamit Singh.

These students are sometimes called the successors to the MDU. But this is inept. The MDU was not a 'left' organisation simply because the main current of events was either independence or self-government, which was the MDU's objective.

The MDU was an association made up of a diverse group of English-educated individuals united in their opposition to the restoration of the colonial rule that followed on the surrender of Japan in 1945.

Its founders included Philip Hoalim Sr, a pugnacious lawyer who kow-towed to no one and was very often in the magistrate's court, charged with assaulting some arrogant white person who had insulted him; John Eber, an 'aristocrat' of Eurasian society, from Harrow and Cambridge but barred from the Tanglin Club even though his mother was English; Lim Hong Bee, a

Queen's Scholar and a pacifist of the Peace Pledge Union.

I was the last of the four, a Cambridge University graduate, nursing an inflated ego for having been the president of the Cambridge Chinese Students Society; the first Malayan on the committee of the prestigious Union Society, and cocky with the reputation of having rejected a coveted offer from Kingsley Martin to join the staff of The Statesman and Nation, driven by the desire to 'do something' in lively Singapore, so different from the somnambulant Penang where I came from.

### **Mood for change**

The mood of the Malayan towns immediately upon the Japanese surrender was celebratory with news of the setting up of a United Nations Organisation and the victory of the towering Soviet Union which had smashed the much-feared German army at Stalingrad.

British soldiers, untainted by the colour bar, drank beer with the locals and sang Soviet songs. But a sombre mood followed, weighed down by the memory of the treacherous British abandonment of Penang.

The resentment against the colour bar had increased in intensity after the 1942 surrender and the long Japanese regime that followed. At the same time, a feeling of self-discovery and self-confidence had grown in the English-speaking world which the British had cultivated and leaned upon.

The Raffles College graduate Lim Ewe Hock's sensational article in *The Monsoon* gave word to this change: '... my education taught me to be a clerk, the spirit of times put its shackles on me, the economic and social condition drew me inevitably and relentlessly into clerical drudgery. I learned how to make a living but I was not taught how to live'. After the war, '[i]t was only through a baptism of war and suffering that I regained my soul and returned to the East. I recovered my sight. I can see now that my country is Malaya, though my blood is Chinese and my education English.

And that I have an active part to play, however small, in the rebuilding of a new and better Malaya for my children's children'.

The civil service was still barred to non-whites; white-only clubs remained white; and it was not unexpected that sometimes whites ordered non-whites off the pavement in Raffles Square, off

the tennis court.

There was a floating of ideas about justice and equality and fair play. An anti-colonial ideology to which the MDU gave expression emerged as a major force; but a minority group, led by the English lawyer John Laycock, and his favourites, C.C. Tan and A.P. Rajah, welcomed the 1945 restoration.

## **The MDU**

The MDU read the pulse of the country correctly. A swarm of recruits rallied to its banner, eager to end the colour bar and move forward to gaining self-respect by achieving self-rule.

First came the Raffles College graduates. There was P.V. Sharma, a junior badminton champion and a Bartok enthusiast, who unsnobbishly championed the cause of the lowly-regarded Normal-trained teachers and organised a union for them with Devan Nair as secretary.



Then there was Seow Cheng Fong, a well-known Shakespearean actor of the school stage, consigned to an inferior status with low pay compared to the white teachers who lived in bungalows in contrast to Asian terrace houses. There was also the arrogant and loud-mouthed Yong Nyuk Lin, now a company executive, cursing his luck for not having been born rich, and Lim Kim San, helping his father at his petrol station, eager for an end to colonial apartheid.

There was Goh Keng Swee, a notorious tormentor of college freshmen. He served in the MDU's economics committee, a brilliant economist who harboured an unspoken contempt for the college economics professor, known to be his inferior. He could be described, together with Lim Kim San and Yong Nyuk Lin, as one of the conservatives in the MDU.

But he was a minority voice in the committee, voting against Singapore making its own tyres and manufacturing chemical fertiliser. During the evening beer sessions (and there were many he and I had together), he sang the praises of Hitler and advocated castrating men who produced mediocre children, in spite of being frequently reminded by friends who knew the family that one brother was a clerk and a sister a telephone operator in the municipality of Malacca.

The appointment of Eu Chooi Yip as general secretary pulled in more graduates. This humble man, then ill with tuberculosis who had resigned from the plum job of assistant commissioner of labour, was popular in college, a fact demonstrated by many graduates visiting the office of the MDU, then located above the Liberty Cabaret.

