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### Hanif Omar [Malaysia, Inspector General of Police]

Hanif Omar

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Interviewee: **HANIF OMAR**  
Interviewer: Lim Lai Cheng  
Date: 25 September 2015  
Location: Singapore

0:00:20

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

So Tun Hanif, thank you so much for doing this interview with us. We're the Institute for Societal Leadership. Our focus is Southeast Asian leaders or people who have been around, made an impact, and who have good things to share with our younger generation. That's why we picked you, and we would love to hear some of your experiences and your challenges.

0:00:40

[Hanif Omar](#)

Most welcome, Lai Cheng.

0:00:42

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

Thank you. The first thing we notice, all of us notice, is your long and illustrious career, especially within the police force. I'm wondering whether there were key events that have shaped you and have shaped your values.

0:00:55

[Hanif Omar](#)

Yes, I wouldn't say the police shaped me. I had a good education at the Malay College, but I would not even say that the Malay College shaped me. What shaped me, really, were the things that my parents, aunties, and relatives, my Imam, my Koran teacher, passed on to me. As in the values that I should imbue myself with, and the whole surrounding in those days. People were very ethical. We had imbued of the British Victorian values - discipline, honesty, integrity.

0:01:48

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

So how did you become part of the police force? What made you join the police force?

0:01:54

[Hanif Omar](#)

I think it was, in a manner of speaking, I was cutting my nose to spite my face. A lot of things happened in my life. I didn't want to go to the Malay College, the elite school. Because I was comfortable with my old school. I was top student in my old school, my father was from that school. My father just died just a few months, and his grave was within sight from my class. I would go there in the morning, recess time I'd go there. Before going home at one, I'd go there. And to countenance leaving that, it's not on. But I was more or less shanghaied by the powers that be at that time, they told my headmaster don't have him in your school anymore.

0:02:40

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

Because you were the top boy?

0:02:41

[Hanif Omar](#)

Yes, because they wanted me to go to the Malay College. They wanted five students, top Malay students to occupy five vacancies there. I was one of those. They had promised me scholarship, they never delivered that. I didn't have any money.

0:02:56

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

So you had to pay fees for...?

0:02:58

[Hanif Omar](#)

Yes, yes, we had to pay fees. So, for the first term, my uncle supported me. But he had ten children, later on up to twenty children. So, he couldn't afford. It was only that first term. Second term, my own grandfather picked up the tab, then he died. So, there I was, looking at the third term, who was going to finance this? I had always been the kind of chap who cannot go around with a begging bowl to my relatives, or whatever it is... maybe too proud or whatever. I wrote to UMNO (United Malays National Organisation). This is long before the Independence, and UMNO gave me 100 Ringgit. I needed only seventy-eight for the term, but UMNO gave me 100 Ringgit. That carried me through, past my fourth form. Then my granduncle picked up the tab for the following year. Then I wanted to go to either Cambridge or Oxford. I rejected all schools, only Oxford or Cambridge. Then they created a special scholarship. Nine of us were awarded the scholarship

to go to Oxford or Cambridge. At the last moment, they said, "Somebody failed to register your names there, so we're afraid that you may have to report to the University of Malaya, Singapore." We have rejected Australian universities, other British universities, and now you're asking us to go to Singapore? What a big climb down. We protested, then they said, "Please go, otherwise you'll miss going to Singapore, you also miss going over there. But we promise after you have passed your first year, come and see us. We can discuss about going to UK." We passed our first year. Out of nine, five of us drove in a car to meet. It so happened the Chairman of this committee was Tunku Abdul Raman's elder brother. We went in one by one, when they came out long faces, I said, "what happened?" "You go in," long face. "You go in and find out." So, I went in. "Ah Cik Hanif, I see that you have done very well in your first year, so I suppose you're thinking about getting us to send you to UK." I say, "Yes sir." "Well you know, we are on the threshold of independence..." What has this got to do this? "We're on the threshold of independence, and we need every single graduate that we can produce as soon as possible. So what say you, if you carry on into the second year in Singapore, and forget about UK because you'd have to start from the first year over there." So, what can you say? What can you say? You have been fired up with this independence struggle, what can you say? So, remain in Singapore. Then I found two of the students there, who were with me, were given the scholarship.

