SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE 1990s

Authoritarianism
Democracy & Capitalism

It recommends that more companies hire Australians of Asian origin.

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Preserving the one-party state in contemporary Singapore

Garry Rodan

In the recent growth of literature examining political change in Latin America and Asia, the transition to civilian, and particularly parliamentary, rule has been considered a crucial measure of the decline of authoritarianism. In the case of Singapore, however, a Westminster-style parliamentary system has been in operation for the duration of self-government, with some recent modification to incorporate an elected President with significant powers (Cotton 1992). Hence, government has been determined in Singapore by popular elections since 1959, with parliament and political parties, rather than military juntas, prevailing. Yet despite such democratic appearances, an authoritarian regime has managed to successfully coexist with these political forms in Singapore. Here the definitive feature of authoritarianism is the extra-parliamentary constraint on challenges to the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP). This has at times involved crude measures like the detaining or imprisoning of opponents, but more commonly it has involved techniques of greater sophistication that systematically obstruct counter views and institutionalise the PAP’s ideology.

Successive PAP administrations have exercised state power in accordance with a system of restrictive rules and regulations. That system or mode of administering state power which governs the daily lives of all Singaporeans can be referred to as an ‘authoritarian regime’. It is at the same time the ‘PAP regime’ because it is the extensive influence of the Party in all exercises of state power that makes the systematic and comprehensive imposition of a particular set of restrictive rules and regulations possible. In other words, the particular form that authoritarianism takes in Singapore is largely shaped by the PAP.

With the existence of such a regime, parliamentary elections constitute a stunted political expression—they are not the end product of broader contests over social and political power but rather the only contest. Contestation outside a narrowly defined formal
politics is severely limited. But even in this sphere, the PAP sees little margin for opposition, continually arguing the importance of the ‘dominant-party system’. This system is a critical element in what is effectively a one-party state.

Nevertheless, as elsewhere, the conditions under which the PAP attempts to reproduce the authoritarian regime have undergone considerable change in the last decade or more. No longer is Singapore at a rudimentary stage of economic development, as it was in the 1960s when the regime was established. Rather, it is now a reasonably affluent society with a sizeable middle class and much greater exposure to the lifestyles and political cultures outside the city-state. Much of this exposure has to do with the emergence of qualitatively new forms of integration with the international economy. Though the precise influence of any of these factors is unclear, there is reason to speculate that the authoritarian rule, which has proved so effective in political and economic terms in the past, may have a problematic future in Singapore. After all, since the early 1980s, the PAP has experienced a sustained electoral decline, leading to a range of political reforms at the initiative of a second and third generation of party leaders.

It is the purpose of this chapter to evaluate these reforms and their significance for the exercise of power in Singapore. The argument to be developed is that, although they do represent a conscious break from the more extreme state paternalism of the past, these changes are intended above all else to preserve the essence of the authoritarian regime—the one-party state. The idea is to broaden the scope of the state in an attempt to co-opt disgruntled elements of the newly emerging middle class and pre-empt democratic reforms which might genuinely threaten the one-party state.

More precisely, the strategy attempts to channel dissent and dissatisfaction through the PAP or institutions through which it can exert an influence, and away from opposition political parties or non-government civil organisations. Moreover, while this strategy may not be proving as successful as the leadership would like, since the PAP has been unable to halt its electoral decline, the regime is not facing the sort of challenge likely to force more dramatic changes in the near future. Emerging social forces are not on a collision course with the regime. On the contrary, the substantial middle class, which some theorists regard as a critical prerequisite for political liberalisation, may be irritated by aspects of authoritarian rule, but its material interests and social position are also shored up by the essentially elitist policies enacted through this regime. Indeed, the PAP state is very much a ‘middle-class state’, in which decision-making is dominated by technocrats and professionals and rationalised in terms of ‘meritocracy’, a concept supportive of the social position of this class. However, speculation is currently enjoying a renaissance, also owing to its recent success in pushing the discipline of labour. Rather than relying upon its traditional forms, Singapore continues to rely more heavily upon incentives and in particular on the ‘Asian model’. Hence, the political economy of Singapore is a more integrated and complex one than in South Korea.

Furthermore, the development strategy in Singapore is reliant upon its own economic strength and the exploitation of the region. The country is a major player in the region and its economy is a major contributor to the region’s economic growth. The government has been successful in attracting foreign investment and developing a strong manufacturing base, which has helped to create jobs and boost economic growth. The government has also been successful in developing a strong infrastructure and has invested heavily in education and training, which has helped to improve the skills of the workforce and boost productivity. The government has also been successful in developing a strong institutional framework, which has helped to attract foreign investment and ensure the stability of the economy.

This is not to say that the government is without its critics. Tremendous social and economic inequality exists in Singapore, and there are concerns about the way in which economic development is being pursued. There are also concerns about the way in which the government is using its power to regulate the economy and control the flow of capital. There are also concerns about the way in which the government is using its power to regulate the economy and control the flow of capital. There are also concerns about the way in which the government is using its power to regulate the economy and control the flow of capital. There are also concerns about the way in which the government is using its power to regulate the economy and control the flow of capital.
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class. However, this is not to suggest that the middle class's privileged position is reliant upon authoritarian rule; the social position currently enjoyed by the middle class, while bolstered by the PAP's rule, also owes something to the relatively advanced nature of the Singapore economy and the related social and technical divisions of labour. Rather, the persistence of the particular form of rule in Singapore under the PAP is primarily a function of the latter's party-political ambitions.

Furthermore, as a city-state with an export-oriented industrialisation strategy in place since the mid-1960s, Singapore has long been reliant upon integration with the international economy. The domestic bourgeoisie did not have sufficient interest or capacity to contest this. Consequently, the PAP has championed internationalisation ahead of economic nationalism. Moreover, the regime has derived much of its political legitimacy and its effectiveness in attracting capital from the fact that Singaporean authoritarianism has embodied efficient, regularised and relatively corruption-free bureaucracy. Hence, the political pressures emerging in Indonesia (Robison 1988) and South Korea (Cumings 1989) for either an opening up of the economy or a more regularised bureaucracy are not in evidence in Singapore.

This is not to suggest, however, that the path ahead for the PAP and its mode of administration is without trepidation, nor that significant political change—if not liberalisation—is inconceivable. Tremendous social and economic change provides a quite different backdrop against which official policy and related ideological pronouncements are now interpreted within Singapore. Certainly there seems little demonstrable need for the extent of control and discipline exerted by the regime in contemporary Singapore. In the past, developmentalism and anti-communism have been politically effective rationales for such a regime, but they would appear to have little currency left in them. In this climate, are we to see some xenophobic variant surface which emphasises the threat to Singapore's 'Asian' heritage, or an even greater emphasis than already exists on the state as a manager of ethnic sensitivities? The widening income gap associated with Singapore's economic development might also add fuel to a critical re-evaluation of the regime's self-justification and possibly provide a stimulus for more concerted attempts to form independent civil and interest-group organisations (Rodan 1992a). Such a development is a necessary pre-condition for a more fertile environment for organised political alternatives to the PAP. It is precisely the PAP's appreciation of this point that informs much of its current political strategy—a strategy that involves the introduction of new political structures intended to undercut such alternatives.
Establishing the authoritarian regime

When the PAP stormed to victory in the 1959 elections that brought self-government, it carried with it serious internal divisions. In the postwar nationalist struggle against the British, the PAP was formed out of a marriage of convenience between a left-wing Chinese-educated working-class movement and a more conservative group of English-educated middle-class nationalists led by Lee Kuan Yew. The former had the organisational structure and mass support and the latter the appearance of respectability in the colonialists’ eyes. The early 1960s was thus an intense period of strategic jockeying for ascendency within the Party. The authoritarian regime in Singapore was born out of this contest and was essentially the mechanism by which it was resolved in favour of Lee’s faction.

Despite the paucity of organisational structures or any serious social base behind it, Lee’s faction was in charge of the Party executive in 1959. Though this had been accepted by the left as a temporary expedient to win office, Lee demonstrated clearly that possession was nine-tenths of the law. Having already reformed the party structure to centralise power in the hands of the executive (Turnbull 1982: 266), Lee and his colleagues also fashioned the post-colonial state to the same end. For instance, upon taking office the PAP abolished local government and in 1960 also disbanded all management committees of community centres. The latter had been established in the 1950s to encourage grassroots participation in community developments but were brought under the central control of a new statutory body, the People’s Association, whose staff reported directly to the Prime Minister’s office.

