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Contested Nationalisms in Singapore's Decolonization

17 April 2024 | 10:00 AM –11:30 AM (Philippine Standard Time)
UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies

Compiled by Federico R. Laciste IV, Jianna M. de Celis, and Junah Amor C. Delfinado

UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES
CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

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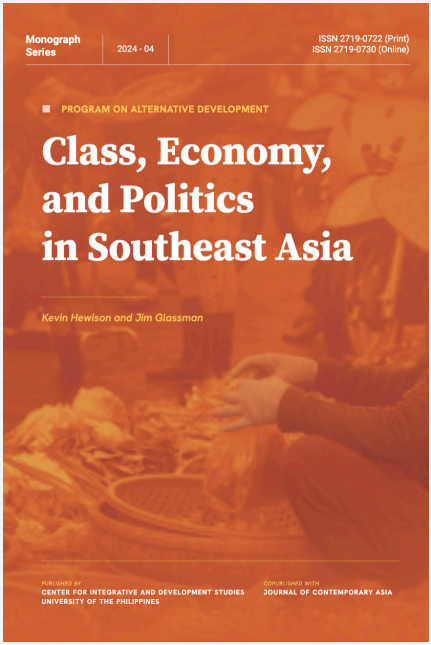

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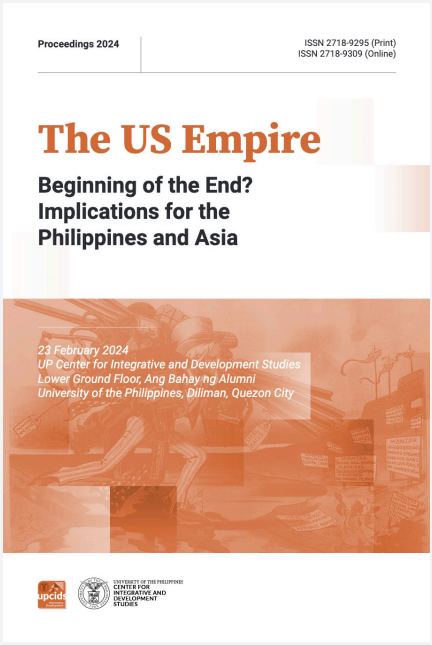

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About the Conference

How do we explain the deep-seated conflicts that drove Singapore's decolonization process? The official history of Singapore presents the conflict as between a "moderate" group of men led by Lee Kuan Yew, against "sinister communists," led by Lim Chin Siong. This narrative, however, is a Cold War-era justification of the repression of Lee's People's Action Party. It continues to justify Singapore's authoritarianism today, where attempts to tell more accurate histories have been violently suppressed.

In this lecture, Dr. Pingtjin "PJ" Thum discusses how his book provides a different framework for understanding Singapore's decolonization: as a conflict over the content and shape of the identity of Malayan nationalism, stemming from four deep seated schisms in Singapore society: race, class, language, and the meaning of self-determination. These schisms drove the events of decolonization, the creation of Malaysia, and Singapore's separation, and continue to actively shape Singapore today. Finally, he discusses the lessons we can learn from these events and how they may be applied in the Philippines and globally.

The lecture, a joint collaboration between University of the Philippines Center for International Studies (UPCIS), University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, Program on Alternative Development (UP CIDS-AltDev), and UP Department of Political Science, attracted a diverse audience comprising students, academics, and individuals interested in gaining deeper insights into Singapore's decolonization process. These proceedings were jointly prepared by Federico R. Laciste IV[1], Jianna M. de Celis[2], and Junah Amor C. Delfinado[3].

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Opening Remarks

Professor Emeritus Eduardo "Ed" C. Tadem, PhD
Convenor, UP CIDS Program on Alternative Development

Dr. Ed Tadem, Professor Emeritus and convenor of the UP CIDS Program on Alternative Development gave the opening remarks that anecdotes from his experiences as a doctoral student at the National University of Singapore, he shared a series of intriguing "oddities" he had observed throughout Singapore's history. These peculiarities, he noted, have collectively shaped the Singapore we see today.

First, he remarked that the country's time zone, which is set 30 minutes ahead of its actual (real time) time zone. He recounted that Singaporean pupils and students usually go to school very early in the morning before the break of dawn. One official explanation for this change of timezone was the need for Singapore to align with neighboring Malaysia, which incidentally also changed its timezone. Dr. Tadem later learned from his Singaporean colleagues that one explanation for this change may have been because of the competitive need of the Singaporean stock exchange to operate exactly at the same time with its competing rival stock exchange in Hong Kong.

Second, Singapore proud itself as multi-ethnic city-state. This is evident in with the vibrant ethnic quarters, such as Chinatown, Malay Town, and Little India—representing the three major ethnic groups that form modern Singaporean society. Despite a multi-ethnic society, it is also important to remember that ethnically-Chinese, or Singaporeans of Chinese descent, make up the majority (estimated 75%) of the country's total population. Furthermore, Singapore's ethnic quarters, each with its own cultural communities, businesses, and festivities, are which serves as a historical reminder of British colonialism.

