

Singapore: The PAP's Long and Bloody History of Foreign Interference

Friday 29 October 2021, by [TJIN Thum Ping](#) (Date first published: 14 October 2021).

Singapore's PAP government has long meddled in the domestic affairs of its neighbours. If the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA) applied to PAP activities abroad, most of its efforts would be illegal. This is hypocrisy of the highest order.

During the second reading of the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill (FICA) on 4 October, Singapore's home affairs and law minister K Shanmugam [attacked New Naratif as an avenue of foreign interference](#).

In his speech, he recounted how Singapore authorities rejected New Naratif's request to register as a company in 2018 on the grounds that we had received funding from the Open Society Foundations, founded by billionaire George Soros, which "has a history of getting involved in the domestic politics of sovereign countries". He also brought up the series of Democracy Classrooms we've hosted in Malaysia, which are supported by the US embassy in Kuala Lumpur:

Make no mistake about it, we will say no to that in Singapore. You can organise democracy classrooms, we have no issues. Anyone can organise, anyone can criticise the current state of democracy, but it cannot be funded by Soros, or the US Embassy, or any other Embassy.

He also smeared me and New Naratif's co-founder Kirsten Han personally by insinuating that we are traitors to our country:

Thum and Han, and some other activists, met with Dr Mahathir on 30 August 2018. They asked Dr Mahathir to bring democracy to Singapore—I suppose Malaysian-style democracy.

His accusations that we are agents of foreign interference are not just false, but also hypocrisy of the highest order. The People's Action Party government's own foreign interference abroad has destroyed societies and contributed to the deaths of at least half a million people, and they continue to welcome foreign interference in Singapore, as long as it supports their own political agenda.

The PAP's Foreign Interference Hypocrisy

It is breathtakingly hypocritical of the PAP government to condemn foreign interference. Bilahari Kausikan, Singapore's former ambassador to the United Nations, [admitted in a 2008 interview](#) that the countries of Asean, including Singapore, "have been interfering mercilessly in each other's internal affairs for ages, from the very beginning". The PAP government's foreign interference includes supporting the United States' invasion of Vietnam in the 1960s, in the face of [domestic protests against US imperialism](#); [financing the unelected military junta](#) in Myanmar while [coercing them to pursue political and economic liberalisation](#); acquiescing, after a short period of hesitancy, to the Indonesian conquest of Timor-Leste and [offering Singapore as a participant in Jakarta's "joint](#)

[authority](#)”, while Singapore’s domestic press [actively spread Jakarta’s anti-independence propaganda](#); and generally [helping right-wing governments suppress left-wing movements](#) for self-determination throughout the Cold War.

Most egregiously, the PAP government, along with other Asean governments, propped up the Khmer Rouge, which was responsible for some 1.7 million deaths from starvation, torture, execution and forced labour in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. After Vietnam and allied Cambodian forces overthrew Pol Pot’s regime, Singapore and other Asean states intervened, alongside China and the US, to support the Khmer Rouge. They waged a proxy war against Vietnam and the new Cambodian government, and [supported the ousted Khmer Rouge at the UN](#). Asean hosted, armed and resupplied Khmer Rouge guerrillas, and manipulated foreign aid to fuel the fighting in Cambodia.

“Without ASEAN, there would have been no Cambodia issue,” [admitted Tommy Koh](#), then-Singaporean permanent representative to the UN. “Because if we had not taken up the cause of Cambodia in early 1979, and steadfastly championed it, it would have disappeared.”

Singapore [proposed](#) and, from 1981, [led efforts to form a new coalition government-in-exile](#) to manoeuvre the Khmer Rouge back to power in Phnom Penh. The goal, then-Singaporean prime minister [Lee Kuan Yew explained](#), was “to preserve the Democratic Kampuchea seat in the UN and alter the nature of leadership of the Government of Democratic Kampuchea” in ways which would also advantage Singapore and Asean. Singapore dispensed US\$55 million in aid to the coalition and helped persuade the US to participate.

