

Singapore preempts the ayatollahs

by Linda de Hoyos

The Singapore government of Lee Kuan Yew announced Aug. 17 that four foreign Muslim imams are henceforth prohibited from entering Singapore. The four—from Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and South Africa—have not been in Singapore this year, according to government reports, but their banning is a warning to their in-country networks that the Lee government will not tolerate the importation of Muslim fundamentalism to its minority Muslim community. In the case of Indonesian Imam Abdul Rahim, the government cited his agitation among Malays and Muslims; he called them “stooges” of the government if they did not rise up against it.

The banning of the imams is but the latest action taken by the Lee government against fundamentalist incitement in the country. By far the most dramatic actions have been taken against the Catholic Theology of Liberation networks that have been nurtured in Singapore through Philippines Cardinal Jaime Sin. These networks, coordinated through the Asian Partnership for Human Development, an umbrella organization for politically active Catholic groups throughout the region, are most active in the Philippines and South Korea, where the Theology of Liberation priests and nuns have played leading roles in the anti-government insurgencies. As one source from Singapore put it, the Lee government does not intend to be next on the chopping block.

On June 21, the interior ministry detained 16 people who, the government charge sheet said, had infiltrated both Catholic and student organizations for the purpose of fomenting communist activity. Those detained included Vincent Cheng, a full-time Catholic lay worker, who will be held for two years. Also detained were a Harvard-trained businessman, a woman lawyer, a lecturer at the Singapore Polytechnic Institute, two leaders of the Singapore Polytechnic Students Union. Six of the 16 arrested were later released. On July 19, the government took action again, detaining for one year Chew Kheng Chuan, a graduate of Harvard who owns a typesetting business in Singapore; Tang Fong Har, a lawyer; and Cheng Suan Tse, president of the experimental drama group The Third Stage.

The network was led on the ground by Cheng, who is believed to be directed by one Tan Wah Piow, currently a student at Oxford University who is wanted in Singapore under the Internal Security Act. When Tan fled to London in 1976, Cheng stayed behind to build contacts with local com-

munists and leftist priests in the Philippines, reported the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

In 1985, Cheng joined the Catholic Peace and Justice Commission, using the commission's publications, the *Dossier* and *Singapore Highlights*; as vehicles for anti-government propaganda. The network forged by Cheng and Tan succeeded in infiltrating Catholic student societies in the National University of Singapore and Singapore Polytechnic, the Geylang Catholic Welfare Center, the Student Christian Movement of Singapore, the Young Christian Workers' Movement, the Workers' Party, and formed their own front organization, The Third Stage.

The arrests sparked quick response from the international “human rights mafia,” including Amnesty International. More significantly, the Socialist International government of Australia formally expressed “concern” to Singapore over the arrests, demanding that the detainees be given a trial.

Soon after the arrests, Singapore's Catholic Archbishop Gregory Yong admitted that Cheng had been a lay worker, and said he had accepted government reassurances that its target was not the church per se, but subversive individuals. “The Church was not involved,” stated Catholic leader Michael Thio. “This is a vital issue which must be made known to Catholics and non-Catholics.” Vatican envoy Giovanni Aniello flew in from Bangkok for meetings with Singapore officials.

Soviet penetration of churches

At issue are not only conspiracies in Singapore launched under the cover of the city-state's 105,000 Catholics, but the penetration of church organizations throughout Asia for purposes of destabilization. The Australian chapter of the Catholic Commission for Peace and Justice was dissolved in May in face of growing concern from Catholics that it was becoming a vehicle for Soviet penetration of Asia. Australian Catholics cited the fact that the Commission had hosted an Australian speaking tour by Jose Maria Sison, founder of the Philippines Communist Party and former priest and current New People's Army (NPA) member Ed de la Torre. Publications subsidized by the Commission had also demanded that Australia break with the United States and expel the three U.S. bases from the country.

In addition to the Commission, the Catholic umbrella organization, the Asia Partnership for Human Development, funnels money into the leftist May First Movement in the Philippines and also the Task Force Detainees, an organization of priests and nuns that offers political and other protection to the NPA guerrillas. From Radio Veritas, under Cardinal Sin, Theology of Liberation propaganda is then disseminated throughout Asia in 13 different languages, including Chinese.

It is the interface of communists with the Catholic networks in particular that is now the focus of attention, not only by secular authorities but also by the Church itself.