Contents

7 Patronage-based parties and the democratic deficit in the Philippines: origins, evolution, and the imperatives of reform  
Paul D. Hutchcroft and Joel Rocamora  
97

8 Consultative authoritarianism and regime change analysis: implications of the Singapore case  
Garry Rodan  
120

9 Vietnam: the ruling Communist Party and the incubation of ‘new’ political forces  
Martin Cainsborough  
135

SECTION III
Markets and governance  
149

10 Politics, institutions and performance: explaining growth variation in East Asia  
Richard Doner  
151

11 Donors, neo-liberalism and country ownership in Southeast Asia  
Andrew Rosser  
174

12 The judicialization of market regulation in Southeast Asia  
John Gillespie  
186

13 Global capitalism, the middle class and the shape of the new mega cities of the region  
Chua Beng Huat  
199

SECTION IV
Civil society and participation  
211

14 The limits of civil society: social movements and political parties in Southeast Asia  
Edward Aspinall and Meredith L. Weiss  
213

15 Decentralization and democracy in Indonesia: strengthening citizenship or regional elites?  
Henk Schulte Nordholt  
229

16 The post-authoritarian politics of agrarian and forest reform in Indonesia  
John McCarthy and Moira Moeliono  
242
CONSULTATIVE AUTHORITARIANISM AND REGIME CHANGE ANALYSIS

Implications of the Singapore case

Garry Rodan

Introduction

It had been expected by earlier modernization theorists that social and economic transformations generated by rapid capitalist development would promote new aspirations, opportunities and functional governance pressures favouring liberal democracy (Huntington 1991). However, in Southeast Asia, while authoritarian regimes have collapsed in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, they have proved durable in precisely the most economically advanced countries of Singapore and Malaysia. Such patterns in Southeast Asia and elsewhere led to analytical attention by transition theorists to the contingencies of political change (Diamond et al. 1997) - a focus that has both enriched the literature and also reinforced the limited nature of the problematic under investigation. Preoccupation with understanding the prospects of liberal democratic regimes has come at the expense of more open and fundamental questions. Where are political regimes headed, and why? What are the possibilities for the continuation of authoritarian rule and the forms this might take?

Answering these questions of Singapore reveals significant institutional and ideological changes challenging transition theory assumptions of liberal democracy as the natural regime partner of advanced capitalism. Indeed, Singapore's experience suggests the possibility that some authoritarian regimes may be able not just to survive advanced capitalism but to be modified and thereby strengthened in response to dynamics emanating from capitalism. Given leaders of the world's most populous authoritarian regime in China have embraced capitalism with the aim of shoring up the ruling party's legitimacy, understanding where and why political change has been headed in the city-state assumes an obvious wider theoretical and policy significance.

The Singapore case has led to a variety of explanations for the absence of a liberal democratic regime transition. In his influential book *The Third Wave*, Huntington (1991: 108) contended that the missing ingredient was one of political will, observing that 'a political leader far less skilled than Lee Kuan Yew could have produced democracy in Singapore'. Subsequently, explanations increasingly centred on the quality of political institutions. This approach has seen Singapore and other authoritarian regimes variously classified as a 'semi-democracy' or 'hybrid regime' because of the formal appearance of political competition through elections and other institutions (Case 2005). In this vein, Levitsky and Way (2002: 54) portray Singapore as a 'façade electoral regime' where 'electoral institutions exist but yield no meaningful contestation for power'. Such a characterization of the regime is descriptively accurate. However, it omits particular insights into the determinants and dynamics of authoritarian rule in Singapore. This chapter is intended to redress this, both by making non-democratic institutions a focus of inquiry in their own right and by examining political institutions in relation to the wider conflicts and alliances over state-civil society relationships inherent to capitalist development.

The institutional and ideological means by which authoritarian rule in Singapore is reproduced have changed significantly since the 1960s, as has the balance of interests served by the regime. None of this can be understood without analysing the way that capitalism has developed. As anticipated by early modernization theorists, economic development has indeed produced greater social diversity and new social interests that require a political accommodation. However, rather than leading to an irrepressible expansion of independent civil society, creative institutions within the state have been developed to facilitate expanded opportunities for political participation.

In what might be described as an evolving *consultative authoritarian regime*, these new institutions traverse parliamentary and extra-parliamentary spheres to involve a range of individuals and groups in public policy discussion and feedback. At the same time, they exclude contestation with the ruling party and increasingly involve the development of non-democratic values of political representation. Such a direction is related to how the consolidation and expansion of state capitalism has enhanced the power of technocratic elites predisposed towards more bureaucratic and administrative techniques of political control and while their emphasis on consultation is meant to limit the boundaries and conduct of political conflict, this is also informed by a view of politics as principally a problem-solving rather than normative exercise that can usefully harness relevant information and expertise.

