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Contents

Garry Rodan 3 
Singapore’s Leadership Transition: Erosion or Refinement of Authoritarian Rule?

Richard Luiroano 19 
Nanjing Spring: The 1989 Student Movement in a Provincial Capital

Hua Shaping 43 
All Roads Lead to Democracy: A Critical Analysis of the Writings of Three Chinese Reformist Intellectuals

Su Shaozh, Wang Ruoshui, and Yan Jiaqi 56 
Responses to Hua Shaping’s “All Roads Lead to Democracy”

Louise Edwards 59 
Broadening Horizons: Representations of Women in Asia (review essay)

Rakesh Ray 67 
Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism, edited by Sonita Kruks, Rayna Rapp, and Marilyn B. Young (review)

Martin J. Murray 70 

Leo Cawley 76 
Cawley, 1944–1991: tribute

80 
Books to Review

The photo on the front cover is of the Singapore River in Singapore, with old buildings in the foreground and some of the more recent additions to the central business district in the background. Although only about the size of Chicago, Singapore has become the world’s busiest port and has world-class status in finance and trade. The lead article in this issue, Garry Rodan’s “Singapore’s Leadership Transition: Erosion or Refinement of Authoritarian Rule,” explores the prospects of political liberalization in Singapore. This photo is by and courtesy of Garry Rodan.

With the exception of the names of authors in the list of books to review at the end of the issue, BCAS follows the East and Northeast Asian practice of placing surnames first in all Chinese, Japanese, and Korean names.

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Singapore's Leadership Transition: Erosion or Refinement of Authoritarian Rule?

by Garry Rodan

Introduction

On 28 November 1990 forty-nine-year-old Goh Chok Tong became Singapore's second prime minister since self-government was instituted in 1959, with the former leader, sixty-seven-year-old Lee Kuan Yew, assuming the post of senior minister in the new cabinet. This transfer of power was the culmination of a decade of self-renewal and preparation within the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) as a new generation of leaders assumed the mantle. Indeed, following the 1988 general election, the only first-generation PAP leader left in the government was Lee himself.

Conducted with remarkable precision and order, this leadership transition has been completed under economic and social conditions that pose new challenges to the PAP's objective of retaining absolute political supremacy. As we see below, this has resulted in a number of significant modifications in the political process in Singapore, though it does not necessarily mean a decisive shift away from authoritarian rule. Rather, while Singapore's younger leaders have actively promoted new outlets for political participation and dissent, these have tended to take a pseudocorporatist form wherein the PAP enjoys a significant capacity to define the limits of debate. At the same time, the new leadership has tried to enforce the closure of genuine political pluralism through a series of repressive measures. The bulk of this paper is dedicated to outlining this two-pronged strategy as a way of understanding the significance of the leadership transition for the prospects of political liberalization in Singapore.

Authoritarianism and the Challenge to PAP Monopoly

Authoritarianism in Singapore is characterized not by the absence of formal parliamentary democracy but by the extensive extra-parliamentary controls and influences enjoyed by the PAP that obstruct effective dissent and opposition on the one hand and institutionalize the PAP's world view on the other. This world view, among other things, emphasizes the technocratic nature of public policy at the expense of competitive politics. The broader context into which the formal party system fits thus greatly conditions the opportunities and terms within which the PAP's dominance can be challenged. Indeed, so close is the coordination of social and political institutions toward the realization of PAP-defined goals that we can meaningfully refer to a "PAP state," a state that enjoys an unusual degree of relative political autonomy owing to the


distance of the ruling party from the political pressure of both capital and labor. The breadth of PAP influence over Singapore society by virtue of its effective integration with the state has been crucial in both legitimising the PAP and countering effective opposition. However, this has combined with social and economic policies that have substantially raised people’s material standards of living. The result has been a historic and political success for the PAP. After the withdrawal of the frustrated Barisan Sosialis from the parliamentry process in 1966, the PAP not only averaged about 75 percent of the vote in general elections, it also held every seat from 1968 to 1980, when a by-election loss to the Workers’ Party’s J.B. Jeyaretnam upset this monopoly. Far from being relaxed about the by-election result in view of the PAP’s overall supremacy, the government’s reaction reflected deep concern. The PAP not only administered the electorate for its decision, it also subjected Jeyaretnam to harassment inside and outside Parliament. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was especially concerned that Singapore’s younger generation might subscribe to the liberal notion of an opposition as an important force in keeping a government accountable. According to Lee, “an opposition, if we are lucky, if there is one, will help the good government.” His Old Guard colleague, Second-Deputy Prime Minister S. Rajaratnam, went even further, claiming “the role of the opposition is to keep the government on its toes. Without keeping with this thinking, at its 1982 Biennial Conference the PAP redefined itself as a ‘national movement’.” The official party organ, Petal, explained: “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. Only a Party which can move an opposition party to govern Singapore.” Ironical- ly, it was also at the 1982 Biennial Conference that Lee suggested the possibility of an opposition serving some useful function. Singaporeans, worried about the performance of the PAP’s New Guard leaders who were being prepared to assume control of the party over the next decade, Lee raised the possibility of ensuring that several “better and more intelligent opposition members” would be allowed to serve as “sparring partners to keep them [the New Guard] fit and agile.”

