Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia
Edited by Garry Rodan
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State–society relations and political opposition in Singapore

Garry Rodan*

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the relationships between economic development, civil society, and political opposition are explored through an examination of one of the most dynamic and economically advanced Asian newly industrialising countries (NICs) – Singapore. This study demonstrates that the link between economic development and the expansion of civil society is more problematic and contingent than is often conceded in the literature. In particular, it challenges the idea of civil society as something of an incremental but progressive historical process associated with economic development, an idea already brought into question in the introductory chapter and the survey of historical political developments in Southeast Asia by Hewison and Rodan in Chapter 2.

Certainly, the social transformations associated with rapid industrialisation and increasingly sophisticated economic development in Singapore are contributing to a significant reworking of state–society relations, with important implications for both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political opposition and dissent. However, to date, the major feature of this reworking is the expanding realm of the state through the extension and refinement of the mechanisms of political co-optation, not the evolution of a more expansive civil society. Progress towards genuinely independent social organisations engaged in regular and legally enshrined political contests over the exercise of state power has been limited in Singapore, despite the emergence of a very sizeable and diverse middle class.

This extended co-optation involves modifications to the political system to incorporate sectional interests, the establishment of new relations with business and ethnic communities, and other institutional initiatives and rhetorical appeals. New corporatist forms of political organisation are being introduced to 'manage' emerging social forces.
The chief objective is to reconcile a de facto one-party state to a new social reality. Despite the existence of various political parties, the People’s Action Party (PAP) has an effective monopoly of state power in Singapore. The relationships that define the state reflect and consolidate the interests of only one party. Furthermore, the PAP simply does not entertain the notion of a ‘loyal’ opposition, regardless of the unthreatening nature of the opposition parties, most of which either embrace key aspects of PAP ideology or struggle to conceptualise alternatives. The new initiatives in co-optation thus provide carefully defined alternative avenues for contestation consistent with the elitist structures and ideologies built up over past decades by the PAP. However, they are intended as alternatives not just to opposition parties, as vehicles for contending views, but to any independent organisation attempting to influence political decision making.

The rhetoric which has accompanied these initiatives has nevertheless emphasised a new era in Singapore politics: one of greater tolerance and openness (see the Straits Times (ST), 8 May 1990: 1; Straits Times Weekly Overseas Edition (STWOE), 13 January 1990: 1, 16 June 1990: 1, 7, 30 June 1990: 13). While the government’s intention may be to harness social diversity to the maintenance of authoritarian rule, there have been limited and tentative, but nevertheless significant, cases where individuals and organisations have tried to exploit that rhetoric to expand the space for a measure of independent political activity. In the ensuing attempt by the PAP to clarify its position, the ‘political’ and the ‘non-political’ are sharply delineated and encapsulated in a legal discourse. This discourse reflects a suspicion of, and hostility to, extra-parliamentary forms of political contestation. By their nature, the control of these forms is more problematic than formal political institutions.

Significantly, in those limited cases where implicit official tolerance of extra-parliamentary political activities has occurred, it has involved predominantly middle-class groups with moderate political objectives, notably in the areas of conservation and women’s interests. There is an aspiration among an element of the middle class in Singapore for greater opportunity to contribute to public policy without operating through government-controlled organisations. However, in Singapore the middle class is a major beneficiary of the PAP state, in both material and non-material terms. Indeed, the economic growth and associated social development achieved under the PAP has generated significant social bases of support, especially among the middle class. The gripes of the middle class are thus particularistic rather than general or
The government's handling of these limited pressures has been ambiguous, sometimes tolerating critical public comment, at other times not. By and large, though, this has tended to fall short of the rhetoric on political change. Ironically, the middle class in Singapore represents a potential force for a civil society that legitimates PAP rule. But the PAP leadership appears to be a victim of its own ideology, convinced of the paramount importance of its direct and absolute political control, and has difficulty recognising this potential.

The PAP may in some respects be a little unsure how to handle perceived middle-class dissent, but it remains perfectly clear how to manage any political attempts to advance the interests of the underprivileged via independent organisations. They continue to feel the full force of the state's repressive apparatus such as internal security legislation, especially where cross-class alliances are involved. The state in Singapore retains a considerable ability to define the limits and complexion of civil society through its empowering of some organisations and obstruction of others, a capacity Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) have discussed more generally of states. Therefore, widening inequalities in income and wealth and associated grievances felt by the working class expose the representational shortcomings of the state-controlled National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) without translating into alternative, independent organisational bases.

While major breakthroughs in the development of civil society are yet to happen in Singapore, by the standards of the city-state's electoral history, opposition political parties have made significant vote gains since the early 1980s. But this does not reflect a transformation in the organisational capacities of these parties, or a greatly reduced level of reticence among the population about the personal repercussions of involvement with them. Moreover, the extent to which these parties actually constitute 'opposition' to the PAP and provide meaningful alternatives remains questionable. In particular, the elitist ideological premises of the PAP make their mark on these organisations. It must be acknowledged, though, that the rapid economic growth over which the PAP has presided, in fostering significant bases of social support, has served to limit the receptiveness for alternative politics. Repression and ideological hegemony by the PAP are by no means the sole basis of its political success. Nevertheless, opposition parties are fundamentally hamstrung by the absence of an extensive and dynamic civil society with which to form organic links, a situation that would only be compounded if the PAP's strategy of greater co-optation succeeds.
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CLASS TRANSFORMATIONS

The adoption in Singapore of an export-oriented industrialisation strategy in the mid-1960s laid the basis of the city-state’s impressive economic development. Propitious external circumstances were combined with domestic social and political conditions conducive to manufacturing investment geared to global markets. One of these local factors was the absence of a domestic bourgeoisie entrenched in import-substitution industrial production and capable of exerting a political influence to frustrate reform (Rodan 1989). Thus, direct manufactured exports, negligible in the first half of the 1960s, jumped to a value of S$47,520 million by 1990. Steep increases in foreign investment have fuelled the bulk of this. Whereas foreign investment amounted to a mere S$1.57 million in 1965, by 1990 it reached S$23,903 million (Economic Development Board 1981, 1992; Department of Statistics 1983). The ensuing industrial development generated considerable demand in wage labour, thereby alleviating unemployment and laying the basis for general material improvements for the population. The PAP’s social policies, particularly in public housing, added further to these improvements and the party’s electoral appeal.