Consultative authoritarianism, then, is distinguished from other forms of authoritarianism by the emphasis on state-controlled institutions to increase political participation. Political suppression and intimidation remain integral to these regimes. However, new social and economic interests created by capitalist development are increasingly engaged through various institutional mechanisms of consultation in an attempt to obviate greater demand for independent political space. In these particular authoritarian regimes, ideological emphasis on consensual politics is marked and consultative mechanisms are necessary to give substance and legitimacy to claims about more appropriate alternatives to liberal democratic change. Importantly, while consultative authoritarianism reflects growing sophistication in strategies of political control, perceived advantages in economic and social governance in the context of dynamic and globalized market systems can also be important considerations by ruling elites.

The discussion below begins by explaining the circumstances that gave rise to the emergence of consultative authoritarianism and then proceeds by examining, in turn, the parliamentary and non-parliamentary institutions through which new opportunities for political participation have been promoted. This will be followed by some observations about the implications of this analysis for understanding political regime dynamics more generally within Southeast Asia.

The core argument is that in Singapore new modes of political participation are shaping the inclusion and exclusion of different groups and individuals in the political process, favoring both functional and elitist conceptions of citizenship and representation as clear alternatives to a rights-based democratic politics. The social foundations of this sort of consultative authoritarianism have been laid by the particular dynamics of state capitalism in Singapore. Similar historical and geopolitical contexts of capitalism’s development across Southeast Asia may also render emerging social and political forces in some parts of the region potentially vulnerable to new...
forms of state-sponsored political participation. However, the precise coalitions of interest associated with capitalist development in Singapore are not replicated elsewhere in Southeast Asia, suggesting limits to the possibilities of consultative authoritarianism in the region.

State capitalism and consultative authoritarianism

Consultative authoritarianism’s foundations were laid in significant part by Singapore’s particular state capitalist path taken after self-government. The PAP came to power in 1959 through an alliance of leftist and Chinese-educated nationalist forces controlling trade unions and student, cultural and ethnic organizations, on the one hand, and right-wing English-educated middle-class nationalists on the other hand. However, inherent tensions in this historical marriage of convenience became unmanageable in office and by July 1961 a breakaway faction formed the Barisan Sosialis (BS) or Socialist Front, stripping the PAP of grass-root networks and mass mobilization capacity. It is critical that the PAP’s response was not just to exploit state power to harass and intimidate political opponents, but also to develop new bases of power and support to ensure the PAP’s long-term electoral survival. This latter strategy generated a powerful new class of politico-bureaucrats and a form of state capitalism that rendered many Singaporeans directly or indirectly dependent on the state for access to economic and social resources, including housing, employment, business contracts and access to personal savings. This structural relationship has fostered vulnerability to political co-option and intimidation and constrained alternative social and economic bases from which challenges to the PAP can be mounted.

In response to the severing of links between the PAP and independent civil society organizations in 1961, the ruling party and state were effectively merged. In the process, policy formation became the preserve of the PAP executive in consultation with senior civil servants, diminishing the importance of wider party structures. Civil service appointments not only enabled the PAP to extend control over the state apparatus, but the upper echelons of the civil service soon became the standard route to political leadership (Worthington 2003). This state-party nexus in turn facilitated the development of grassroots para-political institutions and state-owned media through which PAP ideology was disseminated, while the state-sponsored and PAP-affiliated National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) emerged as pivotal to the ruling party’s policy implementation and electoral support mobilization.

Consolidation and extension of the ruling party’s power owes much to the flourishing of state capitalism in subsequent decades. A massive programme of public housing began in the 1960s not only helped meet an urgent social need, it generated popular support for the PAP and afforded it a capacity for social and political engineering. These apartments, on ninety-nine-year leases from the government, enabled the PAP to control the racial composition of electorates and to discriminate in dispensing state infrastructure against electorates voting for opposition parties (Chia 1991; Chia 1997). Meanwhile, the state’s initial economic roles were geared towards supporting industrialization via government departments and statutory bodies and essential infrastructure, but direct investment by government-linked companies (GLCs) dramatically escalated as the economy grew. GLCs not only consolidated their dominance over the commanding heights of the domestic economy but internationalized, becoming pivotal to the integration of state economic and political power. Here state holding company Temasek — whose chief executive officer Ho Ching is the wife of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong — and the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC) — chaired until early 2011 by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and then by his son the Prime Minister — have been major players. The former boasted an investment portfolio with a net market value exceeding US$120 billion in 2010 and the latter in charge of foreign reserves officially, and probably conservatively, declared on its website as ‘in excess of US$100 billion’ (http://www.gic.com.sg/about.htm). Interlocking directorships and other arrangements avail the political executive of a capacity to exert direct and indirect influence over GLCs.