0:06:19

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

To England?

0:06:21

[Hanif Omar](#)

Yes, and off they went. So, I thought that was not on. But they were children of very strong UMNO supporters. So, to me that scholarship that I missed in the Malay College, here this thing again, I was quite drawn off. When I left the university, I decided not to serve the Government. I went to Guthrie (Group Private Limited). Then I got a letter from the Government. I signed a contract to serve the Government, so they asked me to report. I went to see the man in charge who was a couple of years my senior. I said, "Anas, can I buy myself out? I'll pay you monthly. I'll pay the Government back monthly." It was only 7,000 Ringgits. So, he said, "Oh no, Hanif you can't do that. You either pay the 7,000 now, but since we are friends I'll accept you 3,500 now, and 3,500 next month." I said, "Anas, what are you talking about? I have got only 30 Ringgits left from my good conduct refund from the university. Out of fifty Ringgit, thirty Ringgit remain with me, twenty Ringgit had been spent. I'm wearing my father's shoes. I haven't got my first salary from Guthrie." "Well I can't help you, it's that or you pay the lump sum." So I went to see Guthrie, and they said you have just joined us, probationer, we're thinking of sending you to Singapore. We can't lend you

the money. I was really, really down. I looked at the advertisement; there was this advertisement about the police force. So instead of joining the civil service, I joined the police force. Three months into my training, they sent another stiff letter: either you report, or we sue you. I said, "You read the contract there, it says serve the Government, doesn't say serve the civil service or whatever it is. I am now with the police, for the past three months, I'm serving the Government." Then they kept quiet. That's how I found myself in the police force.

0:08:38

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

So were you caught up in this whole spirit of independence during that period?

0:08:43

[Hanif Omar](#)

Yes. When independence was declared I was actually still in the University of Malaya. We had a holiday, went back. I was there that night, at the Dataran Merdeka. I saw the flag being brought down, saw all the ladies weeping. I was there, caught up, so happy. Next day was the real declaration by Tunku Abdul Raman in the stadium, but I missed that declaration that morning. But quite early in the morning I went out to town, very happy, so shouting "Merdeka, Merdeka". I was quite surprised. I mean the town was Chinese, the shop assistants, they were not responding at all. What I didn't realise that time was that the non-Malays were getting citizenships in batches. They had to qualify. So, very small numbers were still citizens, the rest were still non-citizens.

0:10:07

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

So it didn't matter to them whether Malaysia was independent or not?

0:10:09

[Hanif Omar](#)

I suppose that was what it was. But even at that point in time, when it was a Malayan Union, when you're prepared to give the Chinese full citizenship rights, the Indians full citizenship rights, equal to the Malays... they excised Singapore from the equation, because they had other plans for Singapore. Later on, when they give independence to Malaya, Singapore would be out, still be the colony. So because of that it was a shock to the Chinese because with Singapore, they were the single largest community. Without Singapore, they were equal to the Malays. But with the Indians, they would outnumber the Malays, so they didn't like that position. Also, they didn't like the idea of accepting the Malay rulers. The Malays didn't want independence because they were not ready. The British kept the education to Standard six, only to Primary six. That's why when Tunku went to

see the council rulers for permission to discuss the British independence, the Sultan of Kedah said, "Look, I think what is better is to improve the education of the people, so that they don't become prey to demagogic politicians." Johor simply refused to accept independence. We are a nation that cannot even make needles, how can we be independent? So, they wanted to be under British protection. But only these two, the rest they acquiesced to it so that was how discussion went on for independence.

0:11:51

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

These are insights we wouldn't be able to read from any textbook and of course, the most difficult part of Singapore's history is during the time of the Federation of Malaysia. Can you give us some insights into the events leading to it and the events after it? Were the Malays keen to have Singapore as part of the Federation in the first place?

0:12:21

[Hanif Omar](#)

Singapore was pressing for independence. How could you give to Malaya without giving to Singapore? In fact, I think David Marshall went to Britain to demand independence in 1956, before the Malay independence, and failed. Britain just wouldn't listen to it, so he came back and resigned. Part of the agreement for our independence, was that we would also help to look after the security of Singapore. They have been working on it, to take in Singapore as a rationale for giving Singapore independence. It's got to be independent within Malaya.

