

Electoral Politics in Singapore

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Introduction

Elections are a necessary but not sufficient condition of democracy. Having a free and fair election is an important component of democracy because it is meant to provide the means for popular choice and control over government – popular choice being a key principle of democracy. Democracy, however, requires more than just elections. The degree of democracy can be measured by how far socio-political and economic structures are built and organized to realize the various principles of democracy. The definitions of these principles in most Western literature include ‘popular control’ and ‘political equality’. ‘Popular control’ implies that people have the right to a controlling influence over public decisions and decision-makers; and the meaning of ‘political equality’ is that people should be treated with equal respect and regarded as having equal worth in the context of such decisions.

Singapore has never been fully accepted as a democratic country by Western liberal standards. It is often described as a model of ‘soft authoritarianism’, or a limited democracy at best. The electoral system in Singapore is sometimes also seen as flawed by political commentators, who point out the lack of options and the lack of an effective opposition. The ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) enjoyed parliamentary monopoly from 1966 to 1981, and in the last two decades, while conceding between two and four seats to the opposition, has continued to exert such political dominance that some see Singapore as virtually a one-party state.

This chapter gives a historical account of the development of the electoral system in Singapore, outlines the major changes and provides an evaluation of its performance, noting how it has contributed to the democratic development of Singapore.

The Historical Development of Singapore’s Electoral System

The attainment of Singapore’s self-government and independence was channelled through the electoral process and political parties. After administrative separation from Malaya and the declaration of Singapore as a Crown Colony in 1946, a Legislative Council was inaugurated in 1948, which

comprised six elected seats and a further 16 ex officio and nominated members. The proportion of elected seats was raised to nine out of 25 in 1951. However, it was only with the advent of the Rendel Constitution of 1955 that elections began to assume meaning for the general population. The Rendel Constitution represented the first concrete step towards self-government for Singapore. While leaving defence, finance and internal security matters in the hands of the governor, the constitution introduced automatic voter registration and a new 32-member Legislative Assembly, 25 seats of which were directly elected by the people (Rodan, 1996: 63-64).

With the prospect of self-government there was a burgeoning of political parties, including the People's Action Party and the Singapore Labour Front. These were both formed in 1954 and both quickly commanded genuine popular support (Rodan 1996: 64).

The process of election into the Legislative Assembly was adapted from the Westminster model of democracy, based on the ethos of majority rule determined by the first-past-the-post, or plurality system. The first Legislative Assembly election held under the Rendel Constitution took place in April 1955. Several parties took part, the strongest then being the Progressive Party and the Democratic Party. However, none of the parties won a clear majority. The Labour Front, led by David Marshall, won the most seats – ten out of 25. It then teamed up with three Alliance members from UMNO-MCA (United Malays National Organization-Malayan [later Malaysian] Chinese Association) and the Singapore Malay Union to form the majority. Opposing David Marshall were four Progressive Party members, three PAP members, three Independents and two Democratic Party members.

An election was held in 1959 for the first fully-elected Legislative Assembly, bringing Singapore closer to complete self-government. At that stage compulsory voting was introduced. The PAP embraced this election wholeheartedly, filing candidates for all 51 seats. It won 43 of these, and with 53.4 per cent of the popular vote went on to form the government.

It took about a decade for the PAP to establish almost absolute political dominance. According to Raj Vasil, the PAP 'chose a democratic polity based essentially on the British Westminster model but limited it to ensure a stable political order. In so doing they were able to attain their objective by essentially continuing with the colonial political system and processes; instead of having to introduce a variety of limitations on the rights and freedoms of their citizens, the mass media, the political parties, the trade unions and other voluntary organisations through Singapore's constitution or through a new set of laws, they allowed most of the laws introduced by their British colonial overlords to remain in the same statute book' (Vasil, 2000: 50-51). These included, for instance, the Internal Security Act.

The electoral system meanwhile did undergo some changes in response to a changing electorate and in the PAP's attempt to remain in control.

Legislation Governing Elections and Some Major Amendments

After separation from Malaysia and becoming a full sovereign state, Singapore's electoral process has been governed essentially by the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (see the section on *The Singapore Parliament*) and the Singapore Parliamentary Elections Act .

The constitution lays out the role of the legislature (the parliament) and defines the qualification and disqualification for membership of parliament, the exercise of legislative power and the overall legislative process. The Parliamentary Elections Act contains provisions for the lead-up to and conduct of elections for members of parliament (MPs). Its main features are the production of the registers of electors and the conduct of elections.

The Elected Presidency

One significant change to the electoral system in Singapore was the 'elected presidency'. Prior to 1992, the president of Singapore was appointed by parliament and played a largely ceremonial role. It was not until 1991 that the constitution was amended to provide for an elected presidency with new powers, such as the right to veto senior civil service appointments and government expenditures which draw on the national reserves. An overseeing role is also accorded to the office with regard to the application of the Internal Security Act, the laws relating to the control of religious organizations and the activities of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau.

To run for the presidency, prospective candidates must be above 45 years old and must have a minimum of three years' experience in any one of the following positions: cabinet minister; chief justice; speaker of parliament; top civil servant; or chairman/ chief executive officer of a company with paid-up capital of at least S\$100 million. Prospective candidates must have an eligibility certificate from the Presidential Commission set up for the purpose of ascertaining the criteria before they can run for president. The prospective candidate must also have severed any connections with any political party; in short, he/she is supposed to be non-partisan. The first presidential election was held in 1993.

Other major amendments to the constitution that affect the electoral system were the introduction of Non-constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs) in 1984; the introduction of the Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) in 1988; the introduction of Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) in 1991; and overseas voting in 2001.

Group Representation Constituency

A GRC is a constituency where at least one MP is a person belonging to the minority race. There can be three to six MPs in a GRC and they are elected as MPs on a group basis. The rationale of GRCs, according to the official Elections Department website, is to ensure that there is always representation of members from the Malay, Indian and other minority communities in parliament. It is felt that in a single-member constituency, a person from a minority group running in a predominantly Chinese ward would have less chance of winning. And since Singapore is predominantly Chinese and all constituencies have a majority of Chinese because of the housing policy racial quota system, which is aimed at preventing racial enclaves from forming, theoretically there is a possibility of a parliament devoid of MPs from minority communities. This is deemed undesirable for a multi-racial society like Singapore.

Opposition parties, however, complain that the GRC scheme serves to further undermine the chances of opposition candidates as marginal PAP wards are grouped with strong ones. As Rodan puts it, the GRCs 'would stretch their limited resources and open up the scope for weak PAP candidates to be shielded through team membership' (1996: 75). They argue that the official rationale for GRCs has not matched the evidence provided by the fact that the Workers' Party Indian candidate, Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam has twice defeated two Chinese PAP candidates in the Anson ward in both 1981 and 1984.

Non-constituency Members of Parliament

The change in the constitution to provide for up to three NCMPs from opposition political parties is to ensure a minimum number of opposition representatives in parliament. Only when no opposition party candidates are returned in elections are NCMPs (who are the top three losers measured in terms of percentage of popular votes garnered) invited to enter parliament. The number of NCMPs is reduced by one for each opposition party candidate returned on his/her own merit. This is one of the PAP's public relations exercises to show that it is not intolerant of political opposition and to appease those who through their votes have shown that there are people who wanted opposition for its own sake.

