Chapter 4

The People's Action Party and Political Liberalization in Singapore

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Abstract

In formal terms, Singapore seems to have all the trappings of modern representative democracy. And yet in practice, politics in Singapore appears to fall short of democratic ideals. In particular, the People's Action Party (PAP) has been in power since 1959, having within legal means secured advantage and dominance over other political parties, resulting in a stable one-party dominant state. To understand the nature of political competition in Singapore, this essay's analysis focuses on electoral resources, system, and strategy, the performance and relevance of the political opposition, and the culture of fear. In particular, the essay argues that several political innovations introduced over the last two or three decades — officially justified in terms that are supportive of democracy — have in reality made it even harder for opposition parties to succeed. These seemingly democratic changes must therefore be understood in terms of how they create and obscure new opportunities and resources for political control, increasing the PAP government's capacity and legitimacy to control more widely and deeply.

1. Introduction

In formal terms, Singapore seems to have all the trappings of modern representative democracy. The five stars on its national flag each

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represent democracy, peace, progress, justice, and equality. Its national pledge includes the wording, “to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality”. Its Constitution provides an account of the separation of powers, judicial review, and the fundamental liberties that are protected under what is recognizably the rule of law.¹ Its state institutions, in spite of various constitutional innovations over the decades, still bear the colonial hallmark of the Westminster model and are categorized into the familiar branches of the legislature, executive, and judiciary; thereby mimicking the structures of western liberal democratic government. And, together with regularly held political elections with universal suffrage and compulsory voting, these institutions seem to be animated by the principles of accountability, representation, and checks and balances.

And yet in practice, politics in Singapore appears to fall short of the democratic ideals. At the heart of this observation is the fact that one party — the People’s Action Party (PAP) — has been in power since 1959, having within legal means secured advantage and dominance over roughly 20 other major, minor, and dormant registered political parties almost entirely through the formal structures and processes of electoral democracy. While in government, the PAP — with its elaborate and stringent mechanism for recruiting talent and its significantly more than two-thirds presence in Parliament — has exercised extensive control over a large scope of political, economic, social, and cultural activities, including these electoral structures and processes. The PAP government has managed to attune the popular consciousness to the almost singular importance of maintaining Singapore’s considerable but fragile economic success, a politically useful object of pride and anxiety, since this can often be made to suggest the necessity of maintaining a PAP government in a position of strength.

What should one make of a situation where a single party is continuously and, by many accounts, convincingly voted into government through a formal process that, in spite of its idiosyncrasies, is

¹ Kevin Y.L. Tan, *An Introduction to Singapore’s Constitution*.

still identifiably democratic? The US State Department, for instance, regularly assesses Singapore's voting and vote-counting system as "fair, accurate and free from tampering".² Is this result simply and ultimately a reflection of the will of the people? If the practice has in fact been unfair, or perceived to be unfair, what will need to be done to achieve genuine political competition as required by democratic ideals and by an increasingly sceptical electorate? Will a focus on the electoral core, however, distract from efforts to develop a more expansive participatory approach to Singapore's democracy? Or, has the public spectacle of economic and sociocultural liberalization managed to redirect public attention away from the deficiencies of electoral practice? More fundamentally, even as Singapore recognizes and criticizes the hypocrisies associated with countries of the West that attempt to export and impose their brand of democracy, can it afford to ignore what John Dunn has described as "the public cant of the modern world,"³ when democracy continues to be upheld as the international benchmark of political legitimacy?

The markers of independent Singapore's political trajectory have readily coincided with prime ministerial tenure. Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990, maintained a tough, no-nonsense authoritarian style in dealing with his political opponents but also in moulding the kind of Singaporean which he regarded as necessary for a multi-ethnic and newly industrializing society to survive and succeed.⁴ Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister from 1990 to 2004, promised to build on the achievements of his predecessor but to introduce a new style that was kinder and gentler towards a more consultative and participative society.⁵ Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister

² Quoted in Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne, *Singapore Politics under the People's Action Party*, p. 143.

³ John Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*, p. 12.

⁴ Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez, and Sumiko Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*.