The third oddity in Singapore's political history, as noted by Dr. Tadem, draws a parallel with the Philippines' experience of entrenched political dynasties—what he refers to as the "Lee Dynasty." This lineage began with Lee Kuan Yew,

Singapore's founding prime minister, who held office from 1959 to 1990 and was widely regarded as a strongman leader. His eldest son, Lee Hsien Loong, has continued the legacy, serving as Singapore's third prime minister since 2004.

Yet the influence of the Lee family extends beyond politics into the financial sector. A prominent example is Ho Ching, the wife of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who formerly served as CEO of Temasek Holdings and now sits as director of Temasek Trust. Temasek Holdings is one of Singapore's largest and most powerful conglomerates, with major subsidiaries including Singapore Airlines and SingTel. Through these political and economic ties, the Lee dynasty wields considerable influence across Singaporean civil society.

The fourth oddity is another curious feature of Singapore's education system is the practice of "grade moderation," particularly within the National University of Singapore (NUS). Dr. Tadem was reminded of the time he recalled that faculty members reportedly receive a confidential memo from the NUS administration at the end of each semester. This memo outlines a standardized grading distribution: 7% of students are to receive A's, 30% B's, 40% C's, and a designated percentage must be assigned D's (failures). Even if a faculty member chooses to deviate from this guideline, the administration is said to override the submitted grades to conform with the prescribed distribution. This rigid system of moderation raises questions about academic autonomy and the broader implications for merit-based evaluation in Singaporean higher education.

Dr. Tadem concluded his remarks by highlighting Singapore's exclusive hosting of the six-day Taylor Swift Eras Tour as the final "oddity.", which was reported to have been bought to monopolize the 2023 concert tour outbidding most of Southeast Asia and neighboring regions. This moves sparked criticism from several ASEAN neighbors, notably the Thai Prime Minister and a Filipino legislator. He remarked that Singapore's strategy to monopolize the concert was a calculated effort to stimulate its sluggish economy. By the end of Swift's final performance, the country had reportedly generated an estimated USD 500 million in revenue.

Main Lecture

Dr. Pingtjin "PJ" Thum

Founder and Managing Director, New Naratif

■ **Figure 1.** Prof. Mon Sy introduces Dr. Thum, the main speaker and author of the book. Photo by AltDev team.

Dr. PingTjin “PJ” Thum is the Founder and Managing Director of New Naratif, a movement to democratize democracy in Southeast Asia. A Rhodes Scholar, Commonwealth Scholar, Olympic athlete, and the only Singaporean to swim the English Channel, his work centers on the history of Malayan nationalism and decolonization. He obtained his Doctor of Philosophy in History from the University of Oxford in 2011 and held various positions from the years 2014 to 2022. Due to sustained harassment from the Singapore government, he lives in political exile in Manila, Philippines.

Dr. Thum picked up from where Dr. Tadem left off and mentioned some common misconceptions about Singapore that foreigners may easily see as facts. One obvious misconception is that Singaporeans are wealthy. He clarified this by stating that Singapore is rich but Singaporeans are poor;

the poverty rate in Singapore (35 percent) is much higher than that of the Philippines (23.2 percent).

Another misconception is that of Lee Kuan Yew, who is often viewed as a right-wing authoritarian and pro-capitalist leader. Dr. Thum explained that this was the case during the later part of Lee Kuan Yew's life in politics. However, Dr. Thum argued that the majority of Lee Kuan Yew's political victories in the Singaporean electorate were built on radical, socialist, pro-labor, and trade unionist platforms. An instance of this is how Lee Kuan Yew conducted extensive land reforms to dismantle the capital assets of Singapore's entrenched local oligarchs. As a result, Dr. Thum considers the transformation of modern Singapore into a huge welfare state as Lee Kuan Yew's political achievement.

The discussion proceeded to the state of Singaporean nationalism and decolonization, two topics that are often viewed with misconceptions. To contextualize the topic of Singapore's decolonization, Dr. Thum laid out the first question in his book regarding the main cause of internal conflicts in Singapore during the 1950s and 1960s wherein these conflicts shaped Singaporean communal experiences. He also noted that these conflicts were fueled by the opposing forces of capitalist and communist thought, a common global occurrence during the 50s and 60s due to the Cold War.

Dr. Thum noted that these conflicts were often sparked by the dominant narratives of right-wing and authoritarian pro-capitalist governments during those decades, which used the fear of communism and the Cold War as an excuse to crush their left-wing and socialist political opponents. Consequently, these led to the justification of oppression and state-led violence against socialist intellectuals and leftist movements around the world. In the case of Singapore, the People's Action Party (PAP) – which is still the governing party in Singapore today – used and continues to use the same narrative as an excuse to dismantle their potential political rivals. The PAP constantly uses the framing of communist "menace" and "subversives" to legitimize its strict and repressive policies in Singaporean civil society.