The state capitalist path was not simply a choice born out of functional economic imperatives: the PAP contained and conscripted the domestic bourgeoisie’s development as a matter of political strategy. Suspected links between elements of local business and oppositionists in the 1960s made the PAP wary of this class (Visher 2007). Opportunities for the domestic bourgeoisie have thus been heavily conditioned by, and dependent on, articulation with state capitalism. Consequently, in contrast with what transpired in Taiwan and South Korea from the 1980s, there has been no concerted private sector challenge to the economic dominance of the state that could be exploited by democratic forces in Singapore. Meanwhile, much of the city-state’s middle class is either employed in government departments, statutory bodies or GLCs, or indirectly derives its livelihood from servicing state capitalism through the provision of commercial, legal or other professional services.

The net effect of Singapore’s brand of state capitalism is to limit the space for independent economic and social bases that could be harnessed by critics and opponents of the PAP even more so than under many other authoritarian regimes. This structural relationship helps explain not just the effectiveness of repressive legislation but also the growing propensity for, and vulnerability to, various forms of PAP state political and ideological co-option.

Therefore, by the early 1980s, the PAP leadership profile had narrowed acutely in favour of technical or managerial elites most useful to the economic interests of the state-party (Rodan 2008). One symptom of this absolute power of technocrats was an increasing shift in the techniques of political control towards legal and administrative means. Defamation suits, for example, became a preferred means for tarnishing critics and opponents, while regulations covering licences and permits for public gatherings and disseminating political materials proliferated. Another symptom was the ushering in of a new phase of institutional and ideological reforms to promote increased opportunities for political participation. Importantly, this charted an expansion of the political space of the state — not civil society — and was grounded in a recognition that authoritarianism would need to be dynamic to endure in the face of the complex social changes that the city-state’s dramatic economic development had experienced.

Against the background of a 12.9 per cent drop in government support in the 1984 general election, the PAP’s younger technocratic leaders began an ideological and institutional reform campaign promoting state-sponsored political participation. Early in this project, Goh Chok Tong (Goh 1986: 7), Prime Minister between 1989 and 2004, asserted that:

What a plural society like ours needs is a tradition of government which emphasizes consensus instead of division, that includes rather than excludes, and that tries to maximize the participation of the population in the national effort, instead of minimizing it.

Importantly, this sort of consensus politics is seen as functional for elite rule, helping to gather intelligence useful to the effective refinement and implementation of policy, a point Lee Hsien Loong (Lee 1999) has been explicit about: ‘In a rapidly changing environment, much of the valuable up-to-date information is held by people at the frontline. Policy makers must draw on this knowledge to understand realities on the ground, and reach better solutions.’ He reiterated this perspective on the eve of his ascension to Prime Minister, endorsing more civic political participation on the basis that ‘The overriding objective is to reach the correct conclusions on the best way forward’ (Lee 2004). New forms of political participation, then, are meant not just to marginalize competitive politics by framing politics as a technical exercise; but also to render the
one-party state more politically robust by developing new institutions incorporating citizens into preferred forms of conflict management. These ideas, and the 1984 election results that precipitated them, surfaced in the context of a rapid social and economic transformation that exposed some of the limitations of existing structures of political co-option. The NTUC and grassroots Citizens’ Consultative Committees (CCCs), for example, were constrained in their capacity to represent the interests of lower-income Singaporeans as material inequalities and living costs increased with capitalist development. The contradiction between elitist official rhetoric championing meritocracy and a dearth of opportunities for increasing numbers of middle-class professionals to exert an influence over public policy was also becoming apparent. Thus, new institutions have been developed creatively expanding the sites of participation, including through government parliamentary committees, public committees of enquiry led by government ministers, a public policy think tank and nominated members of parliament. These sites, however, represent an alternative to collective political action through independent civil society organizations (including opposition political parties) in favour of ideologies and processes intended to narrow the scope and nature of political contestation.

The discussion to follow focuses on two of the most significant such initiatives in consultative authoritarianism, one outside the parliamentary system and the other marking a modification to it. A host of mechanisms have been developed that allow for both individuals and groups to be involved in public policy and service delivery feedback and discussion forums and channels. As will be demonstrated, there is no shortage of public concerns about government policy directions that these mechanisms are designed to target. However, who can be involved or represented through these mechanisms, on what basis and for what purposes, is vital to the regime implications of this apparent opening up of politics.

Public feedback as administrative politics

The most significant non-parliamentary institution of consultative authoritarianism was launched in 1985—the Feedback Unit (FU) within the Ministry of Community Development. Its stated mission was to receive and document for action suggestions from the public on national policies and problems; gather feedback on existing or impending government policies and their implementation with a view to improving them; ensure swift and effective responses by government departments to public suggestions and complaints; and help inform and educate the public about national policies and problems. The importance attached by the PAP to this institution was reaffirmed in 2006 when it was reviewed and renamed REACH—Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenship @ Home. REACH Supervisory Panel chairman and government member of parliament (MP), Amy Khor (2006), proclaimed that FBU’s ‘roles have to be enhanced, its reach widened and its channels of communication strengthened’. In the rationale for REACH, special emphasis was placed on the importance of greater engagement of younger Singaporeans and the need to exploit new media platforms to that end.