After pursuing a series of policy directions at odds with the left, Lee’s faction prompted a showdown within the Party by its enthusiastic support for political union with Malaya in the Malaysian federation. The left saw this as a means through which it would be comprehensively purged by the right-wing central government. The result was the formation in 1961 of a separate party, the Barisan Sosialis (BS), which drew the vast bulk of the Chinese working class, students and intellectuals from the PAP, leaving Lee and his colleagues without significant organisational support at the grassroots level.

The PAP dealt with this vulnerability on a number of fronts. First, it used the various repressive mechanisms of the state, either directly or indirectly, to whittle away the leadership and organisational structures of the BS. The most conspicuous such exercise was Operation Cold Store in 1963 which resulted in the arrest of 111 people by the Special Branch, including 24 executives of the BS,
9 elections that brought internal divisions. In the 1960s, the PAP was formed left-wing Chinese-educated group of intellectuals and mass support among the colonialists' eyes.

Second, the PAP turned very deliberately to the civil service as a political ally, improving allowances and conducting propaganda sessions through the Political Study Centre. The hitherto lukewarm relationship with the conservative bureaucracy naturally benefited from the sharp break with the left. But it also benefited from the expansive role it was to enjoy due to the social and economic policies subsequently pursued by the PAP.

A third and not unrelated point was the further centralisation of Party responsibilities. With grassroots organisational structures decimated, the PAP executive harnessed the machinery of the state to traditional Party functions. No longer was there any notion of the Party organisation assisting in the formation of policy. Rather, this was the exclusive domain of the executive. What Party organisation existed was intended only to convey and promote executive decisions (Bellows 1973: 28–9). But this task was increasingly to be undertaken by the institutions of the state, notably the public bureaucracy, which came to be almost indistinguishable from the PAP. This was most conspicuous in the harnessing of the Community Centres and Citizens’ Consultative Committees (CCCs) to the task of mobilising support for the PAP, but it extended to all other aspects of the public sector. To deal with the bureaucracy was to deal with the party and the regime at the same time. Public appointments were invariably viewed by the PAP as a strategic opportunity to consolidate both a particular set of policies and a mode of implementation. Without PAP membership or sanction it was not possible to exert any real influence through the state. The state-owned media were also creatively employed to the PAP’s advantage. Possibly one of the greatest political achievements in the 1960s, however, was the PAP’s supplanting of effective independent trade-union organisations with a state-sponsored National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) (Deyo 1981).

This meshing of the PAP with the state was rationalised through a corporatist ideology which soon became institutionalised. Various arguments were advanced in support of this, including: the precariousness of the city-state as a political entity following the failed merger with Malaysia; the sensitive ethnic and geopolitical context of Singapore; and the potential for political pluralism to frustrate the urgent task of economic development. This systematically restricted policy debate and marginalised organisations, individuals and viewpoints at odds with Lee and his cohorts (Rodan 1989). Civil society was naturally a casualty in this process. The very idea
of social organisations and associations voluntarily formed for self-protection and self-interest, and enjoying more or less autonomy from the state, was incompatible with the evolving regime structure.

However, the political strategy of the PAP did not rest exclusively on a combination of intimidation on the one hand and ideological production on the other. Rather, there was the simultaneous development of social and economic policies intended to give substance to the notion that political curbs were part of a trade-off for material benefits. Substantial expenditure on public housing and education, for example, did demonstrate a commitment to transforming conditions for the masses and helped build working-class electoral support for the PAP. These social reforms, nevertheless, took a particular political and ideological form—enhancing the control of the PAP over the population through the latter’s dependence on the former (Chua 1991a). The general pervasiveness of the state in the social sphere has indeed been one of the central features of the regime (Chan 1978). Similarly, successful policies to attract capital investment, especially towards the end of the 1960s when the export-oriented industrialisation (EOI) strategy gathered momentum, earned the PAP wide support. The authoritarian regime was fundamentally in place before the EOI programme took root, but the political pre-conditions for success as an exporter of low-cost, labour-intensive manufactures destined for world markets—notably docile or compliant labour—reinforced such a regime. This meant the PAP’s own political objectives could be presented as economic imperatives.

Clearly the PAP leadership comprised capable administrators who also happened to be adept at various techniques of social and political control. However, these points must be placed in context, otherwise the character of the party and the political basis of it can be distorted. First, the essentially middle-class leadership owed its political pre-eminence in part to peculiar socio-historical circumstances and not entirely to its own qualities. In the lead-up to self-government, the domestic bourgeoisie, whose interests were structurally linked to those of colonial capital, could neither appreciate nor accommodate the overriding nationalist sentiment of the population. Thus, with self-government in 1959, it found itself without an effective political voice. However, if the middle-class leadership of Lee Kuan Yew and others had attained power without reliance upon capital’s support, with the breakaway of the left to form the BS, before long it could also, indeed had to, distance itself from labour as an independent political force. The consequent high degree of relative political autonomy enjoyed by the PAP facilitated decisive public policy, something that was portrayed by the government as demonstrative of the rational, rather than sectional, deci-
The technocratic administration thus had a broader foundation than the abilities and inclinations of the leadership itself.

Second, we must keep in mind that the seemingly rational decision-making process was nevertheless fundamentally oriented towards maximising private capital accumulation. Indeed, private investment levels and economic growth rates were the determining criteria by which good government was consistently measured. In pursuing these goals, policymakers chose to promote those fractions of capital, and the attendant middle class, that could most effectively integrate Singapore with the global economy through export-oriented industrialisation. In this sense, despite the PAP’s political separation from capital, it very consciously and actively presided over a capitalist state. To lose sight of this in favour of emphasising the PAP as an almost autonomous modernising elite is to ignore the structural constraints and opportunities taken into account by the PAP in its exercise of power. Certainly the PAP leadership had its own vision of society, one that reflected broader concerns than capital accumulation per se, but the pursuit of this entrenched the social and economic power of others outside the state and party. The PAP thus constituted a wider set of interests than is captured by the notion of a modernising elite, even though it enjoyed an unusual degree of relative political autonomy from capital and labour.

Against the above background, the PAP has enjoyed remarkable electoral success. After the internal split in 1961, the PAP secured re-election in 1963 with 46 per cent of the vote. From then until 1984, it averaged 75 per cent of the total vote in general elections. The PAP also held every parliamentary seat from the general election of 1968 until a by-election in 1981. Whatever observations we might make about the regime, throughout this period the PAP’s political legitimacy in government was almost unquestioned within Singapore. However, since the early 1980s reproduction of the PAP’s absolute political monopoly has become a more difficult task, giving rise to new strategies to preserve the one-party state, and its associated authoritarian structures, over the longer term.

End of the parliamentary monopoly

The PAP’s by-election loss in Anson in 1981 to Joshua Jeyaretnam of the Workers’ Party (WP) came as a shock to a party that had become accustomed to a total dominance of parliamentary seats. Moreover, it provided the occasion for a series of explicit public statements by the PAP leadership about political opposition in
general and within Singapore in particular. According to the then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew (Straits Times [ST] 15 December 1981), ‘... an opposition, if we are lucky, makes no difference to good government’. His Old Guard colleague, Second-Deputy Prime Minister Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, held the concept in even less regard, claiming ‘the role of the opposition is to ensure bad government’ (quoted in FEER 7 May 1982). The intensity of the PAP’s reaction to the breaking of their parliamentary monopoly, expressed in its hostile and dismissive attitude to Jeyaretnam both inside and outside Parliament, reflected more than resentment and bitterness. The concerted attack on individuals by the PAP represents a not uncommon strategy to destroy any potential focus of opposition per se.

The PAP’s insistence on its exclusive right to power was further underlined at the 1982 Biennial Conference of the PAP where the Party redefined itself as a ‘national movement’. According to the official PAP organ, Petir, ‘No fly-by-night political parties, committed only to the politics of dissent, which are devoid of capable leaders and credible alternative policies, can run the country’. However, it was also at this conference that Lee Kuan Yew floated the seemingly contradictory idea of ensuring that several ‘better and more intelligent opposition members are in Parliament’ (quoted in Asia Research Bulletin January 1983). Lee claimed that the existence in Parliament of a few opponents might help to sharpen up the skills of the PAP’s emergent new generation of leaders, the so-called New Guard. Subsequently, in 1984, Singapore’s Constitution was amended to provide for up to three of the highest opposition losers in general elections to be non-constituent members of Parliament (NCMPs). This was increased to four in 1991. However, the voting rights of NCMPs were restricted, since they could not vote on money or constitutional bills, although they could speak on these issues.