Nominated Members of Parliament

The NMP scheme was introduced to try and cater to the desire of some Singaporeans for a wider representation of views in parliament and to steer dissatisfaction away from the opposition. A constitutional provision for the appointment of up to nine NMPs was made in 1991. NMPs are appointed by the president for a term of two years on the recommendation of a Special Select Committee of parliament chaired by the speaker.

The NMP scheme is not only a form of co-optation but conforms to the government's familiar elitist philosophy. Through the Special Select Committee, the government ensures that only people who have excelled or have special expertise in the professions, industries, commerce, cultural activities and social services are appointed. As noted by Garry Rodan (1996: 72), through this scheme, the government has projected itself as providing a responsible and capable opposition.

Both the NCMPs and NMPs have some voting rights but are not allowed to vote on bills pertaining to financial and constitutional matters. This has led to criticism that they are second-class MPs and that the NMP scheme is particularly an affront to the principle of popular representation. It is argued by some that traditionally the appointment of nominated positions in parliament (usually leading to the development of a second/upper house) is to expand the representational base of a system that already has a distribution of politicians from different political parties. What is unique about the Singapore case is that the development of NMPs precedes the development of proportionally elected representation. The scheme therefore does not support the development of multi-party representation but is a means of co-optation by the PAP to further entrench its position.

Overseas Voting

In April 2001, a bill seeking to amend the Parliamentary Elections Act to allow Singaporeans residing abroad to register as overseas electors and remain entitled to vote was passed. The official rationale for the Overseas Voting Bill was to provide an avenue for Singaporeans overseas who have strong links to Singapore to have a say through their votes (*Straits Times*, 18 March 2001). However, overseas voting will only be available in five cities initially, namely, Beijing, Hong Kong, Canberra, London and Washington. These cities were chosen because of the significant number of Singaporeans living in China, Hong Kong, Australia, Europe and the United States, and the fact that the missions in these five cities have enough staff to handle the exercise.

To qualify to vote, Singaporeans living overseas must fall into one of the following categories:

- Have resided in Singapore for an aggregate of two years in the five years immediately before the cut-off date;
- A member of the Singapore Armed Forces on full-time training or service outside Singapore;
- A public officer or employee of a statutory board, either working or training full-time overseas;
- Engaged in full-time training overseas with government or statutory board sponsorship;

- Employed overseas by international organizations of which Singapore is a member or by any organization designated by the president;
- The spouse, parents, child or dependent of any persons who fulfil any of the above criteria.

These conditions, among others listed in the Amendments of the Parliamentary Elections Act, have generated a lot of discussion over the rights of citizenship. In particular, the discrimination in favour of public employees against those who are working in private commercial enterprises overseas has resulted in some unhappiness and resentment. But like most other laws and regulations, because of the PAP's overwhelming dominance in parliament, the Amendments were passed anyway.

Table 1: Evolution of the Electoral System in Singapore

Year	Total No. of Seats	Single Member Districts (SMDs)	Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs)	Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs)	Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs)	
			C* Seats			
1963	51	51	NA	NA	NA	
1968	58	58	NA	NA	NA	
1972	65	65	NA	NA	NA	
1976	69	69	NA	NA	NA	
1980	75	75	NA	NA	NA	
1984	79	79	NA	0	NA	
1988	81	42	13	39	2	NA
1991	81	21	15	60	1	6
1997	83	9	15	74	1	9
2001	84	9	14	75	1	9

* Constituencies

The Singapore Parliament

The Singapore parliament is unicameral (single house) and is modelled on the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy where members of parliament are voted in at regular general elections. Elections are based on the first-past-the-post system, that is, whoever secures the most votes wins. The leader of the political party that secures the majority of seats in parliament will be asked by the president to become the prime minister. The prime minister will then select ministers from the elected MPs to form the cabinet.

When the new parliament meets for the first time, the speaker of parliament is elected followed by the oath-taking of MPs. The 'life' of each parliament in Singapore is five years from the date of its first sitting after an election. Elections must be held within three months of the dissolution of parliament. However, the prime minister, at his own discretion, can also dissolve parliament to call for snap general elections.

Table 2: Elements of the Current Electoral System of Singapore

House	Unicameral System: The Parliament
Electoral System	First-past-the-post system in single-member (SMCs) and group representation constituencies (GRCs)
Number of Individual Votes	1
Number of Constituencies and Size	23 constituencies: 9 SMCs, 5 GRCs with 6 seats each and 9 GRCs with 5 seats each (2001)
Threshold (Party List)	None
Type of Party List	NA
Independent Candidates*	Allowed in SMCs, relevant
Administration of the Elections	Elections administered by civil servants working in the Elections Department which comes under the Prime Minister's Office. No Independent Election Commission

* Relevant: independent candidates' average share of total seats is between 3 and 10 per cent; Highly relevant: independent candidates' average share of total seats is higher than 10 per cent

Since 1968, the PAP has enjoyed almost total hegemony in parliament. Although the opposition has consistently bagged an average of more than 30 per cent of the popular vote since 1984, this has only translated to between 1.2 and 4.9 per cent of parliamentary seats for opposition parties. This is due in large part to the first-past-the-post system, but the PAP, which has held power continuously and overwhelmingly for over three decades, also uses the government's extensive powers to place formidable obstacles in the path of political opponents. These means are usually in keeping with the law and the normal prerogatives of government, but the overall effect is a much weakened political opposition. Table 3 shows the seats won by the PAP and the percentage of popular votes.

The present parliament,¹ the ninth parliament, constituted by the election held on 2 January 1997, consists of 83 elected MPs (81 PAP members and two from the opposition, with one each from the Singapore People's Party and the Workers' Party), one NCMP and nine NMPs. Nine out of the 83 elected MPs are from single-member constituencies and the remaining 74 are from 15 GRCs.

1. Since this paper was written, there has been another general election in Singapore. It was held on 3 November 2001. See the Postscript at the end of the chapter.

Table 3: Dominance of the PAP in Parliament

Year	Total No. of Seats (Actual Seats Contested)	No. of Parties Contesting (Independents)	Seats won by PAP (%)	Seats won by Opposition (%)	% of PAP's Popular Vote
1963	51 (51)	8 (16)	37 (72.5)	15 (27.5)	46.93
1968	58 (7)	2 (5)	58 (100)	0	86.72
1972	65 (57)	6 (2)	65 (100)	0	70.43
1976	69 (53)	7 (2)	69 (100)	0	74.09
1980	75 (38)	8	75 (100)	0	77.66
1984	79 (49)	9 (3)	77 (97.5)	2 (2.5)	64.83
1988	81 (70)	8 (4)	80 (98.8)	1 (1.2)	63.17
1991	81 (40)	6 (7)	77 (95.1)	4 (4.9)	60.97
1997	83 (36)	6 (1)	81 (97.59)	2 (2.41)	64.98
2001	84 (29)	4 (1)	82 (97.61)	2 (2.4)	75.30

Sources: Compiled from Pugalenth, 1996 and Open Singapore Centre, 2000.

The Electoral Process

Elections come under the direct responsibility of the Prime Minister's Office and are administered through the Elections Department headed by a civil servant.

