

23 September 2011

Ministry of Home Affairs Press Statement on ISA, 23 September 2011

Sixteen ex-ISA detainees issued a joint statement on 19 Sep 2011 taking issue with the length of detention under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and also the ISA Advisory Board process.

2 These sixteen ex-detainees were not detained for their political beliefs, but because they had involved themselves in subversive activities which posed a threat to national security. Nine were actively involved in Communist United Front (CUF) activities in support of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), which was committed to the violent overthrow of the constitutionally-elected governments in Singapore and Malaysia. They infiltrated legally-established organisations like trade unions and student associations, and instigated illegal strikes and demonstrations to cause mayhem and civil strife, to complement the CPM's armed revolution. In 1974, one of them provided medical assistance to a CPM saboteur who was hiding in Malaysia. The saboteur had been conveying a bomb for an attack in Singapore, and was travelling along Still Road (Katong) when it detonated prematurely, injuring him and killing his two accomplices. Such was the volatile and dangerous security situation then prevailing in Singapore. Following the CPM's call in 1968 to its underground networks to return to armed struggle, new CPM organisations were formed in the 1970s which included killer squads to carry out sabotage, assassinations and other acts of violence.

3 In the 1980s, seven of the sixteen ex-detainees were involved in a Marxist plot to subvert and destabilise Singapore. The plot was part of the CPM's renewed efforts to rebuild the united front by penetrating and manipulating legally-established organisations. Three of them infiltrated and manipulated several religious organisations and, exploiting the religious cover, pursued activities towards subversive ends. They worked with others, including leftist elements from the CPM era, to build a covert network to promote a Marxist agenda, using united front tactics to control and influence organisations engaged in religious and social activism. Five of these ex-detainees swore Statutory Declarations concerning their past activities.

4 On the issue of length of detention under the ISA, whether a person's detention is extended depends on whether he still poses a security threat. For example, detainees who refused to renounce violence were detained for longer periods until they were assessed to no longer pose a security threat to society, whereas others who renounced violence and no longer posed a security threat were released much sooner.

5 The allegation that "the protection accorded by the Advisory Board is spurious, if not a farce" is baseless and unwarranted. The Advisory Board is chaired by a Supreme Court judge, and scrutinises every detention case to satisfy itself that there are valid security grounds which warrant detention. Members of the Board are appointed by the President and the Board enjoys the immunities and powers of a court of law. It examines representations from detainees and their legal counsel, studies the evidence including classified intelligence, and examines witnesses including senior ISD officers

when it deems necessary. These safeguards were further enhanced when in 1991, the elected President was given the power to veto the Government's decision to detain a person against the recommendation of the Advisory Board. Indeed, the Board has on several occasions made independent recommendations for the early release of detainees, including three of the sixteen ex-detainees.

6 The external security environment and the threats to our national security have evolved with changing times and circumstances. In the CPM era, armed communist insurgencies, transnationally motivated and supported, infected countries throughout our region. The communist threat was not just violent insurgency but also the systematic subversion of the political arena to foment civil strife and de-stabilise the country. We also encountered cases of espionage, and cases where a foreign power or agency tried to subvert Singapore's domestic politics. From time to time racial and religious extremists, sometimes externally supported and instigated, sought to provoke racial conflict and subvert our ethnic harmony. Today, we face the threat of jihadist terrorism, not only from Al-Qaeda-linked clandestine groups like the Jemaah Islamiyah but also from self-radicalised individuals.

7 A small country, open to external influences and located in a turbulent region, will always face security threats. Their nature will evolve over time. The ISA and its use have likewise evolved as Singapore's circumstances, vulnerability and risk tolerance change. While the Government certainly monitors developments in the laws and systems of other countries, on a matter as important as security it ultimately has to decide based on what is prudent and necessary in Singapore's context and is in Singapore's best interests. As an instrument of last resort, the ISA has enabled us to counter serious security threats, protect our people, and preserve our racial harmony and social cohesion. It remains relevant and necessary in today's evolving security environment, for keeping Singapore safe and secure.

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