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S. R. Nathan [Singapore, President]

S. R. Nathan

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Interviewee: **SR NATHAN (SELLAPAN RAMANATHAN NATHAN)**

Interviewer: Lim Lai Cheng

Date: 12 February 2015

Location: Singapore

00:00:19

[Lai Cheng](#)

Thank you Mr Nathan for agreeing to do this interview for us. It's really a conversation, and we're at the Institute for Societal Leadership, and that's why we're keen to hear from senior societal leaders over this series of interviews. Can you tell us which were some of the key events that shaped you?

00:00:36

[S R Nathan](#)

I'm not sure whether there are any specific events that shaped me. As you went along in your career, you face the challenges of each job, because I was not trained for any of them. I didn't have a higher qualification, so for me it was learning on the job. I suppose each of those jobs left their mark on you. You learn from them, you learn from the mistakes you made, you learn from the successes you achieved, but you never know how much each of it had an impact on you.

00:01:21

[Lai Cheng](#)

What touched me most when reading your book was your early life and the struggles. Do you think that has made you a very different person than if you had a comfortable life, or a regular life in your early days?

00:01:35

[S R Nathan](#)

No, I think... having such an early childhood, you learnt about the good things in life, the bad things in life, you learnt about good people, you learnt about bad people. You learnt about things you should not do, and which others were doing... or misleading you to do. So, you grew up ahead of your times. Then also in the early period, you went through the Japanese Occupation, and you also learnt from that, because you saw people in the raw. People were exploiting each other, people were putting some into trouble; others were saving others. So, you come across the reality of life face to face.

00:02:28

[Lai Cheng](#)

Given what you've seen of the Japanese Occupation... humanity, the good and the bad... has that caused you to have more faith in human kind or less?

00:02:37

[S R Nathan](#)

I can't say I have more faith in human kind. I learnt what is real, what one can expect and what... should not place too much of faith in it. Nothing specific... as I said, you saw human kind at its best, and its worst, during the occupation and as a young boy it impacted on your mind, what to avoid, what not to.

00:03:06

[Lai Cheng](#)

Which was the toughest portfolio you had in your career?

00:03:10

[S R Nathan](#)

Each one depended on the times. What was toughest at a certain stage was overtaken by some new problems. So, you can't specifically say a job was the toughest, because we were all acting with little or no experience. The leaders were also learning on the job. We were learning on the job. We were not an independent country before. We didn't have any of the institutions that countries had before they attained certain nationhood. We were just caught overnight, and with no support services, no experienced people. We were really struggling to do what we had to do, not knowing whether what we were doing was likely to succeed, or likely to become more problematic. That unpredictability was one of the jobs that you found in the early years of our independence.

00:04:18

[Lai Cheng](#)

Can you give us one example of when you had this challenge, and you had to make a decision?

00:04:26

[S R Nathan](#)

Yes, we were handling the crisis about the time of the two Indonesian KKO's (Marine Corps), who were under trial, and they had exhausted all the opportunities of appeal through Privy Council and others, and there was a tremendous amount of tension in Jakarta and our embassy was sacked. But at the time, there was the problem of repatriating them after they had paid with their lives.

One night, the Indonesian Ambassador came to the foreign ministry at about 1 am and said, "You must return the body to us, because we are going to place it in the embassy for the people to pay their respects." Now at 1 am, I didn't have the chance to go and consult anybody, so straight away I told him, "As far as I'm concerned, they paid their penalty in Singapore, it's under our law and we don't

do such honours for them. If you want, you can take the bodies out, and once you are outside Singapore territory, you can do what you want."

Of course, he was angry, but I said, "No, that's our position." He used a lot of businessmen from Chinatown, and others who had Indonesian connections to threaten me that there would be wider repercussions for this. I said, "I don't care, that's my decision." So, next morning when Dr Goh came to the scene, I told him, "This is what I have done. It was too late for me to consult you at night." He said, "No, you're right, that's the right stand." But until the stand was taken, the repercussions on that stand were unclear. This is the kind of tense situation.

00:06:43

[Lai Cheng](#)

Have there been clashes where you feel a certain decision was the right one, or that we have to do the right thing, but your superior, or whoever you were working for at that time did not come to that same conclusion and took a different decision?

