MERGER AND SEPARATION

I. BIRTH OF A LION

The name Singapore derives from the Sanskrit word for ‘lion city’. The way Singapore became a nation state has no precedent. The tiny island republic came about because it was mutually agreed between the Federal Government of Malaysia and the elected leadership of Singapore that the only solution to the incompatibility of political objectives was outright separation—people, territory, political leadership, economic assets, military assets and civic institutions—23 months after merger. It was all the more bewildering because Singapore’s very origins were predicated on its strategic location in one of the most important sea-lanes of the world and its centrality to its hinterland, the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago. There was no question that the Malaysian Government had a constitutional claim as well as a vital national interest to retain Singapore, whose leadership had sought the unification with the widespread endorsement of its populace. Malaysia might have even reinforced its claim with the historical fact that the island had belonged to the Johor Sultanate before Stamford Raffles founded the trading post that was to become the colony and state of Singapore. In realpolitik terms, the island would have been more than worth the international and foreign policy opprobrium that retaining it by force would have generated, especially since its populace as a whole had not been advocating separation. The Malaysian Government could also have addressed the problem of a confrontational Singapore leadership by more circumspect means if it had been so minded. Moreover, the Singapore leadership would have preferred to stay within Malaysia if the Federal Government had offered a slightly less drastic alternative.

II. THE MIRAGE OF MERGER

Malaysia had been the outcome of a number of political developments from 1957, shortly after Malaya, its core entity, became independent. For various reasons including costs, Britain wanted to relinquish its other colonial territories in South East Asia, which then comprised Singapore, the Borneo territories of Sabah (British Borneo) and Sarawak and separately, the Sultanate of Brunei. Singapore would had been part of Malaya when the latter became independent on 31st August, 1957, but for the fact that in April 1946, the British colonial rulers had included only Penang and Malacca from among the three Straits Settlements in the Malayan Union because they were mindful of the fact that extending Malayan citizenship to an additional million plus Chinese would have left the Malay demographic majority in the federation in a precarious position, in addition to being economically underweight in its traditional homeland. As Singapore was also the main British defence node outside the UK, and Britain had major defence commitments in the region, the Singapore issue was deferred to play itself out. But over the next few years, ever increasing domestic pressure in the UK to rationalise its defence expenditures had to be addressed. At the same time, colonialism had become an acute embarrassment and agitation in Singapore for independence could not
be ignored, especially since anti-colonialism was the rallying point of rampant communism in the region.

Under the Colonial Office, Singapore, Penang and Malacca had been one administrative entity as the Straits Settlements, but with seamless interaction with the peninsular Malay states. With the abortive implementation of the proposal to create the Malayan Union on 1\textsuperscript{st} April, 1946, Penang and Malacca were relinquished to Malaya. But the Malayan Union scheme had been decisively rejected by the Malay community because it offered political and constitutional equality with indigenous Malays for Chinese, Indian and other immigrants who had settled in Malaya. So, the scheme was abandoned three months after inauguration. In its stead, the Federation of Malaya was created on 1\textsuperscript{st} February, 1948, with Penang and Malacca as member states, under British rule until the Federation was granted full independence in 1957. The Federation of Malaya constitution provided for Islam to be the state religion and for Malays to be regarded as ‘princes of the soil’ or ‘bumiputra’ with exclusive special privileges. In the meantime, Singapore had been left a separate British colony. By 1959, Singapore had been granted internal self-government and was on track for independence from Britain. Under the circumstances, merger with the Federation of Malaya was a logical proposition. But, logical or not, the main objection which had led to the creation of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and derailed the Malayan Union—namely the British initiative to promote constitutional equality for all citizens of Malaya—should have been revisited more diligently by all concerned before the merger was mooted, let alone implemented.