In July 1984 this culminated in Singapore’s constitution being amended to provide for nonconcurrent members of Parliament. Up to three of the highest opposition losers in general elections could be offered these seats, which carried restricted voting rights in Parliament.

The change of thinking on the opposition question occurred after heavy public attacks on Jeyaretnam proved counterproductive for the PAP, evoking sympathy for the opposition members of Parliament and exposing the attitude of the government. It had become apparent that there was a general public sympathy for the idea of an opposition in such an essentially Singaporean society. The government had therefore come to the conclusion that it should be following ways of including the form and nature of parliamentary opposition in order to maintain that it could be absorbed without threatening the PAP’s dominance. A similar approach had been successfully employed with the cooperation of organized labor through the National Trades Union Congress. The PAP had not so much worried about the idea of genuine opposition as it recognized the need to revise the means of limiting it.

If the PAP was hoping that the appearance of a more tolerant attitude to opposition would put the brakes on the electoral support for the opposition parties, it was to be disappointed. In the 1984 general election, not only did the PAP fail to recapture the Averse seat from Jeyaretnam, but it also suffered a 13 percent swing against it, reducing the government’s share of the overall vote to 64.8 percent. Meanwhile, the opposition vote jumped from 22.4 percent to 32.5 percent, including the election of Chiam See Tong in the Potong Pasir seat with a 60.4 percent vote. Dissatisfied at the outcome, Lee immediately threatened to make good the one-person-one-vote system to prevent the possibility of the PAP being toppled in the future. “It is necessary to try and put some safeguards into the system.”

In the discussion below, I examine these reforms and other initiatives that the PAP has adopted in response to the political challenge posed by the opposition. From the 1970s, the PAP has introduced a range of measures to enhance its own electoral prospects, including the introduction of a new voting system. The PAP has also made efforts to improve its image and thereby to increase its support among the electorate. This has included the introduction of new policies and programs that are designed to address the concerns of the electorate.

The PAP has also been responsive to criticism of its policies and practices. It has taken steps to address some of the concerns that have been raised about its policies, including its relationship with the business community and its approach to labor relations. The PAP has also been more open in its dealings with the opposition, and has sought to engage in constructive dialogue with the opposition. This has included the establishment of a dialogue forum, which has provided an opportunity for the PAP and the opposition to engage in meaningful discussions about political issues.

The PAP’s response to the political challenge posed by the opposition has been marked by a willingness to adapt and evolve. The PAP has demonstrated a commitment to addressing the concerns of the electorate, and has been willing to make changes to its policies and practices to reflect these concerns. The PAP has also been willing to engage in constructive dialogue with the opposition, and has sought to find solutions to the political challenges that it faces. In this way, the PAP has been able to maintain its political influence, while also ensuring that it is responsive to the needs of the electorate.


participation in local decision-making, especially in the selection of councillors. The council's policy formulation and decision-making processes were seen as too structured and bureaucratic, with little room for innovation or responsiveness to public concerns. This led to a need for more flexible and participatory approaches to governance.

18. As quoted in ibid., p. 5.
24. For instance, "Do we have adequate safeguards to protect our accumulated foreign reserves?" (when the PAP had already announced that it was contemplating the introduction of enhanced presidential powers to control the use of these reserves?), "What can go wrong with an open market system?" (when there was a loud question being asked), and "Can we ensure that dissenting views are aired and discussed, even in the absence of an effective opposition?" (as opposed to asking why an effective opposition has not emerged). See "Questions for the People," Straits Times, 19 February 1987, p. 14.
29. "Quality of Debate" (editorial), Straits Times, 14 Feb. 1987, p. 18.

The middle class was the main beneficiary of Singapore's considerable economic growth, but the poor did not benefit. The government's social policies were aimed at increasing the middle class, and the middle class was increasingly concerned about the future.
reading in Parliament, by which time the terms of debate and scope of the questions asked are restricted. Critics of the GPCs have maintained that the real effect of them in Parliament is stage-managed debates wherein GPC members are primed to ask questions to ministers, with whom GPC members have already consulted through their committee work. This results in policy statements merely enhancing the bill’s passage through Parliament. In contrast, some GPC chairmen maintain that they have been able to influence government thinking on certain issues. However, it does appear GPCs have relied heavily on in-fighting with the respective minister for whatever influence they have exerted, rather than any major fundamental power inherent in them.

