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24-1-2015

### Ramon Navaratnam [Malaysia, President of Transparency International Malaysia]

Ramon Navaratnam

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#### Citation

Navaratnam, Ramon. Ramon Navaratnam [Malaysia, President of Transparency International Malaysia]. (2015). 1-12.

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Interviewee: **RAMON NAVARATNAM**  
Interviewer: Kirpal Singh  
Date: 24 January 2015  
Location: Singapore

00:00:19

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Good morning, Tan Sri Navaratnam. It's a great pleasure to be here with you and thank you for agreeing to have this short conversation. As I look back at your very illustrious career, I wonder if you could share with us how was it like growing up in the then Federation of Malaya?

00:00:40

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

I was born in 1935, so I was in school at the Victoria Institution and this was a good, this was a premier school. We had a good education. English was the medium, and after that I went to University of Malaya in Singapore. It was a tradition of learning and having fun and thinking very much like Malaysians and later Malaysians. It was a time of great expectations, of hope, of aspiring to do your best to serve your country.

00:01:28

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now, many of your contemporaries from Edwin Thumboo, Herman Hochstadt, that group... Ngiam Tong Dow...

00:01:34

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

Ngiam Tong Dow, yes...

00:01:35

[Kirpal Singh](#)

...said that the Japanese Occupation had an indelible, left an indelible mark on all your careers and all your attitudes. Is that true and what was your experience of it?

00:01:44

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

That's very true. There was hardship. My father was working in the General Clerical Service, but there was not enough food in the house. So, they asked me whether I could sell curry puffs and I sold curry puffs, but I didn't like it. When you talk about indelible mark, the experience I had selling curry puffs ingrained in me a dislike to do business. The way people treat you, "Why your curry puffs so small? This. That. Why so high?" I couldn't take it, and my mother struggled to make curry puffs and I couldn't take it. So, I said, "I'm not going to be in business." But I then said, "I don't want to sell curry puffs." So, my father said, "Would you like to work, because we need the money, we need the rice." Everybody got a sack of rice, whether you're a little boy, or a grown-up, if you worked. So, I worked as an office boy, and the irony of life, or the blessing, the fairness in life sometimes, is that I worked as an office boy under the Japanese in the Ministry of Transport and ended up my career as the Secretary-General or the Permanent Secretary, (in the) Ministry of Transport in Malaysia.

00:03:05

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Interesting, right.

00:03:05

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

So, there were turns and twists in that. Yes, so, it taught me one thing. The hardship. You got to struggle in life. The world doesn't owe you a living. You learn to appreciate simple things. If you have a good place, all right, with some chicken curry, wow, that was a blessing. So, you are not wasteful. Till today I cannot buy something expensive, which I can do without. Because you learn the value of being frugal, of being careful and not wasteful.

00:03:44

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now that brings me into your experience of Merdeka, 1957. Can you share with us what feelings you had?

00:03:51

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

You remember, the Fajar days in Singapore, you remember the GPMS [Gabungkan Pelajar Melayu Semananjung; translation: Peninsular Malay Students Federation] and the raising of the Union Jack... that was resisted by the students because they said, "Well, we're going to get independence and this convention, Student Convention, we are having the British flag. We don't want any flag if we can't have a Malayan flag, or Singapore flag," or whatever. So, that was the feeling, the feeling of resurgence, the feeling of independence, and we followed very carefully the developments taking place in the Singapore and Malaysian front, in regard to their negotiations for independence. Tunku Abdul Rahman going to London, and up and down, and that was the feeling. Look, we are preparing ourselves now and finally when we graduate, we'll be getting jobs in the new independent Malaysia and self-governing Singapore. And so, there was a special pride, a special anticipation, a special hope, that we are equipping ourselves to serve the country.

00:05:05

[Kirpal Singh](#)

That was shared by all Malaysians, right?

00:05:06

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

Oh, yes. All Malaysians.

00:05:07

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Regardless of race, colour, religion, and all that. Now the Straits Settlements, right, the way the British had divided them, so Penang, Malacca, and Singapore were always a little bit peripheral to the central concerns of the Federation. I'm wondering whether that British kind of formulation led to some of the differences that were going to emerge more and more strongly as the years went by, because Malaya got independent in '57, Singapore became self-governing in '59, and even though there was a convergence at some point between Lee Kuan Yew and Tunku Abdul Rahman, that convergence became more and more of a divergence. Do you want to reflect briefly on that?