⁵ *The Next Lap* (Singapore: The Government of Singapore, 1991); Bridget Welsh, James Chin, Arun Mahizhnan, and Tan Tarn How (eds.), *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore*.

since 2004, has called for a more open and inclusive society compatible with a world-class global city.⁶

Prime ministerial personalities aside, this trajectory has in part been fuelled by a more demanding electorate composed of larger sections of Singaporeans who have become urbanized, affluent, better educated, globally connected, egotistical, and motivated by post-industrial values and aspirations. It is tempting, in this regard, to project Singapore's future onto an essentially linear universal history famously described by Francis Fukuyama as driven by a Hegelian "struggle for recognition" and directed towards a capitalist liberal democratic endpoint.⁷ David Martin Jones and David Brown, however, argued in the mid-1990s that Singapore's middle class consisted of "educated urban managers, bureaucrats, executives and professionals" whose culture and values were neither (Western) liberal nor (Asian) communitarian. Instead, their technocratic orientation, secured by specialist education, favoured a "managerial corporatist form of political development".⁸

Middle-class preoccupations in Singapore are more likely to be centered on personal careers and lifestyle matters including consumption activity and choices, social status, and quality of life. In a highly competitive society where the cost of living has risen considerably over recent decades, students and members of the labor force devote nearly all their energies towards academic achievement, career development, and higher salaries, all of which seem to be required for the attainment of middle-class standards of living. The focus, therefore, has generally been on economic, social, and cultural liberalization and the continued efficiency and effectiveness of public policy and administration to ensure continued material well-being. This, ironically, has been the cause of some concern for the government, since it desires a citizenry that is not completely apathetic, but able and willing to give positive endorsement and contribute to government policies and

⁶ Kenneth P. Tan, "Optimists, Pessimists, and Strategists," pp. 253–269.

⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

⁸ David Martin Jones and David Brown, "Singapore and the Myth of the Liberalizing Middle Class," p. 80.

programs, while remaining usefully apathetic in those areas that are potentially more political. In other words, the government wishes to have an active citizenry that will give it full support, perform its nation-state obligations, volunteer in community and society, but not challenge the government's legitimacy and its fundamental principles and policies, particularly in public.

Global-city Singapore's liberal spectacles — a lightened censorship regime, an arts scene that is more varied and daring, a vibrant nightlife, more critical voices in the mass media, etc. — together with attempts by the state to inspire and selectively activate an apathetic citizenry have had the effect of refocusing attention away from electoral deficiencies in the assessment of Singapore's democracy. This chapter will examine these electoral deficiencies and argue that various constitutional changes since the 1980s that provide some evidence of democratization must also be understood in terms of how they create and obscure new opportunities and resources for political control.

2. Political Competition, Elections, and the One-Party Dominant State

From 1968 to 1980, the PAP won all parliamentary seats at every general election. In the 1981 by-election, it lost one seat to the Workers' Party candidate J. B. Jeyaretnam; and then another to Singapore Democratic Party candidate Chiam See Tong in the 1984 general election. In 1991, it lost a record high of four seats to opposition parties and took only 61 percent of the votes. Since the 1997 general election, the PAP has been winning all but two seats, and it scored a record high of 75.3 percent of the votes in 2001.⁹ Although a relatively clean electoral process has been in place, there seems to be no real possibility in the foreseeable future of a change in government through democratic means. So why has the PAP been so successful in

⁹ Sylvia Lim, "The Future of Alternative Party Politics: Growth or Extinction?" p. 241.

these general elections? Do these basically unchanging results reflect strong democratic support and mandate for the PAP? Does the PAP enjoy any real advantages; and, if so, how have they been secured over the decades?

Electoral Resources

One set of reasons for the PAP's electoral success relates to its incumbency and the superior resources that are available to a party that has been in power for over half a century. For example, the PAP government can claim exclusive responsibility for Singapore's success, chalking up a virtually unchallenged and unchallengeable record of achievement, reflected to great effect in its election manifestos.¹⁰ Official history textbooks, mainstream scholarship on Singapore history, the two memoirs written by Lee Kuan Yew, and more general efforts in "national education" all position the PAP as heroic protagonists of Singapore's history, defeating the historical antagonists — the PAP's political opponents included — in a narrative of Singapore's transformation, "from Third World to First". In this way, the PAP is popularly viewed as a national party responsible for past and future success, and for protection against crises and vulnerabilities. When the economy does well, the people often see this as a result of good policies and so they vote for the PAP; in times of economic crisis, the people also rally behind the only government they have known, and whose good track record has been acknowledged widely.

The incumbent also has the distinct advantage of being in control of when general elections are held. A minimum of nine days is required by law between nomination day and polling day, enabling the government to call what could in effect be a "snap" election, denying the opposition parties adequate time for preparation. The prime minister also appoints senior bureaucrats to form an Electoral Boundaries Review Committee to review and recommend appropriate changes to the boundaries of electoral divisions, though there is no provision for

¹⁰ Derek da Cunha, *The Price of Victory: The 1997 Singapore General Election and Beyond*, pp. 123–127.

this in the Constitution. While the redrawing of boundaries is done ostensibly to correct for demographic shifts, it can also adversely affect the prospects of the opposition parties. This is especially so when the redrawing is done very shortly before a general election is called and when the constituencies that opposition parties have been cultivating are redrawn, sometimes out of existence as in the case of Anson constituency.