Fed by the enthusiasm of the graduates and the teachers, the influence of the MDU spread rapidly and gathered momentum when it established Singapore's first cooperative stores, selling everything from Max Factor lipstick to controlled items like rice, which it sold as appointed dealers of the British Military Administration, who were confident that 'troublemakers' would not play the black market.

Its weekend sales van, driven sometimes by Eber and sometimes by Sharma, was an instant sensation; its volunteer salesgirls like Alice Woon (who married Goh Keng Swee) and the sister of Loke Wan Tho (wife of the president of the municipal council Louis McNeice) made headline news.

Recruitment gained momentum when the British Military Administration announced that it had no objection to municipal clerks joining the MDU. Government clerks started coming to our meetings. Clerks from the commercial houses joined the revamped Clerical Union with Lim Yew Hock as its secretary. We were even invited by the cabaret girls to form an association for them.

The MDU in the first few months of its existence had already become the leader of popular opinion. The British recognised this when they invited me to be a member of the advisory council of the British Military Administration, which I quickly rejected as a retrograde step, recalling that members of the legislative council of the Straits Settlements were appointed only after election by their respective chambers of commerce. (I often wondered why the Malayan Communist Party agreed to Wu Tian Wang's membership, why it was silent on major issues, a

mystery solved when we learnt that the Party was paralysed because its secretary general turned out to have been a triple agent.)

### **AMCJA-Putera**

The MDU's dominant role came to be respected by the great trade unions, women and youth organisations. It became an active partner of the immensely popular Malay National Party and the organisations led by it. It was the ideas and organisation centre of the anti-colonial movement.

Its great achievement was the formation of the All Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA) and the alliance with Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (Centre of People's Power, PUTERA), the Federation of Malay organisations.

The acceptance by Tan Cheng Lock, that most British of the 'King's Chinese', of the post of chairman moved the boundaries of influence to the King's Chinese as well as the chambers of commerce.

His chairmanship and the influence of Lee Kong Chian helped to lead the support of the People's Constitutional Proposals and the successful hartal — the Gandhian general strike, proposed by Tan Cheng Lock. I cannot leave mention of Loke Wan Tho, the multimillionaire, one of my earliest confidential financiers of the MDU's Malayan Standard.

The British panicked. A circular, issued by the chief secretary to the government on 19 September 1947, warned: 'Whatever a hartal might signify in Malay, the Chief Secretary desires to make it quite clear that if any Government servant absents himself from his duties in the public service with the real or ostensible object to bringing pressure to bear on Government on a political issue, not only will such officer forfeit his pay for the period of his absence, but he will be dealt with under the disciplinary regulations of the service'.

Cracks too had appeared in yet another of the pillars of empire, thought to be invulnerable to the damned troublemakers.

## Emergency

The British had come to the end of their patience. Their loyal supports were crumbling. First, Malay nationalists were rounded up and interned, then the Indian and other trade unionists, after which a cleaning-up war was launched to look after the rest. This is the real history leading to the launching of the war in 1948 — called the 'Emergency' for insurance reasons — a history distorted by imperial historians and their colonised copycats.

It was in 1951 that the British, using the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance (PPSO), detained the leaders of the MDU and many more on the island of St John's Singapore. The arrests included the University of Malaya's Malayan Orchid group comprising Joseph K M Tan, Lim Chan Yong, Yap Kon Puck, Ong Cheng Piao, James Puthucheary, Tan Seng Lock and Dollah Majid.

When the 'final victory' was achieved preparations could be made for the grooming of the local successors to empire.

But was it a final victory? The British had underestimated the opposition. The cloud of fear quickly dissipated. Fajar and its aftermath were to teach them the lesson that rebellions cannot be put down.

Though the 'winds of change' were blowing, the Singapore Naval Base was never to be surrendered. The British struck again in 1963, under cover of the tripartite Internal Security Council, smashing the Barisan Sosialis and establishing a regime which was to practise its meanness and spite on the lonely and defenceless J.B. Jeyaretnam.

This informative collection of articles, from the time of Fajar to the dream of the future by Poh Soo Kai, is a must read for all who care for the history of the people, who aspire to a future of social justice and fair play.

Soo Kai and his friends live in hope, an encouraging sentiment, stifled by the unanimity of the cemetery. But let them look north where a socialist party struggles to survive in a world of the Internal Security Act. — [www.aliran.com](http://www.aliran.com)

*\* Lim Kean Chye was a founder member of the MDU, formed in December 1945. Now retired in Penang, he was a well-known, fearless advocate. This article, which reminisces about the MDU and its involvement in the multi-ethnic AMCJA-Putera, first appeared as the Foreword to the "Fajar Generation."*