00:05:47

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

I think there's a difference between Singapore as part of the Straits Settlement, as opposed to Malacca and Penang. But there was a common thread, you're right. There were a lot of

people in Penang who said, “Look, we don’t want independence,” and Malacca too, and Singapore definitely. I mean, sorry, who don’t want to be here. “We want to be by ourselves, and not part of the mainstream Malay states.” So, but to a lesser extent, Malacca and Penang were one entity. But Singapore for sure, they were always different, and I think there was this feeling that they always thought they were better. Of course, it is an urban centre, and they’re a small concentrated population. They were ahead, actually, the education and their quality. So they had that sense of superiority, right or wrong, which reflected, was epitomised by Lee Kuan Yew, and I recall as a junior officer attending parliamentary sessions to take down notes, and even me at that young age, was struck by the arrogance that he showed in talking to Tunku Abdul Rahman, and our Cabinet here, when he was here in Parliament as part of Malaysia, and was very condescending, arrogant, and hurtful. I have always entertained his view that if he had been only a bit more civil, more gracious, more understanding, more aware of the sensitivities here, of a not so sophisticated society, less urbane society, I think we could have still carried on in Malaysia, benefitting all. We would have benefitted in Malaya – the Peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak, and themselves, Singapore itself, because it’s an unnatural split, I still believe.

00:08:02

[Kirpal Singh](#)

From your point of view, do you think that it was essentially unnatural because of the economic, political landscape considerations, or do you think it was unnatural in the sense that the two personalities, that were critical to this whole union, decided that they just couldn’t work together?

00:08:21

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

I think it was because Lee Kuan Yew felt that... he was a prima donna. I don’t think he found himself able to work with Malayan leadership in a somewhat secondary role. He wanted his own space, his own kingdom, and so the differences that there were... were not so fundamental. It was a personality clash in many ways, and arrogance I think on his part. I don’t think he saw long term. Unfortunately, he’s a great man I respect him a great deal, great intellect. But at that time, I don’t think he had the foresight to recognise that, “Look, let me be part of Malaysia, contribute, and make this a great country with Singapore, Peninsula Malaya, and Sabah and Sarawak.” But instead he just fought, he didn’t give ground. I mean that to me is not very statesman-like.

00:09:30

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Though, looking back, Mr. Lee himself had said that the long-term future of Singapore still belongs with, and to Malaysia so...

00:09:40

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

No, I didn't hear that. If he said that... yes. There's a contradiction in terms. He could have fought his battles from within, rather than have to do things so, and make things so difficult that people here got desperate. I think our people too could have exercised more restraint and said, "Look, this is a young Turk. Let's accommodate him, and see how we can work together, rather than just dismiss him. And you know, cutting our nose to spite our face.

00:10:10

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now independence brings with it of course a sense of self-making and self-determination, and all that. So, not to make the conversation too serious, some of the persons from your vintage at the University of Malaya in Singapore said that one of the big, perhaps jokingly, mistake was to have the university transferred to Kuala Lumpur. Because unlike your generation, they can just pick up the phone and say, "Hey, can you solve this problem between the two countries?" Ever since the university was setup in KL and students began to diverge, it's more difficult for the top echelon civil servants, even the political leaders, to have that kind of empathy, fellow feeling, and sense of common destiny. Do you see this as a kind of...?

00:10:56

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

Well, it's very different now. I was Permanent Secretary of Transport when Ngiam Tong Dow was Permanent Secretary of Transport in Singapore at that time, and I remember we had negotiations on Woodlands railway line, the KTM (Keretapi Tanah Melayu). Interesting story, there was, I forgot his name now, Lee I think, a Deputy Perm Sec (Permanent Secretary) who came along with Ngiam, and we were talking across the table and we said... But I found this guy, this Colonel chap, National Service Colonel, Deputy Secretary General Perm Sec, somewhat hostile, aggressive, assertive, it's not the style of negotiation I thought. But Ngiam was very quiet, calm, intervening at the right time, making his point very clear, concise, so I said, "Okay, let's go and have lunch." We went to the Lake Club, so Ngiam... I was the host, so I took him along in my car. I said, "Ngiam, why is your chap so aggressive when he doesn't have to be?" He said, "Not to worry, he's Colonel in the army." So, I got a

message I didn't want to belabour it and he said, "Never mind, Ramon. Today is Friday I'll go back, I'll settle it I'll let you know by Monday. I think we both got reasonable positions. We'll work out something, but I can't say anything now. I need to have it authenticated." So, he went back, Monday first thing he called me, "Hey, Ramon everything... it's all settled." You see, that kind of relationship we don't have.

00:12:35

[Kirpal Singh](#)

We come back to you. You are one of the more quickly promoted civil servants, you arrived at the top fairly quickly. Was it easy for you as a Permanent Secretary to galvanise, and garner support from people around you, vis-à-vis say your predecessors, the Orang Putihs?