Critical as the manufacturing sector has been to Singapore’s development, since the early 1980s the economy has been maturing and diversifying. Activities in the services sector, notably financial and business services, are assuming increasing importance. This has been actively encouraged by the government, both because it recognises there are objective limits to the possibilities of extending the manufacturing production in Singapore and because an acute dependence on this sector has left the economy highly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of global demand. In particular, the electronics industry has been susceptible to fluctuations in demand from American consumers. Thus, there has been a concerted attempt by the government to foster greater integration with the rapidly expanding regional economies. This is expected to assist with sectoral diversification and further technological upgrading of the economy.

Discussions of class transformations in the NICs have tended to pay special attention to the burgeoning ranks of the middle class, however defined. In Singapore’s case, there can be no denying that its rapid industrialisation has generated a sizeable middle class; even the most conservative measure has it approaching one-quarter of the workforce and more than doubling since 1970 (Rodan 1993a: 53–7). Professionals such as managers, computer personnel, and advertising workers have expanded alongside the ‘traditional’ administrative elite in the civil service, and there is a notable expansion of skilled manual workers. In the 1980s, a new group emerged, consisting of small proprietors, who’ve turned into small traders, and the self-employed. The growth of retail enterprises has been significant, offering entry to a wide range of small traders, who were once confined to the traditional core areas of Chinatown and Little India. The expansion of small businesses has been rapid, with an estimated 28,000 new business enterprises emerging in the last 20 years, rendering a major contribution to the economy.
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c NICs have tended to pay the middle class, however no denying that its rapid dle class; even the most -quarter of the workforce 993a: 53–7). Professionals advertising workers have strative elite in the civil

service (Mak 1993: 326). Yet the Singapore state itself has made a significant contribution to middle-class expansion, chiefly through its extensive economic role and profit-oriented statutory boards. The professional skills demanded here are weighted heavily in favour of those relevant to the functioning, administration, and accounting of the economy. This, in conjunction with the PAP ideology of meritocracy which accords the various technical specialisations of the middle class an exceptional social status, fosters mutual interests and values between the development-minded PAP and large sections of the middle class.

The most conspicuous development in Singapore’s private sector since the mid-1980s has been the influx of foreign-based international capital associated with export-oriented industrialisation. But the government also now exerts a crucial impact on the structure of the domestic economy, and so vast is the capital of Singapore’s government-linked companies that they are increasingly embarking on internationalised accumulation strategies. For some of the established domestic private capital groups, the offshore ventures led by the state open up new avenues, either by bolstering investment abroad or by providing the first real such opportunity. However, for the bulk of Singapore’s domestic-based private sector in commerce, services, and manufacturing, offshore investment is not a serious option. The current economic trajectory thus involves widening disparities between the different fractions of capital in Singapore.

Although Singapore’s rapid industrialisation has also generated a significant increase in the working class, since the 1980s manufacturing production has become more capital-intensive. Hence, the share of the total domestic workforce in manufacturing dropped from 30 per cent to 28 per cent between 1980 and 1990 (Department of Statistics 1991), and white-collar areas of working-class employment have become more important. The stocks of the domestic working class have also been augmented by guest labour from abroad, concentrated in the construction and manufacturing sectors, and also employed as domestic maids for the bourgeoisie and middle class. However, this in no way renders the working class marginal to the dynamics of Singapore’s political economy. Rather, after decades of rapid upward social mobility, anxieties about income and wealth differentials are rising among blue- and white-collar sections of the working class as the structural barriers to large-scale mobility begin to assert themselves (see Medhi 1994; Rodan 1993a).

In broad terms, then, Singapore’s dramatic economic transformation has been accompanied by significant developments in social structure. The city-state now has a more socially differentiated population and the
objective preconditions exist for new, separate identities and organisational structures in society. Against this background, let us consider pressures on the one-party state in Singapore and the prospects for oppositional politics as a result of the emergence of new social forces.

THE ONE-PARTY STATE IN A NEW SOCIAL CONTEXT

As explained in Chapter 2, as in other societies in Southeast Asia, there have been periodic advances and retreats in the attempt in Singapore to forge a civil society. In Singapore, from the 1930s onwards, trade unions and student organisations intermittently enjoyed significant independent political space, especially during the 1950s when the student and labour movements proved a potent combined anti-colonial force. Indeed, they were the organisational backbone of the emerging political parties, especially those outside the tutelage of the authorities. Even where colonial regimes were at their most repressive in Singapore, organised leftist opposition movements survived in some form or another, however clandestine their operations. By contrast, the PAP's brand of authoritarian rule has been effective in direct repression of political opposition and in carefully defining the limits to political space outside the state.