In another sense, the PAP also uses these narratives to suppress alternative and critical readings of Singaporean history. The Singaporean history taught in schools largely stems from the perspectives of the English-speaking and pro-capitalist Singaporean elite. Furthermore, the history of Singapore is

mostly defined within the context of English influence and powerful elites. In 1957, 75.4 percent (1.09 million people) of Singaporeans were classified as ethnically Chinese. However, only 0.2 percent (2,287 people) of this Chinese population were classified as speakers of English as a first language. More ethnically Chinese Singaporeans speak Malay as a first language than English during this time. With these figures, Dr. Thum argued that it is more logical to tell Singaporean history from Malay or Chinese language sources. Thus, the use of the English language as the sole basis for narrating Singaporean history only serves the interest and the hegemony of the Singaporean elite minority.

Dr. Thum then discussed how Singapore was a very unequal society during the 1950s. Economically exploited by European colonialism, 19 percent of Singaporean households, or 25 percent of Singaporeans were classified as living in poverty. For a Singaporean family of 4 during those times, the poverty line was at 100 Malayan dollars a month. In 1957, only 54 percent of Singaporeans (aged 15 and above) were employed, with the majority lacking basic labor rights and security. This impoverished economic state naturally pushed Singaporean workers to flock to their local labor movements and campaign for socialist ideals toward an equitable and just society in Singapore.

Dr. Thum argued that these situations—from efforts to include Malay and Chinese perspectives in Singaporean history to the struggles of socialist Singaporean intellectuals and workers against capitalist exploitation—represent an expression of Singaporean nationalism and decolonization from the people's perspective rather than that of the elite. With this focus, the book highlights accounts and narratives that are often overlooked or absent in mainstream Singaporean historiography.

Dr. Thum introduces the “Malayan Left” as the main subject of his book, describing it as a coalition or loose alliance among three major sectors in Singapore that were most discriminated against by the colonial authorities and thus strongly opposed colonialism. This coalition comprised the Chinese-speaking population, the working class, and left-wing professionals and intellectuals. These groups shared common experiences of colonial exploitation, socio-cultural marginalization, and linguistic discrimination, and they held a united perspective on Malayan nationalism, embracing socialism and anti-colonialism in Singapore.

Throughout much of the 1950s and 1960s, the Malayan Left was represented by the People's Action Party (PAP), which was then a left-wing, pro-labor, and socialist party. Within the PAP, a divide existed between a large trade union faction led by Lim Chin Siong and a smaller faction of English-speaking professionals led by Lee Kuan Yew. Dr. Thum explains that, after gaining power, Lee Kuan Yew labeled Lim Chin Siong and his colleagues as subversives, a move that justified their imprisonment. Consequently, Singaporean history has continued to depict Lim Chin Siong and his colleagues as communists.

Dr. Thum argues that the fundamental question the Malayan Left sought to address was how to solve the deep-rooted problems facing Singaporeans in their pursuit of building an independent Singapore within a united Malaya. It was highlighted that Singapore's decolonization was uniquely complex due to its relationship with the rest of Malaya (now Malaysia). In 1946, British colonial authorities separated Singapore from British Malaya, resulting in the traumatic division of families across newly established borders. Thus, Dr. Thum contends that Singapore's struggle for independence was not aimed at standing alone but rather at reuniting with Malaya.

Singapore's nationalist movement was therefore progressive, socialist, and oriented toward Malayan unity—hence, the term "Malayan Left." Dr. Thum notes that while the Malayan Left sought to resolve the core question of how to address Singapore's collective challenges, this pursuit ultimately raised further questions, which continue to confront Singaporeans today. He identifies these enduring issues as: (1) the question of national identity, (2) how to end discrimination, (3) how to build a democratic society, and (4) the meaning of citizenship.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Singaporean nationalism was relatively straightforward, with a majority favoring a Malayan national identity and envisioning Singapore as a Malayan socialist state. However, these terms were only loosely defined, and lacked a clear consensus on their exact meaning. At the time, Singaporeans did not yet see themselves as an independent nation, perceiving Singapore primarily as a British colony. This lack of clarity led Malayan nationalists to struggle with establishing fundamental structures for the country, resulting in conflicts that would shape modern Singaporean nationalism. These conflicts stemmed from four major societal divisions: (1) race, (2) class, (3) language and culture, and (4) the meaning of self-determination.

To examine Malayan national identity in Singapore, Dr. Thum presents a case study illustrating how colonialism shaped the country into a plural society, with most citizens being descendants of Chinese, Malay, Arab, and Indian immigrants who spoke various languages from their ancestral homelands. This diversity raised the challenge of building a cohesive state among people who did not share a common language. The Malayan Left thus advocated adopting Malay as the national language to foster a sense of shared identity.

