

Abolish Singapore's Internal Security Act

We welcome Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's announcement that his government would repeal the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the Emergency Ordinance. He said the changes are aimed at "having a modern, mature and functioning democracy which will continue to preserve public order, ensure greater civil liberties and maintain racial harmony." We look forward to the Malaysian Prime Minister fulfilling his promise to his people.

Singapore inherited the ISA from Malaysia. This law has been in existence for more than half a century and its impact on society is both crippling and pernicious. Its life began soon after the Second World War as the Emergency Regulations in 1948 when the British used it to put down strong anti-colonial movements. In 1955, the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance incorporating the Emergency Regulations was passed. When Singapore joined Malaysia in 1963, the Federation of Malaya's Internal Security Act 1960 became part of our law.

The Ministry of Home Affairs claims that:

“ ... A person arrested under the ISA in Singapore may be held in custody for up to 30 days after which an Order of Detention or Restriction Order must be issued or else the person must be released unconditionally.

In Malaysia, the period of custody is up to 60 days...” (ST 17.9.2011).

This comparison is irrelevant because political detainees in Singapore have been imprisoned for periods which far exceed those in Malaysia. Dr Chia Thye Poh was imprisoned for 26 years. Dr Lim Hock Siew was imprisoned for 20 years. Mr Lee Tee Tong was imprisoned for 18 years and Dr Poh Soo Kai and Inche Said Zahari for 17 years.

The Ministry further claims that the Advisory Board is a safeguard against abuse under the ISA. The protection accorded by the Advisory Board is spurious, if not a farce. Several of us have appeared before such a board and can confirm that the board did not examine witnesses and evidence against the detainee. In 1987, appearances before the board lasted not more than a few minutes each. Furthermore, detainees were discouraged from appearing before the board by ISD officers. Many were advised that appearing before the board would jeopardise their chances of early release.

Singapore has many existing laws that will deal with acts of terrorism. We have the Penal Code, the Sedition Act, Corrosive and Explosive Substances and Offensive Weapons Act, Vandalism Act and after 9/11, the Terrorism (Suppression of Bombings) Act and the Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act. These laws provide severe punishments which include death, life imprisonment and caning.

In 1991, then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said, “Singapore will seriously consider abolishing the Internal Security Act if Malaysia were to do so”. He made this response to seven Malaysian journalists in his office when asked why the ISA was still needed in Singapore even though the Communist Party of Malaya no longer posed a threat. (ST 3.2.1991.) Now that Malaysia is repealing the ISA, we call upon PM Lee Hsien Loong to translate his 1991 statement into reality and keep in step with the aspirations of our people for a mature and

functioning democracy. Indefinite detention without trial is an affront to the human rights of citizens and an assault on our justice system.

Dated this 19th day of September 2011.

Dr Lim Hock Siew
Dr Poh Soo Kai
Said Zahari
Lee Tee Tong
Loh Miaw Gong
Chng Min Oh @ Chuang Men-Hu
Tan Sin alias Tan Seng Hin
Toh Ching Kee
Koh Kay Yew
Vincent Cheng Kim Chuan
Teo Soh Lung
Yap Hon Ngian
Tan Tee Seng
Low Yit Leng
Wong Souk Yee
Tang Fong Har