Another initiative early in 1984 is the establishment of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), founded in early 1988. Though launched with a government grant for 4 million Singapore dollars, the IPS is run by a board of governors comprised of civil servants, academics, and private-sector executives and relies on fund raising for its expansion. Goh Chok Tong envisaged the IPS as playing two major roles. The first was to educate younger Singaporeans in public administration and private-sector managerial positions about Singapore’s political history: “Those of us who have not personally gone through the struggles yet but are enjoying their fruits, have a responsibility to learn how the fruits came about.” The second role, however, was to promote open debate about Singapore’s future among younger Singaporeans, or what the IPS’s inaugural director called the “Singapore intelligence.” Invitations to partake in the IPS’s sessions are therefore selective, limited to professionals with expertise on particular issues and potential to deflect discussion of related but broader social and political questions that may be no less relevant to Singapore’s future. It is still not clear how the IPS will be used. The IPS can provide a forum within which seriously challenging those of the PAP can be formulated into policy recommendations and taken into account by the government. However, this does not seem to be the government’s intention behind the IPS and other new structures.

The authorisation of this sort of forum is precisely its potential to deplete political power generally. This may be the least controversial of recent reforms is the alteration of the Constitution to provide for a new category of parliamentary members—non-MPs, N.M.P.s. The idea was first signalled in the president’s speech at the opening of Parliament in January 1989, a speech authored by Goh in consultation with Lee Hsien Loong. Then, in November 1989, the government introduced a bill providing for the appointment of six N.M.P.s, each for a renewable term of two years. These N.M.P.s were to be appointed by the president on the advice of a Special Select Committee appointed by Parliament. It was proposed that N.M.P.s would have the same restricted voting rights as nonconstituent members of Parliament, who are unable to vote on money bills, bills to alter the Constitution, or motions of no-confidence in the government, although they can speak on these issues and can vote on all other bills and motions.

Goh’s explanation for the bill’s introduction centered around the need to correct the misconception, encouraged by the PAP’s electoral dominance, that the government did not take alternative viewpoints into account when deciding policy. Goh suggested Parliament had not consulted people who had excelled or had special expertise in the professions, commerce, industry, cultural activities, social services, or people from underrepresented sections of the population, such as women. Importantly, though, being nonpartisan, such N.M.P.s would “concentrate on the substance of the debate rather than form and rhetoric,” as opposition N.M.P.s were prone to do according to Goh. Lee Hsien Loong also expressed the hope that the existence of N.M.P.s would arrest the growing support for opposition candidates.

This reprofrected a conviction that Singapore’s political culture must not evolve to a form of pluralism in which a sizable and influential parliamentary opposition is institutionalized. However, as we will see briefly, the new PAP leadership is rethinking the terms of political debate in the context of its deliberations concerning the existing political culture led not just to imaginative institutional reforms to co-opt new participants in the political life but also to an imaginative term project of fostering an official “national ideology” intended to guide political practice.

National Ideology
One of the most ironic twists in Singapore’s politics in recent times has been the officially inspired debate about whether Singapore’s leaders and political scientists have long maintained that the impressive development of the island state owes a great deal to the triumph of pragmatism over ideology. Now, however, Singaporeans are being told that the call for a national ideology essentially amounts to giving official recognition to values that have been fundamental to Singapore’s past development. The fear, it seems, is that these values are being undermined with rapidity as Singapore’s economic development leads to increased integration with the international community, thus exposing Singaporeans to ideas and influences that local authorities have increasing difficulty monitoring and controlling. The latest product of this national ideological concern has been a national leadership that thus portrayed by the New Guard leaders as an attempt to arrest the declining autonomy of the nation state in the cultural sphere. The national ideology is intended to coordinate Singapore’s existing political culture and shape the future form of oppositional politics in Singapore. The construction of “Western” and “Asian” values, and emphasis on the former’s threat to Singapore’s economic and political survival, is a familiar theme of the PAP leadership. It was reiterated in Lee Kuan Yew’s 1988 National Day Speech when he lamented that the first language had made it possible for Singapore to become “a pseudo-Western society,” devoid of any genuine sense of an Asian, cultural identity in which the promotion of English as Singapore’s first language had made it possible for Singapore to become “a pseudo-Western society,” devoid of any genuine sense of an Asian, cultural identity.

The PAP has had a remarkable degree of electoral success due to its fruitful economic policies and ability to co-opt or repress its opposition. PAP losses in a few seats in 1984, 1988, and 1991 were taken very seriously and resulted in reforms and consideration of policy changes to reduce the appeal and effectiveness of the opposition. For more on the 1991 elections, see pages 15 and 16 of this article and the Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 12 Sept 1991, pp. 10-13, which is also the source of this scoreboard by Ricky Hui, reprinted here courtesy of Ricky Hui and the Far Eastern Economic Review.