This was one of the few aspects of Singaporean national identity that found broad agreement. To further address identity, the Malayan Left advocated for creating a new national identity through a cultural fusion of Singapore's diverse communities, based on shared experiences of anti-colonial struggle and aspirations for nationhood. They believed that this new identity could only be realized through constant negotiation and the resolution of differences among Singapore's various cultural groups.

However, the Lee Kuan Yew-led faction within the Malayan Left opposed the idea of cultural fusion, arguing that it would take too long to realize and offered no guarantee of success. Instead, they proposed that the state should define the foundation of Singapore's multi-ethnic identity and impose it on the population, suggesting this approach would be faster and more likely to succeed. Other members of the Malayan Left countered, contending that such an imposition would be anti-democratic, ultimately reflecting only the identity of the elites who controlled the state.

This fundamental disagreement led to a split among the three prominent Indian intellectuals within the Malayan Left: Sandrasegaran Woodhull, Devan Nair, and James Puthucheary. Woodhull argued that, despite its imperfections and potential failure, cultural fusion was the only politically viable path. Nair, concerned about a possible Chinese-majority dominance of Singapore's Malayan national identity, supported Lee Kuan Yew's vision of a strong, state-imposed identity. Puthucheary, though empathetic to both perspectives, recognized the limitations of cultural fusion and viewed a state-imposed identity as a form of colonialism. This division, despite the shared ethnic and educational backgrounds of the intellectuals, illustrates the complex challenges of defining Singapore's Malayan identity.

To contextualize this, Dr. Thum presented the summary of the data which was collected from the forum attendees prior to starting his presentation, The survey questions were framed to explore the forum audience's differing views and understanding of their national identities. The responses revealed internal contradictions, with some participants offering conflicting answers to related questions—underscoring the complexity and fluidity of identity in postcolonial societies.

He then turned to a case study on systemic discrimination in Singapore, tracing its roots to British colonial rule. Under this system, anyone outside the British elite faced exclusion, but ethnic Chinese Singaporeans—despite being the majority—were particularly targeted. British authorities viewed Chinese language and culture as inherently subversive, fearing they might serve as conduits for revolutionary ideas from mainland China. This colonial suspicion laid the groundwork for enduring structures of discrimination that persisted beyond independence.

In the 1950s, British colonial authorities actively undermined Chinese-language education in Singapore by underfunding Chinese-language schools. Some ethnic-linguistic communities in Singapore even supported gaining societal advantages over the Chinese-speaking communities. They believed that only by offsetting the dominance of ethnically Chinese Singaporeans—who formed the majority and wealthiest segment of the population—could true equality be achieved in Singapore. This stance, however, was unacceptable to Chinese-speaking communities, who saw it as a continuation of colonial discrimination. While Dr. Thum acknowledged the concerns of Singapore's minority ethnic-linguistic communities regarding potential domination by the Chinese majority, he cautioned that addressing discrimination with further discrimination could create new layers of resentment between diverse cultural groups.

To illustrate these dynamics, Dr. Thum presented data gathered from forum attendees who had responded to questions on racial, ethnic, and linguistic discrimination. Like the earlier responses on national identity, these answers revealed sharply opposing positions.

He then introduced his third case study, focusing on the question of building a democratic society in Singapore. He posed the question: Is it enough for

a society to be ruled by its own citizens rather than by a colonial power to be considered democratic? He discussed that, for Lee Kuan Yew, the answer was yes—a society could be considered democratic if it was ruled by its own citizens, even when that rule involved oppressive policies.

Dr. Thum suggested that Lee Kuan Yew's perspective was shaped by his elite economic background and Cambridge education, which insulated him from the harsh colonial and economic oppression faced by others under British rule. This privileged position informed Lee's embrace of strongman governance, rooted in the belief that he could resolve Singapore's problems more effectively without external interference. In contrast, members of the Malayan Left—many of whom had experienced direct colonial discrimination—challenged this view. For them, democracy meant more than local control; it required genuine self-determination and the protection of civil liberties.

To put this principle into action, the Malayan Left adopted what Dr. Thum calls an "associational democracy" model, which encouraged people to organize around mutual interests. These groups sought to bridge their differences to create a cohesive national consensus or manifesto for governance. According to Dr. Thum, associational democracy represented the Malayan Left's vision of a government rooted in self-determination, bringing together Singaporean society.

Although associational democracy was a gradual and, sometimes, uncertain process, it ultimately succeeded for the PAP (the party representing members of the Malayan Left), who won a landslide victory in the 1959 elections with Lee Kuan Yew as prime minister. However, within a year, Lee began to implement policies reminiscent of British colonial rule. He favored elite governance, rejected calls for transparency, imprisoned former political colleagues without fair trials, and disregarded the popular will.