As is well documented (Deyo 1981; Rodan 1989; Rosa 1990), organised labour was the first casualty in this. By the late 1960s, independent organised labour was virtually irrelevant in Singapore and the state-sponsored NTUC was actively mobilising its affiliated organisations behind government policies. This undercut the social basis of the PAP's major political opponent, the Barisan Sosialis (BS). But a more pervasive, even if less conspicuous, measure for blunting political opposition was introduced through the Societies Act (1967). This followed a spate of student movement activism, but was subsequently bolstered and strictly enforced to bar any 'political' engagement by organisations not specifically registered for such purposes. This legislation effectively outlawed pressure group formation and severely curtailed public debate.

The Societies Act, by inference, marks out a very expansive political monopoly for the PAP state. Apart from blatantly restricting the ability of voluntary, independent organisations to pursue their collective interests, this legislation has obstructed opposition political parties in their efforts to develop an alternative programme. Unable to forge links with interest groups, they are significantly limited in their access to policy expertise and the ability to mobilise political support. Yet the PAP has been able to harness a host of state and para-statal organisational structures to maintain a tight grip on power.
parate identities and organ-

isations for its party-political purposes, many of them specifically created for community-level scrutiny and propagandising for the PAP (Seah 1973). Indeed, the successful candidate in the 1993 presidential election, Ong Teng Cheong, was nominated by the NTUC leadership which subsequently mobilised support for Ong through the organisation (Straits Times Weekly Edition (STWE), 14 August 1993: 14). Engagement in ‘politics’ by organisations not strictly established for that purpose is not so much the problem, but rather engagement in non-
PAP or anti-PAP politics.

A number of incidents from the mid to late 1980s suggested that the PAP’s determination to restrict civil society had not fundamentally altered. One was the amendment to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in 1986 which empowered the Minister of Communication and Information to limit the circulation of publications considered ‘engaging in the domestic politics of Singapore’ (Asiaweek, 15 June 1986: 20). This was used against *Time, Asiaweek, the Asian Wall Street Journal, and the Far Eastern Economic Review*. However, when the Law Society publicly questioned this legislation on the grounds it contained ‘ambiguities’ and afforded the Minister considerable powers, it was sternly rebuked by the Minister, Wong Kan Seng, and reminded that professional organisations should not ‘get involved in issues of public policy which do not affect their professional interests’ (Wong as quoted in *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 2 June 1986: 7). Subsequently, legislative amendments to Acts covering the legal and other professions were introduced to enforce this position further. These were intended to clarify in greater detail the boundaries between the ‘political’ and the ‘non-political’.

The most resilient and defiant of independent organisations during the period of consolidating the de facto one-party state has been the Jehovah’s Witnesses religious sect, banned in 1972 on the grounds that its existence was prejudicial to public welfare and order. Their members refuse to do military service, salute the national flag, or swear oaths of allegiance to the state. Despite deregistration and the detention and court-martialling of more than 100 members for failing to undertake national service, the movement has continued to grow, with an almost threefold increase in membership since 1982 to around 2,000. Thus, in early 1995, police raided four separate private residences, seizing sect magazines and literature, and arresting sixty-nine people with a view to charges under the Societies Act (*Sunday Times* (Singapore), 26 February 1995: 1).

The spectacular return to the use of the Internal Security Act (ISA) in 1987 to detain twenty-two so-called ‘Marxist conspirators’ was also
motivated by a concern about independent organisations going beyond their brief. Detainees included members of Catholic organisations such as the Young Christian Workers’ Movement, the Catholic Welfare Centre, and the Catholic Centre for Foreign Workers which were condemned as ‘cover’ organisations for political agitation (Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER), 4 June 1987: 8–9; Haas 1989: 59–63). In their work and publications they addressed issues such as retrenchment, wage and social security levels, the conditions of guest workers, and other matters of special pertinence to the poorer and more vulnerable sections of a working class largely denied independent organisational bases. The showdown with the Church also led to the expulsion of several missionaries and the dissolution of the Christian Conference of Asia for allegedly involving itself in Singapore’s domestic politics (FEER, 14 January 1988: 22). The government subsequently passed the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990 to reinforce its insistence on a separation of religious faith and social activism. The severity of the response to the Church activities highlighted PAP sensitivity to non-government organisation (NGO) activity involving grassroots links with the underprivileged and attempts to represent such politically marginalised groups (Rodan 1993b).

CO-OPTATION AND THE EXPANDING REALM OF THE STATE

Alongside the continued official discouragement of certain ‘political’ activities by NGOs, government pronouncements about the need for greater political consultation and less paternalism gathered momentum throughout the 1980s. Goh Chok Tong, then Deputy Prime Minister, projected himself and his generation of colleagues taking over the party’s reins as forces for change in the manner, if not the content, of Singapore politics. The attendant rhetoric about ‘opening up’ was born from a sustained deterioration in the PAP’s electoral dominance since the early 1980s. The post mortem on the 1984 general election, which resulted in a 12 per cent swing away from the government, focused on the rapidly expanding, younger middle-class constituency and its alienation from the government (Chua 1994: 659). As a result, mechanisms to effect political co-optation have been considerably extended in an attempt to divert the disaffected from oppositional politics. Initiatives in this vein include: the Feedback Unit (an extra-parliamentary body established within the Ministry of Community Development to take suggestions from the public and explain policies at grassroots level);
The adoption of Government Parliamentary Committees through which experts in the community could be incorporated into legislative processes; and a Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme whereby parliament can appoint up to six people with special expertise to serve two-year terms in parliament (Rodan 1992: 5–9).