This apparent contradiction was actually an attempt by the PAP to stem the tide of serious opposition on the one hand, yet to project an image of political tolerance on the other. It did not take long for the attacks on Jeyaretnam to evoke widespread public sympathy and admiration for the PAP critic. What most worried the PAP was the apparent support for the liberal notion of opposition as a positive element in a political system. In this climate, the PAP turned its attention to shaping the form of political opposition. The ‘better and more intelligent members’ to whom Lee referred would of course be so because they would not, like Jeyaretnam, openly confront and challenge the PAP. The idea was to have more accommodative individuals if there was to be opposition at all.

While the PAP did not take the Anson loss lightly, to some extent...
it could attribute it to specific issues within that electorate, including the effect of eviction notices to employees of the Port of Singapore Authority resident in the electorate. However, a 13 per cent swing against the PAP in the subsequent 1984 general elections represented a decisive shift in Singapore politics that indicated a more generalised alienation with the party than the PAP previously perceived. The NCMP provision had not blunted voter enthusiasm for legitimately elected representation. This election not only saw the return of Jeyaretnam but the entry of Chiam See Tong of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) to Parliament. However, the first-past-the-post voting system meant that the PAP’s 62.94 per cent of the vote gave it the remaining 77 seats.

One factor in the PAP’s declining electoral fortunes was the apparent alienation of the now substantial middle class. Singapore’s rapid economic growth and successful industrialisation had brought with it a significant expansion in the number of technicians and professionals and a general increase in educational levels. According to census data, administrators, executives and managers, professionals and technicians collectively accounted for 18 per cent of the workforce in 1980 and reached 24 per cent by 1990. Many of these people undertook tertiary education and/or employment overseas, and were thereby exposed to different social and political systems.

Though the middle class was the principal beneficiary of the PAP’s policies, elements of it were increasingly finding the ideological pronouncements and authoritarian excesses of the PAP objectionable. Lee Kuan Yew’s stance on eugenics in August 1984, for example, led to a flurry of dissenting opinion in the English-language daily Straits Times newspaper, bearing witness not just to dismay at Lee’s views but to the greater preparedness to publicly criticise the government and its leaders (Rodan 1989: 183–6). One of the contradictions operating here was that, on the one hand, the social and economic status of this class was reinforced by state-sponsored ideologies about ‘meritocracy’, yet, on the other hand, public policy treated these people in the same patronising way it did the rest of the population. If they were encouraged to see themselves as the talented and gifted upon whom the rest of the population depended, then it was only natural that they would come to resent the state’s all-pervasive influence. They also tend to enjoy a comparatively high degree of autonomy in the workplace (Wright 1978), something that stands in sharp contrast with their social and political experiences in Singapore.

However, dissatisfaction with the PAP was not confined to the middle class in the 1984 election. The policies of the so-called ‘Second Industrial Revolution’ strategy, adopted in 1979 to accelerate Singapore’s transition to a more sophisticated technological base,
adversely affected large sections of the domestic bourgeoisie who felt this represented a new high in preferential treatment for foreign-based transnational corporations. But there were also concerns among middle- and low-income earners in particular about proposals mooted by the government to raise the age from 60 to 65 years at which withdrawals could be made from the compulsory superannuation scheme, the Central Provident Fund (CPF) (Asiaweek 4 January 1985).

In general, though, the middle class, being more inclined to articulate viewpoints through conspicuous channels like letters to the daily English press, possibly had greater visibility in its dissent. Certainly the trade union movement, through the NTUC's dominance, did not engage in open contest over government policy on behalf of the working class.

The 1984 election result set in train a significant modification in the PAP's political strategy. By this time, a stage-managed handover of senior positions to the New Guard was well advanced. Led by Lee Kuan Yew's anticipated successor, Goh Chok Tong, there was an explicit attempt to demonstrate that the leadership transition marked the opening up of politics in Singapore. The 'new' PAP would be a more consultative and tolerant one. Goh also raised expectations of a society in which the state's circumscription of the individual would be relaxed (FEER 24 January 1985; Goh 1986). The assumption underlying this programme of political reform was that the bulk of the PAP's electoral decline stemmed from a perceived authoritarianism, with Goh quite openly conceding in the wake of the 1984 election result that the government needed to more widely consult and involve people in the decision-making process (FEER 21 February 1985). This perception was thought to be concentrated among Singapore's younger—just over 50 per cent of the 1.5 million eligible voters in the 1984 election were under 35 years of age—and better educated voters, of which the fast-growing middle class was a major and strategic component. Accordingly, the latter was targeted in the range of measures introduced from the mid-1980s.

It is of course to be expected that any political party will endeavour to arrest its electoral decline. The distinctiveness of the PAP response to the 1984 election lies more in the effect the reforms were intended to have on the way politics was conducted. The idea was to provide more elaborate mechanisms for political expression outside the party system rather than to elevate competition between parties. The latter was incompatible with the de facto one-party state to which the PAP was still totally committed. It is the constancy of this objective that explains why Lee Kuan Yew has been prepared to take a back seat during the New Guard experiment. Where there were...
were modifications to the regime governing social and political life in Singapore, they did not contradict this basic aim.

**Consultative government under the New Guard**

The major initiatives by the PAP since the mid-1980s to provide alternative avenues for public involvement in policy debate include: the establishment of the Feedback Unit in 1985; the phased introduction of Town Councils which began in 1986; the introduction of Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs) in 1987; the creation of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in 1988; and the establishment of a new category of parliamentarians—nominated MPs (NMPs)—in 1990. A complementary ‘national ideology’ has also been promoted to encourage a political culture that excludes ‘confrontationalist’ politics.

The Feedback Unit is an extra-parliamentary body headed by a government MP. Its four stated objectives are: to receive suggestions from the public on national problems; to gather information on existing policies; to facilitate prompt responses by government departments to public complaints; and to instigate public information programmes. Between 1985 and 1990, a total of 109 ‘dialogue sessions’ were conducted with a range of professionals, grassroots leaders, trade associations, small business groups and others. Professional groups have, however, been disproportionately represented at these forums, leading to charges that the unit is fundamentally targeting the English-educated middle class (*Straits Times Weekly Overseas Edition [STWOE] 21 April 1990*). The intention, it would seem, is to provide both an opportunity for these people to air their views and feel that they are being taken into account, and at the same time for the government’s case on policy to be sympathetically put.

The introduction of Town Councils between 1986 and 1991 resulted in a decentralisation of various administrative activities previously centralised under the Housing Development Board (HDB). Town Councils were attached to the different electorates and became the responsibility of the local MP. This change was presented as an opportunity for greater community participation in the allocation of public resources. At the same time, though, it tested the commitment of the electorate to its preferred candidate. As Lee Kuan Yew argued, constituencies that reject the PAP cannot expect to be insulated from ‘bad choices’ (*ST 2 July 1989*). In practice, however, the Town Councils have been more significant as a demonstration that the PAP has no monopoly on administrative competence, rather than as a breakthrough in participatory democracy,
with no evidence to date of either inferior services or efficiency in their delivery in the opposition SDP Town Council of Potong Pasir. Indeed, according to a survey published in the *Strait Times* (STWOE 28 December 1991), 48 per cent of respondents believed that Town Councils would be run the same regardless of whether the local MP was from the PAP or another party.

GPCs, like the Feedback Unit, were also heavily geared towards tapping the expertise of professionals. By 1988, ten such committees were established, each comprising five or six MPs who can appoint a resource panel of up to twelve members from outside parliament. Goh Chok Tong (ST 14 February 1987) explained that the ‘most compelling’ reason for GPCs was ‘the need for a new political formula that would take Singapore into the next century’. These committees were supposedly the means by which both backbenchers inside and experts outside parliament could increase their participation in the policy process. However, as is generally the case with GPCs in other political systems, they can also enable the government to set the agenda for public debate and steer attention to problems of policy implementation ahead of basic questions of political philosophy and direction.