The direction of the REACH is broadly set by the Supervisory Panel, whose head (officially referred to as chairman) is appointed by the relevant minister, the current title of which is Community Development, Youth and Sports, with the concurrence of the Prime Minister. Not only is the chairman invariably a currently serving PAP MP, but so are many other members of the Panel. Since 2001, the non-PAP MP composition has increased but largely through the incorporation of people nevertheless belonging to the PAP establishment. In 2010, for example, the 25-person Panel included seven government MPs (including the chairman), five from the PAP-affiliated CCCs, six from GLCs and three from PAP-affiliated unions. The omission of opposition politicians and independent civil society activists from the Panel is precisely because the idea is to foster a ‘consensual’ rather than competitive conception of, and framework for, politics.

Who can be involved in these processes, over what matters and how depends on the purpose and nature of the particular channel of political participation involved. Where channels are intended to gather information for the government to better understand public reaction to an existing or prospective policy or issue these can be quite open and inclusive. Yet where they are meant to solicit suggestions on policy improvement or policy initiatives, the process is more selective. By far the most frequent form of participation fostered through feedback channels is by individuals, but notionally representation of groups and social categories is also actively sought. However, by constructing the social categories to be represented or by working closely with preferred existing groups, authorities have been able to shape this representation to achieve a fragmentation in the treatment of political issues and a disciplining of policy debate to choices and debates linked to the ruling party’s agenda.

Online consultation channels, which account for the vast bulk of the feedback, have been especially significant in promoting individual forms of participation. Some of this feedback is solicited from the People’s Forum database of over 7,000 registered respondents, matching the issue involved with demographic characteristics deemed of interest by REACH, a statutory body or a government department. Much of it, however, is generally open to the public.

One online channel involves e-Consultation Papers (eCPs) published by government departments and agencies and seeking either targeted or open expressions of views through SMS and email. Reactions from those affected by, or interested in, existing policies are sought. Another form of individual participation has been e-Polls, indicative polls surveying around 500 to 1,000 participants each time (Feedback Unit 2004:88). These are again driven by the issues or questions of interest to government ministers or agencies but target specific respondents. Some involve annual surveys such as on the budget, while others are conducted on wide-ranging policy issues as they arise, which has included marriage and procreation measures, racial integration in schools, and the White Paper on Terrorism. REACH’s e-Townhall web-chat initiatives, chaired by MPs and other political appointments, have also been adopted to expedite consultation and public participation. The inaugural such exercise in February 2007, for example, sought the public’s views on the 2007 Budget Speech, which could be discussed in real time directly with the Minister of State for Finance and Transport, Lim Hwee Hua, and REACH chairman Amy Khor.

The Discussion Corner, referred to as the Discussion Forum under FBU, has been yet another avenue for individual participation. Unlike eCPs, all discussion here takes place on the REACH website and not on government department websites. Also, instead of asking for comments on specific policies and laws, the topics for discussion are typically more general and open-ended, although often requesting people’s responses to certain facts, arguments or issues that REACH has effectively defined as a problem. The propensity of Singaporeans to emigrate, for example, was opened up for comment in August 2006. Through the General Feedback channel, there has also been in place for some time an avenue for individuals to make comments without prescribed categories or topics. Here citizens are linked to the relevant government departments that subsequently reply directly to the participant rather than engage in any public debate. Complaints and suggestions are, in effect, treated as technical or service quality issues to be dealt with privately.

Although online feedback may be more voluminous, live meetings are often more significant for policy education and influence. They are also more amenable to group involvement. One example is Dialogue Sessions, which were the first form of feedback introduced and remain a core medium. In 1986 there were fewer than 20, but by 2003 more than 60 for that year were
organized (Feedback Unit 2004: 35). These are generally small and informal, involving pre-policy and post-policy consultations. Some topics are initiated by REACH, others by ministers. Annual topics include the Pre-Budget and the National Day Rally Speech Dialogue Sessions, but mostly these meetings address issues as they are deemed relevant at the time and have included SARS, the threat of terrorism, low wage workers, gambling, and proposed smoking bans, for example. Most meetings – chaired by two Supervisory Panel members, one of whom is a PAP MP – are in principle open to the general public but in practice this is largely through invitations to select members of the People’s Forum and what REACH refers to as ‘strategic partners’, ‘organisations the Unit works with to widen and deepen its reach to the people’ (Feedback Unit 2004: 35, 37). This has involved groups already with a record of working co-operatively with the ruling party, such as the NUTUC; ethnic self-help groups MENDARI, Chinese Development Assistance Council, Singapore Indian Development Association and the Eurasian Association; educational institutions; clan associations and chambers of commerce and industry. A separate category of meetings that is less policy-driven is the Tea Sessions, also chaired by a PAP MP and one other Supervisory Panel member. These are far less frequent, usually held twice a year, but participants have a greater opportunity to raise issues that concern them. Importantly, though, the way that REACH conceptualizes social sectors has an impact on the participation and content of meetings. Tea sessions are broken up into one or other of 14 discrete groups of Singaporeans, including students, youths, women, professionals, ethnic communities, ‘heartlanders’, small and medium enterprises, and multinational corporations. Observations from participants themselves suggest that this compartmentalization of issues concerns discussions in the Dialogues and Tea Sessions (Feedback Unit 2005a: 10).