The PAP has, in people's minds, become indistinguishable from the government and state. The PAP government's immense influence over the civil service, the defense forces, the labor unions, the business community, grassroots organizations, and mass media has given it a powerful network of control and a monopoly over enormous human, informational, financial, and logistical resources. In particular, this influence has translated into tremendous advantage during electoral campaigns. Opposition candidates often complain about how the prime campaign venues and timeslots seem to be more easily reserved by the PAP, which leaves them with less effective platforms for campaign rallies. The PAP can also raise impressive numbers of volunteers and supporters — many implicit — from the grassroots sector, the National Trade Union Congress (historically, a sister organization of the PAP), and even the civil administration. The labor-intensive and time-consuming house-to-house visits by candidates and their grassroots members are an important means of canvassing support.

More important, though, has been the media coverage of these campaigns. The government's influence over the local media has ensured that coverage clearly favors the PAP. Even the selection, editing, and layout of campaign pictures are barely able to conceal this bias. Blogger YawningBread's photo-essay gives concrete examples of some of this bias in the 2006 general election, noting also the PAP's "bicycle-thief tactics" through which it "singles out one opposition candidate and issues a torrent of innuendoes that really amount to character assassination." YawningBread also observes how the media "readily play their part" in all of this.¹¹ A 1991 survey of 434 voters

¹¹ YawningBread, "Rally at Hougang Field," *YawningBread* blog (May 2006), http://www.yawningbread.org/photo_essay/pew-05/pew-0500.htm [1 January 2010].

in the 1991 general election found that the electorate relied heavily on newspapers and television for information about the election, although media credibility in terms of perceived fairness and completeness was seen to be relatively low given the way the PAP received twice the amount of coverage allocated to the opposition.¹²

Not surprisingly, new media alternatives to traditional journalism — including online citizen journalism, podcasts, vodcasts, YouTube, blogs, and social networking websites like Facebook — have become a more popular and, for some, “credible” source of political news and commentary. Up until 2009, the Parliamentary Election Act had not included podcasting and vodcasting of “explicit political content” in a “positive list” that specified what forms of election advertising were permissible; these new media were in effect outlawed. Before 2009, party-political films had been banned under the Films Act. Today, the government has agreed to impose a lighter touch when it comes to the control of new media and political films, in part almost certainly a response to the sheer practical impossibility of monitoring infringements and maintaining bans. In fact, continuing to heavily censor these political media objects would invest them with greater significance that drives them into wider and faster circulation in the global cyber-networks.

The Electoral System

A second set of reasons for the PAP’s electoral success has to do with the electoral system itself. In a first-past-the-post system, the candidate with the highest number of votes in each constituency wins a seat in Parliament; and the party that wins the highest number of seats in Parliament forms the government and its leader is appointed prime minister. This system, unlike those based on proportional representation, disadvantages smaller and weaker parties as the percentage of votes that they win does not generally translate proportionally into

¹² Eddie C.Y. Kuo, Duncan Holaday; and Eugenia Peck, *Mirror On the Wall: Media in a Singapore Election*, pp. 102–103.

the number of parliamentary seats they are awarded. This is exacerbated by the fact that party support has been rather evenly distributed across electoral divisions, which are relatively homogenous in demographic terms due in large part to the public housing policies that prevent the formation of any significant ethnic and class enclaves. Even at its worst showing in 1991, the PAP's victory over 95 percent of parliamentary seats was a significant mark up from winning only 61 percent of the total votes cast. And this is even more problematic if one takes into account the fact that a significant proportion of electoral divisions is not even contested, in some years more than half.

In 1988, the government introduced a controversial electoral innovation that created a mix of multi-member and at least eight Single-Member Constituencies (SMCs) out of the original 81 SMCs. In the multi-member constituencies, known as Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), residents vote for entire teams, each consisting of three to six individual MPs from a single party, at least one of whom must be from a designated minority racial community. Officially, this innovation has been explained as a way of institutionally ensuring adequate racial minority representation in Parliament. It was also designed to encourage political parties to moderate their policies in order to appeal to a multi-racial middle ground, rather than pursue extremist agendas. However, GRCs have also presented the PAP with significant advantages. Firstly, new and less experienced PAP candidates can be shepherded into Parliament on the strength of the more experienced, popular, or "heavy weight" MPs and ministers in each GRC.¹³ In fact, there have not been any full ministers who were voted out of office in independent Singapore's electoral history, and the odds of this happening in the near future are very low.¹⁴ Secondly, the larger the constituency in terms of number of voters, the more likely will its electoral behavior resemble that of the total

¹³ Derek da Cunha, *The Price of Victory: The 1997 Singapore General Election and Beyond*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Loh Chee Kong, "Time to Test the Young Guns with Single-Seat Wards," *Weekend Today* (16–17 January 2010), p. 35.

population, allowing the PAP to make even better use of the first-past-the-post system.¹⁵ Thirdly, the task of putting together teams of credible candidates that must include a racial minority candidate has been an enormous challenge for the opposition parties that are already strapped for resources.