00:06:59

[S R Nathan](#)

I'm fortunate enough that many of them were accepted. I can't pick on one event where my superiors had rejected mine and overruled. I'm sure there must have been many occasions where what I had suggested were modified, or changed, or rejected. But even if they were rejected, I had the good fortune of working with superiors, who always explained why what I was proposing was not a good idea. Maybe there was an alternative. That was what we learnt from the founding leaders, they always listened to us, and then later told us why it could not be done, why it should not be done, what was the other alternative. So, they were always one step ahead of all of us.

00:08:03

[Lai Cheng](#)

Who do you think most influenced you out of all these people?

00:08:08

[S R Nathan](#)

At different times. Dr Goh, while I worked in MINDEF (Ministry of Defence) with him. Mr Rajaratnam, a man of ideas, philosophy and tremendous patience. He was never flustered by things. PM Lee, Lee Kuan Yew, from his passion, with which he pursued objectives for the improvement of Singapore, for attaining what was needed and taking very tough decisions, not popular ones. Each one must have had impacted on me in one way or another, but all three of them made me feel that I was walking the road with them, and what they were striving to do was also my obligation.

It was a tremendously... what shall I say... stressful times which they were going through, and you working for them, it felt the impact of it. Sometimes they were impatient, you had to understand they were impatient not because they don't like you, but because of the circumstances that had to be overcome. So, you experienced from that, that we were walking a common course, and we were in that time of history, whether the same circumstances will prevail now, I'm not sure. But whatever it is, it is an experience.

00:10:03

[Lai Cheng](#)

You mentioned that time of history, and I remember what Mr Rajaratnam said that on my IC I'm an Indian, right? But I don't care if you call me an Eskimo or an Indian, as long as you consider me a good man. That's his view of the world, that it's not about race. It's about an all-embracing ethos of nationalities working towards good, and that was very good for Singapore at that stage of nation building. When did you feel this sense of being Singaporean?

00:10:40

[S R Nathan](#)

We were subsumed under the Malayan identity, and of course we never called ourselves Singaporeans. We said we were from Singapore, we were from Malacca, from Penang, but we were all Malaysians. Then after the war, when citizenship was formally introduced and became a subject to be addressed, then you called yourself Singaporeans, and cut off from Malayan Peninsular at independence, that Singaporean identity became more... much more impacting on us. The first was when the idea of a Malayan - we each, the Chinese, the Indians born here, we called ourselves Malaysians. - Now, once that was rejected and Malay supremacy was enforced after the war, we were disappointed. We still strove to get back to Malaya, even as, after the PAP (People's Action Party), government came, it was on the manifesto about merger and all that. So that was what it was. Then we... that identity was lost. Then we got our Malaysian identity. Again, in the Malaysian identity, we were not a prominent member of that. Race was still an important factor. Then when separation came, we all, we didn't look at the Malayan identity, we started to look at ourselves as Singaporeans.

00:12:39

[Lai Cheng](#)

So it was a natural transition. Do you regret the separation? Do you think we could have done better being part of the federation even now?

00:12:50

[S R Nathan](#)

I can't, we can't regret it. If we had failed after separation, I would have regretted it, but we succeeded beyond our imagination, so we didn't feel sorry.

00:13:07

[Lai Cheng](#)

I remembered an episode you were talking about admiring Subhas Chandra Bose, right? Because he was such a charismatic speaker, and he was also trying to also ask, "Would you join in the Indian sort of revolt or fight?" What kind of leader do you think he was that attracted you to say this is an admirable person at that time of that meeting?

00:13:50

[S R Nathan](#)

I was a long distance away, but I had never seen or heard of any person, local, Chinese or Indian or Malay with that kind of oratory, with that kind of depth of knowledge. He didn't have a sheet of paper, and he was there before the microphone, the field of hundreds. He was narrating Indian history, which I had never learnt from the British. All the atrocities they committed, and all that. The way he spoke, there was not a single sheet of paper. It impressed me to no end. No schoolmaster, nobody could have impressed me with that kind... and he had the... and he was speaking in English. What was more, the hundreds of people who were on the field, were people who did not know English. They were all tongue-tied listening. I was quite impressed as a young boy, that he inspired you. After that, all such persons, even Soekarno with his oratory may... sometimes may not stand to reason, but it impressed me because their words moved you. There was a bond that developed from listening to them. So, that's what it was.