The most significant channel in terms of demonstrable policy influence is the Policy Study Workgroups (PSW) or what was referred to during the FBI Persons Feedback Group, established in 1997 by then Prime Minister Goh. These groups, chaired by people from the private or social sector, undertake in-depth policy studies and submit proposals to government at annual conferences. The proposals, embodying arguments and evidence drawn from a range of consultations under the workgroups’ auspices, are subsequently published with responses from the relevant ministry or agency. The potential and limitations of such political participation are illustrated by a comparison of the differing fortunes of proposals emanating from the previous Health and Political Development Feedback Groups.

In response to recommendations from the Health Feedback Group, the Health Minister announced in early 2006 that Singapore’s national healthcare financing system would be reformed. This would enable larger withdrawals from individual medical insurance accounts to cope with expensive outpatient treatments that the accounts could not previously be used for (Khaw 2006). The Health Ministry also responded positively to a number of the Group’s recommendations on ways to manage the threat of chronic diseases (Feedback Unit 2005b). In explaining the Group’s impact, its chairman Lee Kheng Hock (Lee 2006) emphasized that he saw the work of his group as ‘trying to bring an issue to the top of the in-tray’ rather than changing the course of government policy.

By contrast, the Political Matters and Media Feedback Group (subsequently renamed the Political Development Feedback Group) hit a brick wall with its 2002 Recommendations for Best Practices in Political Governance for Singapore. The document called for an independent and transparent electoral commission to level the political playing field, transparency and accountability for GLCs, measures to ensure legal and judicial independence, reforms to foster freedom of association and greater access to the media for opposition parties. This was an exercise where opposition political party and independent civil society activists were discernibly involved in the consultations. In his evaluation of the fortunes of the Best Practices recommendations, the Supervisory Panel chairman at the time, Wang Kai Yueng (Wang 2006), pointed out that, since there was no ministerial priority accorded to political reform, the chances of any departmental bureaucrats embracing the paper were always slim.

Clearly, these various mechanisms of state-sponsored consultation through REACH are designed to steer political participation as much as possible away from open debate about the objectives and content of public policy towards the more limited exercise of helping to improve or implement PAP government policy. In this respect, it is possible to point to various concrete outcomes from consultation. Crucially, though, the highly compartmentalized way in which different groups and individuals are consulted also militates against the formation of political coalitions around, and indeed beyond, specific sectoral or policy issues. Moreover, these consultative mechanisms embody a technocratic conception of politics rooted in a Weberian bureaucratic rationality which seeks to convert political problems into issues of administrative delivery and efficiency. Politics is, in effect, administratively incorporated into the state (Jayasurya and Rodan 2007: 787–9; Rodan and Jayasurya 2007). Real concerns of representation are grounded not in citizenship rights but in the rationality of the public policy process.

This is an important shift in the nature of authoritarian political rule that cannot be fully appreciated by the transition theory problematic of whether or not these institutions are functional or dysfunctional in democratic terms. The question is instead whether or not this shift in political rule will be effective in accommodating Singaporeans’ aspirations for political participation and avail the PAP of new foundations for regime legitimacy.

Nominate members of parliament

Another initiative in this new form of political rule involves the introduction of nominated members of parliament (NMPs). This institution highlights the complex layering possible under consultative authoritarianism, sometimes superimposing new modes of political participation on existing ones. In providing political participation not just for individuals in their own right and as members of state-conceived social categories, but also as members of independent NGOs, this institution is especially significant for its attempt to politically co-opt these organizations. This societal incorporation thus combines with administrative incorporation to expand the political space of the state (Jayasurya and Rodan 2007: 783–5).