The NMP scheme is the most significant of these co-optation initiatives. Appointments have included individuals associated with domestic business, labour, and women’s and ethnic organisations. While these appointments are dressed up as acknowledgements of individual merit and non-partisanship, they implicitly recognise the inadequacy of existing structures of political representation, including the NTUC. After the initial batch of appointments in 1990, most of the current six NMPs have been as active in parliament as the elected opposition MPs (see STWE, 18 June 1994: 15), to differing extents raising issues on behalf of unofficial ‘constituencies’. Kanwaljit Soin, an orthopaedic surgeon and feminist, has done most to give the scheme credibility. Not only has she dominated oral and written question time in parliament, she has at times shaped the agenda of public debate by questioning the government over issues such as domestic violence against women and the unequal conditions applying to women employed in the civil service. In 1995 she introduced a private member’s Bill – The Family Violence Bill – into parliament. Soin’s advocacy for women has exposed weaknesses in the opposition parties’ commitment and performance in this area. During their terms, NMPs Robert Chua, president of the Singapore Manufacturers’ Association, and Chia Shi Teck, managing director of the Heshe garment chain, also raised a number of concerns held by domestic manufacturers and entrepreneurs. Chia has at times been a voice for the smaller companies who cannot fit into the government’s economic vision of greater offshore activity by domestic-based capital (see Ministry of Finance 1993).3

The incorporation of business into these new structures comes on the heels of more organised attempts since the mid-1980s by the locally based private sector to have its various interests represented in official decision making. The establishment in 1986 of the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises to represent the collective interests of small-scale enterprises was a significant initiative in this direction (Chalmers 1992). Given the government’s objectives of upgrading the domestic economy and co-ordinating its offshore push, there is a certain utility in more institutionalised incorporation of the domestic bourgeoisie into processes of consultation. Moreover, the control the government exerts over the economy places the bulk of the domestic bourgeoisie in a
vulnerable position, necessarily conditioning political strategies to shape policy.

The potential of the NMP scheme to reinforce rather than challenge the government’s policy agenda is exemplified by an initiative by NMP Walter Woon. In 1994, Woon became the first person since independence to submit a private member’s Bill – the Maintenance of Parents Bill. Under this proposed legislation, parents can legally force their children to support them adequately in old age (STWE, 30 July 1994: 15). It received strong PAP support since it neatly complements the government’s ideological aversion to greater direct state welfare and its championing of ‘traditional family values’. However, since it was Woon’s initiative, the political flak for the PAP was less than otherwise might have been the case.

Most importantly, the NMP scheme reinforces the PAP’s technocratic and elitist view of politics ahead of a politics of representation (Rodan 1993c). According to this view, decision making should be left to the most rational and capable individuals, freed from the pressures and constraints of interest groups and partisan considerations. In Singapore, ‘capability’ is widely and closely associated with professional qualifications, an association the current stock of NMPs may have helped to consolidate. Journalists have seized on the comparison between elected and nominated MPs to emphasise the poor calibre of the government’s opponents, echoing a recurrent PAP theme. As an enthusiastic endorsement from a journalist put it in the Straits Times: ‘If indeed this is indicative of the contribution of future NMPs relative to their opposition counterparts, Singaporeans ought to ponder if they will be served better with more NMPs’ (STWE, 16 July 1994: 15).

There are a number of more ambiguous and tentative moves in the direction of modifying the structures of the state to accommodate different social forces. In particular, these include the management of political pressures associated with rising inequalities, with the state creatively harnessing community organisations to its own agenda.

In what at the time marked an important advance for the PAP, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) was established in 1990 out of frustration with Mendaki, the officially sanctioned council representing the Muslim community. In essence, Mendaki was seen as too dominated by PAP MPs and therefore unable independently to defend and promote the interests of the Malay community, whose socio-economic progress still significantly lagged behind that of ethnic Chinese. In this case, the government appears to have tolerated a new organisation rather than further alienate the Malay community, a large proportion of which abandoned the government at the 1988 general election (Chng 1993). One appointment was the opening the door to the AMP’s cause. With the government’s encouragement, the AMP took control of Indian Development Assistance and later the ethnic community funds and various welfare organisations (Brown 1993).

In the context of a growing Review Committee on the utilisation of resources of the Chinese community, resources (CASE) be better utilised. In 1971, PAP executive demanded that the Chinese Association (CASE) be separated from the government financial base. In October 1992, PAP voluntarily enforced the protective function of small businesses.

What these attempts by the government and diverse political space for opposition in Singapore is to steer it within certain limits. The current attempt by the government, not co-operate. As Deputy Prime Minister, the government should be no
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lection (Chua 1991: 659; Singh 1992). However, the 1994 NMP
appointments included AMP’s director, Imran Mohammed, thus keep
the door open for the organisation to work within the system.

The government’s preparedness to sanction a measure of independ
for the AMP was also related to a clear preference for the socio-
economic problems of the underprivileged to be conceptualised in
ethnic rather than class terms. Through financial and other support for
the AMP’s welfare programmes, the government has been able to
minimise direct state welfare and promote political moderation.
With the government’s active encouragement, the Indian and Chinese
communities subsequently established organisations – the Singapore
Indian Development Association (SINDA), and the Chinese Develop-
ment Assistance Council (CDAC) – to assist the needy in their own
ethnic communities. All three organisations receive matching funds
and various subsidies for infrastructure from the government (see

In the context of growing disquiet about rising living costs and
increasing inequalities in wealth and income distribution, the Cost
Review Committee report of 1993 also proposed that the role and
resources of the state-sponsored Consumers’ Association of Singapore
(CASE) be bolstered. The idea is that CASE should effectively become
a permanent cost review committee. At the time, CASE was already
receiving S$150,000 a year in government funding. Since its inception
in 1971, PAP MPs have played a pivotal role on the organisation’s
executive. CASE contrasts with the politically activist Consumer
Association of Penang (CPA) in Malaysia, which jealously guards its
separation from government and business, and enjoys an independent
financial base, mainly through the sale of publications (see STWE, 9
October 1993: 14). In 1995, CASE came in for public criticism for
voluntarily entering a debate over the cost of mobile handphones
to defend retailers and service providers.7