Also, because we had defeated the Communists, and here the Communist coming up. Tunku and his colleagues' main worry was that the inclusion of Singapore would again bring about the situation before the war, where the Chinese outnumbered the Malays. So, the problem for us was not that we didn't want Singapore, but how could we dilute this problem? How to absorb Singapore without being a problem to us? On the discussion of Singapore, "Look, we must have some understanding. You be the New York, we'll be the Washington. You don't take part in our local election." That kind of... But after the first year, then of course Mr Lee Kuan Yew decided to go the whole hog, and that started the bad blood.

0:14:11

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

To campaign for the PAP (People's Action Party) in Malayan territory?

0:14:16

[Hanif Omar](#)

So that was what started it. But Tunku was very honest, he said he had made promises to Mr Lee Kuan Yew about economic independence, he could develop, he could be New York, but he said Tun Tan Siew Sin, our Finance Minister, being head of the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) that was being challenged by the PAP. He was putting a few spanners in the works. That irritated Lee Kuan Yew. Tunku said that Siew Sin was partly to blame.

0:14:55

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

Singapore celebrated fifty years, and then things of the past are starting to come up and one of the controversial events was Operation Coldstore. I don't think young Singaporeans realise how serious the Communist threat was to necessitate detaining these people who seem like fairly straightforward, sincere folks. What is the Malaysian perspective on that? Was the Communist threat so serious?

0:15:21

[Hanif Omar](#)

Yes, because we had our representation on the Singapore Security Council, and of course, we had very close working relations with Singapore Special Branch here. And the British side office, and so on so forth. In those days, we even had the, not only the MI6 but also the MI5, operating both in our territories. We knew fairly well what's going on, and we could see that Lee Kuan Yew was losing to the Chinese educated led by Lim Chin Siong. So much so the British Governor General felt that perhaps Malaya not moving in, perhaps they should reach a modus vivendi with the Barisan Sosialis. He called for a meeting with the Barisan Sosialis leaders, Lim Chin Siong and company at his residence, Eden Hall. They had a tea party... I think in the discussion, they said Britain will hold on to their democratic principles. If the Barisan were to win by democratic means, they're prepared to accept Barisan to form the Government, provided the naval base will remain in British hands, provided defence and foreign affairs remain with the British. I think Barisan was prepared to accept that.

It was at that stage that we had discussions with Lee Kuan Yew. I was one of a group of officers sent to work in Robinson Road here, to look at the total Communist threat. We were allowed to look into all the files, to prepare files for their detention. We had to update all these files, taking on, taking all the people on and update. I was engaged in this thing twice. It was arranged that before Singapore could join Malaya, Singapore should clean up this Communist...

0:17:44

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

Was it Tunku's idea?

0:17:46

[Hanif Omar](#)

British, Tunku, everybody agreed. Lee Kuan Yew agreed. It was to be named OpsCo, Coldstore. It was to be launched at the end of, I think, December '62. We were ready; we'd spend time housing them, where they were living, their habits, what time they leaving the house.... I would come in, strike them, and those of *Semenanjung* origin will be taken back there, and those who stuck to Singapore origin will be interned here. That December, I was all ready when this S.P. Seenivasagam, this very bright Indian officer came in and said, "Sir, we have to stand down, we are not moving tonight." I said, "Why not?" "Oh, they still haven't come to agreement there in Tunku's residence. At the last moment, Mr Lee Kuan Yew balked at the idea of this Operation Singapore, that will probably make him look as if he is the bad guy in the whole scheme of things. So he suggested to Tunku, "Why don't you arrest also, people here in *Semenanjung*?" Tunku said, "You must be mad. I'm not the one with the problem, you're the one with the problem. Look, I'm going to sleep. When you come to your senses, you just wake me up." So off he went to sleep, that's Tunku, late at night. So we were told not likely, we were to stand down because Lee Kuan Yew also won't give way. So it took - I think one and a half months or two months before Lee Kuan Yew agreed, and it was launched. So it was February of '63, I think. We had two series of that, Op Coldstore 1, Op Coldstore 2.