NMPs are appointed by the President for terms of up to two-and-a-half years on the advice of a Special Select Committee appointed by parliament. In contrast with elected MPs, they cannot vote on money bills, bills to alter the Constitution or motions of no confidence in the government. However, they can speak on these issues and vote and speak on any other bills and motions. In explaining the need for NMPs, Prime Minister Goh sought to address what he saw as a public misconception that the PAP was closed to alternative points of view on policy. The legislation altering the Constitution referred to ‘independent and non-partisan views’ in the selection criteria for NMPs (Flo 2000: 90). Significantly, though, Goh made mention not only of the value of incorporating talented people with special expertise in the professions, commerce, industry, social services and cultural domains, but also of sections of society currently under-represented in parliament, including women. Since the first two NMP appointments in 1996, the scheme has expanded significantly to 2011 to involve 57 different people and a total of 76 appointments (some NMPs serving more than one term). In an attempt to capture the chief characteristics and dynamics of the various NMP appointments since the beginning of the scheme in June 1990 through to the eleventh parliament ending in April 2011, Table 8.1 identifies these on the basis of interest groups or
sectors. The individuals involved can generally be depicted as principally belonging to one or other interest group or sector, but many straddle these categories. This would appear to be a strategy by the parliamentary select committee responsible for the appointments to simultaneously incorporate or address different target interest groups and sectors.

One of the striking themes has been a sustained bias towards inclusion of people from the professions and academia (27.8 per cent), with medical and legal professionals especially prominent. In addition to being appointed in their own right, academics and professionals have often been appointed as notional representatives of women or ethnic minorities, or as champions of environmentalism or social welfare. In this way, the link between formal educational credentials and public policy expertise is reinforced at the same time as functional groups are politically incorporated. This evidences elitist and functional premises of the PAP's technocratic ideology.

The most heavily 'represented' single category of NMPs has involved the business sector (34.4 per cent). Especially significant is the repeated incorporation of senior past or present figures from within peak employer and business bodies. Singapore's increasing exposure to economic globalization has brought continuing challenges for the private sector. The consolidation and expansion of GLCs has not been without its critics from the local business community either.

As the PAP has more vigorously embraced economic globalization in recent decades, material inequalities have widened significantly in Singapore, testing trade union officials' ability to represent workers' interests to the government. Increasingly exorbitant ministerial and senior civil servant salaries justified in elite terms have only compounded working-class resentment about rising inequalities. Representation of the NTUC in NMP appointments is thus a symbolic statement to counteract the idea of NTUC impotence.

Appointments in the three categories in Table 8.1 of 'Women', 'Societal' and 'Ethnicity' traverse areas involving embryonic civil society organizations. The number of appointments incorporating 'representatives' of these organizations has not been high, but their strategic significance for attempted state political co-option has thus, the appointment of orthopaedic surgeon Kanwishi Soin to the eighth parliament was a conspicuous attempt to encourage activism within the moderate but independent feminist Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) towards direct engagement within a PAP-controlled institution. Soin did much to give the NMP scheme credibility, dominating parliamentary question time and occasionally shaping public debate, as in 1995 when she introduced a private member's bill – the Family Violence Bill. Although this was defeated, Soin (1999) reflected that:

The media took up the subject of family violence in an earnest and responsible way and gave it a great deal of coverage, and this contributed to increased general awareness of the issue ... Also the government made amendments to the Woman's Charter and these incorporated many of the principles and concepts of the aborted Family Violence Bill.

She has not only endorsed the NMP scheme in view of the existing limits to political space, but also maintains that: 'Even if a bipartisan system should eventually evolve here, there will still be a role for non-partisan NMPs to add another perspective to issues' (Soin 1999).

Another AWARE president, Braema Mathiyanathan, based her application around foreign domestic labour advocacy. Braema was also foundation President of Transient Workers Count Too (TWCTt2), an organization that was officially registered in 2004. Issues facing migrant workers have received remarkably little attention from opposition parties. The Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) has been recognized too through the appointment of orthopaedic surgeon Goh Min – the first female president of the NSS and a past president of AWARE. Like AWARE and TWCTt2, while not a radical organization, NSS's independence and comparative activism from the late 1980s posed a question about the adequacy of existing structures of political co-option and issues of potential appeal to Singapore's expanding middle class.

The other attempted co-option of an independent organization has involved the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), established in 1991 out of frustration with Mendaki – the officially sanctioned council representing ethnic Malays and controlled by Malay PAP MPs. PAP tolerance of AMP independence is in part a function of ruling party preference for problems of socio-economic disadvantage being viewed through an ethnic rather than a class prism. AMP chairman Limran bin Mohamed was among the 1994 NMP appointments, a move attempting to reinforce the prions of the AMP model. Collectively these and other similar appointments highlight the PAP's attempt at some form of political accommodation to the rapidly growing electoral weight of Generations X and Y voters.

After two decades, the NMP scheme is now embedded. But do NMPs see themselves as representatives? And, if so, how? Towards answering these questions interviews were conducted with NMPs from the ninth and tenth parliaments, revealing that NMPs variously see themselves as representing people, interests and/or ideas.

