

**Chris Lydgate** *Lee's Law: How Singapore Crushes Dissent*. Melbourne: Scribe Publications. 2003. 318 pp. ISBN: 090801189X

Historical accounts usually run the gamut of differing degrees of interpretation. There are variations of the facts and nuances of the truth. However, in some cases the essence of the matter is the same. Chris Lydgate's journalistic account of one of Singapore's most important political figures captures the essence of his subject – Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam, or JBJ – in *Lee's Law: How Singapore Crushes Dissent*.

Jeyaretnam's portrayal as a venerable, erstwhile lawyer cuts a tragic figure in the history of Singapore's social and political development. The book traces JBJ's origins and life within the context of the city-state's development, especially through the backdrop of his family upbringing, British colonialism, the Second World War and its aftermath, the political and social upheaval that followed, and the events leading up to Singapore's independence. The main theme of the book is Jeyaretnam's fight for justice and fairness – first as a lawyer and then as an opposition politician – in the Singapore judiciary, as well as against the PAP government at the polls and in the courts. He became the sole opposition parliamentarian in 1981 after winning the Anson by-election, breaking the PAP's monopoly of all seats in Parliament.

Lydgate's book has the almost-deceptive subtitle of how Singapore the state crushes dissent. It is in fact about one dissenter, J. B. Jeyaretnam. It chronicles the key events of his life, from his rise in the civil service and his break from the state's dominant party system, to his foray into opposition politics. In the same vein, Lydgate also exposes the lack of political rights and civil liberties that should normally come with a developed country such as Singapore. This should give food for thought to academically inclined readers who may not have a practical appreciation of the hard realities of being an opposition politician in Singapore.

Although *Lee's Law* is written in a journalistic style, Lydgate provides a valuable ground-level account of the workings of the PAP regime as personified by Lee Kuan Yew and how it treats any serious opposition to its control. Lydgate's incisive insights neatly summarize the truths as well as ironies of a given event or incident, even to the moment. This is too often ignored or missed in many academic works on politics.

Among the memorable incidents recounted are those of the court cases involving Jeyaretnam against members of the regime or its vested interests. Lydgate relates key exchanges and uses them to illustrate the manner in which J. B. Jeyaretnam faced his opponents in court, while also

commenting on and summarizing the crux of these cases. They show, with varying degrees of clarity, how the Singapore judiciary acted and reacted, as well as the political influences and pressures placed upon them. These cases also revealed more of Jeyaretnam's character and the dynamics with which his vocation as a trial lawyer sometimes clashed, in later years, with his role as an opposition politician. More often than not, they reverberated off each other with unenviable consequences.

The writing contains prodigious usage of language and trenchant statements which bring out revealing facets of human behaviour in the various political actors; for instance: 'And while Goh aimed several jabs at Jeyaretnam, he never showed a knack for the vicious form of political ju-jitsu that came so naturally to Lee.'

Although not an explicit, blow-by-blow critique of Singapore's political evolution, Lydgate manages to capture important aspects of Singapore's political life: the gradual erosion of human rights, the rise of a powerful 'nanny state' and the creation of a political system that imposes its will on the people on behalf of an elite, and which tries to persuade its citizens that this is for the greater good of the country. It shows, for instance, how a country can develop into a First World state without the accompanying civil and political liberties that would normally be associated with such development.

Along the way Lydgate does not hesitate to criticize and point out Jeyaretnam's faults. There are a few important ones, among them his misplaced idealism and his infamous tendency to want to seek confrontation based on the principles of his beliefs. There was also his stubbornness and faith in the law, ultimately found to be misplaced. However, this does not detract from the basis of his actions, showing his commitment to fighting for the 'common man'. It is these actions that highlight the true nature of the PAP regime through its persecution of Jeyaretnam.

The strength of this book is its engaging, journalistic style that brings out the tension and themes of the period. For example, in summing up Singapore's political climate, Lydgate writes that the 'atmosphere of crisis', though legitimate, 'provided intellectual camouflage for the government's efforts to dictate the destiny of its citizens'. Although it serves as a good primer or popular history of JBJ's life, it could also have been a more serious work if it had contained, for instance, more details and background of the laws that JBJ ran afoul of, or some technical aspects of the parliamentary jousts and other processes that could have painted a fuller picture of Jeyaretnam's struggles. However, it captures the pathos and even engenders anger at Lee's PAP regime for its treatment of

Jeyaretnam, something that may contribute to academics' understanding of how the Singapore government crushes dissent.

At times reading like a political pot-boiler, at other times reading like popular history, but never quite either, *Lee's Law* is never mundane. Indeed, rather than merely recounting a politician's life story, it recounts his struggles. Jeyaretnam's story is sadly also the story of many of those who suffer quietly under the PAP-dominated system, which is all the more tragic for being both highly pragmatic and subtly oppressive.

In spite of the book's journalistic style of writing, it holds academic value and academics should read and consider it when studying Singapore. Academic studies of opposition parties and politicians in Singapore have been few and far between. Although more are needed to increase the depth of Singapore studies, books such as *Lee's Law* provide a valuable resource that helps to fill in important gaps and increase insights into the political history of Singapore.

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**Carl A. Trocki**, *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control*. 2006. London and New York: Routledge. 211 pp. ISBN: 0415263867

What makes Singapore history boring is the way in which the stories are usually narrated. Singapore history tends to be explained in terms of two representative figures: Stamford Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew. Raffles is the founding father of the port of Singapore while his reincarnation, Lee Kuan Yew, is founding father of the Singapore nation-state.

The author of the present book, Carl Trocki, is fully aware of this pitfall. To avoid it, he demonstrates Singapore history through an interesting theme: the power of the Chinese masses pitted against an alliance of other powers. These powers comprise the local English-educated Chinese elites and the forces of global Euro-American capital (p. 185).

The book can be broadly categorized into two sections. The first section (Chapters 1-3) narrates stories about Singapore from the pre-Raffles era until the Second World War. The second half of the book (Chapters 4-6) is about independent Singapore, from the time of transition after the Second World War until today.