Any Singaporean aged 21 or above, who is on the register of electors, has resided in Singapore for at least ten years and has never been convicted by a court of law and sentenced to imprisonment for a term of not less than one year or a fine of not less than S\$2,000, is eligible to stand for elections. All Singapore citizens, except those serving a sentence of imprisonment, or of unsound mind, or in the foreign armed forces of a foreign country, can vote. Voting in Singapore is compulsory. Anyone who does not vote in an election without a valid reason (e.g. incapacity, being abroad) has his/her name taken off the electoral register, and has to pay a small penalty to have it restored.

A voter is registered in the constituency in which he/she officially resides. The register of electors is publicly displayed before elections and any voter who has any objections to being placed in a particular electoral constituency can approach the registration officer to settle the issue.

Before an election, the prime minister usually appoints an Electoral Boundaries Review Committee, comprising mainly civil servants, to carry out a review of the number and boundaries of electoral constituencies. After its review the committee submits its report to the cabinet. The report needs only to be accepted by the government and is not submitted to parliament for debate and approval.

Once the committee's report is accepted by the government, the number of constituencies and their corresponding boundaries is effected by publication in the Government Gazette.

When the prime minister calls for elections, the president issues a Writ of Election. This official instrument announcing an election must be published between five days and one month before nomination day. The returning officer must give at least four days notice before nomination day. Rules and regulations for the conduct of elections, such as the display of posters and banners, the holding of election rallies and the location of counting venues, are announced shortly before nomination day.

All candidates running for election must place a refundable deposit with the returning officer. The deposit is 8 per cent of the total allowance of an MP in the preceding year, rounded off to the nearest S\$500. In the case of a GRC, the deposit for a group of candidates increases according to the number of people in each group. This deposit is only forfeited if the candidate loses with less than one-eighth of the votes.

After the period of nomination, the returning officer must publish a notice in a gazette to inform the public of the constituencies in which elections will be contested, with all the necessary information. A 'walkover' is announced and the nominated candidate or group of candidates declared elected when there is only one candidate or one group of candidates in an electoral division.

According to the Elections Act, the campaign period is at least nine days but not more than eight weeks from nomination day. However, since 1963, all campaign periods have been kept to the minimum of nine days. Campaigning can start immediately after the candidates' nomination.

There is a strict expenditure limit on electoral campaigning. The limit of campaign expenditure is S\$2.50 per voter. There are also clearly stated rules defining how funds should not be spent and all expenses of more than S\$10 have to be accompanied by a bill or receipt. Within 31 days from the date of publication of the election results, returns on all election expenses must be submitted to the Elections Department. The stringent measures and uncompromising enforcement of electoral expenses underscore the fact that money politics is not tolerated in Singapore.

Campaigning must stop on polling day. All polling stations are usually open between 8 AM and 8 PM. Each polling station must have at least one presiding officer, and also the candidates' polling agents. A polling agent ensures that the procedures in the polling station are adhered to properly and any objections can be raised with the candidate. Each voter is given a ballot paper at the polling station. In a single-seat constituency, a voter's single vote is for one

candidate, and in a GRC, for a slate of candidates. Once voting is completed, the presiding officer, in the presence of the candidates and their polling agents, seals the ballot boxes and follows strict procedures for the transportation of the ballot boxes to the counting centres.

Once the counting of votes is completed and a candidate declared a winner, the documents and papers are sealed and destroyed six months later unless otherwise directed by the order of the president. They are only to be opened for inspection, copy or production if there is an election petition. An election petition must come before the chief justice or a supreme court judge appointed by the chief justice and the procedures applicable to a high court apply here. Though election petitions remain a legal avenue for the reversal of election results that are found to be illegal, so far in the electoral history of Singapore, results of elections have never been contested in court.

Reasons for the PAP's Prolonged Electoral Dominance

Regular and open elections are the means by which the PAP came into power, and has remained in power. Once elected, the PAP has claimed a free hand to govern. The PAP sees it as essential that Singapore's political system represents a fine balance between democracy and governance, and has little interest in the worth of democratic norms, institutions or processes per se. Holding regular elections is one aspect of democracy to which the PAP are willing to pay allegiance, but their thinking is that once the 'mandate to rule' has been conferred through elections, the concern of the government is not to give further expression to the ideals of democracy, but instead to be seen to govern. Central to the PAP leaders' view of the role of government is the notion that the compulsions of economic progress, ethnic harmony and security make it imperative that the government in Singapore controls all instruments and centres of power and does not allow the growth of political pluralism (Vasil, 2000: 50-51). Hence, since sweeping into power in the 1959 elections, the PAP has never hesitated to use the power of the government to stifle the growth of any opposition. It has always had the required two-thirds majority in parliament to change and introduce policies and law.

The considerable power wielded by the PAP government is rationalized by an elaborate ideology of elitism, which is deeply embedded in the social structure of Singapore and dominant within the political culture. According to this ideology, Singapore must be an uncompromising meritocracy. In this view, government as a technical process is emphasized over government as a political process. Such an ideology is antithetical to any concept of representation that emphasizes the obligations of government to reflect and/or respond to the aspirations and concerns of the electorate. Rather it reinforces a strict Hobbesian

notion of representation as the authority to act, an authority in which elections provide formal and periodic acknowledgement of the intrinsic merit of the leadership. This elitism manifests itself not only in a rejection of interest-group representation in the political process, but also in the way candidates for the ruling party are selected through an almost exclusive preoccupation with formal educational and technical qualifications. The ideology of meritocracy is thus a rationale for a very exclusive political process (Rodan, 1996: 62-63).

There are other reasons to explain the PAP's dominance. According to Heng Hiang Khng (1997), despite the lapses in democratic procedure, the PAP has retained the popular electoral mandate for the following reasons:

- The PAP's pragmatism and ability to mediate the diverse interests of a multi-racial nation. For instance, the Chinese community sees the party as being capable of protecting Chinese interests in a larger geopolitical environment of Malay dominance, while the Malay minority believe that the party can be counted upon to rein in Chinese chauvinist sentiments.
- Under the 'governance' of the PAP, there has been impressive economic growth, rising employment and the provision of basic social services such as education, housing and health.
- The exemplary conduct of the PAP leadership in running an incorrupt government and civil service.
- The strictures of the PAP authoritarian government have been implemented with moderation. For instance, discretionary detention of political opponents is tempered by the fact that the coercive measures used are not excessive. In short, there are no gross human rights violations. While the media and other forms of expression are effectively regulated, it is still a relatively open country where people as a whole do not feel cut off from the world at large with no access to a range of information sources other than those endorsed by the state. It is a sort of political climate which might not be acceptable to a Western electorate with its stronger and longer traditions of democracy, free speech and political activism; but for Singaporeans, who do not have these traditions, there is no expectation of such a level of civil liberty and therefore no strong sense of discontent arising from it.

In short, one could argue that the PAP has maintained its political dominance by developing genuine voter support through honest, effective administration and its strong record in bringing economic prosperity to the country. Its authoritarianism is very much tempered and made more hardy and acceptable to voters because of moderation. However, the opposition would counter-argue that the PAP's dominance is also partly a result of the manipulation of the electoral framework, the intimidation of organized political opposition with the potential use of the Internal Security Act and other means, and the circumscription of the bounds of political discourse and action through such

action as the control of the mass media. (These are discussed in greater detail in the section on *Structural and Institutional Obstacles*.)