The NMP who saw himself most unambiguously in a representative role was Edwin Khew, whose application was jointly sponsored by the Singapore Manufacturers' Federation (SMF) (of which Khew was President) and the Singapore Business Federation (SBF). According to Khew (2007), people within the SMF in particular were of the view that 'the interests of manufacturing weren't well represented in parliament'. He established groups of major business leaders within the SMF and the SBF to chair various committees to receive and review input from the business community. These groups were convenant with the routine of parliamentary procedures and schedules, and thus ensured recommended questions were supplied two weeks before any parliamentary sitting.

### Table 8.1 Single and multiple categorizations of NMPs by sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parliament</th>
<th>NTUC</th>
<th>Academia</th>
<th>Professionals</th>
<th>Business</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Societal</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Youth</th>
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</tr>
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<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>8.94%</td>
<td>13.82%</td>
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Notes:
- Bracketed figures refer to the additional cross-categorizations of NMPs.
- Note also that some NMPs have been appointed in more than one parliament so they are counted for each parliament but only once for the sector they are deemed to 'represent' within that parliament. Hence, while the total number of appointments is 66, this translates into 62 sector categorizations.
By contrast, Geh Min (Geh 2006) asserted that she represented ‘environmental issues and interests’ and other issues neglected by the parties. In parliament she raised such issues as the illegal wildlife trade and animal rights. Geh explained that she regularly received solicited and unsolicited feedback from NSS members and others in her personal network but there was no routine process of consultation. According to her: ‘The luxury of being an NMP is bringing up issues that are relevant but won’t win many votes, such as issues of interest to the NSS, which enjoys niche support’ (Geh 2006). Geh Chong Chia, a professional architect who was also an NMP in the ninth parliament, echoed this perspective. Nominated by a professional body, Geh (2006) saw himself ‘representing views not readily expressed in parliament by either the PAP or the opposition’, emphasizing how ‘NMPs are not beholden to anyone and are not seeking re-election from a constituency, they are at liberty to pursue those interests’.

Meanwhile, Siew Kian Hon saw himself ‘representing a specific segment of the population – young, late 20s, English-educated, Western in outlook, fairly liberal and Internet savvy’ (Siew 2007), while Eunice Olsen (2007) conceded that technically she cannot represent anybody but that she ‘would like to represent the thoughts of the youth’ in particular and that her role in the media and her music afforded informal opportunities to gauge youth issues. Academic lawyer Thio Li-Ann (Thio 2007) saw herself ‘representing constitutional matters and human rights issues, with absolutely no claim to consulting anyone on the matters she raised in parliament. Clearly few of the respondents have at their disposal developed structures of feedback and consultation to facilitate engagement with large numbers of citizens. Yet through the Select Committee it is clear that the PAP has been fostering the idea of NMPs as representatives. What appears to matter to the government, though, is that NMPs conform in some way with those elements of professionalism emphasised in Edmund Burke’s (1996) 1774 account of representatives: substantive virtue and expert knowledge. That expert knowledge, though, may increasingly extend beyond technical expertise to include a good feel for views and aspirations among sections of the population not adequately incorporated into the PAP state through other means.

Overall, the NMP record of tangible policy impact is unimpressive. Just one piece of legislation initiated by an NMP has been approved in parliament – Walter Woon’s Maintenance of Parents Bill in 1994 – and a mere handful of other pieces of legislation have been NMP-initiated. Nevertheless, the numbers of people seeking appointments or accepting nominations for appointment rises. Why?

Soin’s view that NMPs afford at least some opportunity for greater political engagement without the risks associated with formal political opposition is likely shared by others. However, a recurring theme from NMP interviews was the assertion that the scheme also enabled issues to be environmentalism, feminism, gay rights, treatment of foreign workers, urban design and constitutional reform issues. These might be described as middle-class or socially progressive issues, which neither the ruling party nor the opposition parties can easily embrace without risk of alienating the socially conservative Chinese-speaking working class, or so-called ‘HLDB Heartlanders’. The technocratic approach to politics fostered by the PAP through the NMP scheme thus affords these issues legitimacy not readily available through the existing parties.

Yet the prospects of broad coalitions across classes around issues of social inequalities and social justice are further dampened by the fragmentation and compartmentalization of political debate encouraged by the NMP scheme. First, the scheme promotes the idea of politics as a set of rational public policy deliberations and choices where it is the logical power of argument, rather than the force of political alliances and collective action, that offers best prospects.