00:12:51

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

I think there was a great feeling of, we are Malaysians, we are Malayans, so people rallied around you. If you were, you tried, I didn't say I was, if I tried to be a good leader, a fair leader and the people recognised in me, as a Malaysian, and non-Malay, and non-Muslim, a true patriot. And I'd like to believe, I'd like to feel that I have already been a Malaysian at heart, and that I'm Malaysian first and foremost. I felt duty bound and dedicated to the commitment to serve the country to the best of my ability, as they say in the civil service, "To serve God, King, and Country."

00:13:46

[Kirpal Singh](#)

You have alluded to the fact of a good leader, and since you have done that, may I ask you to just maybe expand a little bit on what you think makes a good leader?

00:13:56

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

I will give a very simple, realistic, maybe philosophical answer. To my mind, a good leader is someone who serves the people to the best of his ability, with integrity, intelligence, and good sense of consultation. And even from the fisherman and farmer, you can learn a lot of wisdom. If you're honest, have an open mind, and listen, and are determined to take the necessary action, whether it is popular or not, then you're a good leader and people will rally around you, because they know you're sincere, and you serve the best interest, their best interest, not your own best interests.

00:14:51

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So would you say that in the years that you have been a very intimate participant in the way Malaysia has shaped its own history, would you say that given these qualities of good leadership, will you say that these qualities were obtained in the leaders you worked with, or were they, was there like an eighty percent achievement of this, realisation of this, or was it a fifty-fifty? What would you say?

00:15:16

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

Maybe to be safe, also I think to be realistic about fifty-fifty, because I think for the first few Prime Ministers, a lot of these ideals were observed. But then politics became business, and money politics seeped in, corruption seeped in, cronyism seeped in, warlordism seeped in, and in democracies. Unless you have a very strong opposition, you will run into troubles like in Malaysia and Singapore, if I may say so. People get really unhappy when they find monopolistic government. It's what the World Bank now recently calls State Capture. Have you come across that yet? That is happening all over the world, but to a less greater or less extent, depending on the strength of the people's participation, the strength of the democracy, and the vibrancy of the opposition. If the opposition has never been in Government, then you have State Capturism, really capture, and there's a monopoly of power, and it's very difficult to shake off abuses. So, all the successful democracies we know have had alternating governments.

00:16:43

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now you have touched on some very key aspects of even good governance, and all of this. When you were helping to draft the New Economic Policy, did some of you anticipate that given the frames of that, these things were going to be the almost inevitable result in the years following?

00:17:06

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

I was at Harvard at that time. I was not here, in KL, during the May 13th Riots. So, I was not traumatised. But when I came back and started, '69, '70s, the New Economic Policy, I was involved. I was the representative for the Treasury Economic Division on this inter-agency



group at the Economic Planning Unit. I could see that most of my colleagues were highly traumatised, and I could see that the environment had changed, the psychology had changed. People were angry, desperate, sensitive, fearful. So, we hammered out a policy, and all in all, it turned out to be a good policy at that time. But even then, there were some extremist views as to how far we should go left or right. But I think they struck the right balance. The leadership, Tunku Rahman, Tun Razak, they were very wise men, pragmatic, and very Malaysian in their outlook. They struck a compromise which was acceptable. I mean, who can quarrel with this first prong of the NEP (New Economic Policy) - eradication or elevation of poverty regardless of race. I don't care if he's Malay, Chinese, Kadazan, Murut, or whatever, Indian. You help the poor. How can you quarrel with it? Then the removal of the identification of race with occupation. At that time the thinking was, "Why should most farmers and fishermen be Malays? Why should most businessmen be Chinese? Why should most tappers be Indians? We need to cross fertilise." And so that was, you can't find an objection to that. So, we all supported it. But unfortunately, during the course of time, Western interests took over, and then you had the creation of an elitist group, and more tension went towards... although in poverty, I think we are one of the leading examples of the world, in the world. Within a short period, we managed to reduce poverty from fifty percent of the population to now by UN (United Nations) figures, standards, by two percent.

00:19:46

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now, this series of interviews that we're doing, basically commissioned by the Institute for Societal Leadership in Singapore Management University. I wonder whether in your thinking there is a clear difference between political leadership, economic leadership, and this societal leadership? The point I'm leading to is that if there are very strong leaders in the sphere of society, and societal leadership is powerful, then perhaps the political leadership might be a little bit more advised to be cautious in how they work out what you call "money politics".

00:20:28

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

I think you summed it up well. You got the political, economic, and the societal. They all have a role to play. Unfortunately, the political leadership has been dominant, not that it's bad, but it has perhaps been too strong. The economic leadership should be independent really, but there was a point of time when somebody... one Prime Minister said, "Look, why should the Chinese make all the money? Why can't the Malays also make money?" Which is fine, but we must have now Malaysia Inc Corp, and that's also fine, except the

implementation. If you have the right guys running the big statutory bodies, the big GLCs (Government-Linked Companies), if it's free and competitive and meritocratic, more meritocratic...