00:15:06

[Lai Cheng](#)

Which were the Asian leaders who feature highly on your list of...

00:15:10

[S R Nathan](#)

You'll be surprised. I began with Chiang Kai-shek.

00:15:15

[Lai Cheng](#)

Chiang Kai-shek?

00:15:16

[S R Nathan](#)

He had gone to Whampoa Military Academy and all that, and he was standing up to fight against the Japanese, and he was able to mobilise people. Although I did not know at that time the poverty of China. But because of... impacted by him, I also began to find out more. He was one. Bose was here, and Nehru, Nehru had

come here. Soekarno, I have seen him from a distance. So, like that you have seen quite a number of them.

00:15:55

[Lai Cheng](#)

What aspect of them are you... were you sort of struck by, for people like Nehru, Soekarno? Is it their openness to ideas, or just the charisma?

00:16:07

[S R Nathan](#)

No, like Nehru, he had been educated in England, and yet he was fighting the British and was going to jail several times. He could have lived a very comfortable life instead of which he did this. So, these things impacted me. That people who were making a sacrifice and striving to achieve something. I could not at that early stage understand what it was they were trying to achieve... this... All I knew was they were fighting the British, or fighting other powers, and they had some aim. What exactly was their... independence was a word, but I didn't understand its meaning. But there was something about them. They had a purpose. My first lesson on purpose was reading about them, listening to their stories.

00:17:13

[Lai Cheng](#)

Back to around our region in our own backyard, are there leaders in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Southeast Asian, whom...

00:17:20

[S R Nathan](#)

Yes, PM Lee who was...

00:17:23

[Lai Cheng](#)

Definitely...

00:17:24

[S R Nathan](#)

...was definitely so. He was fighting against the odds. One of his greatest contributions, he gave strength to the Chinese in Singapore, to stand up against the Communists. They could have easily obliged the Chinese and gone along with the Communists. No, he managed to persuade them to stand up, that they are different, and we are different, their purpose was not our purpose, and he gave us the courage to stand. That is why today we are able to stand up with dignity. Otherwise, it would have been so easy to please the Chinese and join them.

Likewise, there's also a problem. Others will do the same to us. The Indians will do the same, the Malaysians will do the same, but whether we are prepared to stand up by ourselves, and if you know at the time of independence what was said was that we have to protect our sovereignty, and we want to be left alone to be ourselves, and that is still a very important element in our political life. Today a lot of people are saying we should not do this, we should not do that, forgetting the fact that if we don't stand for what we believe in, then we will be cowed by all these other ideas.

00:19:04

[Lai Cheng](#)

That reminds me then of ASEAN. You were there at MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) during the formation, the drafting of the ASEAN agreement. Were there conflicts between the five leaders? With Malaysia, with Indonesia, they're not on the best terms. We'd just left Malaysia, were there some strong voices, and how was that kind of conflict resolved to get ASEAN started?

00:19:28

[S R Nathan](#)

No, before ASEAN was formed, the effort to work on it came with Indonesia, and they had an officer assigned to bring out a draft, and then for that to be worked on, and for all five to come to a common consensus.

In the early... in the first... in that phase before we went to Bangkok for the inaugural meeting, the draft had... most of it was agreeable, but the one element there which Singapore was not inclined to support... and that element was that we wanted all foreign powers to leave us alone, and that military bases should not be established in our countries - foreign military bases.

Now our stand was certainly against that, because we were fighting the Communists, because we needed to stand on our own and it would take time before we could do that. But as long as the threat remained, the British presence in Singapore, in Malaya was for our benefit.

Initially, there was a thought about getting that matter sorted out, but there was no possibility of an agreement. So, the Foreign Minister, Mr Rajaratnam decided he will leave it and go to Bangkok for the meeting, and he felt that Thailand, which is (in a) treaty relationship with the United States, and the Philippines which was in a treaty relationship and had a powerful American presence in the Philippines, he felt that when it comes to discussing, these two will oppose it, because they were very much entrenched in their relationship.