The far Eastern Economic Review/

The N.M.P. bill aroused an uncharacteristic outcry from within the government’s own ranks. Of the thirty-one PAP M.P.s to speak in Parliament in response to Goh’s introduction of the bill, almost one-third expressed serious opposition to it while some gave it only qualified support. The most passionately expressed criticism was that the bill represented a move away from the principles of representation and accountability in favor of appointments in the legislature. This, of course, would open up the party to charges of stacking the nongovernment benches of Parliament with PAP stooges. Furthermore, it would provide an easy route to Parliament, free of the obligations and responsibilities entailed to others, by the absence of formal parliamentary democracy but by the extensive extra-parliamentary controls and influences enjoyed by opposition parties. This exertion of control on the one hand and institutionalization of the PAP’s world view on the other.

The M.P. bill aroused an uncharacteristic outcry from within the government’s own ranks. Of the thirty-one PAP M.P.s to speak in Parliament in response to Goh’s introduction of the bill, almost one-third expressed serious opposition to it while some gave it only qualified support. The most passionately expressed criticism was that the bill represented a move away from the principles of representation and accountability in favor of appointments in the legislature. This, of course, would open up the party to charges of stacking the nongovernment benches of Parliament with PAP stooges. Furthermore, it would provide an easy route to Parliament, free of the obligations and responsibilities entailed to others, by the absence of formal parliamentary democracy but by the extensive extra-parliamentary controls and influences enjoyed by opposition parties. This exertion of control on the one hand and institutionalization of the PAP’s world view on the other.

36. Ibid., vol. 54, no. 8 (29 Nov 1989), columns 695-705.
37. Ibid., column 705.
38. As quoted in ibid., p. 1.
41. These appointments are listed in the Singapore Land-Use Atlas, under "land use".
42. Singapore National Party (SNP) was a small, radical group that supported Lee Kuan Yew’s attempt to become premier of the state of Singapore in 1955. It was abolished in 1963.
 expressed concern that "over the last decade there has been a clear shift in our values." The shift was supposedly one from communalism to individualism. According to Goh, the economic success of Singapore, as of East Asia, rested on the application of Confucian values of hard work, thrift, and sacrifice. Any drift from these values would prove socially and economically disastrous. On this basis, Goh called for a "clear statement of our national ethic" and appointed Lee Hsien Loong to lead a committee to formulate a national ideology.

In President Wee Kim Wee's opening address to Parliament in early 1989, a speech written by Goh in consultation with Lee Hsien Loong, four core values were identified as fundamental to a national ideology: placing society above self; upholding the family as the basic building block of society; resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention; and stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony. In the same speech it was emphasized that political stability was the pillar on which economic success was built.

Though subsequent debate in Parliament by MPs contained denunciations of Western culture, the essence of concern for a national ideology was political. Few speakers gave concrete expression to the claims of cultural malaise in Singapore resulting from Western culture, but Second-Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong offered one of the rare explicit statements: "By adverse, undesirable influence of western culture, we mean their drug taking, and their paying too little attention to family relationships but stressing individualism, their emphasis on personal interest and not paying much importance to social or national interest." Another speaker identified sexual permissiveness as a negative feature of Western culture. However, little evidence was submitted documenting the extent to which such maladies had become manifest in Singapore, nor was any consideration given to the relationship between capitalist economic development and changing cultural values. Rather, support for the idea of an official national ideology was generally couched in terms of rejection of "unbridled individualism," liberal democratic models in which individual rights and freedoms were seen to assume undue significance. According to this view, the social obligations of individuals must be emphasized more than they are in "Western" versions of liberal democracy.

There were some expressions of doubt about the need for an official national ideology from sections of the government's backbenches. Malay MPs sought reassurance that the move was not intended to shore up Chinese dominance through a broader institutionalization of Confucianism. A few MPs even questioned how the imposition of an official national ideology could be reconciled with the more participatory, less regulatory, and more flexible form of government the PAP appeared to be working toward. The party hierarchy made it clear, however, that a national ideology was primarily intended to engender a sense of "differentness" about Singapore that would guard against any simplistic emulation of other political systems. After some delay, then, a parliamentary White Paper entitled Shared Values was submitted and passed in 1991. The shift in terminology to "shared values" was intended to avoid connotations of "straight-jacketed thinking.