Launched with a S$4 million government grant and the declared intention of becoming an independent ‘think-tank’, the IPS has two functions, according to Goh Chok Tong (ST 16 January 1988). The first is to educate younger Singaporeans in public administration and private sector management about Singapore’s political history. The other is to foster open public debate. By its very nature this institution is again one that primarily targets the educated elite. To date it has published some interesting work on matters of public importance (see Low & Toh 1989; Tan 1990; Ooi 1990; Phua 1991), but it remains to be seen whether it can genuinely initiate issues for public debate not already on the government’s agenda.

The one reform that caused a significant degree of controversy within the PAP itself was the introduction of NMPs. The bill, introduced to parliament in late 1989, provided for the appointment of up to six NMPs, each for a renewable two-year term and with the same voting rights as NCMPs. The appointments were to be made by the President on the advice of a special select committee which was in turn appointed by the PAP-dominated parliament. Goh Chok Tong explained that there was a need to correct popular misconception that the PAP was closed to alternative viewpoints when deciding policy. Through NMPs, people who had excelled outside parliament or had special expertise could directly enter political debate. Most importantly, these NMPs were to be non-partisan. According to Goh (*Parliamentary Debates, Singapore* 29 November 1989, column 705) they would thus ‘concentrate on the
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substance of the debate rather than form and rhetoric’, as opposition MPs supposedly did. Brigadier-General (BG) Lee Hsien Loong, Trade and Industry Minister and son of Lee Kuan Yew, quite explicitly expressed the hope for NMPs to halt the growing support for opposition candidates (STWOE 9 December 1989).

A significant number of backbenchers within the PAP expressed concern about the NMP provision, many viewing it as an easy route to parliament that belittled their onerous constituency work. Some even criticised the departure from the principles of representation and accountability embodied in appointed MPs (Rodan 1992b). However, the bill was finally passed with a proviso that future parliaments could vote on whether or not to exercise the legislation. Thus, in 1990, two NMPs entered parliament.6

The common theme to all of these reforms was a determination by Goh and his colleagues to direct dissent and dissatisfaction with the PAP or particular government policies through institutions controlled by the party or institutions with a potential to depoliticise debate. The clear aim was to foster an alternative to the increasing recourse by Singaporeans to opposition political parties.

It should be pointed out that the more consultative style of the New Guard extended to the government’s dealings with the private sector. Indeed, the first evidence of the PAP’s preparedness to consult more widely was provided through the operations of the Economic Committee, appointed in March 1985 to review the Singapore economy and the strategy underlying it. The Committee was headed by Lee Hsien Loong, but comprised representation from the Singapore Manufacturers’ Association, the Singapore Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and various leading local entrepreneurs. In turn, this committee was serviced by eight sub-committees including heavy representation from the domestic business community.

Subsequently, under the auspices of the Economic Development Board and with the involvement of six government agencies, the Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SME) Committee put together a master plan intended to make the Economic Committee’s 1986 recommendations for a stronger local private sector a reality. This was followed by a national forum involving hundreds of local business representatives. More recently, the local private sector has been involved in the government’s economic blueprint for the next two decades, the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP), which was announced in late 1991. Work on the SEP began in 1989 under the Economic Planning Committee (EPC) within the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Through its different sub-committees the EPC comprises over 110 members, a substantial proportion of which is private sector representation (Phua 1991: 1).
Certainly this degree of consultation with the local private sector is unprecedented in the post-1959 Singapore public policy process. In part it is a function of the government’s desire to diversify Singapore’s economic base in the wake of the mid-1980s recession. That experience clearly highlighted the existing vulnerabilities of heavy dependence upon a small range of manufactured exports. With the new emphasis on regional economic integration, and special emphasis on the services sector, the domestic bourgeoisie now assumes greater strategic relevance to official plans. It is in this sector that it has tended to be most numerous and competitive. At the same time, the policies of the Second Industrial Revolution since 1979 had served to compound the difficulties of the domestic bourgeoisie (Rodan 1989: 142–88). In a context of electoral decline, the concerns of this class found a slightly more receptive ear from government than in the past. However, it should also be kept in mind that the New Guard is generally less suspicious of local business than Lee Kuan Yew’s generation of leaders who observed ties between some of its elements and the BS in the early 1960s.

Over time, however, more business people have made their way into the PAP so that now a significant, but by no means overwhelming, number of MPs hold directorships on various companies. In fact, in 1991, the question of MPs simultaneously serving as directors on company boards became a public issue. Goh Chok Tong was himself in favour of more MPs being on company boards (see Business Times 14 February 1991; STWOE 23 February 1991). Thus, a number of factors have combined to facilitate greater consultation with the local private sector.

Alongside these political reforms and modifications to the government’s style, the New Guard was also responsible for the ambitious project of establishing an official national ideology, or what came to be officially referred to as a set of ‘shared core values’. Drawing on the work of George Lodge and Ezra Vogel in a book entitled Ideology and National Competitiveness, Goh (1988) lamented that over the last decade there had been a clear shift in the dominant values in Singapore, away from group interests or ‘communitarianism’ in favour of self interests or ‘individualism’. The supposed shift was depicted as a drift from ‘Asian’ to ‘Western’ values, a theme that Lee Kuan Yew (STWOE 20 August 1988) had himself taken up in the same year. The Shared Values White Paper (1991), eventually completed in early 1991, identified five essential values: placing society above self; upholding the family as the basic building block of society; resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention; stressing racial and religious harmony and tolerance; regard and community support for the individual.

The ‘national ideology’ was a sensitive one for Singapore’s Malay community, particularly the institutional cultural planners who were primarily an association of increasing secular values’ strain and therefore pluralism—something which became a challenge for collective opposition politics. The need for a ‘new wave’ of initiatives was not be immediate. There were limits contained within the same cultural framework.

Keeping the scope of consultation

Clearly, the design of initiatives was to be limited, and therefore carried within the same New Guard cultural framework. The STWOE 1982 publication, Singapore Street Journal and its victims,

The risks of involvement between the government and the leaders of the NGO sector in soliciting the NGO sector’s involvement in the ambivalent ‘community limit policies’. The NGO sector was reminded through the debated S-meta policy, the government setting aside the problem of the NGO sector’s usefulness and livelihood (Wong 1989).
the local private sector public policy process. It's desire to diversify the mid-1980s recession, listing vulnerabilities of manufactured exports. With integration, and special verse bourgeoisie now central plans. It is in this competitive, national Revolution since abilities of the domestic exit of electoral decline, more receptive ear from should also be kept in suspicious of local leaders who observed BS in the early 1960s. have made their way into means overwhelming, companies. In fact, in serving as directors Chok Tong was himself boards (see Business ury 1991). Thus, a greater consultation modifications to the responsible for the national ideology, or a set of 'shared core ge and Ezra Vogel in tiveness, Goh (1988) been a clear shift in group interests or ts or 'individualism', a 'Asian' to 'Western' 20 August 1988) had Values White Paper entitled five essential he family as the basic es through consensus ligious harmony and the individual. or Singapore's Malay community, who feared the government's exercise might result in the institutionalisation of Confucianism and thereby elevate the cultural position of the Chinese. However, the PAP's concern was primarily with the possibility that a new set of cultural values and an associated political culture was evolving, contributing to the increasing support for opposition political parties. The 'shared core values' statement was intended to assert Singapore's distinctiveness and thereby discourage any emulation of other 'Western'—notably pluralist—political systems. The political significance of the document was that it opened the possibility for the PAP to portray challenges to itself as challenges to the national consensus or the collectively shared values of Singaporeans. If there was to be opposition in Singapore, the PAP was determined to ensure that it took a 'non-confrontational' form (Clammer 1992).

**Keeping the lid on civil society**

Clearly, then, the period since the mid-1980s has witnessed a range of initiatives from the PAP to increase consultation. But these should not be interpreted as a fundamental recasting of the regime. Strict limits continue to be placed on civil and political life. Indeed, during the same period, a number of measures were also adopted by the New Guard to curtail and structure critical debate in the public domain. One of these involved amendments to the *Newspaper and Printing Presses Act* in early 1986 which empowered the Minister of Communication and Information to restrict the circulation of publications considered 'engaging in the domestic politics of Singapore' (Asiaweek 15 June 1986). *Time, Asiaweek, the Asian Wall Street Journal* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review* were all victims of the new legislation within 18 months.