The PAP had a total monopoly of all the seats in parliament from 1968 to 1980. This allowed the government to act swiftly to shape the economy and society for rapid development. With a booming economy, the PAP intensified its strategy to depoliticize society, and further entrenched its rule over society. Rigid hierarchical structures throughout both the political and social spheres were institutionalized, aided greatly by the supportive elitist ideology of meritocracy.

The End of the PAP's Parliamentary Monopoly

Despite the pervasiveness of the PAP state and the weaknesses of the opposition, opposition parties have made some progress in elections over the last decade. The victory of Workers' Party Secretary-General Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam in the 1981 by-election in Anson was a psychological breakthrough and signified the return of a more organized opposition. More importantly, however, since the 1980s, the PAP has sustained an electoral decline in terms of the percentage of popular votes garnered at each election. The biggest swing in its electoral support was registered when the popular vote dropped from a high of 77.66 per cent in the 1980 elections to 64.83 per cent in the 1984 elections.

The swings in popular vote were not translated into significant gains in seats by the opposition, mainly because of the first-past-the-post system. The peak of the opposition gains was in the 1991 elections when four opposition members were returned. The downward swing of popular votes was arrested in the 1997 elections when only two opposition members were returned.

Nevertheless, even with the big swing in popular votes, the PAP's rule has never been seriously threatened, and a change in government in the foreseeable future is inconceivable. However, as noted by Garry Rodan (1996: 63), 'precisely because elections have been the only sanctioned avenue for political contestation, and because the PAP has itself drawn so readily on their existence for its legitimacy, elections are now entrenched in the political system', and even the small gains made by the opposition parties in the 1980s and 1990s have aroused serious concern within the PAP.

The decline in electoral support can be attributed to many reasons. However, one widely cited reason is the rapidly expanding middle class and the increase in younger, better-educated Singaporeans who are more sympathetic to the opposition. These post-war, post-independence Singaporeans, most born in the 1960s, who have not really experienced the tumultuous years of Singapore history, are more attracted to the idea of having an opposition presence to check the power of the PAP. Another reason is the growing discontent from

different groups with regard to specific government policies that were implemented in the 1980s. In short, rapid economic development generated many socio-economic changes that combined with demographic, ethnic and other dynamics to produce a much more differentiated electorate, resulting in the dilution of overall support for the PAP.

So what are the prospects of elections becoming a more meaningful exercise in democratic choice in Singapore? To answer this question, we need to look at the current state of the opposition parties in Singapore.

The Opposition Parties in Singapore

Registering a political party in Singapore is uncomplicated and political parties are free to stand for elections. There are 23 registered opposition political parties in Singapore (see Table 4).

Though impressive in number, in reality few are consistently active in contesting elections and promoting their causes. Those that are include the Workers' Party (WP), the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), the Singapore People's Party (SPP), the National Solidarity Party (NSP), the Singapore National Malay Organization (PKMS) and the Singapore Justice Party.

All these parties, however, are very limited in structure and resources and are comparatively dormant between elections. Given that the PAP usually provides little more than the minimum required nine days' notice of election, campaigning itself is often a brief affair (Rodan, 1996: 83).

Neither major opposition party (WP and SDP/SPP) represents a coherent ideological alternative to the PAP, and certainly neither directly challenges nor scrutinizes the PAP's central ideological concept of meritocracy. It is this ideology that rationalizes the hierarchical social and political order built up over the last decades. While this does not mean that there is a conscious acceptance of the PAP's ideology, it does at least reflect a limited ability to formulate alternatives. Without a challenge to the elitism embodied in meritocracy it is difficult to see how the political process can be altered in such a way as to render elections a more meaningful exercise in democracy. So long as government is regarded as the preserve of experts, the permissible extent and form of political opposition, both formally and informally, will necessarily result in restricted choices available to the electorate. But, at the same time, opposition parties themselves have found it difficult to break out of the PAP's ideological framework, in no small part because of the institutionalization in Singapore of a comprehensive set of mutually supportive ideological concepts in which meritocracy is pivotal (Rodan, 1996: 86-89). By explicitly agreeing with the goals advocated by PAP, the opposition can only nit-pick on issues.

Table 4: Registered Parties in Singapore (as at 2000)

Name	Date of Registration
Singapore Chinese Party	26 September 1950
Persatuan Melayu Singapura	2 February 1952
Partai Rakyat, Singapore State Division	3 December 1956
Angkatan Islam	6 August 1958
The Workers' Party	30 January 1961
Pertubohan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura (Singapore National Malay Organization)	20 February 1961
People's Action Party	18 February 1961
United People's Party	14 July 1961
Barisan Socialis	15 August 1961
Parti Kesatuan Ra'ayat (United Democratic Party)	18 June 1962
Singapore Indian Congress	7 August 1962
Alliance Party Singapura	17 February 1966
United National Front	6 March 1970
National Party of Singapore	26 February 1971
The People's Front	21 May 1971
Singapore Justice Party	10 August 1972
Democratic Progressive Party	16 March 1973
People's Republican Party	30 August 1973
United People's Front	20 March 1975
Singapore Democratic Party	8 September 1980
National Solidarity Party	6 March 1987
Singapore National Front	15 August 1991
Singapore People's Party	21 November 1994

Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2001.

It is hard for the opposition to fault the PAP government, given the success story Singapore has been. With their limited resources and structure, the opposition have become realistic enough not to campaign on the grounds of forming an alternative government. Instead their main appeal to the electorate is the need to check the PAP government by having an opposition and introducing resistance in parliament. Understanding that the majority still want a PAP government, the opposition adopted a so-called 'by-election' strategy for the 1991 and 1997 elections. This meant that the PAP was returned to power on nomination day as the opposition contested less than half the seats. The rationale was that once people were assured that the PAP would form the ruling government, those required to vote would be more willing to vote for the opposition in order to have more checks and balances in parliament. Such a strategy, though realistic, is not contributing to the maturation of opposition politics in the country (Ooi, 1998: 360).

Structural and Institutional Obstacles in the Political System

Opposition parties often point to various structural and institutional obstacles in Singapore's political system to explain their inability to mount an effective challenge against the PAP, and therefore extrapolate that elections in Singapore are not free and fair. These include the following:

The Internal Security Act

The Internal Security Act (ISA) has its origins in the British Preservation of Public Security Ordinance, which was used against the Communists. Anyone reasonably suspected of being a Communist and a danger to national security could be detained without trial for an unlimited period of time.

It has been noted that Operation Cold Store in 1963, in which 115 opposition Barisan Socialist leaders, journalists and trade unionists were arrested and detained without trial under the ISA, and a number of subsequent swoops in the early years of PAP rule effectively stunted the growth of political opposition for the years to come. And still fresh in the minds of many Singaporeans is the arrest of 22 Catholic social workers and professionals in 1987. The episode, referred to as the 'Marxist conspiracy', saw social workers accused of using religion as a cover for their left-wing activities.

Though used sparingly in recent years, the fact that the government has refused to remove the ISA has given the opposition and human rights activists ammunition to claim that it is an instrument to instil fear in the electorate and hence stifle the freedom of expression crucial for the functioning of a real democracy.