What these different reforms and initiatives reflect is a thematic
attempt by the PAP to politically accommodate increasingly complex
and divergent social interests without conceding independent political
space for opposition and dissent. If there is to be ‘opposition’, the aim
is to steer it through manageable institutions and keep it within strict
limits. The critical premise to sanctioned engagement in public debate
is the notion that such contributions should assist the PAP in govern-
ment, not contest the government’s control over the political agenda.
As Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recently explained, there
should be no need for dissent:
If we have good people, we will try to co-opt them into the PAP and make them part of the system. If good people are forced to join the opposition then I think we have already failed. We’ve done the wrong thing. Why aren’t they able to join us? What are we doing wrong? So I’m not sure we want to go in that direction.

(as quoted in STWE, 30 July 1994: 2)

The Deputy Prime Minister’s quote suggests that one-party rule remains a given in the PAP’s conception of the politically possible in Singapore.

THE RISE OF CIVIL SOCIETY?

While the state may have been able to sponsor close ties with some of the recently established social organisations, and this is the political trajectory preferred by the PAP, there are limited cases of other organisations both exerting an influence over public policy and managing to retain their independence from the state. The most noteworthy of these organisations are the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) and the Association for Women Action and Research (AWARE). Similarly, the arts have become an interesting arena of late for critical social and political commentary by individuals. While we should not overstate the significance of these developments, since they are certainly the exception rather than the rule, they do indicate aspirations from at least some elements of the middle class for independent political spaces, encouraged possibly by the government’s own rhetoric about greater political tolerance. The government thus increasingly finds itself having to clarify the limits to this.

The NSS is not a new organisation, its origins dating from 1954, but its membership has been boosted since the mid to late 1980s, by increased environmental consciousness among the expanding middle class. Total membership now stands at about 2,200, nearly 70 per cent of which is comprised of people in professional, senior administrative, managerial, executive, or supervisory employment (see Table 4.1). The NSS has constructively criticised government policy through detailed submissions to government departments and selective letter writing to the editorial pages of the daily English-language newspaper, the Straits Times.

The organisation has had an impact on government policy, starting with its role in persuading the government in 1988 to reserve 87 hectares of degraded mangrove at Sungei Buloh for a bird sanctuary. The land had actually been zoned for an agro-technology park prior to this decision. Subsequently, in 1990, the government’s Green Plan incorporated much of the content contained in the 152-page Master
co-opt them into the PAP and... but they able to join us? What...

Are limited cases of other... in critical social... since they are certainly the... and has a much shorter history than the NSS, since it was only established in 1985. Its membership is predominantly made up of professional women between the ages of 30 and 50 (Sunday Times (Singapore), 19 February 1995: Focus Page Six). As Table 4.1 shows, a little over 60 per cent of its membership is in professional, senior administrative, managerial, executive, or supervisory employment categories. Internally, AWARE is characterised by a high level of participatory democracy through the activities of various subcommittees. Generally, it employs a similar approach to the NSS in trying to shape government decision making, although it has at times adopted a comparatively aggressive public stance, as it did against the government's procreation policies in the late 1980s and, to a lesser extent, in a controversy in 1993 over unequal benefits to female public servants. Reflecting the interests of its overwhelmingly middle-class membership, the focus of AWARE has until the early 1990s been primarily on issues associated with the public, as opposed to private, work of women. But there now appears to be a conscious attempt to appeal to a wider constituency and to move beyond a narrow class base. AWARE has, for instance, taken up the issue of the conditions of foreign maids with the Ministry of Labour.

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**Table 4.1 Occupational characteristics of NSS and AWARE memberships (percentages)**

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<th>Occupation</th>
<th>NSS</th>
<th>AWARE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and technical</td>
<td>50.98</td>
<td>44.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative, managerial, executive and supervisory</td>
<td>17.21</td>
<td>15.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical, sales, and services</td>
<td>16.12</td>
<td>11.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production, agricultural and other</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>17.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td>7.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Membership records, NSS and AWARE
arguing for contractual improvements that would, among other things, more adequately protect maids from arbitrary abuses by employers. Significantly, in recognition of the government's sensitivity to debate on such topics, this has been done through correspondence rather than a public campaign.

Since former AWARE president Kanwaljit Soin has been serving as an NMP, the temptation has existed for this organisation to direct some of its energies unofficially through this avenue. The difficulty here is striking a balance between capitalising on the advantages of this connection in the hope of influencing parliamentary activity, yet retaining credibility as a genuinely independent organisation.

The first general point to make about these organisations is that their capacity to undertake restricted 'political' activities is partly contingent on acceptance that such engagement with the government is not presented as oppositional. As has been pointed out (p. 100), legally these organisations have a very carefully defined existence under the Societies Act and face the possibility of deregistration should they pose a serious challenge to the PAP's authority to make public policy. This reality is ever present in the minds of organisation members and was given lucid expression by the president of the NSS, Wee Yeow Chin, following the NSS's apparent success in 'lobbying' the government over the golf course proposal. Declaring that the NSS was not a 'pressure group', Wee elaborated: 'We like to see ourselves as a group of nature enthusiasts interested in studying the environment around us, enjoying it, and passing on our knowledge to others.' He continued, emphasising: 'We are level-headed and look at things rationally' (as quoted in ST, 2 October 1993: 23).