In the 1980s, a covert group of Singaporean, Malaysian, Thai and US officials [regularly convened in Bangkok](#) to coordinate the supply of arms, ammunition, training, communications equipment and food to the coalition government-in-exile. Asean’s command of the issue also allowed it to heavily influence the final 1991 Paris Peace Agreements. Singapore was thus instrumental in shaping the society that emerged from the war by insisting on the imposition of elections designed to legitimise the new regime. The agreements brought Singapore-style democracy to Cambodia, as well as capitalism and private property rights, which opened up the Cambodian economy to Singapore’s state-linked business elites. The cash flooding in from Asean in a mad competition for profits then helped fuel the resurgence of civil war in Cambodia, culminating in the collapse of the coalition government in 1997.

Aside from Cambodia, Singapore and state-linked business elites have tried to export their capital and governance models to other neighbouring states in pursuit of profits. In particular, the PAP government and capitalist allies [bolstered authoritarianism in Myanmar](#) since the early 1990s, helping shield the military junta from domestic and international criticism while [pushing for economic liberalisation](#). Government-linked corporations in Singapore [funnelled arms and ammunition to the military junta](#), bypassing Western embargoes; state-linked banks provided large loans for down-payments on Chinese arms; and Singapore helped Myanmar develop a domestic arms industry in exchange for the prioritisation of Singaporean investments. According to former Singapore High Commissioner to Malaysia K Kesavapany, Lee Kuan Yew frequently travelled to Yangon to [promote Myanmar adopting Indonesia-style democracy](#).

It continues to this day: less than a month ago, independent activist group Justice For Myanmar released a report showing that a subsidiary of a firm chaired by former PAP parliamentarian Ang Mong Seng was found to have [made two payments](#) “with no formal written invoices” totalling more than US\$5 million to Myanmar’s military.

Singapore also trains government officials in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam under the Singapore Cooperation Programme. This includes [almost S\\$119 million spent by the PAP](#)

government between 2002 and 2009 on training 27,447 officials who would, in the words of Singapore's former ambassador to Myanmar, [return home to implement "good governance" and economic growth](#). The creators of the programme bet on the assumption that the officials would then favour Singapore and its investments in the country.

The PAP government is not concerned about foreign interference, but is merely against dissent, criticism and alternative views.

Overall, the death toll related to Singapore's foreign interference in Southeast Asian nations includes an estimated [182,000 people killed](#) in Indonesia's occupation of Timor-Leste; [100,000 civilians killed](#) during the insurgency phase of the Vietnam-Cambodia war, and countless more from disease and famine; and hundreds of thousands by Myanmar's Tatmadaw over the last 30 years during [campaigns of genocide](#), torture, rape and [murder](#). This does not take into account the many more refugees and internally displaced people from these conflicts.

More recently, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's government supported the US invasions and occupations of [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#).

The PAP government continues to engage in foreign intervention across the world that would be punishable under FICA if it were applied by other countries. This includes [back-channel discussions](#), soft loans and strategic investment, as well as [covert action and the cultivation of foreign proxies](#).

Foreign Funding Is Welcome When It's Pro-PAP

Shanmugam attacked New Naratif for having received funding from the Open Society Foundations. New Naratif received one [start-up grant](#) of US\$75,000 from OSF in 2018, which we declared on our website.

The government of Singapore, meanwhile, engages in foreign grant funding along the same lines and with similar goals to OSF, and is also happy for Singaporean organisations to accept foreign funding when it aligns with the ruling party's goals.

Most hypocritically, since the 1980s, the PAP has bent over backwards to [encourage foreign direct investment](#) in the country, even when it [undermined Singapore's sovereignty](#) or made the lives of Singaporeans demonstrably worse, in pursuit of its own domestic aims.