00:21:23

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So where do you think it went wrong? It was not definitely in the conception of it, right? And you said it wasn't in implementation, so was it like the wrong people got the right jobs or...?

00:21:32

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

The wrong people got the wrong jobs. That's politics, you see.

00:21:35

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right. So how do you propose that a nation prepares itself for these extremes of corruption, cronyism, perhaps sometimes even one ethnic group getting more privileges than another in contemporary times. We are so global these days that you think these threats are still getting more and more powerful, or do you think in time they are all going to be, you know, erased?

00:22:02

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

I hope in time it will be erased. We are beginning to move towards more liberal competitive society, but to me the pace is too slow. While others are running, if we are walking, we will lose out. But this country actually is a very blessed country. You look out to see the green, there's plenty of rain, plenty of sunshine, land is pretty fertile, the land to population ratio is pretty favourable. See, unlike Singapore, you got major constraints. Here you can move out, expand, you just drive from Singapore to Penang, and look at the vast expanse and the potential. So, everything is in our favour. Even our racial mix is our asset, but I think some nasty politicians try to make it out as if it is a liability. Look at this multi-racial group here, your crew, yourselves, and all that. Yes? We can learn from each other, and we can be a model, our country, like a mini-United Nations. But unfortunately, some politicians and some, and others, want to be greedy and capture power, State Capture, capture power for themselves in perpetuity, and this is the problem. So how do you solve

it? There must be a more active lively civil society, a stronger opposition, and a guy, you can't aim big, aim small. Your own leader, your own constituency, your own parliamentarian, your own state representative, your own local counsel chap, if he's elected but even if he's appointed, show your dissent, show your opposition, show your dissatisfaction with your service. If that happens, that's the pressure of the people.

00:24:06

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now as you look back on your long career, can you sum up in maybe two or three sentences, your major challenges?

00:24:16

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

The major challenges have always been - how do we develop this county into a truly Malaysian entity? How are we able to overcome the differences in race and religion, and vested political and economic interests that do not necessarily serve public interest? That has been the challenge. Our Constitution reflects it and provides safeguards, our Rukun Negara aspires to overcome these problems, but even in the United States, even today, after what 260 years, or something? You still have the allegations of white policeman going for black fellows. So, it's a huge human problem, and you need strong leadership, and you need people who are aware of it and say, "Look, how can I play my role? How can I just remain aloof and indifferent, because it's affecting me, and it will affect my children and my grandchildren." I have a duty to God, and to myself, and to my progeny, to my future, that they should be served well. I can't change the world, but I can change myself, and change things around me. So, I have a motto in my book, I have written ten books, and one of which is an autobiography. I say every day I do my best, to God I leave the rest. I can't do better than my best. So then I sit back and rest, and that's what I'm trying to do.

00:26:06

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now, I gather that in your more recent experiences, you have been the target of some threats, but you're still continuing in spite of it all. If I may ask, sir, what's your motivation for doing this, for continuing to fight battles that have not always been stacked for you, but stacked against you?

00:26:29

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

I have always been critical in my heart, internally in my conscience, that people don't speak out. I'm a Christian. I'm taught in the Bible, speak up, speak out, tell the truth. As long as I'm not dishonest, as long as I'm not abrasive, not rude, why can't I say what I want to say? If it's not benefitting me per se, but it's of general public interest. So, I cannot criticise people for not speaking up if I don't speak up. In my way I'm trying to encourage people to, "Hey, say more, speak up more, wallop harder." I say "Look, personally, firstly, I'm a civil servant. I want to be civil. Number two, you tell me to do it, what are you doing?" Everybody in Malaysia, Singapore, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) must play a role. You cannot just be pointing fingers at others, and not at yourself. So that is my motivation. Be true to yourself, and practice what you preach. You want others to learn from your example for what it's worth, live up to your example, or your expectations of others and of society.

00:27:54

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So would you agree that education is the answer so that we try to rectify the mistakes?

00:28:00

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

I think as we all, the consensus is you need awareness education and good education. Not education for the sake of going to school and university. It must be quality education, and not necessarily education that is introduced, or practised for the marketplace, but to turn out good holistic individuals, who have their talent, God-given talent utilised, or optimised, to the highest.

00:28:35

[Kirpal Singh](#)

That's what you're doing in a wonderful way, because this morning I couldn't help but note the number of people who came up so respectfully to you, to thank you for writing, and for making them more aware of what Malaysia is, some of the issues and challenges facing this. Tan Sri, I really want to thank you for this interview.

00:28:51

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

But don't forget and that people also come up to me and say, "Bloody hell, why are you talking so much?"

00:28:55

[Kirpal Singh](#)

That I didn't hear this morning. Thank you.

00:28:58

[Ramon Navaratnam](#)

Thank you. Thank you very much. I enjoyed the interview.

00:29:02

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Thank you.