Conclusions and implications for analysing other regimes

Understanding the political regime in Singapore requires more than scrutiny of the democratic credentials of its political institutions. Those credentials have been suspect for many decades. Yet the political regime has been anything but static, undergoing significant changes in the attempt to accommodate new social forces and contain tensions associated with the city-state’s path of capitalist development. In particular, with the ushering in of consultative authoritarianism and its associated active citizenship, political participation is of heightened importance to the process by which contestation is actually contained. This includes new structures and notions of representation meant to limit politics to exercises in the governance of problem solving rather than more explicit debate and challenge over larger normative choices. Through state-sponsored and state-defined groups, fragmented political engagement is fostered as an attractive alternative to independent collective action, which continues to be heavily circumscribed and scrutinized by authorities.

As we have seen through the brief examinations of REACH and NMPs, new forms of state-sponsored political participation have met with a degree of acceptance – especially among business and professional classes. This cannot be explained without reference to the particular way that state capitalism has been consolidated in Singapore, which has enhanced not only the power and homogeneity of a class of politico-bureaucratic ruling elites, but also the direct and indirect dependence of citizens on the state controlled by these elites. The blocking of independent political space and the vulnerability to overtures of creative state-sponsored alternatives in political participation are intimately related.

The implications of the above analysis extend to the study of authoritarian regimes within and beyond Southeast Asia. Developments in Singapore suggest the possibility of far more creative institutional and ideological potential among authoritarian regimes than hitherto counterpoised by transition theories. In Singapore there has been an explicit shift towards consultative authoritarianism, but to differing degrees similar initiatives can be found in China and Vietnam, for example (He 2006; Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007). However, the crucial point is that not all authoritarian regimes are inclined towards or capable of moving in this direction, and it is only by linking political institutions with wider political economy dynamics that we can begin to understand some of the divergent paths of authoritarian rule. The state capitalist trajectory of Singapore under the PAP, dominated by a powerful class of technocrats, is not a general feature of authoritarian rule and may be an ideal foundation for consultative authoritarianism. The question to ask is: what sorts of coalitions and interests are being consolidated or challenged as capitalist development transforms the economies and societies of other authoritarian regimes? The answer to this has a considerable bearing on the extent and nature of change to political institutions.

On this basis, there are significant points of intersection between Singapore’s experience and those of various post-authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia where democratic transitions are being attempted. This includes a shared legacy of Western support for repressive governments to shore up capitalism during the Cold War. Consequently, civil societies have often had to be built from low bases and in a context of late industrialization under globalized capitalism less conducive to strong, independent trade unions linked to reformist political parties, as was typical of the route democracy took in Britain and Western Europe. In the Philippines, Thailand and
Indonesia, for example, political avenues for the middle class have been limited owing to the absence of independent, cohesive working-class organizations and peak employer groups with which to form alliances.

Nonetheless, middle-class support for democracy has not been readily incorporated into political movements or parties – not simply because of deficient political institutions but because the historical and geopolitical context of capitalist development has influenced the character of civil society and the relationships between its component elements (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2009). Arguably this renders these social forces in Southeast Asia potentially more amenable to various forms of state-sponsored political participation – some of which may have resonance with Singapore’s consultative authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, the capacity or inclination for following the Singapore model elsewhere in Southeast Asia is also constrained by the absence of comparable coalitions between technocratic and political elites on the one hand and the complete suffocation of civil society on the other – both of which are products of a specific form of state capitalism. Consequently, initial steps towards consultative authoritarianism in Vietnam have some way to go before they approximate the scale and character of what has been described above of Singapore. To get to that point, amongst other things, state power would have to be more tightly controlled by an essentially technocratic and rationalist elite coalition capable of crafting structured state dependence into a force for systematic political co-option. Here Vietnam and China face similar challenges in any attempt to emulate the Singapore case: keeping business and professional interests under the tent of a cohesive and mutually reinforcing set of power relationships of state power. The scale and complexity of market transformations in these larger countries are more conducive to pockets of middle-class and private sector interests that may contest or complicate the comprehensive institutionalization of rationalist and market fundamentalist ideologies evident in Singapore – the ideal model of consultative authoritarianism. The degree to which working classes can be mobilized through state-controlled trade unions and complementary forms of political participation is also unlikely to match that in the city-state.

Notes
1 Research for this essay was supported by Australian Research Council funding for a Discovery Project [DP099214], ‘Representation and Political Regimes in Southeast Asia’, for which the author is grateful.
2 The term ‘consultative authoritarianism’ has recently been used by He Baogang and Sigg Thaigeren (He and Thaigeren 2010) to characterize tendencies in contemporary China. It was used much earlier by H. Gordon Skilling (1978) in his work on political change in communist systems and subsequently drawn on by Harry Harding (1987) to characterize post-Mao political reform in China. Harding (1987: 2006) contended that consultative authoritarianism ‘increasingly recognises the need to obtain information, advice, and support from key sectors of the population, but insists on suppressing dissent, cultivating its vision of public morality, and maintaining ultimate political power in the hands of the Party.’
3 For a fuller discussion of NMPs see Rodan (2009).

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Garry Rodan