Government-linked organisations such as the Temasek Foundation and the Singapore International Foundation offer grants and funding to civil society and non-governmental organisations around the world to influence society. SIF, for instance, was founded explicitly to [promote Singapore's globalisation agenda abroad](#) through soft power. The only difference between the activities of OSF and those organisations is how the PAP chooses to characterise them.

"It is brazenly Machiavellian for the PAP government and its authoritarian counterparts throughout the region to aggressively drive away local funders and then criminalise looking for funding elsewhere."

It is also rich to hear Shanmugam raise OSF funding as evidence of foreign interference when several of his PAP colleagues are members of OSF-funded organisations, like [ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights](#) and Asean Youth Forum. APHR lists former PAP MP [Charles Chong](#) as a board member and current PAP MP [Louis Ng](#) as a member.

Aside from encouraging foreign direct investment in Singapore, the PAP government also welcomes foreigners to [join the National Wages Council](#), [manage sovereign wealth funds](#) and lead government-

linked companies. The largest donor to the National University of Singapore is the Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing, who has [donated SG\\$100 million](#), and the NUS Business School has a building [named for Mochtar Riady](#), an Indonesian magnate who donated SG\$21 million.

Applying for foreign grant funding is common practice for civil society organisations, media organisations, academics and artists. This includes mainstream media organisations: in 2019, Zaobao.sg, owned by the Singapore Press Holdings, [received SG\\$200,000](#) from the Google News Initiative Innovation Challenge.

More importantly, the prevalence of activists and independent journalists accepting foreign funding is a situation of the PAP's own making. Like authoritarian governments around the world, the PAP deliberately and systematically [suppresses civil society](#) and [media workers](#), and starves their organisations of funds through regulatory harassment and public intimidation. Cut off from local sources of funding, foreign foundations are a lifeline to Singaporeans who want to make their country more democratic. Arguing that Singaporeans should fund their own civil society and news media is specious when the PAP aggressively scares away the vast majority of potential funders.

The case of *The Online Citizen* is instructive. The site was thriving until the PAP government started attacking it. This included a hostile information campaign, issuing public statements against its editors, gazetting the platform as a political association in 2011, ensnaring it in red tape via the Info-communications Media Development Authority and the Broadcasting Act, and filing multiple civil and criminal cases against editor-in-chief Terry Xu.

Other independent news organisations have met a similar fate, from the [Singapore Herald](#) in the 1970s to websites such as [The Middle Ground](#) (its first iteration), [Breakfast Network](#) and [SIX-SIX News](#) in recent years.

The choice we face, thanks in large part to the PAP, is between taking foreign funding and closing down.

New Naratif has [noted the distortionary effect](#) of foreign grant funding in Southeast Asia as part of our argument as to why we [strive to be entirely member-supported](#). We do not want to seek grant funding; we wish to be funded entirely by our readers across Southeast Asia. But the choice we face, thanks in large part to the PAP, is between taking foreign funding and closing down. It is brazenly Machiavellian for the PAP government and its authoritarian counterparts throughout the region to aggressively drive away local funders and then criminalise looking for funding elsewhere.

Shanmugam ought to remember that the PAP itself was founded in 1954 with funding from both non-Singaporeans and supporters outside Singapore, with the explicit intention of bringing democracy to the country and reunifying Singapore with the rest of Malaya.

Banning New Naratif From Singapore, Then Attacking Us for Being “Foreign”

Shanmugam attacked New Naratif for taking “foreign” funding while neglecting the fact that New Naratif is itself a foreign organisation that is not subject to Singapore law. Our attempt to register in Singapore in 2018 was [blocked by the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority](#). We were subsequently subjected to a hostile campaign that included smears by PAP MPs, disinformation and [outright threats against us](#). We were willing to be regulated by Singapore's laws and regulations; we cannot be blamed for not conforming to Singapore law if we were never given a chance to operate in Singapore.