The Mass Media

Another important pillar in a democratic society is the mass media and its attendant need for the freedom of the press. It is argued that the role of a free press is fundamental to the electoral process. Unfortunately the press in Singapore has also been subdued after the earlier tumultuous years of Singapore's political history. Several newspapers were closed down in the late sixties and early seventies after brushes with the law. Since the 1980s, only one publicly listed company, Singapore Press Holdings, has published all the newspapers in Singapore.

Critics charge that control of the media is instituted through the 1974 Newspaper Printing and Presses Act (NPPA). This stipulates that newspapers must issue both ordinary and management shares. Management shares have 200 times the voting power of ordinary shares. Acquisition of management shares has to be endorsed by the government. Government officials are also appointed to the

board of directors of Singapore Press Holdings. Through these regulations, the government effectively controls the press, albeit in a less visible and subtle way. It need not force the closure of newspapers, but exerts control through the people holding the management shares who have a say over the appointment of personnel. Editors or personnel deemed unsuitable can be removed at the government's wishes.

While it may be hard to prove that the government directly interferes with the general editorial decisions of the media, and indeed the government could say with all honesty that they do not, critics believe that self-censorship has become part and parcel of the survival tactics of the press after earlier brushes with the PAP government. Also the media is constantly exhorted to be 'responsible' and to contribute to the greater efforts of nation-building and social cohesion. This implies that the mass media should provide information and knowledge that contribute to the unity of Singapore, and give full coverage to the government's perspective on issues. To the opposition and critics, the media has become part of the government's propaganda machine. The opposition has accused the media of biased reporting and of giving them less access and coverage.

While international and foreign media are also allowed to circulate in Singapore, again through the NPPA, the government has been able to institute some form of control over the foreign media who wish to continue to circulate in Singapore. Amendments to the NPPA allow for restricted circulation of publications that 'interfere' in the domestic politics of Singapore. Rather than resorting to direct censorship or blocking those publications that are critical of the government, the PAP government has chosen to limit the circulation and hence affect the advertising revenue of these publications. The rationale is to silence the critics that such a move is aimed at control of information. By allowing restricted circulation, the government is able to say that Singaporeans still have access to these publications (and they are also allowed to xerox copies for their own use freely), and that they are only aiming at the profit line of the foreign media. This deviously sends a message to the population that the foreign media is ultimately driven by commercial interests and are not as principled as they would like to portray themselves to be.

The government has also not hesitated to use libel laws to sue the foreign media and its correspondents for any claims in articles that they feel are libellous and cannot be substantiated with hard evidence. It is noted by critics that the combination of these measures have resulted in a 'troubling trend of capitulation and self-censorship' (Lingle, 1996: 110).

The advent of the Internet and the rapid growth of information technology might have made this a less important consideration since it brings about almost unlimited access to information. However, the government's recent moves to tighten the rules governing websites with political content is again

seen as a move to stifle the use of this new media to the advantage of the opposition.

Serial Number on Ballot Paper

The opposition has on many occasions raised concern about the serial numbers that appear on ballot papers. When a voter goes to the polling centre, he/she is given a ballot paper torn from a booklet perforated by a franking machine. Each ballot paper is numbered serially. This number is also printed on the counterfoil, which the Elections Department retains. The voters' registration number is entered on the counterfoil. The opposition has charged that the recording of the ballot number is an affront to the secrecy of the vote as theoretically the ruling party is able to find out how any voter has voted. Though it is unlikely that the government would go to the extent of finding out how each voter votes, it nevertheless makes the electorate fearful about voting for the opposition.

Gerrymandering

Gerrymandering, while widely practised by many ruling parties the world over, is seen as a particular problem in Singapore since the PAP has ruled continuously for more than three decades. The opposition have charged that the results of the redrawing of constituency boundaries are announced only shortly before elections are held, giving them very little time to react and work the ground.

The government has asserted that the redrawing of electoral boundaries is necessary because of the high geographical mobility of Singaporeans. In order to have an MP serving about the same number of constituents, the guidelines for redrawing the boundaries may call for either a division of the constituencies into an equal number of residents, a bundling of a number of group constituencies, or the break-up of certain constituencies.

Kirby (1982: 76-97) points out that in the exercise of creating constituencies of about the same size, the law of the averages automatically favours the relatively more popular political party. Relatively less popular parties have to hunt for large pockets of supporters in specific constituencies in order to win any seats in the first-past-the-post system. If supporters are evenly spread out in all constituencies, these parties will not win seats. With the majority of Singaporeans supporting the PAP, opposition parties worry that their pockets of support may get neutralized in the redrawing of boundaries (Ooi, 1998: 376).

Nominated Members of Parliament

As discussed earlier, the NMP scheme was introduced in 1991. This can be seen as a response by the PAP government to the demands of an increasing, albeit still small, minority vocal group who want to see more debates and more representation in parliament. The vocal minority, as they are usually called,

are seen to come mainly from the more highly Western-educated professionals whose concerns are not the 'bread and butter' issues of the 'HDB heartlanders'.²

Garry Rodan also argues that the NMP scheme is a pre-emptive move to ensure that any dissatisfaction with the government from de facto interest groups does not translate into greater support for opposition parties (1996: 74). The government also hopes that through such a scheme it can co-opt critical individuals, but at the same time set the limits of criticism.

Linking Votes to Upgrading of Housing Estates and Apartments

Just before the 1997 elections, the government announced that it would pursue a policy of giving priority to the upgrading of public housing apartments to residents who voted for the PAP.

This has to be understood in context. More than 80 per cent of Singaporeans live in public housing apartment blocks, built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB). Some of the housing estates are now more than 20 years old. In the early 1990s, the government announced a comprehensive upgrading plan for old flats and their surrounding areas to 'rejuvenate' them and ensure older estates do not deteriorate into slums. The upgrading of flats includes building either an extra utility room or an additional toilet in each apartment, and putting additional lifts into each block, while the upgrading of estates includes the landscaping of common areas, building covered walkways, etc. It is argued that as upgrading raises the value of flats in the open resale market, linking voting to upgrading is a devious way of influencing the way people vote.

To demonstrate that it was serious about giving upgrading priority to those who voted for the PAP, the government announced six days before polling that within each constituency the counting of votes would be divided into smaller precincts. Each precinct comprised a small number of HDB apartment blocks, amounting to approximately 5000 votes. In past elections, there was only one counting centre for each constituency. In the 1997 election, however, each constituency had multiple counting centres, and in each one the votes for the precincts were counted separately. This enabled the government to identify the level of support the PAP received in each precinct and therefore give the occupants who voted for the PAP priority in upgrading. Upgrading in opposition constituencies and in pockets within constituencies that showed strong support for the opposition was to be delayed.

Related to this was the amendment of the Town Councils Act in favour of wards that elected PAP candidates. Before 1988, the HDB was responsible not only for constructing affordable housing, but also for the day-to-day

2. The word 'heartlanders' was first used by the Singapore government to refer to the majority of Singaporeans who live in public housing estates and are presumed to be more conservative in their outlook.

management of estates. However, the management and general maintenance of housing estates then became the responsibility of the MP through the town councils set up in each constituency. Budget surpluses of the councils are put in a sinking fund for future major maintenance works. The amendment provided for a 20 per cent portion of this surplus to be allocated to the MP to spend on amenities and projects as he/she deemed fit, but only if a PAP MP was elected. If an opposition MP was elected, 100 per cent of the surplus from the previous town council would have to go into the sinking fund of the new town council, thereby depriving the newly elected opposition MP of any funds for immediate and urgent maintenance projects (Open Singapore Centre, 2000: 22-24).