Dr. Thum then showed another set of data similar to the previous two case studies, which showed answers from the attendees in response to questions about democracy and self-determination. Unlike in the previous two case studies, the responses for the questions showed overall agreement to a certain position. Reflecting on the challenges of decolonization in Singapore, he discussed that former colonies such as Singapore are "arbitrary territories3" where different groups of people, cultures, and languages from other parts

of the world have since coexisted with each other because of colonialism. Consequently, during the post-colonial era, these differences soon became the main points of contention to Singaporean efforts of decolonization, nationalism, and nationhood. For Dr. Thum, these contentions led to schisms similar to what he discussed in his case studies about Singapore.

Today, schisms related to race, culture, and language are still a central challenge for Singapore's decolonization. Dr. Thum also used the data he collected from his case studies to prove how difficult it is to navigate the creation of Singaporean nationalism due to mutually opposing viewpoints. The Malayan Left attempted to instill the model of associational democracy to address these in a politically acceptable manner. Yet, it was Lee Kuan Yew's strong state and authoritarian model that eventually restrained Singaporean schisms on nationalism during the decolonization period of the 1950s and 1960s. Lee Kuan Yew's model, which is distinctive in its repressive policies against political self-expression and self-determination, continues to be perpetrated by the PAP in modern Singaporean society.

Dr. Thum presented the extensive history of global movements, including nationalism, socialism, and decolonization, and addressed complex, thought-provoking questions relevant to post-colonial societies. Specifically, he examined how nations such as Singapore and the Philippines can navigate post-colonial landscapes shaped by racial and ethnic discrimination. He highlighted the difficulty of establishing democratic societies amidst enduring colonial legacies and the persistence of contemporary forms of imperialism, particularly within Southeast Asia. His discourse challenged the audience to reflect on whether true democratic societies can emerge in contexts where colonial histories continue to influence the present.

Book Review

Professor Ramon "Bomen" Guillermo
Director, UP Center for International Studies

■ **Figure 2.** Prof. Bomen gives his insight on how Singapore's experience is similar to the Philippines. Photo by AltDev team.

Prof. Ramon "Bomen" Guillermo is the director of the Center for International Studies (CIS), University of the Philippines Diliman where he teaches subjects on Southeast Asia and Europe. His current research projects are on the transmission, dissemination, reception, and translation of radical texts and ideas in Southeast Asia using techniques and approaches from translation studies and digital humanities. He is the author of several books which include *Translation and Revolution: A Study of Jose Rizal's Guillermo Tell* (Ateneo De Manila University Press, 2009), *Pook at Paninindigan: Kritika ng Pantayong Pananaw* (UP Press, 2013), and the novel *Ang Makina ni Mang Turing* (UP Press, 2013).[4]

4 From https://ac.upd.edu.ph/index.php/news-announcements/3229-democratic-governance-future-university-up-diliman-forum and https://forsea.co/author/ramong/

Prof. Guillermo opened by praising Dr. Thum's work as a significant contribution, one that provides insights relevant to the Philippine experience. He specifically highlighted the parallels of the cultural, linguistic, and political challenges faced by the Philippines and Singapore. The review was framed in connection with the book's themes to a particular historical period, emphasizing the importance of Nationalism and Decolonisation in Singapore: The Malayan Generation, 1953–1963 in Philippine discourse.

Prof. Guillermo shared an anecdote from his own research in Malaysia, noting his surprise at an aspect of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which was founded in 1930 and connected to the broader Southeast Asian communist movement. Despite its "Malayan" identity, the MCP was predominantly Chinese in membership, with nearly all its literature, including novels, articles, and newspapers, published in Chinese. This raised a critical question: What truly made the party "Malayan" if it functioned primarily in the Chinese language with a largely Chinese membership? This question, he noted, points to the complex cultural and political dynamics that Dr. Thum's book seeks to explore.

The term "Malay" and its historical layers were critically unpacked, revealing its colonial entanglements. British authorities introduced "Malaya" in the 19th century as an exonym for a territory under their control, adapting it from "Melayu"—a term that traditionally denotes ethnic identity rather than political geography. Meanwhile, the French used "Malaysi" to refer to a broader region encompassing present-day Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand, indiscriminately labeling all inhabitants as "Malay." These divergent usages underscore how colonial powers imposed geographic and political meanings onto a term rooted in ethnic identity.

This conceptual backdrop framed the discussion on the Philippines' unique trajectory of decolonization, which unfolded nearly fifty years before Singapore's independence. Prof. Guillermo highlighted Apolinario Mabini's reflections on Malaya, emphasizing the Philippines' role in leading Asia's first anti-colonial revolution—a movement so influential that neighboring countries looked to it for guidance in their own quests for independence.