Where New Naratif does operate, we have followed local rules and regulations. Our Sekolah Democracy classrooms in Malaysia were funded by the US embassy in Kuala Lumpur. They focused

on Malaysian topics, had Malaysian speakers and were open only to Malaysians. By Shanmugam's logic, he has no right to protest any of this—only Malaysians can comment on these classrooms, and we received no objections.

Shanmugam has stated explicitly that it is not illegal to organise Democracy Classrooms for Singaporeans as long as they are funded by Singaporeans, and we welcome this clarification. We will be organising locally-funded Democracy Classrooms open to Singaporeans next year, and we would welcome Shanmugam's participation. His [contradictory interpretation of rule of law](#)—that a “dogmatic, absolutist approach” is not practical—would certainly provide a different perspective from the international standards enshrined in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

PAP lawmakers [share foreign blog posts](#) that praise them and the party's governance, while they ignore hostile information campaigns by pro-PAP actors (one such page, “Fabrications About The PAP”, was [shut down by Facebook](#) for violating its policies). Clearly, the PAP government is not concerned about foreign interference, but is merely against dissent, criticism and alternative views.

New Naratif openly and transparently declares our [funding sources](#), [our mission and values](#), and [our intention to build a democratic Southeast Asia](#). If the PAP objects to this, it can only be because they are afraid that granting Singaporeans basic rights will inevitably lead to their ouster from government.

It's Not Always About You

Finally, Shanmugam repeated falsehoods about Kirsten Han and me meeting Malaysia's then-premier in August 2018. He stated that we “asked Dr Mahathir to bring democracy to Singapore”.

This is false. We did not ask Mahathir to bring democracy to Singapore. Han has already [addressed these false allegations](#), and I published a statement immediately after the meeting noting that I had asked Mahathir “to take leadership in Southeast Asia for the promotion of democracy, human rights, freedom of expression and freedom of information”.

New Naratif is a Southeast Asian organisation that promotes democracy. Why its founders would meet with the newly-elected prime minister of Malaysia to push for democracy in Malaysia should be obvious. Shanmugam, however, insists on inserting Singapore into the conversation. Shanmugam should remember that the world does not revolve around the PAP, and he is not the only source of mounting authoritarianism in this part of the world.

New Naratif's Pledge to Southeast Asians

The PAP government has never shied from destroying lives and societies in foreign countries in pursuit of its political, economic and strategic aims. It has not shied in cultivating foreign proxies, using direct aid and indirect grant funding to promote its agenda, nor running hostile information campaigns locally and abroad. That's because the PAP government does not truly care about foreign intervention in Singapore. What it cares about is destroying any dissent and opposition to its rule.

This is selfish and short-sighted. Destroying many of the domestic institutions needed to underpin a strong and robust democracy, including a vibrant civil society and a free and independent press, and discouraging media literacy and critical thinking in favour of slavish obedience to the government, fatally undermines the ability of Singaporean society to resist foreign intervention and disinformation campaigns.

New Naratif will continue to fight for the rights of the people of Southeast Asia, including their rights to free association, information and expression. Our pledge to Singaporeans, and to all

Southeast Asians, is that we will continue to provide a platform through which we can hold those with power accountable. In this way, we will create a more democratic Southeast Asia where the people, not foreign powers or authoritarian governments, have the power.

Thum Ping Tjin (“PJ”) is Managing Director of New Naratif and a historian at the University of Oxford. A Rhodes Scholar, Commonwealth Scholar, Olympic athlete, and the only Singaporean to swim the English Channel, his work centres on Southeast Asian governance and politics. His most recent work is *Living with Myths in Singapore* (Ethos: 2017, co-edited with Loh Kah Seng and Jack Chia).

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

New Naratif

<https://newnaratif.com/the-paps-long-and-bloody-history-of-foreign-interference/>

If you appreciate this coverage of South East Asia, please consider [subscribing](#) to New Naratif. New Naratif’s operations are funded by memberships. Membership starts at only US\$5/month. For more information about the organisation, please see New Naratif’s [About Us page](#) or [Manifesto page](#).