It could be argued that larger constituencies can also be a greater risk for the PAP since the possible loss of just one GRC could usher into Parliament up to six opposition candidates who would then find opportunities to prove themselves and form a critical mass to be taken seriously. In 2009, the government announced that it would reduce the number of six-member GRCs and increase the number of SMCs from nine to at least 12, a move that Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong described as being in line with the government's guiding principles of political change: The moves would make it fairer for all political parties, giving them "an equal chance to contest and win" without leading to "democratic chaos and politics of division". Goh delineated three principles to guide political change in Singapore: (1) changes must be "fair to all political parties," (2) changes should "result in a strong, effective government after an election," and (3) changes must "ensure diverse views are represented in Parliament."¹⁶ These principles are mostly democratic in character, and if the opposition parties take full advantage of this opening to win a few SMCs and even just one GRC, there could be a significant change in the oppositional dynamics within Parliament.

Electoral Strategy

A third set of reasons for the PAP's success has to do with electoral strategy. Here, the opposition parties have not been without good ideas. Their "by-election strategy," particularly successful in the 1991

¹⁵ Derek da Cunha, *The Price of Victory: The 1997 Singapore General Election and Beyond*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Zakir Hussain, "SM Goh on 3 Principles Guiding Changes to Political System," *The Straits Times* (25 May 2009).

general election,¹⁷ ingeniously capitalized on the plausible assumption that most Singaporeans, although desiring more oppositional voices in Parliament to serve as a strong enough check on the PAP government, would nevertheless be cautious about voting for an opposition candidate just in case their votes lead to the unintended consequence of unseating the PAP and bringing an opposition party into power.¹⁸ The PAP has warned Singaporeans to be responsible with their vote or else suffer the consequences of a “freak” election. The by-election strategy involved coordinated planning among the opposition parties to field candidates in less than half the total number of constituencies so that Singaporeans could vote for the opposition candidate confident that whichever way one voted, the PAP would already be in government right from nomination day.¹⁹ By giving the voters an absolute guarantee that their parties could not possibly come into power, opposition politicians were able to maximize their chances of increasing their parliamentary presence.

The PAP attempted to counter the opposition's by-election strategy by highlighting the “local election” characteristics of general elections.²⁰ It sought to highlight the incentive for residents to vote for MPs not only as representatives of their interests in Parliament, but also as managers of their local constituency. Residents should also think about who will be looking after their housing blocks, neighborhood amenities, and other common spaces, and who would have the ability and access to resources needed to do this job well.

More than 80 percent of Singaporeans live in high-rise public housing apartments built and sold by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), set up in 1960 as a state agency under the Ministry of National Development. In 1988, the first Town Councils were set up to manage, repair, renew, upgrade, and improve common areas and facilities in these

¹⁷ Bilveer Singh, *Whither PAP's Dominance? An Analysis of Singapore's 1991 General Elections*, pp. 103–104.

¹⁸ Raj Vasil, “Singapore 1992: Continuity and Change,” p. 303.

¹⁹ Jon Quah, “The 1980s: A Review of Significant Political Developments,” p. 391.

²⁰ Derek da Cunha, *The Price of Victory: The 1997 Singapore General Election and Beyond*, p. 117.

public housing estates, originally the responsibility of the HDB. Today, there are 16 Town Councils: 14 that manage PAP constituencies and two that manage opposition constituencies. Each Town Council consists of between six and 30 non-elected councillors appointed by its chairman, who is one of the constituency's MPs. In this way, politicians win votes at national parliamentary elections not only because of the party they belong to, but also for the kind of local politician-managers they would make. Furthermore, amendments to the Town Council Act have limited the access of new MPs to surplus funds accumulated in previous years by MPs from a different party.²¹ In effect, constituents are encouraged to vote for the incumbent PAP MPs who enjoy the support of the state and the use of surplus funds accumulated by previous PAP Town Councillors.