Though a minority of PAP backbenchers may be unsure how a national ideology can be reconciled with recent political reforms apparently intended to provide greater public participation and debate and less government control over civil society, there is indeed a close and complementary relationship between the two. As explained above, after some reluctance the PAP has recognized the strength of public support for opposition candidates. Its attention has turned to the task of conditioning the form that opposition politics takes in Singapore. Many of the recent political reforms are designed to discourage the emergence of a system in which political debate and the struggle for power legitimizes the process of interest-group representation and conflict. Such a system conflicts with the corporatist ideology employed to legitimize the PAP's absolute political power. The attraction for the PAP of an official national ideology lies in its potential to institutionalize values that are not only supportive of the PAP world view but which interpret fundamental challenges to that world view as "confrontational." If effective, this places opposition politics within tolerable limits. Goh's instigation of an official national ideology therefore represents the New Guard's particular response to a perceived political problem that both Lee Kuan Yew and his successors see as paramount—how to correct the drift toward a less manageable society. A well-managed society, it appears, is one that guarantees predictability and stability, characteristics that the government automatically associates with the reproduction of the PAP's political supremacy well into the future.

Maintaining the Space Between Political and Civil Society

If the New Guard's commitment to a more consultative style of leadership and its ambitious project of instituting an official national ideology represent breaks from the approach taken by Lee and his Old Guard colleagues, there remains nonetheless a crucial continuity in the insistence on a sharp distinction between political and civil society. It is this continuity that suggests that the New Guard leadership, in essence, has not lessened its commitment to its predecessors to political authoritarianism. Though we should be careful not to underestimate the continuing influence of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the New Guard and Lee himself repeatedly maintain that the former have been in effective control of the government.

53. In this final document, the essential values were extended from four to five with the addition of "regard and community support for the individual." See White Paper, Shared Values (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1991).
since 1984." At the least, we can be confident that Goh and his colleagues have acquiesced to stern measures, but as we will see below, more likely the concerted attempt to counter any trend toward political pluralism has been actively supported, if not initiated, by the New Guard. One of the first post-1984 developments that contradicted the appearance of an emerging political liberalization in Singapore involved a series of clashes between the government and the foreign press. Sensitive to the critical reporting of Singapore's domestic affairs by foreign-owned publishers, a style that contrasted sharply with that of the government-owned Straits Times, the government introduced amendments to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in 1986. Under these amendments, the government could demand communications and information was empowered to restrict the circulation of any publication considered to be "engaging in the domestic politics of Singapore to a level "that "thinks like." Under the amendments, there was no appeal for the publisher, nor was there any definition of what constituted engagement in domestic politics. However, according to a government official, a publication would be considered to be "engaging in domestic politics" if it were "continuously and persistently . . . manipulate domestic politics by disinformation, by distortion, by resorting to half-truths, to create division and to arouse tension and feelings." Time, Asiaweek, the Asian Wall Street Journal, and the Far Eastern Economic Review all fell afoul of the act within a year and a half.

The Singapore government under Lee Kuan Yew has always paid close attention to the activities of the press and media generally. The more interesting feature of the new clampdown on the activities of the press in Singapore was the position adopted by the New Guard. Given their espoused enthusiasm for a greater degree of public debate and consultation it is surprising that the New Guard has been so active in restricting the activities of the press. The New Guard's position was not surprising because of the different situation for both the foreign and local press might not have seemed discrepant. However, not only were the amendments proposed after the New Guard had reasserted control over domestic communications and information Wong Kai Seng, these amendments and the subsequent circulation restrictions received vigorous opposition from both the government and Singaporean editor Helen Loong, suggesting that no such possibility had been entertained by Lee's successors. On the contrary, Goh maintains that the tendency of the local press not to reflect government thinking requires no apology, and furthermore, journalists wanting to influence the public should stand for parliamentary election. Goh's view of the proper role of the press leaves little room for criticism of the government. "We cannot have two forces [the press and government] trying to influence the public in different directions." More recently, this view has been reinforced by Helen Loong who argues that since the media is not accountable to the electorate it has no right to criticize the government. Rather, he maintains, the principal role of the mass media in Singapore is to "form people of government policies." During his libel case against the Far Eastern Economic Review in late 1989, Lee Kuan Yew also revealed that the New Guard leaders had considered restricting the stay of foreign correspondents to two years to avoid any getting "too involved." Indeed, according to Lee, Singapore's younger leaders would be less tolerant of the foreign correspondents than those of his own generation.

Certainly Goh and his colleagues seem braced for continued friction with the foreign press. In July 1989 further amendments were introduced to Parliament to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in 1986. Under these amendments, the government could demand communications and information was empowered to restrict the circulation of any publication considered to be "engaging in the domestic politics of Singapore" to a level "that "thinks like." Under the amendments, there was no appeal for the publisher, nor was there any definition of what constituted engagement in domestic politics. However, according to a government official, a publication would be considered to be "engaging in domestic politics" if it were "continuously and persistently . . . manipulate domestic politics by disinformation, by distortion, by resorting to half-truths, to create division and to arouse tension and feelings." Time, Asiaweek, the Asian Wall Street Journal, and the Far Eastern Economic Review all fell afoul of the act within a year and a half.