The new Singapore has so far retained the rigid distinction between political and civil society that Lee Kuan Yew's generation had enforced. When the President of the Law Society and former solicitor-general, Francis Seow, issued a press release on behalf of the Society, criticising the amended legislation for containing 'ambiguities' and affording the minister 'too wide' an authority to limit publication sales without any appeal process, he was sternly reminded of that distinction. His criticisms were not seriously debated. Instead, the Minister for Communications and Information, Wong Kan Seng, emphasised that 'public policy is the domain of the government. It isn't the playground of those who have no responsibility to the people, and who aren't answerable for the livelihood or survival of Singaporeans' (quoted in *FEER* 12 October 1989). Professional societies, he added, should not 'get involved in
issues of public policy which do not affect their professional interests’ (cited in FEER 12 October 1989). The concern was that the Law Society was attempting to assume the role of a pressure group, something that still could not be accommodated within the Singapore political system. Following this incident, legislative amendments resulted in the establishment of a new Academy of Law whose governing body is almost entirely comprised of government appointees. The intention appeared to be to erode the power and status of the Law Society. Legislation covering other professional organisations has also subsequently been reviewed to safeguard against similar incidents of public criticism.

Probably the clearest indication that the PAP has not, since the mid-1980s, completely overhauled its previous political strategy is the exercise of the Internal Security Act (ISA). This was used in 1987 to imprison without trial 22 people allegedly involved in a Marxist conspiracy to overthrow the state. The essence of the problem, according to a 19-page statement from the Ministry of Home Affairs, was that Catholic organisations, such as the Young Christian Workers’ Movement, the Catholic Welfare Centre and the Catholic Centre for Foreign Workers, were being used as ‘a cover for political agitation’ (FEER 4 June 1987). The arrests became an international embarrassment for the government, with allegations by Amnesty International (1987), and later Asia Watch (1989), of coercion to elicit ‘confessions’. By the end of 1987, the confrontation with the church had worsened, with five Christian missionaries expelled and the dissolution of the Christian Conference of Asia on charges of involvement in Singapore’s domestic politics (FEER 14 January 1988). Not coincidentally, the government subsequently passed the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in late 1990. This legislation empowers the Minister for Home Affairs to prohibit religious workers deemed subversive or threatening from addressing congregations and holding office in religious publication organisations. Like other aspects of civil society, religion is expected to be clearly demarcated from politics. But the concern about religion is more than this. Through the various organisations of the Catholic Church, Singapore possibly had the embryo of genuine non-government organisations (NGOs) with grassroots links. Elsewhere in Asia, notably Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, NGOs have become politically significant precisely because of grassroots connections with groups that cannot find effective representation or expression through mainstream channels.

Despite the various legislative amendments since the mid-1980s to enforce the demarcation of political and civil society, together with the abandonment of the armed struggle by the last vestiges of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), the ISA itself is not seen to
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ISA itself is not seen to
be any less important to contemporary Singapore. Rather, the new
leaders have not only argued a case for its continued existence but
have taken steps to consolidate the executive’s powers under the
Act. Through legislation introduced in 1989, the executive’s judg-
ment over the use of the ISA is now clearly above any legal scrutiny
(Rodan 1992b).

What all of this indicates is that the PAP’s strategy since the
mid-1980s has been a dual one. On the one hand, it has opened up
avenues for greater, albeit conditional, public consultation in the
policy process, while on the other hand, it has tried to reinforce the
strict separation of political and civil society. The importance of the
latter for the former is that, if successful, it safeguards the PAP’s
ability to continue to define the boundaries of public debate. In such
a climate, the risk of the various consultative mechanisms backfiring
on the PAP is greatly reduced. With this in mind, it is interesting
to reflect on the extent and nature of NGOs since the mid-1980s.
Despite the experience of religious workers and the Law Society,
some noteworthy organisations have surfaced, raising the question
of whether, difficulties notwithstanding, there is an opening in the
new style of government under Prime Minister Goh for a more
flourishing civil society than has hitherto been possible. NGOs that
stand out over the recent years include the Malay Nature Society
(MNS) or the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) as it has been
known since 1992, the Association of Women for Action and
Research (AWARE) and the Association of Muslim Professionals
(AMP).

Significantly, both MNS/NSS and AWARE have deliberately shied
away from public disagreement with the government. The former’s
lobbying is done primarily through private correspondence and the
presentation of documented material. The latter, whose declared
strategy is ‘to take a low profile’ (AWARE 1988a: 46), has been
slightly more adventurous. Its executives have written letters to the
Straits Times, conducted public forums and even produced a critical
paper in response to the government’s procreation policy (AWARE
1988b). Importantly, though, to date neither organisation appears in
any way to facilitate the growth of oppositional politics—either in
the sense of adopting a confrontational posture or in the sense of
providing avenues for members of opposition political parties to
advance their causes. On the contrary, to some extent these
organisations provide feedback for the government which its own
party structure is unable to deliver. But, above all else, neither
organisation has been involved in the development of grassroots
linkages in a way that would threaten the PAP’s control over the
political process. Such factors temper the PAP’s otherwise sceptical
attitude to these NGOs (Rodan 1992a).
The AMP is the exceptional case. It was formed in 1990 in a climate of Malay discontent with Mendaki, the officially sanctioned council for the development of the Muslim community. In particular, the dominance of that association by PAP MPs, who had endorsed rather than challenged government policies seen as detrimental to the Malay community, came in for criticism (Chua 1991b: 261–2). The initiative to break away from Mendaki and form a separate association was surprisingly supported by the government. Here the government was faced with a choice of risking an open and sustained attack on PAP MPs through an attempted transformation of Mendaki, or tolerating a separate organisation with greater independence. The government chose to actively support the latter, with the provision of matching funds on a dollar-for-dollar basis for the AMP. Primarily this represented an attempt to depoliticise the matter. Already concerned about the level of Malay support for opposition political parties, the government was keen to pre-empt any further drift in that direction. Moreover, the form of official support for the AMP was also functional for the government’s current policy objective of stronger community-based, rather than direct state, welfare. Brown’s (1992) argument that the government has entered a new corporatist phase in its handling of ethnicity seems applicable here.

The point about these NGOs, then, is that although they can find a degree of space within which to operate, they have a somewhat conditional existence: the right to public comment is limited and contingent upon acceptance of the government’s ground rule of ‘consensus’ ahead of ‘confrontation’, a rule that appears to disqualify grassroots linkages that modify the existing political process. This raises the question of just what the then acting, and now appointed, Minister for Information and the Arts and increasingly one of the government’s leading ideologues, George Yeo, had in mind in mid-1991 when he called for the development of civic society. According to Yeo (1991a: 4):

Yes, the state is strong. The family is also strong. But civic society, which is the stratum of social life between the state and the family is still weak. Without a strong civic society, the Singaporean soul will be incomplete. If the creation of the strong state was a major task of the last lap, the creation of a strong civic society must be a major task of the next lap.

Here Yeo seems to be drawing on Huntington’s (1965; 1968) notion of authoritarianism in a developing society playing an historically necessary role in laying the basis for a more liberal future. But what does he mean by the ‘weakness’ of civic (read civil) society? Does he really mean by this that the avenues for political engagement are underdeveloped?
It is interesting that Yeo portrays the family as a distinct realm, separate from civil society. In this conception, it would appear that civil society is expected to be harmonious with family, and state for that matter. Yet in concrete terms ‘family’ here refers to a particular social construction—patriarchy—and Yeo is effectively endorsing its entrenchment. What space would there be then for a feminist civil organisation, for example, to question patriarchal relationships? Nevertheless, Yeo had a number of different functions in mind for civil organisations. One was to ‘give individuals and families their sense of place and involvement in the larger community’ (Yeo 1991a: 5). Another was the role they could play in increasing people’s self-reliance and independence, which had become a casualty of the all-pervasive state; a state that must now ‘withdraw a little and provide more space for local initiative’ (Yeo 1991a: 8).

Yeo’s speech was certainly an attempt to address the real problem of alienation within Singapore that is manifest not only in the PAP’s electoral slide, but also in the high levels of emigration—in 1988 alone 4707 families emigrated—that have occurred side-by-side with Singapore’s economic success (cf. Asian Wall Street Journal, 9 October 1989). It recognises the need to ensure a sense of belonging that cannot necessarily be assured by material satisfaction. In the process, though, it recommends a political solution: the arresting of the state’s intrusion in the everyday lives of Singaporeans. But what are the areas in which the PAP is prepared to curb state paternalism and hand responsibility to individuals and civic organisations? And what sort of ‘local initiatives’ are compatible with the insistence on a strict separation of civil and political society?