This sort of comment is indicative of the nervousness and insecurity inside independent organisations undertaking informal political activities. The open public acknowledgement of the government's sole authority to make policy is presumably designed to reassure the authorities that there is no engagement in 'politics'. When the government takes notice of independent organisations in public policy, gratitude is the appropriate sentiment to express. Notice has been taken principally because these groups are seen to have demonstrated some technical knowledge functional to sound policy. Their arguments and protestations can thus be reconciled with the technocratic regime. But assertions of an organisation's right to help shape public policy, let alone to contest the PAP over it, can be sure to arouse a rebuke or worse. Not surprisingly, important divisions exist within these organisations over how to manage this process and just how far to go in testing the government's tolerance for political engagement.
The fear of proscription may well have been determinant in the strategy used by conservationists in their campaign in late 1994 against Ministry of National Development plans to develop some 70 hectares of land in Senoko. Senoko had been designated a five-star nature site in the Nature Society's Master Plan (Briffett 1990) in recognition of its rich bio-diversity supporting extensive bird life. Even the Urban Redevelopment Authority's (1991) master plan, Living the Next Lap, had designated Senoko both a 'bird sanctuary' and a 'nature park'. However, the Acting Minister for National Development, Lim Hng Kiang, declared in 1994 that the area would be developed for housing and industrial purposes. This time, opposition to the government's proposal was mobilised through a single-issue movement called Friends of Senoko rather than through the NSS. Though NSS members were involved in this campaign, including the co-ordinator Ho Hua Chew, Friends of Senoko was a cross-class, community exercise in which a number of high-profile public figures assumed strategic roles. The appeal to have core areas reserved for a nature park amassed 25,000 signatures in a petition presented to Prime Minister Goh. While the appeal was unsuccessful, a number of significant points were demonstrated by Friends of Senoko. The collection of so many signatures on a petition in Singapore, which requires committing a personal identification number, evidenced an unprecedented preparedness to identify publicly with a challenge to government policy. Furthermore, support was genuinely broad-based, demonstrating that environmental concerns could not be dismissed as 'middle class'. Finally, the organisational form and spontaneous nature of Friends of Senoko may well constitute a new model for certain oppositional activities that avoids the vulnerability of formally registered NGOs in Singapore.

The second point to emphasise about both the NSS and AWARE is that, despite disclaimers by activists themselves, the activities of these organisations are clearly political: they involve concerted and regular attempts to influence government policy on behalf of members. What matters, then, is not so much whether their activities are political, but whether the PAP perceives them as politically threatening. The care taken to avoid a confrontational style and the eschewing of any sympathies or connections with the PAP's party-political opponents is part of the formula for survival. But these organisations have also been able to present their entry into the public arena as consistent with government discourse about consultation, consensus, and the welcoming of technical expertise that assist policy.

On this point, the PAP's broader ideological campaigns extolling the virtues of a distinctive 'Asian democracy' (Goh 1989) as a counter to
the transplanting of 'western liberalism' raise similar problems of political management. Concepts of 'consensus' and 'communitarianism' assume a central place in this 'Asian alternative' to political confrontation and contestation. But as Chua (1993: 14) has observed, this language may yet come back to haunt the PAP if widespread expectations of new consultative structures are raised. After all, genuine consensus requires a political process that gives adequate expression to differences in the first instance. It remains to be seen whether this can be done in practice without damage to the prevailing elitist assumptions about good government as fundamentally a technical process best handled by competent individuals.

While both the NSS and AWARE are careful not to challenge explicitly the notion that politics should be the preserve of formally constituted political organisations, a couple of organisations were registered under the Societies Act in 1994 which have stated aims to foster political debate outside the strict realms of party politics. These are The Roundtable and the Socratic Circle. The former is a small group of young professionals and business people with no particular agenda but united in the view that political discussion should be open to the public. Their proposal is to operate as a discussion group and think-tank, with no claim to represent any broad societal interests (Lim 1995). The latter is another small, predominantly middle-class, discussion group with its origins in the National University of Singapore Democratic Socialist Club. But according to the organisation's chairman, Gerard Lim, participants of any ideological persuasion are welcome to join the Socratic Circle (STWE, 29 October 1994: 15). The organisation's constitution emphasises the 'cultivation of social and political awareness amongst its members'. Significantly, registration of the Socratic Circle was delayed as authorities insisted on a constitution barring members of political parties from eligibility. Nevertheless, what is interesting about the emergence of these organisations – however small and substantively unthreatening they may be to the PAP – is that they represent a desire for greater independent political spaces, not necessarily as a means to the end of contesting the PAP so much as an end in itself.

In view of the above analysis, it is interesting to reflect on the increase in local artistic productions in Singapore that contain some measure of social and political comment. This development is sometimes pointed to as indication that tight political controls are generally being loosened in Singapore (see Asiaweek, 29 September 1993: 44). Others have made the point that the government's determination to exploit more fully the commercial potential of the arts can work in favour of a slightly greater...
'sm' raise similar problems of onsenus' and 'communitarian-Asian alternative' to political Chua (1993: 14) has observed, haunt the PAP if widespread ies are raised. After all, genuine t gives adequate expression to ins to be seen whether this can e prevailing elitist assumptions tally a technical process best are careful not to challenge ld be the preserve of formally couple of organisations were 994 which have stated aims to realms of party politics. These ;le. The former is a small group ple with no particular agenda cussion should be open to the a discussion group and think- d societal interests (Lim 1995). nly middle-class, discussion niversity of Singapore Demo- the organisation's chairman, cal persuasion are welcome toober 1994: 15). The organi- tisation of social and political nificantly, registration of the ies insisted on a constitution m eligibility. Nevertheless, ce of these organisations – ening they may be to the PAP independent political spaces, ontesting the PAP so much as sting to reflect on the increase that contain some measure of gment is sometimes pointed are generally being loosened 1993: 44). Others have made tion to exploit more fully the in favour of a slightly greater