Apart from making it clear that the New Guard's vision for Singapore involved no shift from past policy toward the press, the introduction of the amendments to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in 1986 gave occasion for the New Guard to reiterate another constant in Singapore politics: a strict separation of civil and political society. This convention was challenged when the president of the Law Society and a former solicitor general, Francis Seow, issued a public statement in which he voiced his opposition to the new provisions of the Law Society that criticized the amended legislation for containing "ambiguous" and giving the minister "too wide" an authority to limit publication sales without any provision for an appeal against the decision.

Rather than debate the issue with the law society, either publicly or privately, Wong Kai Seng emphasized that "public policy is the domain of the government. It's not the playground of those with no responsibility to the people, and who aren't answerable for the livelihood or survival of Singaporeans." He added that professional societies should not "get involved in issues of public policy which do not affect their professional interest." Minister Wong felt that the Law Society had lost its role as a regulator of the role of a person in public policy and that simply would not be tolerated. Significantly, Goh adopted a high profile in the condemnation of the Law Society. He accused the society's officials of stating it would "seek to influence the shape of the nation's constitutional and political development." For Goh, the Law Society was a cover, a "shock absorber," in a political confrontation with the government.

The government's reaction carried definite implications for the sort of participatory public policy alluded to by the New Guard and a debate over public policy could only be legitimately conducted by parliamentary representatives or those seeking to explicitly advance the cause of a political party through the formal political process. "This is the constitutional right of citizens to comment on public policy was conditional. Moreover, the idea that professional organizations should strictly confine themselves to issues of public policy that have an impact on professional interests, that is, the conditions influencing the practice of that profession, raises some interesting questions. As the then National University of Singapore associate professor of political science and, ironically, subsequent Singapore ambassador to the United Nations, Chan Heng Chee, asked: "Should doctors comment on abortion bills? Should architects comment on the environment and preservation? Should lawyers comment on proposed legislation? I can't see why not. If they do not, who would and who should?"

Aside from earning the Law Society a strong official rebuke for "interfering in politics," the above incident led to amendment of the policy of "public 'setting the bar' from the position of the political. The society anyone had been suspended from practicing for a minimum of six months, forcing Seow's removal since he had been in the public eye. More recently, the status of the Law Society has been threatened by the establishment of a new Academy of Law, likened by the government to the London Inns of Court and supposedly intended to raise judicial competence and collegial spirit. However, unlike the Inns of Court, the governing body of the Academy of Law is almost exclusively comprised of government appointees, the one exception being the president of the Law Society. Among other features, the academy has been granted vague disciplinary powers, which have the potential to usurp many of the functions of the Law Society.

Just one year after the government's clash with the Law Society, releasing the PAP's New Guard guise another important indication of political continuity. One of the definitive features of political authoritarianism in Singapore has been recourse to the Internal Security Act. Just as Parliament has always guaranteed that the ISA has been reserved for genuine subversion. However, the main target of the ISA in the 1960s was the radical labor movement, which provided the base of support for the PAP's leftist parliamentary opponents, the Barisan Sosialis. Since the 1965 Singaporean Revolution, the independent labor movement broken, the ISA has generally been used as a more symbolic or as a strategic necessity in the PAP's political supremacy, the New Guard leaders evidently still see a role for it in modern Singapore in enforcing the boundary between civil and political society.

Probably the most dramatic post-1984 development in Singapore has been the emergence of a significant opposition. In 1986, twenty-two people under the ISA for an alleged Marxist conspiracy to overthrow the state. The crux of the problem, according to the government, was that Catholic organizations were being used as "a cover for political agitation." The arrests prompted international attention and condemnation, with documented allegations by Amnesty International of torture to elicit "confessions." By the end of 1987 matters had escalated to include the expulsion of five Christian missionaries and the government's dissolution of the Christian Conference of Asia on charges of involvement in Singapore's domestic politics.

Whether the government genuinely believed that the detainees were plotting to bring down the Singapore state is of course open to question. Remarks by Lee Kuan Yew in reference to the first batch of sixteen detainees suggested that, if such a threat was perceived, it would be treated no less seriously. Internal Security Department notes produced in Lee's trial with the Far Eastern Economic Review, centering around reports from the Catholic Church, revealed that according to the prime minister, "they were novices just starting to do mischief," whom he had dealt with in "a way that was somehow a little more severe."

He was reportedly more concerned with the general entry of the church, not its priests, into areas of social justice, "do-gooders who wanted to help the poor and dispensers, getting perverted along the way to Marxism."