0:19:50

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

But Lim Chin Siong in the video interviews that I saw, insisted he was not a Communist. Is that true?

0:19:58

[Hanif Omar](#)

Well we don't know, but we make no strong distinction between a Communist, a non-Communist, or an anti-Communist, so long as they work towards the Communist cause or contribute to the success of the Communist cause. This is what we call fellow travelling. You have your own objective, the Communist have their own objective, you travel together, you only separate after you reach a certain point, but during that fellow travelling, you are already enabling the Communists to get closer to the objective. So for us we don't care at that time, we take them all in, then we sort out. Many people don't understand this.



0:20:52

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

Right, because it could be misconstrued... as Mr Lee wanting to kill off an opponent, or... because Mr Lim Chin Siong was very prominent.

0:21:02

[Hanif Omar](#)

No. He did not prepare the files. We from the Federation prepared the files.

0:21:11

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

So that part, we entered the merger, and then we were expelled. Can you share with us some of the events leading to Singapore's expulsion?

0:21:19

[Hanif Omar](#)

We never wanted Singapore because the Chinese problem, pardon my saying so. But Lee Kuan Yew realised that as well, so he wrote his book 'Battle for Merger'. He said, when we established PAP, UMNO was one of the first organisations to congratulate us. But after they achieved independence in '57, UMNO had been trying to get further away from us, why? Because we are Chinese and the Malays are afraid of us. So, to make ourselves more acceptable to the Malays, we must make sure that the symbols the Malays treasure, are taken into our institutions, that our language will be Malay; our flag will display Islamic symbols. All these things were considered by him to appease the Malays. And the Malays as usual, they are stronger on form than on substance. So with Singapore willing to make Yusof Ishak its President, the first President, and the language being Malay, it softened our resistance to having Singapore in. I wouldn't say we welcomed with open arms, but it softened. And, of course, with the agreement that you don't take part in our municipal elections.

0:23:24

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

But it didn't work. It didn't last.

0:23:24

[Hanif Omar](#)

After Singapore, after Lee Kuan Yew failed to displace MCA from this Malayan coalition, then he decided to go all out, and that was to preach a Malaysian Malaysia. He challenged the view that Malaya belonged to the Malays. The Malays themselves were immigrants he said. That shocked us. It worked up the Chinese. In Malaya, by 1963, more Chinese had become citizens because they became citizens gradually. As they qualified, they became citizens, so more had become... and that included people who had never mixed with the Malays before. These were Chinese who were settled in new villages as part of the measures to break the back of the Communists. They had lived only amongst the Chinese, they don't understand the Malays, and the Malays also didn't understand them, so you get more of these people out there. You can see the effect on society. Then came Singapore with this very radical idea. That caused a lot of heartache and I think we were moving towards a racial clash.

0:24:59

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

How would you describe Tunku as a leader?

0:25:03

[Hanif Omar](#)

Tunku was an easy-going aristocrat. Father was a Sultan, but with a chip on his shoulder, because his mother was the younger wife. It's only his half-brothers from the first wife who could be Sultan. He probably was, felt that he was the better man, in the father's family. That was reflected also in the timing of his handing over to Tun Razak. When his own nephew became the Agong, he said, "I can't bend down to my own nephew." So he was that kind of man, he was a man about town, maybe more so than Lee Kuan Yew. Mixed with everybody by virtue of being exposed to the British, so he had no feelings of insecurity with them. Very generous to a fault, when it comes to money matters. His favourite phrase would be '*biar be lah*' let it be, let it be, '*biar be*'. The Malays were fretting about that because many of the things that he said '*biar be*' to actually was accommodation for the Chinese and the non-Malays. We have this agreement, why can't they follow the agreement? Why did they want more? So that was the complaint, the Malays, that agreements are made to be kept, but they're not being kept, they want changes. So Tunku '*biar be lah*, small matter'. But on big matters, Tunku could be quite intransigent. He knows it.

0:27:11

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

What was Lee Kuan Yew like? How do you feel about Lee Kuan Yew as a leader?