The government's move to link votes to upgrading has generated a lot of discussion. Some have even gone so far as to question the legality of the ruling party using government machinery, the bureaucracy and public funding to further entrench its position. However, while many citizens intuitively disagreed with the government's policy, there was not enough groundswell to force the government to back down on this 'threat'.

An Insidious Obstacle?

Beyond these specific obstacles, as alleged by the opposition, what is indisputable is that in the general political arena, through years of negotiation, co-optation and management, the PAP government has reined in potentially contentious political forces in Singapore, including the unions, grassroots organizations, ethnic associations and civil society as a whole. The unbroken record of mandates given to the PAP for more than three decades has enabled it to both strategically and tactically dominate the political arena through the use of the law. Even more controversial in the approach adopted by the PAP government is the notion that 'politics is only for political parties' and that anyone who wants to comment or publicly challenge national policies must join a political party. Other organizations, such as religious groups, professional associations, labour unions and clans, are barred from any political engagements or activities. As noted by commentator Ooi (1998), politics in Singapore has now been professionalized – politics is only for the political parties. Another academic, Chua (1995) went a step further to proffer that the PAP has changed the public sphere of life in Singapore to one that is largely in need of administration rather than one fraught with political contestations. Politics in Singapore seems to be more a matter of administrative efficiency and effectiveness of policies than ideological issues of political representation, civil and political rights.

Since independence, elections have been part of Singapore's political landscape, and one could not theoretically charge that they are not free and fair. Elections in Singapore are also free from the violence witnessed in many countries in the region, and election activities are all conducted within the legal framework of the constitution and the Parliamentary Elections Act, in which electoral rules

are clearly spelt out. As they are cleanly and fairly conducted, elections in Singapore provide the PAP with the legitimacy to claim that they have the mandate of the people. However, there are many characteristics in the Singapore party system that do not allow for the growth of opposition parties. The control of the media, the restriction of political discussion to political parties, the co-optation of various organizations and talented individuals by the PAP government which has stunted the growth of a strong civil society, the uneven access to information and resources between political parties and, of course, the first-past-the-post system, have all worked against the opposition.

More importantly, the fact that the PAP has been able to continuously control a two-thirds majority in parliament for three decades means a dominance void of a workable system of checks and balances. With a two-thirds majority, the PAP has been able to introduce policies and change laws, including constitutional laws, with little resistance. This has led some to cynically observe that the rule of law has been reduced to the rule-by-law under the PAP.

Given these conditions, what functions then do elections serve in Singapore?

The Function of Elections in Singapore

Since independence in 1965, parliamentary elections have taken place at regular intervals in Singapore. They have never been shamelessly manipulated, though the PAP, like ruling parties all over the world, has not hesitated to take political advantage whenever possible of its position as the ruling party. Undoubtedly, considerable numbers of Singaporeans have chosen to vote against the PAP but, significantly, not many of them have ever wished to have their vote for the opposition parties result in a change of government, a transfer of power from the PAP to the opposition. The spectacular achievements of the PAP government over the past three decades have ensured that. Consequently, opposition parties have remained utterly demoralized. They have never been able to persuade many Singaporeans to treat them as an opposition that is capable of delivering a stable political order, progress and prosperity, and ethnic peace and harmony. Clearly, although not all Singaporeans are ardent supporters of the PAP government, not many of them have ever wanted to replace it with the opposition (Vasil, 2000: 250-251). In accepting this reality, the opposition has changed tack by adopting their unique 'by-election' strategy in a bid to gain more votes without the risk of unseating the PAP government.

A United States Department of State Singapore Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998 notes that "The Constitution provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully through democratic means, opposition parties are free to contest elections, and the voting and vote-counting systems are fair, accurate, and free from tampering. However, the PAP, which

has held power continuously and overwhelmingly for over three decades, uses the Government's extensive powers to place formidable obstacles in the path of political opponents'. This effectively sums up the paradoxical situation in which elections appear free and fair, and therefore provide the legitimacy for the PAP's rule, while at the same time, opposition parties are disadvantaged and weakened by the continued dominance of the PAP and its ability to use its power as the government.

Without an effective opposition and a real alternative to the PAP, Garry Rodan eloquently noted that in Singapore '... elections have not given effect to broader democratic representation or processes. Rather, extra parliamentary constraints on challenges to the policies and ideologies of the ruling PAP have generally rendered elections a stunted political expression – not the periodic culmination of many contests over social and political power, but the only contest. Nevertheless, in the PAP's historical struggle for, and subsequent consolidation of, political supremacy, elections have been a significant institution. They have afforded the PAP government a political legitimacy not enjoyed by other authoritarian regimes, especially important in limiting the impact of external criticism. Ironically, elections have thus enabled the PAP to claim a mandate in operating outside democratic processes between ballots' (1996: 61).

In the end, Singapore's limited democracy may not fully conform to accepted democratic norms and values, but it is difficult to deny that the system has worked extremely well and has produced remarkable national development. When Singapore gained its independence, the overriding concern for Singaporeans was to secure a reasonable existence for themselves. Not many of them were willing to subscribe to the contrary view that democratic rights and freedoms had an innate importance of their own and that Singapore had to have a fully democratic polity. And during the last 30 years, despite remarkable progress and prosperity, not many Singaporeans have been persuaded to radically alter that view of their polity (Vasil, 2000: 249).

It is unlikely that Singapore will see a dramatic transformation from a limited democracy to a model based on Western liberal democracy in the foreseeable future. However, in response to the emerging domestic realities of a more well-educated polity brought about by years of economic prosperity and the changing socio-economic and political landscape, the PAP has begun to take steps to expand the political space for Singaporeans. It has become evident to the ruling party that as Singapore moves towards a more knowledge-based economy, the old political and economic formulae that proved effective in the past cannot be continued.

Political Transformation: Towards a More Consultative Government?

The political succession from Lee Kuan Yew to the second generation of leaders, led by Goh Chok Tong, heralded a period of gradual change in the political arena. Under Goh, the government has adopted a more consultative approach towards policy-making, and opportunities for Singaporeans to participate in the polity, especially at the local government level, have increased.

There have been greater attempts to gather feedback on policies. The Feedback Unit, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs) were established. Each has its own constituency. While the Feedback Unit gathers feedback across a whole section of society, the IPS takes a more intellectual approach to its research, focusing more on feedback from the 'intelligentsia'. The GPCs give MPs a greater role in scrutinizing and troubleshooting new legislation, thus tempering their image of being just tribunes of the government (Heng, 1997).

Schemes like the NCMPs and NMPs were also instituted in response to the desire of the polity for more debates and representation in parliament. However, as noted, these two schemes have critics who feel they stunt the real development of electoral democracy rather than promote it. They are seen as PAP ploys to further weaken and demoralize the opposition parties.

The most visible areas of the PAP's liberalization programmes are the media and the arts. Newspapers are gradually discussing more sensitive issues and giving publicity to critical views. In the arts, both theatre and film have censorship regimes which are significantly more relaxed (Heng, 1997).

However, a main plank in the agenda for political transformation, as pointed out by John Clammer (1993), was the proposal to adopt a National Ideology as the basis for social and political stability.

