

## **Biographical Notes**

### **Sinnathamby Rajaratnam (23 February 1915 – 22 February 2006) – Journalist/politician**

Sinnathamby Rajaratnam was the oldest of two sons born to a Ceylonese rubber plantation supervisor on 23 February 1915.<sup>1</sup> He was born in Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) but his mother took him to join his father in Seremban, Malaya when he was six months old.<sup>2</sup> Rajaratnam grew up in Seremban at a rubber plantation.<sup>3</sup>

Rajaratnam attained his primary and secondary education at St Paul's Institution in Seremban (1923 – 1933). He left for London in 1935 to study law at King's College but did not complete his degree as he had lost interest in his studies, and became heavily involved in the Marxist movement in London.<sup>4</sup>

During World War II, Rajaratnam lived in London with his wife, Piroska Feher, whom he married on 2 January 1943. She was a Hungarian refugee whom he met at a Left Book Club meeting in 1938.<sup>5</sup> It was at this time that he started his career as a journalist at the *Daily Express*.<sup>6</sup> He also freelanced for several left leaning publications and wrote fiction.<sup>7</sup>

Rajaratnam and his wife returned to Malaya in February 1947.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after, he started his journalistic career in Singapore, working at the Malaya Tribune (1947 – 1950), Singapore Standard (1950 - 1954)<sup>9</sup> and the Straits Times (1954-1959).<sup>10</sup> He founded the Singapore Union of Journalists in 1951.<sup>11</sup>

In 1952, Rajaratnam met Lee Kuan Yew through Goh Keng Swee.<sup>12</sup> Lee was then the legal adviser for the Postal and Telecommunications Uniformed Staff Union in a case related to a pay dispute. Lee asked Raja to support the Union's cause in his articles for the *Standard*.<sup>13</sup> Raja did, and over the course of the 17-day strike, published daily articles drumming up public support for the strikers.<sup>14</sup>

Rajaratnam was one of the founding members of the People's Action Party (PAP). Given his journalistic and intellectual leanings, he was put in charge of PAP's Political Bureau, party propaganda and party publication – PETIR.<sup>15</sup> He was the one who articulated the PAP's goal at the time, which was “an independent, democratic, non-Communist Socialist Malaya”.<sup>16</sup>

In 1959, Rajaratnam resigned from the Straits Times to be fielded as a PAP candidate in Kampong Glam.<sup>17</sup> He was elected to the Legislative Assembly that year and remained a Member of Parliament of Kampong Glam until he retired from politics in 1988.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Melanie Chew, *Leaders of Singapore* (Singapore: Resource Press, 1996, reprinted 2015), p. 151; Tommy Koh, ed., *Singapore: The Encyclopedia* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), p. 444.

<sup>2</sup> Irene Ng, *The Singapore Lion: A Biography of S. Rajaratnam* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2010), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, pp. 5, 12, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, pp. 27, 29, 31-54; Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 151.

<sup>5</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, pp. 54, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, pp. 69, 79-81.

<sup>7</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, pp. 69-78.

<sup>8</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, p. 89.

<sup>9</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, p. 95, 119-120, 186.

<sup>10</sup> Koh, *Singapore: The Encyclopedia*, p. 444.

<sup>11</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, p. 140.

<sup>12</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, pp. 143-144.

<sup>13</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, pp. 146-148.

<sup>15</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, pp. 258-9.

<sup>16</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, p. 260.

<sup>17</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, p. 296.

<sup>18</sup> “Raja, Barker among PAP MPs not contesting”, *The Straits Times*, 20 August 1988.

After the PAP won the 1959 elections, Rajaratnam was made Minister of Culture (1959-1965).<sup>19</sup> When Singapore became independent in 1965, Rajaratnam was made the nation's first Minister of Foreign Affairs (1965-1980).<sup>20</sup> During his 29-year political career, he held the positions of Minister of Labour (1968-1971), Second Deputy Prime Minister (Foreign Affairs) (1980-1984) and Senior Minister in the Prime Minister's Office (1984-1988).<sup>21</sup>

Rajaratnam championed malayanisation and multiculturalism, even after Singapore's independence.<sup>22</sup> He was instrumental in the drafting of the national pledge in 1966,<sup>23</sup> and provided the authorised translation of the Singapore flag symbols to prevent misinterpretation.<sup>24</sup>

After he retired from politics, Rajaratnam was appointed distinguished senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (1988-1997).<sup>25</sup>

Rajaratnam died on 22 Feb 2006 of heart failure at his home. He was 90 years old.<sup>26</sup> When he passed away, Rajaratnam was given a state funeral, the first for a government minister.<sup>27</sup>

Link to [S. Rajaratnam Private Papers Index List](#)

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<sup>19</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, p. 299; "Getting to know S. Rajaratnam", *PAP website*, Retrieved from <https://www.pap.org.sg/stories/getting-to-know-s-rajaratnam/>

<sup>20</sup> "Getting to know S. Rajaratnam", *PAP website*, Retrieved from <https://www.pap.org.sg/stories/getting-to-know-s-rajaratnam/>

<sup>21</sup> "S'pore pioneer Rajaratnam dies", *The Straits Times*, 23 February 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, pp. 299, 302, 308-9, 313.

<sup>23</sup> "Getting to know S. Rajaratnam", *PAP website*, Retrieved from <https://www.pap.org.sg/stories/getting-to-know-s-rajaratnam/>

<sup>24</sup> Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, p. 314.

<sup>25</sup> "Rajaratnam to join ISEAS as senior fellow", *Business Times*, 29 October 1988; "We will miss this universal gentleman", *The Straits Times*, 24 February 2006.

<sup>26</sup> "Former DPM Rajaratnam dies at 90", *Business Times*, 23 February 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Koh, *Singapore: The Encyclopedia*, p. 444.