The Philippine Revolution was then contrasted with nationalist movements in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's insights,

Prof. Guillermo noted that Indonesian nationalism was deeply shaped by the language of socialism and communism—ideologies central to Sukarno's vision. As Dr. Thum had earlier explained, the Malayan Left was similarly influenced by these ideological currents, illustrating the varied political imaginations that animated Southeast Asia's struggles for liberation.

However, Prof. Guillermo highlighted a significant difference in the Philippine case. When the Philippines began its revolution, ideas of socialism, communism, and anarchism had not yet entered the nationalist discourse. While Mabini may have heard of these ideologies, they were not part of the Philippine nationalist narrative at the time, as the Russian Revolution and other socialist movements had not yet unfolded. Prof. Guillermo's analysis underscored how, despite shared anti-colonial sentiment across Southeast Asia, the ideological frameworks underpinning each nationalist movement were shaped by the distinct historical contexts of each country.

Mabini's profound understanding of the revolutionary spirit was emphasized as well, seeing it as a catalyst for liberation movements throughout Asia and as the foundation for a collective Malayan identity. Prof. Guillermo referenced an interview with General Arthur MacArthur, who, upon capturing Mabini, described him as the most intelligent Philippine revolutionary. MacArthur interpreted Mabini's vision as a "dream of a Malay confederacy" that extended beyond Luzon or even the Philippine archipelago, imagining a union rooted in shared ancestry and cultural heritage across Southeast Asia.

However, he clarified that while MacArthur viewed Mabini's ideas through a racial lens, he believed that Mabini's concept of Malaya was not confined to race. For Mabini, the notion of Malaya encompassed a broader socio-political vision for emancipation. Prof. Guillermo read a powerful excerpt from Mabini, in which he articulated the true mission of the Philippine Revolution: "[to] keep alive and burning in Oceania the torch of freedom and civilization," so that its light might "illuminate the path to social emancipation" for the oppressed "Malayan race."

He explained that this was not a utopian fantasy, but a bold critique of colonial empires. Mabini warned that colonial powers—England, Russia, France, Germany, Holland, and Portugal—rightly feared the contagious spirit of the Philippine Revolution. He believed that the revolution held a force potent

enough to disrupt and destabilize the imperial interests of these powers in Asia. Mabini's revolutionary ideology urged Filipinos to view themselves not only as a nation but as part of a larger Malayan identity united by a shared struggle for freedom.

Prof. Guillermo further examined Mabini's complex interpretation of "Malay." He explained that Mabini did not define Malay identity by language. While Malay was not spoken in the Philippines, Mabini proposed in his 1899 draft of the Philippine Constitution that English—the language of British Malaya—should eventually become the national language of the Philippines. This indicated that his vision of "Malay" extended beyond linguistic unity.

Mabini instead viewed "Malay" as a symbol of universal anti-colonial struggle. He saw the Philippine Revolution as part of a broader "Malayan revolution," a movement that was inherently contagious and posed a threat to colonial empires. For Mabini, being "Malay" meant embracing the ideals of anti-colonialism and challenging imperial systems globally, elevating the term beyond racial or national boundaries.

Prof. Guillermo emphasized the symbolic language employed by Filipino revolutionaries in 1899, particularly their formation of military units named *Columnas Volantes de la Federacion Malaya* (Flying Columns of the Malayan Federation) in Cavite and Batangas. This naming reflected a revolutionary consciousness of a "Malayan Federation" decades before any formalized concept of such a federation emerged in British Malaya.

Mabini's interpretation of "Malay" also anticipated later ideological debates. As Dr. Thum noted, the term remains contested in regions like Singapore and Malaysia, with no singular or settled meaning even today. Filipino revolutionaries of the late 19th century laid the groundwork for these debates, envisioning "Malay" not merely as an ethnic label but as a potent, inclusive symbol of anti-colonial solidarity across Asia.

In his review, Prof. Guillermo emphasized how Mabini's concept of "Malay" foreshadowed ongoing debates about identity and resistance throughout Southeast Asia. Filipino revolutionaries in the late 19th century, particularly Mabini, saw "Malay" not just as a racial or national identity but as a symbol of collective anti-colonial struggle. This interpretation connected the Philippine

Revolution to a larger Asian movement, suggesting that true independence required collaboration among all colonized peoples. Mabini's idea of a "Malay" identity was thus inclusive and universal, representing an early expression of solidarity among nations fighting European colonial rule.

In conclusion, this vision of "Malay" as a symbol of universal resistance gave Filipino revolutionaries a unique perspective, one of the first to advocate for an international approach to decolonization. Mabini understood that a single nation could not defeat imperial forces alone; true freedom would require a united effort across borders.

Open Forum

Asst. Prof. Mon Sy thanked Dr. Guillermo for not only reviewing the book, but also for anchoring the discussion in the context of Philippine history and the Filipino effort to relate the broader Malayan movement to the Malayan Left, as mentioned by Dr. Thum.