margin for contentious work (see Patterson 1994: 62). This commercial objective has led to the establishment of a new statutory board, the National Arts Council (NAC).11 According to the Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo (as quoted in STWOE, 6 July 1991: 4): 'For the arts to flourish, we need a tripartite working relationship between the arts community, the private sector and the Government', and the NAC is expected to facilitate this. Whether a corporatist model is sufficient to achieve a vibrant artistic industry remains to be seen. In any case, are there signs that individuals, through the arts, can exercise greater scope for critical expression than is possible through social organisations? Are the arts less amenable to political co-optation?

English-medium theatre has been the most significant avenue for what critical social and political comment has been made recently through art. This is especially significant since dramatists from the Third Stage, a theatre company set up in 1983, were among those detained in 1987 under the ISA in the so-called 'Marxist conspiracy'. It was charged that plays such as Oh! Singapore and Esperanza ('Hope'), the latter focusing on the plight of Filipino maids in Singapore, aroused 'disaffection with the existing social and political system' (Asiaweek, 13 September 1987: 20). Despite this setback, by the early 1990s a range of local playwrights and theatre companies, the most notable being TheatreWorks and The Necessary Stage, were presenting critical observations about social and, to a lesser extent, formal political life in Singapore.

Some of these works touch on the excessive social engineering and rigid bureaucratisation within Singapore, the question of gender, and existing social taboos relating to sexuality.12 One recent play, Undercover by Tan Tarn How, appears to be a satirical and critical portrayal of the Internal Security Department – even if it is not mentioned by name. According to Yeo (1994: 49), we are witnessing 'a new phase in the Singapore theatre in which new and younger playwrights in their twenties and thirties show a determination to tackle controversial themes, and in the process, test the limits of both audience and authority'.13

This observation certainly bears relevance to controversies arising out of acts by Josef Ng Sing Chor and Shannon Tham Kuok Leong during a week-long arts festival organised by The Artists' Village and Fifth Passage in late December 1993. Ng's performance centred on the arrest of twelve men for allegedly committing homosexual solicitations and the way the press covered the matter. Part of Ng's act involved him cutting his pubic hair, with his back to the audience and clad only in swimming briefs. Tham's performance protested against the 'sensation- alised' reporting of the festival, The Artists' General Assembly, by the
New Paper, Singapore’s daily English-language afternoon newspaper. His act included the symbolic burning of a page of the New Paper and featured induced vomiting (see Kwok 1995).

The National Arts Council denounced the acts as vulgar and without artistic content, adding that organisations fostering such acts could not expect support from it. In what followed, not only did the police charge Ng with committing an obscene act in public and the organiser with holding a performance in contravention of a licence,14 but Ng and Tham were barred from future public performances. The government’s concern over the two acts was that the performances ‘may be exploited to agitate the audiences on volatile social issues or to propagate the beliefs and messages of deviant social or religious groups, or as a means of subversion’ (as quoted in ST, 22 January 1994: 3). The Minister of Information and the Arts, George Yeo, elaborated:

It is not good for the arts in Singapore to become politicised. While art, especially theatre, cannot avoid commenting on social and political conditions in society, in Singapore art should not be used to promote particular causes, and certainly not in a covert way. Otherwise the government will be forced to regulate such performances as a form of political activity.

(as quoted in Parliamentary Debates Singapore, 23 February 1994; column 375)

A joint statement from the Ministries of Home Affairs and of Information and the Arts also declared new restrictions on ‘performance art’, a category into which Ng’s and Tham’s acts fall, and ‘forum theatre’. Both art forms, by virtue of their emphasis on improvisation and audience interaction, pose difficulties for control-minded authorities.15

In the wake of these events, an edition of the National University of Singapore Society (NUSS) journal, Commentary, which contained critical examination of the limits to cultural and artistic expression in Singapore and support for the above artists, was aborted following reservations about the content by the NUSS management committee. While this incident has been portrayed by some as an act of self-censorship (see STWE, 19 November 1994: 23), there was also speculation about external pressure to control the content of the journal more effectively.16 The previous two editions of the journal had the themes of, first, civil society and, second, democracy, giving expression to the views and debates of a small but articulate intellectual community which takes these issues seriously.

Further indication of the apparent gulf between government rhetoric about its non-politicised nature was evident in a Singapore Prime Minister’s apparent endorsement of the move by the National Arts Council to ensure that programmes are not presented within a political context (The Straits Times, 29 January 1994).

The Ministerboldedtake steps to ensure that Singapore’s arts scene is not used to promote political aims, keeping to the narrative and dramatic tradition that is not as explicit in its political content. He also added that there would be no new restrictions on the art scene.17 In his view, the arts community continued to thrive and its activities were not ‘in the interest of political parties or political movements’ (Chan 1995: 12). The National Arts Council’s reasons for the review of the arts policy, and the political agenda of the arts, were not mentioned, but it appears to be a concern about maintaining control over the arts scene. The ministers other public statements, however, have been more cautious.18 (Chan 1995: 12).
about increased political tolerance and the practice of the authorities was evidenced in the reaction to newspaper articles in late 1994 by Singapore novelist Catherine Lim, critical of government policy and Prime Minister Goh. In the second of these, she referred to the irreconcilability of two contrasting styles within the government – the more consultative, open leadership style espoused by Goh and the more authoritarian style associated with his predecessors. She lamented the triumph of the latter and questioned Goh's authority within the government: ‘Singapore is like a family in which the Senior Minister is Stern Father and he [Goh] is Oldest Brother, presumably in a mediatory capacity’ (Sunday Times (Singapore), 20 November 1994: 12).