Following the events of 1987, the government, through the Ministry of Community Development, commissioned a study into the growth of religion within Singapore. The findings were released in February 1989 in "The Report on Religious

57. Ibid.
63. As quoted in "Lee States His Case," p. 15.
64. As quoted in ibid., p. 15.
72. "Lee States His Case," pp. 15–16 (see 60 above).
73. Ibid., p. 16.
Understandably, religious organizations expressed concern about the bill. Reservations pertain not only to the almost absolute powers of the minister to determine whether politics have become mixed with religion and the vast and vague categories of actions or detention under national security, which compounds this problem, but also to the inherently subjective nature of any attempt to distinguish between politics and religion. As the Catholic archbishop, Gregory Yong explained:

There can be often an overlap between the secular and the religious. In such cases, the religious leader cannot be accused of going beyond his competence in speaking out and religious leaders recognize of what might appear to be a purely secular matter. Just as the state shows its concern about interreligious harmony because of its political implications, so religious must show its concern about the government policies when there are moral or religious implications.

Government backbencher K. Shanmugam also expressed concern, saying that: “We are moving away from a system of government where powers are separated. We are moving toward a type of system where the Government will be more powerful with few checks and balances in the exercise of its powers.” Arguably the PAP had so effectively merged party and state that even conceptualizing the need for a separation of powers on such matters had become difficult for the leadership. In any case, following strong advocacy of the bill by Goh and Lee Hsien Loong, it was referred to a select committee for refinement and subsequently passed by Parliament in November 1990.

The implementation of special legislation to enforce a separation of religion and politics, it should be understood, does not appear indicative of any substantial reassessment of the ISA by the New Guard. According to Goh, the ISA was invoked in the “Marxist conspiracy” case in 1987 by the New Guard leaders and not the senior Old Guard cabinet members. This “unpleasant decision,” he maintained, was not taken lightly but arrived at after the younger leaders “asked many questions.” Ultimately, however, Goh and his colleagues were convinced of the need for preemptive action, a point conveyed with familiar imagery: “Communist cells are like cancer cells. They multiply very quickly . . . If we do not destroy them now, they will destroy us later.” Not much attention was paid, however, to establishing how it was that a “communist cell” had a foothold in the Catholic church.

The New Guard leadership has also taken active measures to protect the executive’s use of the ISA from any possible challenge. In December 1988, a successful writ of habeas corpus by four ISA detainees caused the government some concern. The four had been released on technical grounds, as the proof submitted to substantiate their involvement in acts or activities of a nature which might constitute an offense under national security, had been signed by the permanent secretary of home affairs instead of the actual minister or cabinet secretary as required under the ISA. As it turned out, months after the detainees walked out through the gates of the detention center they were rearrested with appropriate procedural precision. The most significant aspect of the court’s judgment, however, was that the further polarization of the court’s decision caused a clear rejection of the idea that the government had the power to simply detain a person under the ISA without a hearing. The ISA provides broad legal limits and the rule of law demands that the courts should be able to examine the exercise of discretionary powers . . . In our view the notion of substantial or unduly secret detention is repugnant to the rule of law.” This interpretation contrasted sharply with the finding of the 1969 case of Karam Singh in the Federal Court of Malaysia, the precedent that thereafter guided Singapore’s constitutional practices.

In response, the government introduced legislative changes to the ISA in early 1989 that reasserted the legitimacy of the “subjective test” and the notion that the executive’s judgments over the use of the ISA were above the scrutiny of the courts. The message from the minister of law, S. Jayakumar, and the other New Guard leaders was clear: detention without trial was still a necessity and the political judgments underlying its application could not be subjected to legal scrutiny. Indeed, the formalization of late 1989 by the Communist Party of Malaysia of the end of its unsuccessful armed struggle against the governments of Singapore and Malaysia made the case for these special executive powers, according to Jayakumar.

Though other post-1984 developments could be added to the above, it should nevertheless be clear that the attitude of Singapore’s New Guard leaders to the press, their desire for an official national ideology, their sensitivity to the discussion of public policy outside formal political institutions, and their preparedness not only to use the ISA against its critics but to consolidate the absolute powers of the government under the act represent obstacles to the emergence of political pluralism in Singapore.

It is against this background that a speech in mid-1991 by the minister for arts and information, George Yeo, must be viewed. Yeo, also a member in advance of the new guard, has increasingly become the chief ideological spokesperson within the PAP. Employing the popularly disseminated race analogy to Singapore, he reasoned: “If the creation of a 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.” But on close inspection, the functions of the civic organizations alluded to by Yeo would appear to be related to the transfer of welfare-oriented responsibilities to community groups and the engendering of a stronger sense of national identity. Neither of these developments should be confused with political pluralism or liberalization.