But to our horror, when we went to Bangkok, these two, instead of fighting it, decided to support it. So, we were left alone. Mr Rajaratnam, who was at the meeting, only the leaders were there, we were all outside the meeting, he called me, and he said, "Pack up and let's go." He went to the door when Adam Malik

stopped him, and said, "Come back, Rajaratnam, let's talk about it." And Rajaratnam, I have never seen him in that angry mood, told him, and told all the other ministers, "We are fighting for our lives. The Vietnam War was going ahead, and that's the purpose why we are planning this ASEAN gathering," that time you know, "our gathering. And you are asking us to dismantle the bases. How can you expect us to do that? Who is going to replace them for our defence? You know how vulnerable we are, and yet you would want to abolish it. I'd rather not sign the agreement." Then we went back as well. He persuaded Mr Rajaratnam to come back to the table, and they sorted (it) out, then we were... some of us were called in to redraft the portion where it referred to that. That was a critical moment, and Mr Rajaratnam had the courage to stand up against his four colleagues.

00:23:30

[Lai Cheng](#)

He was persuasive, courageous and persuasive.

00:23:34

[S R Nathan](#)

Yes.

00:23:34

[Lai Cheng](#)

Do you think there's a certain style you have seen amongst Asian leaders that is very different from how a Western leader would have approached a situation? Is there a certain ASEAN, Asian style of leadership?

00:23:47

[S R Nathan](#)

Western leaders use two weapons, religion and the sword. With that, they dominated Asia, so there's no leadership quality there. So that model is not a model for us in Asia, and we're trying to avoid it.

00:24:10

[Lai Cheng](#)

So what is the Asian way?

00:24:13

[S R Nathan](#)

I don't know. I don't think there's an Asian way. Each one will have to grow in his own given circumstances, and he has to find. The Indians still struggling to find an Indian model, because they accepted the British Constitution... has state and the federal in the centre, and they're sometimes very much tied because of that

they can't make any momentum. On paper it looks very nice, what one should do what should not do, but when you're dealing with human affairs, these things don't count. They come as they happen, and you have to find solutions. India will find their own solution; maybe it'll take a longer time. China has found a certain solution after Mao and that's also beginning to have its problems. Japanese had another one. So, each one will grow in their own circumstances, and I don't think you can have a model. If you're economically success(ful), you have a good model. If you're an economic failure, what model is there?

00:25:29

[Lai Cheng](#)

I'm going to bring you back now, almost at the end of it. Do you worry about Singapore at all? Its future... current state?

00:25:35

[S R Nathan](#)

I don't have much time, so...

00:25:39

[Lai Cheng](#)

Because Mr Lee Kuan Yew said he feels we're still on shifting sand... foundation is not there...

00:25:45

[S R Nathan](#)

No, he's the leader. He has sensed it.

00:25:46

[Lai Cheng](#)

Do you feel it's the same way?

00:25:47

[S R Nathan](#)

No, no, I can't... I won't generalise and say I worry. All people of my generation will worry, because what has been achieved can easily fail, and because of that, there is a worry. In what form that worry will develop, why it'll develop, we do not know. It must be some people who are in their fifties, and who have still some twenty years to go at least, that they will think through, and say what is there to worry. What is the scenario that is likely to emerge that will worry you? Can we avoid that from happening? These are questions that they will have at least twenty years to work on. Not my generation.

00:26:51

[Lai Cheng](#)

So, the pioneer leaders, the approach is definitely like you said, different from the current government, because we're in a different stage of growth. What would you think is the approach, or the current style of our cabinet ministers that is very different from the early generation, which is the pioneers?

00:27:14

[S R Nathan](#)

Of course circumstances are different. What the earlier leaders were found, were one situation and one set of problems, which had to be addressed. Now today, many of the problems are municipal. They're domestic problems. They have to be addressed differently. You can't apply the approach taken by the founding fathers by the next generation of leaders. This has happened worldwide, because they were fighting for independence. It's over, then it was a matter of governance, of establishing practices and institutions. So you can't make... it's not a comparison of apple and apple.

00:27:56

[Lai Cheng](#)

What are your hopes for future leaders? What would you like to see in them?

00:28:00

[S R Nathan](#)

Circumstances will throw different leaders in different times.

00:28:05

[Lai Cheng](#)

Thank you very much, Mr Nathan, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us.