Ironically, by 1961, both Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of self-governing Singapore and Tunku Abdul Rahman, founding Prime Minister of Malaya and later of Malaysia, had concluded—for different reasons—that Singapore should merge with Malaya. For Mr. Lee, the division of Singapore from Malaya was an arbitrary technicality. At the time, to him, Singapore had no future by itself. It needed the Malayan hinterland and common market, while Malaya had much to gain from the strategic location of Singapore and its outstanding natural harbour. The Tunku, on the other hand, had concluded that the British would exit the scene soon, leaving a separately independent Singapore, thereby presenting a base for the further communist subversion of the Malayan Peninsula, where armed communist insurgency had barely been crushed. Neither was he blind to the economic benefits of incorporating Singapore into the Federation. However, he was extremely uncomfortable with the robust politics of the colony, more so with its predominantly Chinese population. In addition to their de facto economic domination, Singapore’s one million Chinese combined with Malaya’s 2.3 million Chinese would pose a threat to the political dominance of Malaya’s 3.4 million Malays.\textsuperscript{1} For the Tunku, it was a case of damned if he did and damned if he didn’t. In the end, he acquiesced to Malaysia because the Borneo territories and Singapore’s own Malay population of about 150,000 would contribute additional Malay and indigenous populations to maintain Malay domination, while the Borneo territories would more than double Malaya’s territorial assets and access to natural resources. In August 1961, agreement in principle was reached between Singapore and Malaya on the merger and discussions were held in London in
November. The opposition Barisan Sosialis in Singapore rejected the merger, so a referendum was held in Singapore in September 1962, resulting in overwhelming support by Singaporeans for the merger. But, to further ensure that the communist threat posed by the radical left wing would not derail merger, the Internal Security Council conducted several sweeps which arrested and locked up all the active Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) sympathisers in Malaya and Singapore ahead of the merger between December 1962 and March 1963.

III. A MALAYSIAN MALAYSIA VERSUS THE BUMIPUTERA POLICY

When Malaysia was formed on 16th September, 1963, the ‘bumiputera’ rights that had been guaranteed to Malays under the Federation of Malaya constitution were carried forward to the new confederation to secure the overall domination of the Malays as the rightful owners of the land. This was one of the most contentious of several causes underlying Singapore’s expulsion. Mr. Lee Kuan Yew had forged ahead with merger, fully cognisant of the sensitivity of the ‘bumitputera’ issue, but after merger, he mounted a relentless campaign for a more equal status for all citizens. Singaporean Malays did not qualify directly for ‘bumiputera’ rights, nor did Singaporeans generally raise too much objection to the discrimination mainly on the basis that it was a trade-off for proprietary access to a larger hinterland. But, in the snap Singapore general elections which the People’s Action Party called on 21st September, 1963, just five days after Malaysia was inaugurated, the PAP won 37 seats in Parliament, the left-wing Barisan Sosialis 13 and the Singapore Alliance, one. The Singapore United Malays National Organisation, SUMNO, the Singapore affiliate of the ruling UMNO party in Malaysia, was rejected completely. But, the sting was especially galling because Malay votes had gone to the PAP despite the open, if ill advised, backing of the Tunku himself for SUMNO.
Particularly incensed was UMNO’s Chief Publicity Officer, Syed Ja’afar Hasan Albar, later UMNO Secretary General. A migrant to Malaysia from Indonesia just before WWII, he was more ‘bumiputera’ than many indigenous Malays. With a personal animus against Mr. Lee, he was to play a provocative role in the events leading to the expulsion of Singapore. Besides Syed Ja’afar Hasan Albar, it also happened that Malaysia’s Finance Minister, Mr. Tan Siew Sin, of the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), the Chinese element of the ruling coalition in Malaysia, not only engineered onerous financial obligations on Singapore as the price of merger, but also turned on Mr. Lee Kuan Yew seemingly because he felt that the latter was upsetting the MCA applecart in Malaysia.

But the underlying fear was real enough: if the PAP’s non-communal politics could secure the support of the Singapore Malays to the total rejection of UMNO’s affiliate in Singapore, it could also, sooner or later, influence the voting pattern in Malaysia if the PAP unleashed itself in Malaysian politics.