Interpreting Post-1984 Developments

The fundamental objective underlying the New Guard’s two-pronged strategy of opening up avenues for greater political pluralism and liberalization was to establish a “clear expression on the one hand and yet block the avenues for genuine political pluralism on the other” as consolidation of what the PAP refers to as the “dominant-party system,” a system of political dominance that has become indelibly “fighting” and “handover” from the PAP’s electoral base in the recent elections. Essentially this system discounts the possibility of a serious alternative to the PAP in government. It is argued that Singapore’s small size, hence limited historical experience and economic vulnerability render it unsuitable to a two-party system in which changes of government are common. However, to secure the dominant-party system, Goh recognizes the need for some modification: “I fervently believe that Singapore should be led by a dominant political party occupying the middle ground. That political party must try to enlarge the middle ground through a more accommodative and participatory style of government that seeks to include rather than exclude the greatest possible number of Singaporeans in the political process.” In effect, Goh concedes that reproducing the absolute political dominance of the PAP is becoming more challenging, and the New Guard, as we have seen above, has been exercising its imagination toward meeting just this challenge.

However, the results of the snap general election in August 1991 show that the PAP has been able to hold on to power. The elections were a clear victory for the PAP, which won a landslide victory in most of the constituencies, except for the opposition candidate in the East Coast constituency. The opposition candidate, Professor B.J. Srinivasan, who was running on an “alternative” platform, was re-elected with a majority of 7,500 votes over the PAP candidate, Mrs. Winston Lee.

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The sizable and relatively affluent middle class that has emerged in Singapore is less willing than other groups to be controlled by the government. Although the middle class generally supports the PAP in many areas, they do not like its excessive direction and control over “what to read and view.” This photo of one of Singapore’s “children of the secure” trying out a new bicycle is byidend and popular, and it shows Janer W. Saltiff’s State and Family in Singapore (Ethisa: NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 245.

preference for a tightly controlled populace. In particular, a sizable and relatively affluent middle class has emerged. In 1990 the combined categories of professional, technical, administrative, and managerial workers represented 24.9 percent of the work force, and of course there would be supervisory clerical and sales workers who would also qualify as middle class but cannot be easily separated from these categories as the data are presented. A great many of these people also have no experience or recollection of the turbulent 1950s and 1960s. Rather, they take the political stability and economic prosperity of modern Singapore for granted. Moreover, many professionals who have worked, studied, or traveled overseas have been exposed to different political values and systems, thereby opening up the scope for more critical perspectives on domestic politics. Singapore’s more educated population generally appears less receptive to the paternalism and authoritarianism of the PAP.

The real concern of the PAP has been that the expansion of the middle class might manifest itself in new forms of social power that would provide the basis of pluralist politics.

and the direction of the PAP under it, some qualification is in order before concluding. The continued presence of Lee Kuan Yew in the Singapore government necessarily places some constraints on the New Guard’s scope for maneuver. Lee has indicated that he will remain an influence to the literal end: “Even from my sick bed, even if you are going to lower me into the grave and I feel something is going wrong, I will get up.” There is also speculation that constitutional amendments introducing an elected presidency, bestowing upon that office greatly enhanced powers that include veto rights over the government’s use of Singapore’s considerable foreign reserves and public service appointments, pave the way for Lee to maintain a supervisory role even after his eventual departure from the cabinet. If this is a real possibility, Lee’s capacity to shape events can be as effective through informal networks. Hence, any New Guard aspirations for more significant political liberalization would still take account of Lee’s overarching authority within the party. This factor assumes even greater significance in a context where much speculation exists about how long Goh is likely to retain the top job ahead of Lee Hsien Loong. Goh has taken the unusual step of already nominating him as his own successor.

However, modern Singapore is a quite different place from the economically and politically uncertain Singapore of the 1950s and 1960s when the most important ideas shaping the PAP were formed. The question for today is whether the New Guard’s reforms and more accommodative style will prove substantive enough a change to satisfy the aspirations of a new generation of Singaporeans. The risk for the New Guard is that the insistence on total PAP supremacy and the obstruction of political pluralism may prove the longer term more effective than the government’s electoral decline.

December 1991


93. On the one hand, the new presidential powers reflect PAP concern about the future possibility of a non-PAP government. Hence, the White Paper maintained that only Singaporeans with ministerial, high executive, or administrative experience would qualify for presidential candidacy. For historical reasons this meant that the president would necessarily be directly or indirectly a product of the PAP machine. On the other hand, the introduction of PAP presidential powers would contribute to a more diffuse system of power, something Lee Kuan Yew may have considered more appropriate since he had vacated the prime ministership. For an account of the government’s official explanation of the legislation and its rationale, see Goh Chok Tong, “Costumed Role of the President,” Straits Times, 20 July 1996, p. 14.


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