In the mid-1990s, the PAP also announced that the percentage of PAP votes in each constituency would be linked to their place in the waiting list for the much-desired estate upgrading programmes conducted mainly by the HDB, but increasingly by the Town Councils as well. These included not only the sprucing up of older apartment buildings and the attachment of additional rooms to original apartment structures, but also the construction of lift landings on every floor, extensive sheltered walkways, landscaped gardens, playgrounds and outdoor gymnasiums, multi-purpose halls for common use, and even public sculptures. Then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew put it most bluntly:

You vote for the other side, that means you reject the programmes of the PAP candidate... If you reject it, we respect your choice. Then you'll be left behind, then in 20, 30 years' time, the whole of Singapore will be bustling away, and your estate through your own choice will be left behind. They become slums. That's my message.²²

The PAP later reassured Singaporeans, in an open letter published in *The Straits Times*, that estates in all constituencies would be upgraded. However, as money for upgrading came from budget surpluses built up

²¹ Diane K. Mauzy, "Singapore's Dilemma: Coping With the Paradox of Success," pp. 265–266.

²² "We Will Fight GE as Local Election," *The Straits Times* (23 December 1996).

by the PAP government, “[t]o carry on HDB upgrading, Singaporeans must continue to support good government.”²³ This, of course, was straightforward code for supporting the PAP. Urban studies expert Ooi Giok Ling notes in these and other examples how public housing in Singapore has become more explicitly and acutely politicized.²⁴ In fact, even when it was eventually time in 2009 for the opposition wards — Hougang and Potong Pasir — to be upgraded, the honour of announcing the good news was given not to the constituencies’ elected opposition MPs who were the respective Town Council chairmen, but to the grassroots “advisors,” appointments filled by the PAP candidates whom the voters had rejected in the most recent general election. Workers’ Party Chairman Sylvia Lim noted that this showed just how little “respect the government has for the people’s choice of Member of Parliament, who is vested with the Constitutional mandate to represent the constituency.”²⁵

Performance of the Opposition Parties

A fourth set of advantages that the PAP government enjoys is actually linked to the performance of the opposition parties. Part of this has something to do with the weakness of parliamentary privilege, exposing opposition politicians to the legal actions of a prickly and highly litigious government, which has sometimes led to bankruptcy. Part of this also has to do with the government’s media-assisted efforts to paint opposition politicians as lacking credibility, mainly in terms of their academic and professional qualifications, political and administrative experience, as well as character and integrity. These negative images of the opposition are challenged by the fact that a good number of them have been graduates (some with doctoral degrees),

²³ “Upgrading: PAP Sends Out Open Letter to S’poreans,” *The Sunday Times* (29 December 1996).

²⁴ Ooi Giok Ling, *Future of Space*, pp. 146–175.

²⁵ Sylvia Lim, “WP Rebuts Ministry’s Reply on Lift Upgrading,” Statement/Press Release (15 October 2009), <http://wp.sg/2009/10/wp-rebuts-ministrys-reply-on-lift-upgrading/> [1 January 2010].

successful professionals, and even former high-ranking members of the establishment who have fallen out of favor. Certainly, the government — again assisted by the media — has been able to dig up enough dirt on a number of them to show moral failing (the “bicycle-thief tactics” described above), portray some others as buffoonish and laughable, and present yet others as libelous, traitorous, and treacherous.

However, the opposition parties have also failed to build sufficient capacity, exacerbated by their inability to mobilize and cooperate effectively, and by the overdependence on a few strong personalities whose potential to unite has sometimes been let down by the factions that tend to form around them. Naturally, opposition parties face difficulty in recruiting sufficient numbers of talented Singaporeans who have the moral courage to join them, or who consider that the opposition is where their talents would be put to the best use, or who believe in the abstract value of strong opposition, or who could convincingly disentangle their own career prospects from their political activities. Nevertheless, the more successful opposition parties have started to make effective use of new media, engaging a new generation of more sceptical and media-savvy Singaporeans who turn to online sources for alternative news and commentary.

The once-successful by-election strategy was based on the assumption that the Singapore electorate wants enough opposition in Parliament to check on the government, but not so much as to displace the PAP from the government. Opposition parties, similarly, see themselves as a permanent opposition, aiming at most to secure more seats in Parliament. They have not been able to form shadow governments as a sign of readiness to form a new government. Sylvia Lim used the term “alternative party politics” instead of “opposition party politics” to characterize her party’s constructive political role, which she claimed is not to “oppose the PAP *per se*, and to oppose it on every issue” but to “offer ‘non-PAP’ options” even in cases when it converges with the PAP’s general policy directions which it deems to be “in the national interest”.²⁶ A convincing argument could be made

²⁶ Lim, Sylvia, “The Future of Alternative Party Politics: Growth or Extinction?” p. 239.

that politics has moved so much to a “pragmatic” middle ground that the parties all fail to present real alternatives. And if all had to compete on an identical platform of ideals and values, the electorate’s focus will naturally turn exclusively to questions of technique — who can do the job better? Given the PAP government’s control over talent (which it describes as “meritocracy”), its technocratic expertise, and its half a century of experience, the answer — for the majority of the electorate — is clear.

