

# Singapore holding State Dept. at bay

by Mary McCourt Burdman

Singapore's battle with the U.S. State Department is getting broader. Now, former Singapore President C. V. Devan Nair has entered the fray, to denounce Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew and call on him to resign. Nair, who was a founding member of Lee's ruling People's Action Party, is now a political ally of former Solicitor General of Singapore Francis Seow, currently detained for trying to win release of a number of opposition lawyers and other professionals, whom the government had arrested for a plot linked to the Communist Party of Malaya.

After watching the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, by the same combination of U.S. State Department and liberal press, Lee's government is taking no chances.

Mr. Nair himself is clearly not willing to risk incarceration or a legal suit. He made his statements to BBC radio May 22, and then hastily departed to visit relatives in Malaysia before taking off for his final destination: a fellowship at a U.S. university.

Nair accused Lee of creating an "incredible economic success married to an abysmal political style which does not tolerate any dissent. I think the whole thing stinks to high heaven."

Nair admitted advising and assisting Seow, who was planning to stand as an opposition candidate in elections, which might occur later this year. However, he dismissed the fact that Seow had reportedly sought guarantees of asylum from the United States or Britain, should his campaign not succeed. "In lobbying for support of American establishment circles, Mr. Seow has distinguished predecessors. In short, Francis Seow only did what Mr. Lee and his colleagues, including myself, did with far greater panache and publicity," Nair said.

Then, from Kuala Lumpur the next day, Nair called on Lee to step down. "Mr. Lee's continued presence is tantamount to the presence of an albatross around the necks of a younger generation of leaders," Nair said. "I think the kindest thing he can do now, after having served Singapore so well, is to step down." Nair called the fight with the United States a case of "beating the nationalist drum, so typical of people who are politically bankrupt."

Lee responded by threatening to sue Nair for defamation. His press secretary, James Fu, in a statement issued May 23, denounced Nair for alleging that Seow's actions against Singapore's sovereign government, were "not as bad as what Mr. Lee did when he was in the opposition in Malaysia in

1963-65," working to obtain Singapore's independence. Fu said that Lee's discussions at that time with the British, Australian, and New Zealand governments did not put him under any obligation to them.

Nair and Lee first fell out in 1985—the year economic crisis first hit Singapore hard. From its independence from the Malaysian federation in 1964 until 1985, Singapore's annual growth rate was 10% per year—and there was no inflation. But in June 1985, hit hard by the international collapse of trade, Lee announced that Singapore's export-dependent economy would suffer negative growth, which went from -1% in the second quarter to -6% in the last. Singapore has also been investing far too heavily in property development, and not enough in productive equipment and machinery, according to Japanese economists. When the huge public Pan Electric Company collapsed Dec. 1, 1985, Lee's response was to shut down the stock market for three days—a precaution that did not please institutional investors and several big U.S. banks, the London *Sunday Times* reported at the time.

Accounts of Mr. Nair's ouster from the presidency, which he had held since 1981, vary—especially now. He now says his removal from office because of alcoholism, was a mistake, that medical checks since done in the United States told him that Singaporean doctors had mis-diagnosed the cause of some bizarre behavior.

Singapore's Parliament is now debating a motion calling for "firm action of the government" to prevent Singapore from "being subverted, whether by Marxists, communists, Western powers, or other foreign interest groups," the *International Herald Tribune* reported.

First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, told a press conference May 23, "It may seem very right of you to open up Singaporean society and make it more democratic, to have two or three political parties in Parliament, to have more freedom of the press by your definition. But we are Singapore, we are not going to be an image of you. . . . Leave us alone as far as domestic politics are concerned."

Minister of Trade and Industry Brig. Gen. Lee Hsieng Loong, the son of the prime minister, announced at that press conference that expelled U.S. Embassy First Secretary Mason Hendrickson would have been arrested if it were not for his diplomatic immunity, because his attempts to organize a dissident group to run in elections later this year were "full, frontal, and blatant. . . . If any diplomat does it again, he is going to be expelled." This also applies to journalists, he said.

Lee said that Singapore was trying to contain the damage done in its relations with the United States and hoped that there would be no more "intemperate" responses from the United States, which, he went so far as to say, might force a complete rupture. He abruptly canceled a trip to the United States, the *Financial Times* reported May 23, saying he had "better things to do."