The speech, interestingly enough, comes on the heels of and amid some significant policy developments that involve the state’s social and economic functions. These include the full or partial privatisation of various government companies, statutory boards, public hospitals and the education system (Ng 1989; Thynne & Ariff 1988). But more particularly, in the government’s eagerness to pre-empt any pressure for a significantly expanded welfare system it has begun actively encouraging civic organisations, especially those that are ethnic-based, to explore this area (ST 8 July 1991; 20 July 1991). To differing extents, these policies have been at least partly explained by the government in terms of the need to reduce state paternalism and increase the space for individual entrepreneurs, consumers or groups to take initiatives. Yet even if we accept this as evidence of reduced paternalism, it does not automatically follow that such changes represent political liberalisation. They may in some instances widen the choices of certain consumers, but these sorts of reforms do not necessarily diminish the political power of
the state, nor significantly empower individuals or groups outside the state. What they do, however, is selectively transfer various costly economic and social functions and responsibilities from the state to individuals and communities.

While Yeo's concept of strengthening civil society does not appear, then, to be an invitation for interest or pressure group formation or a re-evaluation of the separation of political and civil life, it contains ideas that are nevertheless functional for the PAP's own policy objectives. It appears that a 'strong' civil society is one that can be relied upon to produce spontaneous agreement with, or acceptance of, the PAP agenda. Interestingly, Lee Kuan Yew (STW0E 6 July 1991) has recently suggested that civic society may never develop in Singapore because of deep-rooted cultural resistance to self-determination in favour of strong government.

Given Yeo's observations elsewhere about democracy, his current push for particular forms of civil society is also linked to Singapore's economic development. In reference to the apparent trend in various parts of the world towards greater democratisation, Yeo attributed this to 'the way technology is transforming the world economy' (Yeo 1991b: 167). According to Yeo (1991b: 22):

> Without a widening circle of popular representation and participation, no national economy can advance very far. Some countries may initially go through a Pinochet-phase which helps to get the market economy going, but once a middle-class emerges and property ownership is dispersed, democracy becomes essential.

Again, the resonance with Huntington's (1984: 201) notion that economic development 'compels the modification or abandonment of traditional political institutions', and the strategic role of the middle class as a potential democratising force is strong. As Yeo sees it, though, Singapore is already democratic, and distinctively so, but there will need to be constant adaptation of the political system to ensure its functional relationship with the dynamic economy. The question is whether the sort of adaptations that have either been implemented or projected are consistent with the aspirations of the electorate.

1991 election: Evaluating the new strategy

The results of the 1988 election were mixed for the PAP. On the one hand, it returned all but one seat and managed to arrest the swing against it to 1.7 per cent. On the other, in eight seats, including six in two of the newly created group representation constituencies (GRCs), the PAP vote dropped below 55 per cent and thus the government track in the mid-1991 elections, dropped from 64 per cent to a PAP majority ranging from 58 to 61 per cent, and this was partially maintained in the PAP's next election. This led to the PAP's electoral success, and related to the 12 September 1991 election, 'electoral values', which was partly affected by various factors. However, as the PAP failed to disappoint, it was exposed to the electorate, mainly...

The opposition, on the other hand, being clever tactics and poor campaigning, was not as successful as expected. The only notable gain was in the northeastern seat of Potong Pasir, which was won by the opposition candidate, Goh Chok Tong. However, the PAP retained its majority with the help of supportive voting, while the opposition parties were not able to gain any significant percentage...
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and thus made them potentially vulnerable in the next election. The government seemed to take encouragement that it was on the right track in its strategy of political co-option and continued to search for new mechanisms in this vein. However, the snap election of mid-1991 in which the government’s share of the total valid vote dropped from 63.2 per cent to 61.0 per cent, thus continuing the steady erosion of PAP support post-1984, came as a genuine shock to a PAP leadership that expected to reverse the trend. This necessarily raised serious questions about the effectiveness of the prevailing strategy. Arising out of this election, the opposition political parties now have four MPs and the PAP’s anxiety about the reproduction of the one-party state has been further heightened.

The 1991 election was announced by Goh Chok Tong as a test of the electorate’s response to his consultative style of leadership. Goh had been Prime Minister since November 1990 and claimed he needed a mandate to continue down this path. He warned that in the absence of a strong personal mandate there was a risk that the PAP would return to the more authoritarian ways of the past. This led to speculation that Goh was alluding to internal divisions and related pressure from Lee Hsien Loong for the top spot (FEER 12 September 1991). Goh was to be more explicit following the election when he commented that ‘BG Lee is more conservative in values’, then drawing a badminton analogy: ‘He is more ready to smash’ (STWOE 7 September 1991) than retrieve. In any case, Goh was particularly appealing to the educated middle class whom the various consultative mechanisms were principally targeting. However, as the results were to suggest, not only did these mechanisms fail to dissuade voters from supporting the PAP’s opponents, they exposed as invalid the assumption that electoral alienation stemmed mainly from the middle class.

The opposition parties’ success can in part be attributed to their clever tactic of allowing 41 of the 81 seats to go uncontested. This was not just for lack of resources and because the government gave only nine days’ notice of the election. Rather, they argued that voter interest in genuine, as opposed to manufactured, political opposition could therefore be expressed without any fear of the ‘freak election’ scenario PAP leaders regularly caution against. With the opposition picking up three additional seats and consolidating the existing one of Potong Pasir, this approach was vindicated and cast doubt on the effectiveness of the government’s process of co-option. Moreover, while there was some evidence of middle-class disaffection with the PAP in the opposition vote, this factor was uneven across electorates and not a dominant theme. The bulk of the electorates in which there were significant swings against the PAP contained high percentages of constituents with average and below-average incomes.
who were either blue-collar workers or non-supervisory white-collar workers (Rodan 1992a). In other words, there was a discernible anti-PAP vote from the working class. It had long been presumed that this was the faithful core of the PAP vote. The failure of the PAP to anticipate this change reflects on its relationship with the trade union movement. Arguably a genuinely independent trade union movement would have given greater expression to the concerns and criticisms of this class in advance of the elections.

Naturally there were various factors at work in this election result, including electorate-specific ones like the linguistic capacities and related campaign effectiveness of individual candidates. However, to generalise about the electorates that fell to the opposition, they were those in which many people, by virtue of their socio-economic positions, would have been hard hit by recent increases in the cost of basic services such as health, transport, housing and education, some of which stemmed from privatisations in part intended to facilitate wider choices for the wealthy middle class. In this climate, elitist policies such as independent schools, the gifted education programme and incentives to encourage graduate marriages, which were principally geared to the middle class, caused some irritation. Indeed, during and after the election, Goh and his government have publicly conceded a need to address perceptions of inequality and elitism (STWOE 17 August 1991). The PAP leadership is at pains to emphasise, however, that this must not involve an expansive public welfare programme nor any holding back or discouragement of Singapore’s talented (STWOE 30 November 1991; 18 January 1992; 25 January 1992). In other words, neither redistribution at the expense of the middle class, nor the compromising of ‘meritocracy’ is acceptable.

Goh’s immediate reaction to the 1991 election results was to interpret them as a rejection of his style of government, raising doubts about his intentions as leader and the direction of the Party: ‘In my view, life cannot go on as it did before. Certain things have to change now. How they would change I do not know tonight’ (quoted in Sunday Times, 1 September 1991). After some reflection, however, Goh came to the view that issues other than his style of leadership were determinant in the result. But at the same time, he clearly saw the need for a change of focus. In a reference to the Chinese-educated working class, Goh remarked: ‘The group which we are not reaching wants firm government; all they are interested in is steady progress and prosperity. They do not care how we are running the place’ (cited in Australian Financial Review 6 September 1991). Subsequently, a review of many government charges was announced along with the above-mentioned exploration of commune.
non-supervisory white-collar jobs, there was a discernible shift long been presumed AP vote. The failure of the on its relationship with the eminently independent trade union, expression to the conscience of the elections.