The Relevance of Parliamentary Opposition

A fifth set of advantages has to do with the way the PAP government has institutionalized a range of alternative institutions to the traditional elected opposition. It would, of course, be in the PAP’s interest to project the elected opposition, which liberal democratic theory requires and Singaporeans still in the main think desirable, as, in the final instance, unnecessary.

One strategy of the PAP was to provide its own internal opposition in Parliament. In 1987, PAP backbenchers were given a more active role as members of various Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs). The main function of these party structures not provided by the Constitution has been to study and monitor policies and issues associated with the ministries and their agencies that each has been assigned to scrutinize. By engaging private sector experts in resource panels, GPCs would also modestly help to generate public participation in parliamentary decisions. At first, GPC members were expected to assume an adversarial stance against the cabinet ministers, but their approach has softened significantly over the decades. Their efforts to perform the role of loyal opposition in parliamentary debate have also been limited often to criticism not of the principles of policy but only the details of implementation.²⁷

A second strategy was to introduce appointed MPs who could perform the role of opposition without the need for citizens to vote

²⁷ Jon Quah, “The 1980s: A Review of Significant Political Developments,” pp. 393–394.

for traditional parliamentary opposition. For instance, in 1984, the PAP government introduced the Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) scheme to ensure that there were at least three opposition members in Parliament. If less than three were elected, the difference was made up by appointing to Parliament the next highest vote-earning opposition candidates who had secured at least 15 percent of the votes in the constituency that they had contested in. A maximum of nine (increased from six in 2009) NCMPs may be appointed for each term. Though they may participate in all types of debate, they have limited voting powers.

Critics have argued that the scheme sends a message to the electorate that it is not necessary to vote for opposition since the government will bring them in regardless.²⁸ When the NCMP scheme was introduced and more recently enlarged, critics were concerned about tokenism and a weakening of the image of opposition politicians who may appear to be hobbling into Parliament on crutches magnanimously provided by the PAP in power. And while in Parliament, NCMPs would not enjoy the full powers of regular MPs. The decision in 2009 to increase the number of NCMPs to nine could amplify this negative impression of the opposition, but it could also provide an opportunity for opposition politicians to impress sceptical Singaporean voters. With the support of more oppositional voices in Parliament, NCMPs can more confidently and credibly ask the really challenging questions that a fully functional legislature is expected to facilitate.

A second example is the Nominated MPs (NMPs), established in 1990. Up to nine NMPs may be appointed for two-and-a-half year terms to provide responsible, informed, expert, and, perhaps most importantly, independent and nonpartisan criticism of government policies in Parliament. The general public are invited to submit names of people who have distinguished themselves in various domains that include academia, science and technology, commerce and industry, labor unions, social services, women's issues, as well as arts and entertainment. Most recently, the government has announced that it

²⁸ Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, pp. 157–159.

would also be looking for environmentalists, young activists, new citizens, and community and grassroots leaders. From these public submissions, a parliamentary select committee nominates up to nine NMPs. The scheme enables people who may not want to join a political party, run for elections, or perform constituency duties to bring a wealth of non-partisan expertise and experience to bear on the quality of parliamentary debates.

The NMPs' legitimacy is based on expertise rather than the popular mandate or the formal importance of opposing a strong government. This, in a way, reflects Singapore's approach to governance, which relies relatively more strongly on proven technocratic ability than popular accountability, and seeks to depoliticize the public sphere. Like NCMPs, NMPs are not allowed to vote on many important bills, but their contribution to debates are meant to keep the PAP MPs from becoming "intellectually flabby" in the comfort of their parliamentary dominance.²⁹ Attorney-General Walter Woon, once himself an NMP, claimed that the PAP backbenchers are less able to act as an effective check on the government, as compared to the NMPs. The NMP scheme, he observed, also discourages voters from wasting their votes on "opposition candidates for the sole reason that they are opposition candidates."³⁰ As in the case of the NCMPs, the NMP scheme is ostensibly about improving democratic institutions, but it also has the political effect of diminishing any esteem that the opposition politicians may enjoy in the eyes of the electorate, rendering them unnecessary. The PAP government would naturally prefer to have traditionally elected opposition MPs replaced with NCMPs and NMPs who have significantly reduced parliamentary powers. Furthermore, the NMPs are more likely to assume a consensual rather than oppositional stance towards the government.

A third strategy was to enhance the constitutional division of power in order to transfer the check-and-balance role of parliamentary opposition to a newly formed branch of the state. In 1991, one

²⁹ Chua Beng Huat, "Singapore 1990: Celebrating the End of an Era," pp. 257–258; N. Ganesan, "Singapore: Entrenching a City-State's Dominant Party System," p. 233.

