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## Singapore need not fear loosening censorship

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**S**ometimes the Singapore government cannot help itself. The conviction of [Alan Shadrake](#), an outspoken but hitherto unknown British author, is not merely unjust; it reminds outsiders of the authoritarian and sinister side of a city state that most people associate only with shopping.

Shadrake is the latest in a long line of victims of one of the world's most vicious defamation cultures. Pretty much any criticism can be deemed as "insult". International media have fallen foul - from the [Economist](#) to the [Far Eastern Economic Review](#) - and most of the tiny group of opposition politicians have over the years been bankrupted and then imprisoned for going against the grain.

Shadrake, who divides his time between Malaysia and the UK, knew what he was doing, and he knew the consequences. He knew he was inviting trouble - more specifically [charges of contempt](#) - by calling into question the probity of the judiciary. But that does not make the attack on him any less acceptable or sensible. Imagine if Singapore had shown a little more foresight and ignored the affair. The book would not have matched Jamie or Nigella on the bestsellers.

Sentencing has now been deferred for a week, with prosecutors asking for "only" 12 weeks jail. This is more lenient than anticipated, perhaps denoting an element of embarrassment at the bad press. But the trial should not have happened in the first place.

As a frequent visitor to Singapore (where I was born), I have seen the best and the worst of the place. When nearly two years ago I wrote a [piece for the Guardian](#) previewing my book, [Freedom for Sale](#) as the model of the global tendency of people trading their liberty for either wealth or security - I was instantly denounced. They did not appreciate my description of the consumer culture there as "the anaesthetic for the brain".

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the denunciations, I sought to engage the Singaporeans at the top of government. I suggested to them that their kneejerk response to all criticism, no matter the tone or subject matter, was doing their country enormous harm. They then surprised me by inviting me over to launch my book there. My father suggested they might "do a Polanski on me" and arrest me at the airport. In the event, I was treated well and the government-controlled Straits Times devoted two pages to a measured critique of my thesis.

The vacillations in my treatment suggest that the government in Singapore is not talking with one voice. Everyone is wondering what will happen once the 87-year-old [Lee Kuan Yew](#), the father of the independent nation and father of the present prime minister, passes on. Will Singapore begin to loosen its stifling grip and tolerate free expression? I examine these questions in a special report later this week on BBC Radio 4's [The World Tonight](#).

Singapore's population is well travelled and highly educated. The country is stable and completely integrated into the global economy and communications. Already it is allowing just a little more [cultural freedom](#), but it does so nervously. The regime has nothing to fear except fear itself.

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