In this election result, the linguistic capacities and dual candidates. However, they are of their socio-economic recent increases in the cost of housing and education, division in the middle class. In this election, middle class, caused some unease, Goh and his government had expressed perceptions of the middle class, nor the commodification of power, the direction of the Party. Certain things have not changed, one does not do that to people. The group which stands. The election results do pose the question of whether the traditional capacity of the PAP to simultaneously win the support of the different social classes is being eroded. In the earlier developmental phase, the Chinese-educated within the working class and small businesses, predominantly in the retail and wholesale trading sectors, benefited appreciably from the general expansion in employment, consumer spending and public housing. However, in Singapore's more technologically advanced period of economic development since the early 1980s, the differential benefits of economic growth have become more conspicuous in class terms (Rodan 1992a). Emphasis on a clash of cultural values of course plays down such class antagonisms.

Nevertheless, seemingly in an attempt to demonstrate that the PAP has not 'gone soft', subsequent to the 1991 election Goh's government charged was an exploration of community-based welfare and some selective non-means-tested increases to state welfare.

Goh's prediction that internal PAP dissent over the political reform agenda of the last eight years would be given a fillip by support for the opposition parties seems to have some basis. In the post-election period Lee Kuan Yew, for instance, has pushed the view that the English-educated have had too much attention paid to them, by way of liberal reforms, at the expense of the Chinese-educated working class. Such comments run the risk, of course, of alienating this strategic social force. He has also commented 'those ministers who are able to read and able to keep close contacts with the Chinese (grassroots)—their views must be given more weight because they represent a larger segment of the population' (quoted in FEER 10 October 1991). In this category we would have to include the two Deputy Prime Ministers Lee Hsien Loong and Ong Teng Cheong as well as Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng. Ong in particular has come out strongly after the election with a similar message to Lee's (STWOE 21 September 1991). He used the case of the relaxation of censorship laws on Restricted (R) films as an example of the government's excessive accommodation of a vocal English-educated minority view. Ong has also urged greater determination to arrest the erosion of Chinese culture. Not coincidentally, a strong advocate of the preservation of traditional Chinese culture and values, Ow Chin Hock, has been appointed the new Chairman of the Feedback Unit's supervisory panel. Whether or not this juxtaposition of a liberal-minded English-educated minority against a more conservative Chinese-educated majority accurately accounts for the election results, it is clearly an influential position within the party that expresses reservation about the 'softening' of the PAP.

While the depiction of divisions between the Chinese-educated and the English-educated in terms of cultural values may be superficial, the election results do pose the question of whether the traditional capacity of the PAP to simultaneously win the support of the differing classes is being eroded. In the earlier developmental phase, the Chinese-educated within the working class and small businesses, predominantly in the retail and wholesale trading sectors, benefited appreciably from the general expansion in employment, consumer spending and public housing. However, in Singapore's more technologically advanced period of economic development since the early 1980s, the differential benefits of economic growth have become more conspicuous in class terms (Rodan 1992a). Emphasis on a clash of cultural values of course plays down such class antagonisms.
ment modified its film censorship laws (STWOE 7 September 1991; 15 February 1992), temporarily suspended the publication of Women's Affair (a monthly lifestyle magazine) for a seemingly innocuous article that contained interview comments critical of the government's women MPs (FEER 5 December 1991), and banned the sale of chewing gum (STWOE 4 January 1992).

The depth of any gulf between informal factions in the PAP is difficult to ascertain. It would, for reasons already argued in this chapter, be exaggerated to portray Goh as a liberal flanked by a dissenting group of more authoritarian malcontents. What is clear is Goh’s concern, and that of his cabinet colleagues, with the emergence of a more substantial opposition in parliament. Shortly after the election he condemned the use of the ballot to apply pressure on government and stated quite explicitly that he was against the principle of political opposition: ‘It will divide the country. I'm not in favour of confrontational politics, so I’m not in favour of opposition' (STWOE 7 September 1991). He also argued that ‘it would take another 15 to 20 years before Singapore society was cohesive enough to be able to afford a multi-party system’ (quoted in STWOE 25 October 1991).

Consistent with these statements, Goh has threatened to cut community services to opposition wards and give opposition wards lower priority in the HDB’s recently announced refurbishing programmes (STWOE 7 September 1991; 18 April 1992). As Goh sees it, people who reject the PAP cannot expect to benefit from PAP-run services. The problem here, of course, is the close intermeshing of the PAP with the state; an intermeshing that is so complete as to seriously hamper initiatives within opposition constituencies to respond to such threats. For instance, it was decided, in late 1991, that capital grants by the state for private kindergartens would be withheld for two years. This, together with new rules preventing political parties from using the open space on the ground floors (void decks) of HDB flats, would, as Heng has argued (Sunday Times 29 December 1991), appear to hamstring the opposition Town Councils in providing one of Singapore’s most important community services.

Clearly the PAP, even under Goh’s leadership, remains reluctant to accept the electorate’s verdict in favour of elected opposition MPs. But if the current strategy of co-option has failed to stem the electoral drift against the PAP, the 1991 constitutional change empowering an elected President to veto government spending and senior public service appointments has the potential to limit the impact of any ‘freak’ election at some future point that might happen to result in a PAP loss of government. To be eligible to stand for the Elected Presidency, candidates must be citizens with no less than
three years’ experience as senior government officials, chairs or chief executives of large Singaporean companies or government agencies, and meet the approval of a Council of Presidential Advisers. This effectively disqualifies anyone outside the PAP establishment. The Elected Presidency was first mooted by Lee Kuan Yew in 1984 (FEER 6 September 1984), leading to widespread speculation that his impending retirement as Prime Minister would simply lead to occupancy of a new and possibly more powerful post. Though Lee has since said that he would not be the first elected President, it remains possible that he could subsequently fill the job. Throughout, however, the argument has remained that Singapore’s considerable foreign reserves could be squandered by a reckless and, by implication, welfare-oriented, alternative government.

Institutional modifications are becoming an increasing feature of the Singapore political landscape as support for opposition candidates grows and Lee Kuan Yew’s anxieties about the capacities and directions of the new leadership intensify. As Cotton (1992) expresses it: ‘wherever possible institutions must be found to ensure that Lee’s legacy lives beyond the present generation’. From such a perspective, this institutionalisation is intended to preserve rather than transform the political system. But according to Cotton (1992), the desire to depersonalise the system is greatly complicated by the fact that Lee nevertheless ‘remains at the centre of the network of patronage and personal relationships which animates Singapore’s party and state’.

Chua (1991c) has also observed an increased institutionalisation and move away from exclusive reliance on the personal integrity of the leadership as a basis of government that has coincided with the leadership transition. However, he links this with Goh Chok Tong’s declared intention ‘to enlarge the middle ground through a more accommodative and participatory style of government that seeks to include rather than exclude the greatest number of Singaporeans in the political process’ (cited in Chua 1991c: 22). The different MP schemes, the GRC scheme and the Elected Presidency are, for Chua, all consistent with Goh’s particular vision of political transformation of Singapore.

But the point to underline is that Goh’s conception of ‘middle ground’ prescribes a politics that is limited in content to the PAP’s philosophy. For instance, the Elected Presidency provisions appear to a large extent motivated by a desire to restrict the scope for a more expansive state welfare system. In the PAP view, welfarism is extreme politics. By contrast, the institutionalisation of social justice conceptions and the attendant welfare systems in the advanced industrial societies play a critical role in ensuring a middle ground or consensus on which stable democracies are built. Do Goh
and the PAP leadership conflate the stability of the PAP’s political monopoly with the stability of the social and economic order, as if anything that challenges the former must threaten the latter? Could it be that Goh and his colleagues are anxious to develop a particular set of mechanisms for greater consultation and participation in the public policy process precisely to preserve the PAP’s ability to define what is extreme politics and what is not?

Clearly the above analysis emphasises the PAP’s attempts to resist political liberalisation. Yet in this pursuit the PAP is nevertheless having to initiate certain forms of political change. In itself, the widening process of co-option is a significant political shift, even if it does not amount to a fundamental transformation of the political system. It represents a new set of political relationships and a potentially new basis for the PAP’s political legitimacy.