³⁰ Walter Woon, "Nominated MPs: Some Check is Better than No Check."

of the most dramatic constitutional innovations was passed, transforming a largely ceremonial president as Singapore's Head of State into an independent institution to check and balance the power of the government, particularly on matters pertaining to the use of the state's financial reserves, key state appointments, governmental powers derived from the Internal Security Act and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and the investigation of corrupt practices. The president, strictly non-partisan, would be directly elected by the entire electorate to serve for six-year terms. This new institution was borne out of Lee Kuan Yew's own concern about the possibility of a future government — keen to adopt populist measures to stay in power — squandering all that Lee's government had built up.

The president earns the highest public service salary in Singapore (and quite possibly the world), currently close to S\$4 million per year. The pre-selection criteria for presidential candidates are stringent to the point of effectively restricting this office to the very top strata of the political and public sector establishment and the economic élite. Since its introduction, there has only been one popularly contested election, and even then involving an unwilling candidate who actually announced publicly that his competitor was the better man for the job. The president's powers are not executive, but custodial and reactive. A two-thirds majority in Parliament may overturn a presidential veto. In fact, over the decades, the powers of the elected president have been gradually reduced by various constitutional amendments.³¹ When former President Ong Teng Cheong set out to inspect the government's books, he encountered resistance from the bureaucracy, complained about this in public, and was eventually discouraged from running for a second term by an irked PAP government that perhaps had not expected their one-time PAP chairman to have pursued his presidential duties quite so enthusiastically. A frustrated Ong decided not to run again as President. It would seem that the PAP government has put in place a potentially powerful state institution to check against future governments; but

³¹ Kevin Y.L. Tan, *An Introduction to Singapore's Constitution*, pp. 89–92.

while the current PAP is still in power, this institution is kept rather limited in its ability to interfere.

A fourth strategy to make parliamentary opposition seem irrelevant and unnecessary was to provide more direct channels of public consultation. In 1985, the Feedback Unit — an agency under the then Ministry of Community Development — was set up to provide a forum for discussion of public policies, through which policies could be explained in layman's terms, details clarified, public suggestions invited and received, and a sense of wider participation engendered. The Feedback Unit aimed to reach a wide cross-section of Singaporeans including the youth and business community, and was part of the move towards a more consultative mode of government by the second-generation PAP leadership, a mode that would be clearly articulated when Goh Chok Tong became Prime Minister in 1990. In 2006, the Feedback Unit was restructured and renamed REACH, which stands for "reaching everyone for active citizenry @ home". It has become the lead agency for engaging and connecting with citizens, rather than simply explaining policies and gathering public feedback.

In 1999, the government set up the Singapore 21 Committee comprising 10 MPs who co-chaired five subject committees consisting of a total of more than 60 ordinary Singaporeans from a wide cross section of society. These subject committees met with large numbers of other Singaporeans to have an airing and exchange of views about what kind of Singapore they desired. The discussions were organized around five dilemmas and eventually yielded five key ideas.

Dilemma	Key Idea
Less Stressful Life vs. Retaining the Drive Needs of Senior Citizens vs. Aspirations of the Young	Every Singaporean Matters Strong Families: Our Foundation and Our Future
Attracting Talent vs. Looking After Singaporeans	Opportunities for All
Internationalization/Regionalization vs. Singapore as Home	The Singapore Heartbeat
Consultation and Consensus vs. Decisiveness and Quick Action	Active Citizens: Making a Difference to Society

Singapore 21 resembled in some ways an earlier attempt at nationwide public consultation — the Agenda for Action, adopted in 1988. Continuing in this line, the government set up in 2002 the Remaking Singapore Committee to review Singapore's strategies for the 21st century. Once again, there were five subject committees chaired by MPs and consisting of Singaporeans from the private and public sectors. The broad-ranging subjects were titled: Beyond Careers, Beyond Condo, Beyond Club, Beyond Credit Card, and Beyond Cars, titles which referenced the so-called "5C's" that captured an undesirable set of materialistic goals Singaporeans were thought to have. Like Agenda for Action and Singapore 21, the Remaking Singapore process enabled the government to tap on the private and public sectors for good ideas and to strengthen the government's legitimacy by demonstrating the regard it has for the people's interests. However, these channels also had the effect of diminishing the role of the elected opposition as an effective avenue for expressing and conveying public grievance and dissatisfaction with government policies.

Culture, Ideology, and Fear

A sixth set of advantages has to do with the cultural-ideological matrix within which Singaporeans vote. It has been said that Confucianism and the apolitical nature of the Chinese both give rise to a meritocratic society that is deferential to authority based on respect for educational achievement, and that prefers consensus, stability, and economic prosperity over antagonism, change, and individual liberties. A quick inspection of the Chinese in history and around the world will show the flimsiness of this essentialist characterization; but normalizing these characteristics helps to create the conditions that are conducive to a dominant-party, meritocratic, and paternalistic government.