0:27:15

[Hanif Omar](#)

Oh, I had enormous admiration for Mr Lee Kuan Yew. We used to listen to his Fullerton Square lunchtime oratory. We were quite caught up, mesmerised by all this. He was one who gives you the impression that he was incisive, that he took great pains to prepare his case. We all knew it, he would have dummy runs for all the big things, would have dummy runs. But most of all, many of us of my generation admired him for his ethical standing. If at all I would fault him would be on his inability to show a real understanding, or warmth born out of friendship. He was always the legal man. If you want this, what are you going to give me? Quid-pro-quo became a very popular phrase in Kuala Lumpur, because that was what Lee Kuan Yew always said. "What's my quid-pro-quo, what's my quid-pro-quo?" On the Malaysian side, of course they're not like that. They're more heart than head, form so important to them.

0:28:56

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

So did you believe those tears on the TV screen, you know the famous video of Mr Lee Kuan Yew crying at the separation announcement at the press conference?

0:29:08

[Hanif Omar](#)

Yes, I saw that, but a lot of people in Kuala Lumpur doubted that it was genuine. Because they thought Lee Kuan Yew can now be Prime Minister of an independent state. So what is he crying for? Unless of course, I'm being so ambitious, so able, such a belief in his genes, unless he thought that had Singapore remained in Malaysia, he could probably work his way up to become the Prime Minister of Malaysia, a larger nation.

0:29:51

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

There was another factor and that's Goh Keng Swee, and Goh Keng Swee of course had been working very closely with Tan Siew Sin on matters of economic development... I read in an interview with Mr Goh Keng Swee that he didn't think the merger was going to work, because Malaysia would stand in the way of Singapore's economic initiatives, and so leaving the Federation was going to be a better solution. So, it didn't come as a surprise.

0:30:17

[Hanif Omar](#)

Yes, because the Tunku bemoaned in one of his books, that Siew Sin put spanners in the works. Siew Sin of course, MCA President, Kuan Yew, PAP, wanted to displace this comprador class party with the PAP to represent the Chinese, but Tunku would have none of it. Tunku was very loyal, loyal to a fault. So that's why I think Lee Kuan Yew gave up the idea of waiting longer, because no way Tunku would separate from the MCA.

0:30:58

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

One last question for you. We've been talking about leadership, I know some of the values that you would hold onto, what would your advice be for this current generation of Malaysian leaders, or the next generation?

0:31:09

[Hanif Omar](#)

We have to roll back, there's no question about it. We have to roll back from our progression towards a less ethical society. When Tun Razak succeeded Tunku Abdul Raman, his second brother said to me, Hanif that's the end of so and so, Raman, another younger brother who was in business. I said why? Because Razak will tell the treasury not to give him any projects, not to give him any contracts. That was what was before. Today when your brother becomes Prime Minister, or your father becomes Prime Minister; they'll be a big celebration because you think wealth is going to pour down your way. That's how far we have degenerated. And I was attached very closely to Razak, and he kept on reminding his wife, "Look, I don't have the money, so be careful about how you spend."

When he was the one and only source of power, after the May 13 '69 incident, I was with him in the National Operations Council, he was worried he might be killed and if so, what would happen to the wife? They had a small house way back there in Petaling Jaya. How would Rahah send Najib and other sons to the St

John's School in Kuala Lumpur, living so far away? So, he thought of renting a piece of land in the centre there, in Bangsar, and build a small house there. But when he went to discuss with the owner of Selangor Properties, Datin Wen, Datin Wen said it was 220 a square foot and wouldn't budge because that set, it's the company, you can't. He was the most powerful man in the country, and what did he do? He just said, "Well, I can't afford it", and walked away from that, grabbed a police officer, somebody who later on became my Deputy, and said, "Let's go to Segambut and see." I hear some of our civil servants have bought pieces of land cheaply, let's see whether I can still get a piece of land there.

0:33:43

[Lim Lai Cheng](#)

That's admirable. Thank you very much for all your sharing, Thank you so much.

0:33:46

[Hanif Omar](#)

Thank you very much Lai Cheng.