ON THE SEPARATION OF SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA IN 1965

■ **Figure 3.** Prof. Edru Abraham asked a question about the separation of Singapore and Malaysia in 1965. Photo from AltDev team.

Prof. Edru Abraham from the Department of Art Studies raised a question on the reaction of the Singaporean socialists before the split in 1965 when Singapore separated from Malaysia. He asked, “How did they react to that? We knew about Lee Kuan Yew’s reaction but that is a reaction from the elite at the top. How did the many socialist organizations react to that split?”

In response, Dr. Thum analyzed the complex political dynamics surrounding Singapore's 1965 separation from Malaysia, focusing particularly on the emotional toll this decision took on Singapore’s Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew.

He noted that while Lee famously appeared in tears on national television, this moment reflected both his genuine emotional reaction and the immense strain he endured during the prolonged negotiations over issues such as representation, revenue, and Singapore's autonomy within the federation. He added that Lee Kuan Yew was under significant stress at the time, relying on sedatives to sleep at night and stimulants during the day. Ultimately, it was Lee Kuan Yew's persistence that drove the separation forward, as the union proved untenable. He and Malaysia's Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, found themselves locked in an unsustainable power dynamic. He emphasized that the separation revealed fundamental challenges in the federal structure, which limited Singapore's political rights and representation outside its own borders.

Dr. Thum also discussed how the Malayan Left in Singapore had long anticipated the instability of the union. Figures like Lim Chin Siong had warned that the federation was designed to marginalize leftist movements, with Malaysia's constitution and policies restricting Singapore's political freedoms to maintain control over its socialist-leaning population. As was explained in his book, Malaysia was effectively a construct designed to undermine and eventually dismantle Singapore's Malayan Left. Tunku Abdul Rahman had been reluctant to include Singapore in the federation because he feared that left-wing support could shift the political balance against his government. He was particularly concerned that the talent and charisma of Lim Chin Siong could unite the federation's left-wing and Chinese parties, forming a coalition that might threaten his own political power.

Reluctantly, Tunku Abdul Rahman agreed to the formation of Malaysia, pressured by the British, who warned of a potential communist threat from Singapore. The British essentially incentivized Tunku's agreement by offering him North Borneo and Sarawak, along with their abundant natural resources. Yet, Dr. Thum raised a critical question: "Can you create a country on the premise that one-tenth of your population should be systematically suppressed by the majority?" He emphasized that the very design of the Malaysian constitution entrenched inequality, granting different rights to Singaporeans compared to citizens from North Borneo, Sabah, and Sarawak. While the people of these other regions enjoyed the same rights as those in the Federation, Singaporeans could exercise their full rights only within their own territory. For instance, Singaporeans were unable to vote once they left

Singapore— a restriction that Lim Chin Siong criticized. Dr. Thum argued that it was inconceivable to form a unified nation while treating an entire segment of its citizens with deep suspicion and limiting their rights in the national constitution.

Dr. Thum explained how Singapore's underrepresentation in Malaysia's National Parliament was criticized by Lim Chin Siong who repeatedly argued that a nation could not function with citizens holding disparate political rights, asserting that either all citizens should share equal rights, or the country should split into two distinct nations.

Following Malaysia's failure to hold together, the Malayan Left called for a socialist, independent Singapore. However, the leftist movement faced severe repression; its top leaders, including anyone with notable talent, were arrested and detained. By 1966-1967, the left had been effectively erased from Parliament, and by the 1968 elections, the (PAP) achieved a clean sweep, as any remaining (MCP) members had already been detained. This suppression prevented the left from capitalizing on Singapore's newfound independence. Dr. Thum emphasized that, by this time, Lee Kuan Yew's administration had effectively stifled opposition across the political spectrum.

He further elaborated that the Malayan Left saw the separation as inevitable, criticizing the unequal constitutional treatment afforded to different regions. He explained that Tunku Abdul Raman's political motivations were driven by the electoral dynamics in Singapore, where the population leaned heavily toward socialist parties. In practice, the Malaysian constitution failed to serve its citizens equitably, assigning uneven rights and creating a sense of alienation among Singaporeans. While Singapore's left-wing movement sought to position itself as a socialist state after independence, the intense political repression ensured it could not capitalize on this transition. In conclusion, the combination of constitutional inequality and Lee Kuan Yew's crackdown on dissent solidified PAP dominance in an independent Singapore, ultimately eliminating leftist influence.

ON IMPACTS OF SINGAPORE'S FORMATION PROCESS

A question was asked whether Singapore's formation process affected the formulation of laws such as the Sedition Act, Internal Security Act, Public Order Act, and FICA.

In response, Dr. Thum began by tracing the origins of the Internal Security Act (ISA) in Singapore, describing it as a direct descendant of the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance passed in 1955. This ordinance itself was based on emergency regulations enacted in 1948, following the escalation of violence by the MCP. The British had declared an emergency, concluding that a peaceful path to independence for Malaya was unlikely and that it would need to be fought for. In this context, emergency regulations were implemented, severely curtailing fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, assembly, and the right to organize. Dr. Thum noted that these basic freedoms, which are often taken for granted in countries like the Philippines, were largely absent in Singapore and Malaysia from the outset of the emergency in 1948.