National Ideology and Shared Values

Besides using institutional responses to secure its position, the PAP also tries to use moral and ideological arguments to justify what they are doing. In the 1960s and 1970s, their fundamental ideology was that social and economic development must come before political development and democracy, as real and effective democracy is possible only on the basis of a literate and well-fed people. Come the 1980s, with the economic success of Singapore, this argument could no longer be used without arousing scepticism. This resulted in a shift to the argument that continued economic development required that Singapore should maximize the potential of all its citizens. Thus having a two-party system in such a small country would be a waste of resources. And so the

liberal-democratic model was rejected as unsuitable for Singapore, in favour of a more workable communitarian and consensus-based 'Asian democracy'.

To guard against the trend towards individualism in society and the desire for liberal democracy, the PAP government produced a formal document outlining a set of values that should underwrite Singapore's political system. The idea of a national ideology and shared values was first publicly mooted by the then first deputy prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, in 1988. It went through several metamorphoses, culminating in a Government White Paper in 1991 which discussed the proposal in detail and came up with the following 'Shared Values':

- Nation before community and society above self
- Family as the basic unit of society
- Regard and community support for the individual
- Consensus instead of contention
- Racial and religious harmony

John Clammer (1993) notes that the national ideology or shared values proposal conceals two hidden agendas. The first is political and represents an attempt on the part of the PAP to pre-empt social change, or to direct it in 'suitable' directions. The second concerns the latent functions of the ideology – a 'counter-modernization' strategy to manage change. He further notes that the fervour for a national ideology or shared values surfaced at a time of political transition and major sociological shifts – a changing international order in which authoritarianism, in its old forms, is disappearing, a change of generations in the political leadership, a mature economy increasingly open to the pressures of the information age and social changes, which have created an affluent and often property-owning middle class with high expectations and a working class now becoming increasingly detached from traditional types of employment and the social conditions that went with them (Clammer, 1993: 36-37).

The shared values concept has been criticized as reflecting the PAP government's unwillingness to accept change, except on its own terms. Despite the show of a friendlier, more consultative government through the opening up of more feedback channels, allowing more pluralistic views to appear in the press and a relaxation of censorship, critics see these moves not as reflecting real political liberalization, but simply as a strategy by the government to cope with change by expanding its network of 'institutionalised channels for controlled participation' (Brown, 1993: 19).

From Democracy to Good Governance

Another ideological response to criticisms against the PAP was the shift of the ideological discourse from democracy to that of good governance. With the

criticism directed at the PAP government for being undemocratic, the PAP has moved away from defining Singapore as a democracy. It is now defined more in terms of good governance. And it is abundantly clear that the PAP displays many characteristics of a strong, honest and effective government. While a democratic contest provides for the stabilization of a democratic political system, higher policy efficiency calls for swift governmental action, unhindered by structural obstacles. The PAP supports the latter on the grounds that, as Singapore is geographically and demographically small, ethnically diverse and intrinsically unstable, democratic contest not only wastes resources but also creates more instability within the nation (Ooi, 1998: 396-397).

This shift in the debate from democracy to good governance was an indication that while changing political and socio-economic realities have forced the government to adopt a more liberal atmosphere in the arts and media, allow more scope for non-governmental organization (NGO) activities and be more consultative, these in no way point to the willingness of the PAP to move towards a more liberal democratic polity. As pointed out by Heng, the PAP government retains the prerogative to set the parameters for permissible criticism and dissent – the infamous ‘OB (out-of-bounds) markers’ – in Singapore’s political discourse. They have also continued to show their intolerance of opposition party members who take a combative approach and attack existing institutions or government leaders by using legal means to cripple them. The growth of civil society is also circumscribed and only NGOs whose activities are in areas not central to the dispensation of power have been tolerated, endorsed and perhaps even encouraged. And even then, the government tries to maintain leverage and control through co-optation.

Because of its pervasive control over power, the government retains latitude in the use of power, and has not shied away from legislating solutions to any real political challenges.

Prospects for Electoral Reforms?

Since 1963, regular and open elections have accorded political legitimacy to the PAP as representatives of the people and to govern at will. After more than a decade of parliamentary monopoly and continued dominance in parliament subsequently, the PAP has guarded its position with much jealousy. It viewed the decline in electoral support that began in the 1980s with much consternation. Although the PAP remain firmly in control of parliament, they have never lowered their guard, so to speak, and are constantly coming up with new policies and new forms of institutionalized co-optation to stymie support for opposition parties.

In this climate it is unlikely that the PAP government on its own initiative will carry out any electoral reforms in the direction of fairer representation and greater openness. The opposite is more likely, and has manifested itself in

several changes in the Parliamentary Elections Act, as discussed in preceding sections. The most recent changes in the rules concern political advertising on the Internet, the registration of 'political websites' and the Political Donation Bill that gave the government power to gazette organizations as 'political' and hence restrict the source of their funding. Any organization that is gazetted as a political organization is not allowed to receive funding from overseas and must declare the sources of its funding.

The government has tried to respond to the demand for greater representation and pressure from the increasingly complex middle-class polity through the politics of consultation and feedback, and by expanding its network of institutionalized channels for controlled participation. The increasing diversity and plurality of Singapore society is to be accommodated and managed through more extensive mechanisms for co-optation. Changes in the electoral system that might in any way favour the development of an alternative party or nurture a strong opposition are not a likely scenario.

The government has no qualms about defending the one-party system. They see a multi-party or even two-party system as unsustainable because of Singapore's small population and limited talented pool. Lee Kuan Yew has openly contended that a two-party system is a waste of talent as half the country's ablest would be sitting idle in the opposition (*Straits Times*, 6 December 1996). Thus in the name of administrative efficiency and effectiveness, a one-party system is considered the best option.

This then begs the question of whether electoral reforms could be forced upon the government by the polity in the foreseeable future. As things now stand, this is highly unlikely because of the expanding channels of co-optation, and the perception that 'there are benefits to be had from being legitimated and co-opted by the state' (Brown, 1993: 18). Sociologists and political scientists observing Singapore have also pointed out that despite an expanding middle class and growing affluence in Singapore, there is little evidence that these have led to any liberalizing pressures on the government in contrast to the classical belief that the growth of an educated, affluent socio-economic elite and the rise of the middle class constitutes a liberalizing force in politics.

It has also been noted that while the PAP government is regularly criticized in 'coffee shop talks' and about 30-35 per cent of the population have consistently voted for the opposition since the mid-1980s, the ideological hegemony of the PAP is quite complete. Many of the PAP's ideas have become taken-for-granted notions among Singaporeans. Even the opposition has subscribed to the PAP's ideology of meritocracy. The PAP's political discourse, which emphasizes the issues of economic survival and the need to remain economically competitive, and constantly portrays the fragility of a multi-racial society, is deeply embedded. So much so, that the opposition, in challenging the PAP, has had to

affirm their support for inter-ethnic sensitivity and the maintenance of high economic growth. The fact that the opposition has had to resort to a 'by-election' strategy shows the widespread belief among the electorate that Singapore cannot do without a PAP government. Such is the extent of the PAP's ideological hegemony (Ooi, 1998: 358, 388).