We should also keep in mind that the adoption of more comprehensive techniques of co-option stems from electoral pressure. The PAP’s electoral margin has not been reduced to the point that it is in danger of losing office in the foreseeable future. There are, in any case, as we have seen above, continued obstacles to a flourishing civil society on which opposition political parties can draw that limit the potential for coherent and comprehensive alternative political programmes to those of the PAP. However, the PAP is increasingly responsive to electoral pressure in its own way. Though its leadership still insists that it is a party committed to taking the long view and the hard but necessary decisions in the national interest, there is a greater preparedness to modify policies and make concessions to disaffected groups than in the past. In the 1980s this included modification to the graduate mothers policy. More recently, in the wake of the 1991 election, there has not only been a concerted attempt to address the perceived loss of support among the Chinese-educated, including an easing of the intense campaign to promote the widespread adoption of Mandarin at the expense of dialects, but symbolic gestures to those left behind in Singapore’s rigid meritocracy. This includes a provision in the 1992–93 budget for the government to pay the December HDB services and maintenance fees for low-income residents (STWOE 29 February 1992). Despite all the rhetoric about the perils of welfarism, this is clearly a means-tested subsidy that departs in principle from the general pattern of across-the-board, non-discriminatory public subsidies in areas like transport, education and health.

The PAP leadership’s enthusiasm for the ballot has clearly waned in the last decade, but for the time being it is a fixture in the political system that must condition the PAP’s strategy to retain its political supremacy.
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Conclusion

To return more directly to the theoretical debates over the dynamics of regimes in industrialising capitalist countries, the recent political developments in Singapore suggest a number of points. First, to understand the persistence of the authoritarian regime in Singapore it must be appreciated that this is principally a function of the PAP's insistence on the continuance of a virtual one-party state. It does not spring from any fundamental need on the part of any fraction of the bourgeoisie or the middle class. Especially now that Singapore's industrial competitiveness derives more and more from productivity-enhancing and technology-intensive inputs, rather than simply lower labour costs, there is little evidence of any structural economic imperative underlying authoritarian rule. The more concerted attempt of late to bolster the service sector, notably knowledge-intensive, industries reinforces this point. As for the middle class, its social and economic position too is established and not under any threat that requires the defence of a one-party state.

Second, although the interests of the middle class are well served by the PAP regime, this does not cancel out for it various irritations associated with authoritarian rule. The excessive paternalism of the regime in the social and cultural spheres in particular is increasingly resented by sections of the middle class. As we have seen, the PAP itself has made some gesture towards change in these areas, but internal party divisions and contradictions on these questions indicate something less than a wholehearted commitment to reform here.

Third, whereas in the earlier development phase of rapid industrialisation the PAP successfully attracted the support of the bulk of the middle and working classes, the capacity to appease both classes simultaneously is now becoming increasingly difficult. Growing material disparities and heightened consciousness thereof, processes not peculiar to Singapore but generally associated with advancing capitalist economies, invariably complicate the task of reproducing traditional levels of political support and provide a more fertile environment for opposition parties. This need not threaten the PAP as government, but it does potentially place the goal of total political dominance in jeopardy.

Fourth, clearly, the political strategies and nature of leadership by the PAP are crucial factors in the determination of the regime's future. What we have seen above is a campaign to foster more extensive consultation and participation with the ruling party in the political process. The purpose of the exercise is, however, to ensure that the definitive feature of the regime—the de facto one-party state—does not become a casualty of the development process. The
New Guard leadership recognises that the previous political formula that supported the one-party state is losing currency, not just among a younger, better educated and more worldly and expanding middle class. It is now discovering that the electoral alienation with the PAP also includes substantial sections of the working class and the small business sector. But none of this compels the PAP to adopt a programme of rapid liberalisation, nor does it recommend any particular response by the leadership. So some of the points made by O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) have relevance for the Singapore case. Singapore’s now ‘developed’ economic status and considerable middle class may be extremely important preconditions for political liberalisation, but they are in themselves insufficient. At the same time, there are also limits to the insights of O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) since the current strategy of political co-option does not appear to be stemming the trend of electoral alienation. Marx’s widely quoted observation in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* remains relevant: ‘Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please: they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past’ (Marx & Engels 1962: 247). Whereas in the past the PAP could draw on Singapore’s relatively undeveloped economic condition, communal violence, the threat of communism and the political insecurity of the nation state of Singapore itself as a rationalisation for the authoritarian regime, the changed historical conditions are less supportive of the PAP’s case for absolute political dominance. Now the PAP’s case for blunting oppositional politics appears more conspicuously inspired by party political considerations.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Kevin Hewison, Richard Robison, James Cotton and Chua Beng Huat for their constructive criticisms in the development of this paper. Of course the responsibility for any errors rests solely with the author.

2 CCCs were established in 1963 in each of the then 51 electoral constituencies. Comprised of appointments by the Permanent Secretary in the Prime Minister’s Office, CCCs had a blatant political purpose: to neutralise or minimise opposition to PAP policy. They pursued this by favourably presenting government policy at grassroots level and by channelling dissent through the PAP-controlled state (see Seah 1973; 1987).

3 The high ethnic Indian population may also have been more disposed
towards Jayaratnam because, being born in Sri Lanka, he could appreciate some of their concerns as members of a minority group.

4 The category 'middle class' is a notoriously difficult one for theorists. In Marxist terms, it is a somewhat ambiguous concept to the extent that the fundamental social relations of class are conceived as arising out of surplus extraction. The distinctiveness of the middle class lies in its indirect involvement in this relationship. One important theme in the contemporary literature attempting to refine the category is the incorporation of some notion of domination between classes resulting from the technical division of labour, drawing on a Weberian understanding of class. The middle class 'dominates' the working class yet is itself dominated by the owners of capital (see Burris 1987). At a more concrete level, most writers agree that managers and supervisors are located in the middle class. They also see a range of non-supervisory professional and technical positions belonging to this class, with differences remaining over exactly which such positions qualify.

5 The Town Council governing committees comprise an MP who has the power to nominate a minimum of six and a maximum of thirty councillors. It is required that two-thirds of the councillors be residents of the public housing administered by the Town Council of which they are members. Identifying sufficient people within constituencies with the interest and skills to be involved has proven difficult and led to some 'outside' appointments (see ST 12 July 1991).

6 The two NMPs were Maurice Choo, a heart specialist and associate professor, and Leong Chee Whye, president and chief executive officer of United Industrial Corporation and chairman of Singapore Tourist Promotion Board.

7 GRCs were introduced in May 1988. According to the government, they were intended to guard against racial politics. Under this change, political parties were required to field three candidates in a GRC, but this has since been raised to four, with a diversity of ethnic composition.

8 The command of Mandarin by the SDP's Cheo Chai Chen in Nee Soon South and of Teochew by the WP's Low Thai Khiang in Hougang enabled them to reach out to their electorales more effectively than the respective PAP candidates.

9 According to one estimate, while the consumer price index rose by 3.8 per cent for the first half of 1991, costs in public transport rose by 19 per cent, health charges by 9.9 per cent and education by 6.8 per cent (FEER 10 October 1991).

10 He received some public encouragement in this reassessment. See, for example, the letter to the Straits Times by local academic Chua Beng Huat in STWOE 7 September 1991.

11 Ironically, surveys showed that it was the Chinese-educated who attended the Restricted (R-rated) films, notably those classified as soft
pornography and violent, in greatest numbers (see STWOE 2 November 1991). Though they were not mentioned, possibly the lifting of a 32-year ban on jute boxes in 1991 and the revival of Bugis Street, a tourist attraction previously notorious for transvestite activity, belonged to this category of reforms as well.

12 Five people were appointed to the Council of Presidential Advisers in late 1991, to take effect from 2 January 1992. The all-male appointees are: Lim Kin San, chairman of the Port of Singapore Authority and executive chairman of Singapore Press Holdings, who is the chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisers; Lee Seng Wee, a banker, billionaire and chairman of the Singapore International Foundation; Michael Fam, executive chairman of Fraser & Neave and chairman of the Nanyang Technological University; Ridzwan Dzaifir, diplomat and director-general of the Trade Development Board; and Cheong Swee Keong, deputy chairman of the Public Service Commission.

13 The significance of the success of the WP’s Teochew-speaking Low Thai Khiang in the Hougang constituency was not lost on the PAP.

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bears (see STWOE 2 November, possibly the lifting of a 148 revival of Bugis Street, as for transvestite activity, yes. I of Presidential Advisers in 1992, the all-male appointees of Singapore Authority and Elders, who is the chairman Lee Seng Wee, a banker, international foundation; & Neave and chairman Ridwan Dzaifir, diplomat pment Board; and Cheong ie Service Commission. P's Teochew-speaking Low was not lost on the PAP.

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