

Operation Coldstore, 'Marxist Conspiracy' Plot Among Events Least Known and Important to Singaporeans: IPS Study

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Yahoo News, 25 January 2015

Singapore's controversial Operation Coldstore and "Marxist Conspiracy" arrests in 1963 and 1987 respectively are two of the least-known historical events to its citizens, according to a recent study by researchers from the Institute of Policy Studies.

In its findings published on Sunday afternoon, the two events were ranked last in a list of 50 key milestones that occurred in Singapore's history, spanning the period between the landing of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 to the twin MRT train breakdowns in December 2011.

In comparison, the top five events survey respondents were aware of included the opening of the two casinos in 2010, the SARS outbreak in 2003, the twin MRT breakdowns, Mas Selamat's escape in 2008 and Goh Chok Tong taking over as Prime Minister from Lee Kuan Yew in 1990.

Academics whom Yahoo Singapore spoke to about the findings said the general lack of awareness and recognition of the "Marxist Conspiracy" and Operation Coldstore arrests stems both from the controversial and seemingly divisive nature of the events.

"These are controversial events which are rarely highlighted and discussed at length, even in schools," said history assistant professor Goh Geok Yian, who teaches at Nanyang Technological University.

"These events are rarely [placed] within a historical and political context, which makes it difficult for people to gain a more nuanced understanding of their significance. Other than captive audiences in academic circles and within schools, discussions of the importance of these events would probably not interest average Singaporeans who may consider them to be irrelevant to the present and future."

Other events that ranked low in awareness and importance in the study included the 1974 Laju hostage incident, the 1984 debate on the Graduate Mother scheme, and the split of the People's Action Party (PAP) in 1961.

The landmark study, the first of its kind to be done in Singapore, surveyed some 1,516 Singaporeans of a demographic spread representative of the nation-state's 3.34 million-strong citizen population.

The study involved showing respondents aged 21 and above a list of 50 historical events in Singapore. For each item on the list, respondents were asked if they were aware that the event occurred. If they were, they were then asked four questions: if it was important to them, whether it was important to their future generations, if they felt positively or negatively about it, and how strongly, emotionally, they felt about them.

The list of 50 was narrowed down from about 80 milestones that were picked from academic and online sources with information about Singapore's history, said IPS senior research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, who led the team of researchers in the study. The list was also

run through three separate trial rounds where the phrasing of each item was also refined. Face-to-face interviews were then conducted with respondents between August and October 2014.

"I suppose if you take this one step further, the question then is [with regard to] these historical events at the bottom of the pile, are there lessons we can draw that we need to pass on to the new generation?" said Leong, in a briefing on the study to reporters on Friday.

Citing the Graduate Mothers' Scheme as an example, Leong said it drew anger from the very people the government was trying to target with that policy.

"Perhaps the lesson moving forward [from this] is before you implement the policies, you need to understand whether these policies, and principles behind the policies, are in alignment with the values of society," he added.

Since respondents indicated that milestones involving material development and progress were more positive and also more important, Goh said this indicated that those surveyed had a more pragmatic mindset.

"It may also be possible that such events (Operation Coldstore and 'Marxist Conspiracy' arrests) were perceived to be divisive or indicative of differences, which the particular sampling of Singaporeans prefers to avoid or perceive as less significant today," she added.

For former Nominated Member of Parliament Eugene Tan, the low ranking of the two controversial events was not surprising.

"They may, in part, reflect a degree of lack of awareness of what these events mean and how they continue to impact us," he told Yahoo Singapore. "They also reflect a good measure of trust in the government with regards to security issues and so the salience of such events significantly recedes in public consciousness."

He stressed, however, that he observed from this a "patent need" to review Singapore's history, social studies and national education curricula in order to provide a more holistic understanding of the nation's past.

Tan, who is also an associate law professor at Singapore Management University, acknowledged why respondents attached importance to events with material significance to Singapore's progress – events such as the opening of the MRT, the formation of HDB and the opening of Changi Airport.

"They are important because they demonstrate that Singaporeans can relate to our progress and development," he said. "But they should be balanced with historical events that have a non-material dimension, like the Japanese Occupation, the trilogy of merger, separation and independence, Confrontation and racial conflict."

Ultimately, he said what he calls "selective amnesia" of certain Singapore historical events should be avoided as far as possible.

"[It] will only undermine how we relate to these pivotal events and compromise our ability to learn from them for a nuanced understanding today and an enlightened approach in future," he added.