External Support for Reforms

The role of external actors in Singapore's political field is minimal. This can be partly attributed to the tight control that the PAP government imposes on foreign actors. Through its Registration of Societies Act, the government has not hesitated to bar the entry or registration of any political groups it deems 'may interfere in domestic politics' such as the human rights watch group, Amnesty International. To further root out any possible foreign interference in the country's internal affairs, a Political Donations Act was passed in parliament in May 2000 to ban foreign groups from donating funds to political parties in Singapore. Trade unions, charitable groups and professional firms are also barred from such donations. Only individual Singaporeans, aged 21 and above, and Singaporean companies that undertake most of their business in Singapore are allowed to make donations to political parties. The Act further requires political parties, elections candidates and polling agents to identify backers who have given them more than S\$10,000 in a single donation or series of donations.

The 1974 Newspaper and Printing Presses Act put a cap on the percentage of shares that could be held by foreign companies at a mere 3 per cent. In addition, ownership of management shares, which have 200 times the voting power of ordinary shares, has to be approved and endorsed by the government. Through these measures, and also by curbing the circulation of any foreign newspapers that are deemed to have 'interfered' in the domestic politics of Singapore, the government has effectively limited the possible role that foreign media or interests might play in generating support for any political or electoral reforms.

More importantly, however, the economic transformation of Singapore from a third world country to a small island state whose per capita income is the second highest in Asia in a span of 30 years has won the admiration of many outside observers. Whether one labels it a limited democracy or soft authoritarianism, it cannot be denied that the PAP government has acted with honesty and integrity in the pursuit of national development. It has consistently been ranked by outside agencies as the least corrupt of all Asian governments. Based on a utilitarian philosophy of the greater good for the greatest number of people, its national development has successfully propelled Singapore from the Third to the First World.

The same reasons that explain the lack of effective opposition against the PAP internally can therefore be used to explain why the role of foreign actors in political transformation would be limited. The legal and political framework, as discussed in earlier sections, has set a limit on political activities in Singapore, applicable both to internal and external actors. Indeed the government has even extended the strategy of co-optation to include external actors, especially external commercial interests. In the present climate where the political and ideological hegemony of the PAP is still pervasive, many external actors would probably find it more productive to work within the limits set by the government.

Conclusions and Evaluations

Singapore offers a unique case study of an Asian state that has sought to balance and reconcile the needs for national development with some notion of democracy. As one political commentator put it, 'the leaders of the PAP were not passionate believers in the creed of democracy although they understood that some form of electoral mandate was needed for their legitimacy to govern. Good governance was defined more by its efficiency at solving problems, and adherence to the democratic requirement of checks and balances was mostly secondary although not abnegated' (Heng, 1997).

Another political scientist believes that 'it is equally certain that Singapore is not likely to see a similar substantial transformation of its limited democracy for a considerable period of time. A large majority of Singapore's population consists of immigrants. The Chinese among them are especially conditioned to taking a more pragmatic view of the nature of their polity and tend not to display acute concern for political and democratic norms. ... It is maintained that the Chinese in Singapore take the view that if a government is performing effectively in producing progress and prosperity and improving the opportunities for amassing wealth, it does not make much sense to distract its attention away from its job of facilitating wealth creation by creating pressures for political change. It is this pragmatism of the Chinese that has made the Singapore rulers consider the political culture of the Chinese as the mainstay of Singapore's limited democracy, a system that is geared primarily to producing progress and prosperity' (Vasil, 2000: 248).

However, critics of the PAP government feel it is precisely this pragmatism that may ultimately undo the achievements of the government in the long run. They allege that 'apart from its economic success and its "kiasu"³ pragmatism, there is little else that unites Singapore's fragmented citizenry' (Lingle, 1996: 99). While this may not be an entirely fair statement, Singapore is indeed at a crossroads. The PAP's effective and efficient management of the whole society and its pervasive influence has resulted in widespread political apathy and a

3. The word 'kiasu' is derived from the Chinese Hokkien dialect, literally meaning 'afraid of losing'.

certain dependency. Singaporeans have come to rely on the government to solve most of their problems. The exercise of extensive controls over so many important public and social institutions by the PAP government has retarded the development of a citizenry that would take greater responsibility for their own actions.

The PAP government has responded to the changing nature of the global economy and faced the onslaught of globalization with greater economic liberalization. Can this, however, be sustained without correspondingly greater political liberalization? The government, as discussed earlier, has loosened its control on society and has encouraged some political pluralism. However, it still attempts to cling on to its old formula of co-optation by trying to tolerate and accommodate more differences through expanding its networks and means of co-optation.

This formula is beginning to show signs of dysfunctionality as the need to transcend into a knowledge-based economy requires individuals that are non-conformist, more creative and more willing to take risks. The government's rather paternalistic approach has stifled the much-needed creative and questioning processes critical for a knowledge-based economy, and it now finds itself in a paradoxical position. With the current decline in economic performance, there is an urgent need to re-structure the economy to ensure the continued economic vitality of Singapore. Without reforms in both the economic and political management of Singapore, there are doubts about Singapore's continued peace and prosperity.

It is at this critical juncture that political transformation in the direction of genuine liberalization might surface. Accustomed to almost unchallenged dominance, the PAP government would find it a difficult transition to make. It would necessitate a move from co-optation and ingenious ways of curbing dissidence to reforms that might ultimately undermine the fundamentals of a one-party dominant system and challenge the basic tenet of the PAP's leadership philosophy, that once given the mandate at the elections it should be allowed to rule without undue pressure from competing groups.

Would the PAP government be able to embark on real reforms and re-invent itself to become truly democratic? Or would genuine reforms be forced upon it by a population faced with declining economic fortunes? Some observers believe that a decline in living standards would upset the existing social contract whereby citizens tolerate authoritarianism in exchange for material payoffs. Since PAP legitimacy is so much tied to its ability to deliver economic results, a prolonged economic recession would affect it. This, coupled with a generational change, makes a scenario of the PAP being voted out of power not unlikely. If and when such a scenario took place, the function of elections would be more in accordance with the Western democratic tradition.

Postscript

After this paper was completed in September 2001, a snap election was announced and held on 3 November 2001. The latest results of the 2001 elections have been incorporated into this paper. A quick analysis of the results would lead one to conclude that the pragmatism of Singaporeans has again ruled the day. Coming in the midst of an economic recession and the shock of the events of 11 September, Singaporeans voted overwhelmingly for the 'tried and tested'. The PAP won 82 of the 84 seats, and received 75.3 per cent of all valid votes cast, a rise of 10 per cent from the 1997 elections. However, a cynic would question the real depth of support for the PAP since only 29 of the 84 seats were contested, representing only a third of registered voters.

List of Abbreviations

GPC - Government Parliamentary Committee
GRC - Group Representation Constituency
HDB - Housing and Development Board
IPS - Institute of Policy Studies
ISA - Internal Security Act
MP - Member of Parliament
NCMP - Non-constituency Member of Parliament
NGO - Non-governmental Organization
NMP - Nominated Member of Parliament
NPPA - Newspaper Printing and Presses Act
NSP - National Solidarity Party
PAP - People's Action Party
PKMS - Singapore National Malay Organization
SDP - Singapore Democratic Party
SMC - Single-member Constituency
SPP - Singapore People's Party
UMNO-MCA - United Malays National Organization-Malaysian Chinese Association
WP - Workers' Party

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