He argued that, in many ways, Singapore never truly enjoyed these rights, as the laws that suppressed these freedoms became entrenched in the legal system even after the country gained independence. These regulations were not simply temporary measures; they were carried over into the statutes, solidifying their permanence. In 1963, the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance was renamed the Internal Security Act to align with the newly formed Federation of Malaysia.

He explained that this was part of a broader legal trajectory, where laws initially intended to address specific crises—such as the fight against secret societies or the communist threat—became permanent fixtures. He pointed out that the Criminal Law Temporary Provisions Act of 1955, originally aimed at addressing the issue of secret societies, continued to be renewed every five years, much like the ISA, which was meant to be temporary until the Communist Party was dealt with. Yet both laws remain in effect today.

Despite their initial "temporary" nature, Dr. Thum emphasized that these laws are still renewed every five years, reflecting the persistent belief in the need to preemptively safeguard the nation from perceived subversion. This

mentality, which assumes that there are always forces conspiring against the government, deeply shapes contemporary Singaporean legislation. He drew parallels between the Internal Security Act and modern laws like the Public Order Act, the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA), and the POFMA (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act), all of which reflect the same underlying logic of counter-insurgency and subversion prevention. These laws, Dr. Thum argued, are spiritual descendants of the ISA, created in the context of decolonization and the ongoing suspicion of subversive elements.

One key feature of this climate of suspicion, according to Dr. Thum, was the red-tagging of the Malayan left. He described how individuals and groups were often accused of being communists, despite the lack of substantive evidence to support such claims. These individuals, who were largely socialists and anti-colonial, were targeted because of their political beliefs, and the term "communist" was used as a broad, generalizing label. This red-tagging became a powerful tool to discredit and suppress left-wing movements, a practice that resonates with what is seen in the Philippines today. Dr. Thum highlighted how this tactic was pervasive, describing it as a means of "putting the red cap on someone's head," effectively marking them as enemies of the state.

He also pointed out that, in Singapore, political assemblies and processions are illegal without a permit, and the definition of what constitutes a political assembly or procession is extraordinarily broad. According to the law, even one person publicly expressing a political opinion is considered an illegal assembly. For example, if someone leaves their house wearing a shirt with a political slogan, they are immediately breaking the law. This, Dr. Thum explained, reflects the mindset of the PAP government, which seeks to eliminate any potential loopholes that could allow political dissent to flourish. By criminalizing political expression in such a sweeping manner, the government ensures it has a legal basis for cracking down on opposition in any form.

Concluding his remarks, Dr. Thum observed that the mindset behind the emergency regulations of the 1940s and 1950s persists in Singapore's current political climate. The continuity of this approach can be seen in the leadership of the PAP, particularly with the impending transition of power to Lee Kuan Yew's son as Prime Minister. This succession, he argued, represents the

continuation of a political philosophy rooted in the "temporary emergency" period, where the preservation of state security was prioritized over civil liberties. The result is a legal and political system that remains heavily shaped by the same logic of preemptive security measures that began under colonial rule and persisted through the decolonization process.

Closing Remarks

■ **Figure 4.** From left to right, Dr. Bomen of UPCIS, ED Rosalie Hall of UP CIDS, Dr. Thum (main discussant and author of the book), Dr. Ed of UP CIDS AltDev, and Asst. Prof Mon Sy of UP CIDS AltDev and moderator of the book launch. Photo by AltDev Team.

■ **Figure 5.** Photo documentation of the organizers, speakers, and some of the attendees of the book launch. Photo by AltDev team.

Asst. Prof. Mon Sy shared his insights on how the counter-insurgency campaign serves as a common thread across Southeast Asia, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. After expressing gratitude to those who participated, he concluded

by referencing Prof. Guillermo's earlier statement, saying, "Indeed, as Dr. Guillermo mentioned, this study of nationalism and decolonization in Singapore is both novel and necessary. It offers a compelling analysis of Singapore's history of independence struggles, incorporating linguistic, cultural, and political perspectives."

CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Established in 1985 by University of the Philippines (UP) President Edgardo J. Angara, the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) is the policy research unit of the University that connects disciplines and scholars across the several units of the UP System. It is mandated to encourage collaborative and rigorous research addressing issues of national significance by supporting scholars and securing funding, enabling them to produce outputs and recommendations for public policy.

The UP CIDS currently has twelve research programs that are clustered under the areas of education and capacity building, development, and social, political, and cultural studies. It publishes policy briefs, monographs, webinar/conference/forum proceedings, and the Philippine Journal for Public Policy, all of which can be downloaded free from the UP CIDS website.

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