**IV. EXPULSION**

The drama played out over the 23 months during which Singapore was part of the merger. It led to deadly riots in Singapore in 1964, instigated from across the Causeway; to proposals for the Singapore government leadership to be gaoled; to the formation by the PAP in conjunction with non-Alliance parties in Malaysia of a Malaysian Solidarity Convention as an opposition bloc against the ruling alliance in Malaysia on a platform of racial equality; to the consideration of various ideas to marginalise Singapore’s participation in Federal politics and economy; and to the final decision to expel Singapore, thereby keeping the PAP leadership out of Malaysia.

Singapore’s ouster eliminated the main threat to the Federal Government, which was the assault on the bumiputera policy and the prospect of ethnic polarisation. As to the security threat that communists posed through Singapore—the concern which had tipped the Tunku’s decision in favour of accepting Singapore into Malaysia—the PAP’s massive win in the 21st September, 1963 general elections, confirmed by the defeat of the communist open-front Barisan Sosialis’ candidate Ong Chang Sam in a straight fight against the PAP’s Lee Khoon Choy in the Hong Lim by-elections of 10th July, 1964, had demonstrated that the communist threat out of Singapore had terminally declined.

Traumatic as the expulsion was to be for Singapore, the peaceful parting of ways was the outcome of a relatively mature approach by politicians of great stature on both sides. Singapore was fortunate in having to deal with Tunku Abdul Rahman and Malaysia’s Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Justice, Ismail bin Abdul Razak, at a time when the norm in developing countries was to settle political scores with violence and non-constitutional measures. The details of the separation were handled between Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak and Singapore’s Finance Minister, Dr. Goh Keng Swee, who was assisted by Singapore’s Minister for Law, Mr. E. W. Barker. Details were kept secret even from inner circles, including
Anthony Head, the British High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur, up to the very last moment to prevent movement on the ground.\(^3\) The separation was announced as a *fait accompli* on the morning of the effective day itself, 9\(^{th}\) August, 1965.

Nevertheless, there were those who felt that the Tunku had been soft, that a provocateur had been allowed to get away scot-free and that a prize had been lost. Syed Ja’afar Hassan Albar resigned from his current post as UMNO Secretary General in protest. Some in the security services would have recommended alternative solutions, had it not been for the complication of the massive presence of the British forces in Singapore. The situation was tense and many people in Malaysia and Singapore were surprised that the Singapore Government had been let off so lightly.

But it was a done deal. On the face of it, an orderly resolution of a potentially explosive situation had been achieved. A Bill was passed in the Federal Parliament on Monday, 9\(^{th}\) August, 1965, authenticating the decision to excise Singapore from Malaysia and abolishing the sovereignty of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the powers of the Federal Parliament over Singapore.\(^4\) Article V “bound both parties to enter into a treaty on external defence and mutual assistance which would provide for the creation of a Joint Defence Council; for Singapore to afford reasonable and adequate assistance and contributing units of its own armed forces for external defence; for Malaysia to continue to maintain and use for external defence, its bases in Singapore; and for each party to undertake not to enter into any treaty or agreement with a foreign country which may be detrimental to the independence or defence of the territory of the other.”\(^5\) There were also provisions for the continuation of existing terms on the supply of water from Johor State to Singapore and the return to Singapore of all territories under its sovereign administration prior to merger.\(^6\) By 20\(^{th}\) September, 41 nations had directly recognised Singapore’s independence and Singapore’s application to the General Assembly of the United Nations, jointly sponsored by Malaysia, Jordan and the Ivory Coast was unanimously accepted and recommended by the UN Security Council. On 21\(^{st}\) September, Singapore was unanimously admitted to the Assembly.\(^7\)

In retrospect expulsion from Malaysia was probably the best thing that could have happened to Singapore. Without being intended as such, the merger had established conclusively the Singaporean way of life was culturally incompatible with Malaysian bumiputera policy.

**Endnotes**

1. Lau 2003, p. 11
2. Ibid., 241.
3. Ibid., 263.
4. *Singapore Year Book 1965*, p. 11
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 12.
7. Ibid., 16.