The culture of apathy may be better explained as a phenomenon of a middle-class society that, instead of being the engine of liberal democratization, has become a smug beneficiary of the technocratic-authoritarian state, content to limit its "politics" to complaining

about mundane policy details, especially those that disadvantage them materially. In general, the freedoms that middle-class Singaporeans desire are not those associated with the right to participate in the public life of the nation, but those that relate to private activities, chiefly the freedom to make money and to spend it. Public participation is personally costly, requiring much preparation and bearing the risk of antagonizing an intolerant state and being ridiculed or reprimanded by it. Instead, many middle-class Singaporeans would prefer to focus on their private lives and effect a fake terror of being arrested for displeasing the government: a ruse to justify to others and to themselves their chosen inactivity. Given the relative security, efficiency, and material affluence valued by Singaporeans, and the ideology that makes a strong, meritocratic, and pragmatic dominant-party state the reason that Singapore has been able to manage its vulnerabilities and achieve material success, it is not surprising to see the level of support that the PAP government continues to enjoy.

An important part of this cultural-ideological matrix is the culture of fear. Many Singaporeans still imagine that the government can and will find out if they voted for the opposition and punish them accordingly. Technically, through the practice of serializing voting slips to prevent fraud, the PAP is able to match voting slips to the voters, but only in an official inquiry.³² The PAP does little to dispel the irrational fear of Singaporeans that it will illegally exercise its capacity to find out how each Singaporean voted since this fear is in itself quite useful in helping to secure votes for the PAP without it having to do anything.

The Political Donations Act makes it illegal for political associations, parliamentary election candidates, and presidential election candidates to accept donations from foreign sources. It also limits them from accepting more than S\$5,000 of anonymous donation in any one financial year. Predictably, many will not dare — or think it prudent — to be identified in public as an opposition party supporter. The Societies Act makes it unlawful for civil and

³² T. S. Selvan, *Singapore: The Ultimate Island (Lee Kuan Yew's Untold Story)*, p. 95.

professional organizations to engage in political activity, thereby circumscribing the political opposition by preventing it from forging crucial alliances with elements of civil society.³³ Both Acts have the effect of limiting opposition parties' access to resources and partnerships.

At the heart of Singapore's culture of fear has been the Internal Security Act (ISA) that enables the government to detain indefinitely and without recourse to trial or judicial review anyone suspected of acting in a way that is deemed to threaten Singapore's security and the maintenance of public order and essential services. Sociologist Chua Beng Huat has asserted that "[i]n the final analysis, the Act must be repealed, this is the *sine qua non* of establishing a democracy in Singapore. When should this be done is best answered by Singaporeans themselves."³⁴ Opposition politician Chee Soon Juan has argued vehemently against the ISA as a substantial source of fear that not only prevents any meaningful elected opposition from surfacing, but also restrains innocent Singaporeans from wanting to get involved in public matters.³⁵ This prevents a meaningful sense of citizenship from evolving.

Those rash enough to claim that the PAP government uses a compliant judiciary to bankrupt opposition politicians face the serious likelihood of being charged for contempt of court. The judiciary, the PAP argues determinedly, is independent, and it is the opposition politicians who expose themselves to adverse legal action through their own crimes and misdemeanours. In 1999, the Workers' Party, unable to pay defamation damages and legal costs, faced the threat of having to wind up, an eventuality that by law could force their two parliamentarians to give up their seats.³⁶

³³ Garry Rodan, "State-Society Relations and Political Opposition in Singapore," pp. 100–101.

³⁴ Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, p. 181.

³⁵ Chee Soon Juan, *Dare to Change: An Alternative Vision for Singapore*, pp. 130–141.

³⁶ The Straits Times Weekly Edition, "Petition Filed to Wind Up Workers' Party," *The Straits Times Weekly Edition* (20 March 1999).

3. Conclusion

These are all very real electoral advantages that the PAP enjoys while in government. The political innovations introduced over the last two or three decades, though making it even harder for opposition parties to succeed, have each been officially justified in terms that are supportive of democracy: empowering PAP parliamentarians to perform a more effective watchdog function through the GPCs, ensuring at least some opposition presence in Parliament through the NCMPs, securing ethnic representation through GRCs, increasing the quality and diversity of parliamentary arguments and points of view through the NMPs, installing stronger checks and balances through the elected president, and providing a variety of direct channels of communication between government and citizens. These democratic changes must also be understood in terms of how they create and obscure new opportunities and resources for political control, increasing the PAP government's capacity and legitimacy to control more widely and deeply.

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