The Prime Minister’s press secretary, Chan Heng Wing, attempted to take stock of events over the last year or so, and clarify the extent and nature of political space being opened up by Goh. Initially, he emphasised that the Prime Minister remained committed to consultation and consensus, but that he ‘cannot allow journalists, novelists, short-story writers or theatre groups to set the political agenda from outside the political arena’ (ST, 10 December 1994: 13). He advised Lim to follow the example of British novelist Jeffrey Archer and enter formal politics if she intended to continue making political comment. However, public reaction through the columns of the Straits Times prompted a sequel by Chan (STWE, 31 December 1994: 23), who insisted that there was a real opening up of political space, but that the Prime Minister ‘has been placing out-of-bounds markers to define the limits of the space he is expanding’. Given its size and fragility, Singapore could not afford its government to be ‘continually criticised, vilified and ridiculed in the media, and pressured by lobbyists as in America’ (Chan in STWE, 31 December 1994: 23). The government would continue to make room for ‘minority intellectual interests, provided majority sentiments are not offended’ (Chan in STWE, 31 December 1994: 23). Goh also modified his insistence that critics should join political parties, emphasising instead that once individuals attacked the government or attempted to have it change policies or shift the political agenda, they would be regarded as having entered the political fray and treated accordingly. As he told parliament: ‘If you land us a blow on our jaw, you must expect a counter-blow on your solar plexus’ (as quoted in the West Australian, 25 January 1995: 20). The reaction, he added, would take into account the tone of criticism, a point echoed in Yeo’s call for suitable respect for authority in public challenges: ‘You must make distinctions – what is high, what is low, what is above, what
is below – and then we can have a debate, we can have a discussion’
(as quoted in ST, 20 February 1995: 19).
What we see, then, is a curious combination of political forms and
practices unfolding to accommodate greater social plurality. Concurrent
with long-standing repressive structures and new forms of co-optation,
some attempts have been made by certain groups and individuals to
secure space for political contestation outside these parameters. Where
such attempts have succeeded, this has involved basically middle-class
groups in very limited and conditional space with a tenuous existence.
Apart from the PAP’s internal uncertainty, and possible divisions, over
the exact margin for political contestation it is prepared to tolerate, the
government also appears to see political mileage in periodically
clamping down on English-educated liberal elements as a way of
demonstrating its bona fides as the custodian of the working class. After
all, it is the working class which has recently shown the greater
preparation to abandon the PAP at the polls (see Rodan 1993a; Singh
1992). But just how much of a threat does the formal political
opposition in Singapore pose to the ruling party and can it continue its
progressive increase in electoral support begun in the early 1980s?

OPPOSITION POLITICAL PARTIES

As is clear from the above, opposition electoral gains have been
achieved in spite of the absence of a broader civil society upon which
to draw. In addition to this constraint, there are numerous problems
for opposition parties in competing with the PAP in elections. First,
they cannot match the PAP’s strategic propaganda advantage of the
very sympathetic government-owned and controlled domestic media.19
Second, there is a strong fear of persecution for involvement with
opposition parties. The long list of candidates and activists taken to
court by government members serves as a strong negative example to
would-be participants in the political process.20 The sacking of a
National University of Singapore academic, Chee Soon Juan, for
alleged misuse of research funds, not long after he contested the
December 1992 by-election in Marine Parade, has only reinforced the
belief that opposition politics remains a personally risky affair.21 In a
city-state where the PAP government is a substantial employer and
commercial contractor, there is a perception that careers and business
interests can easily be jeopardised by association, however indirect,
with opposition parties. Consequently, in spite of the broader social
transformations within Singapore, the opposition ranks tend to be over-
represented by marginalised people with comparatively little to lose, or
bute, we can have a discussion.

Fusion of political forms and later social plurality. Concurrents and new forms of co-optation, retain groups and individuals to outside these parameters. Where involved basically middle-class space with a tenuous existence, and possible divisions, over on it is prepared to tolerate, the itical mileage in periodically liberal elements as a way of dian of the working class. After is recently shown the greater polls (see Rodan 1993a; Singh at does the formal political party and can it continue its t begun in the early 1980s?

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>PAP</th>
<th>WP</th>
<th>SDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>61.0</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sunday Times, 1 September 1991: 9

Although there are twenty-two registered opposition political parties in Singapore, many of these have ceased to operate and very few of them are consistently active in contesting elections and promoting their causes.\(22\) Those that are include the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), the Workers' Party (WP), National Solidarity Party (NSP), Singapore National Malay Organisation (PKMS) and the Singapore Justice Party. Only the WP and the SDP have actually won seats from the government since the BS abandoned the parliamentary process in 1966. All of these parties, however, are very limited in structures and resources, and are comparatively dormant between elections. Given that the PAP usually provides little more than the minimum required nine days' notice of election, campaigning itself is often a brief affair. Cooperation between opposition parties in determining who will contest which electorate has thus been one way of maximising limited resources. This strategy was most effective in the 1991 general election when the government was uncontested in just over half (forty-one) of the total (eighty-one) seats. On this basis, the PAP could not play on

self-employed people who have comparative independence, such as small business people or lawyers. Third, while it thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy on the PAP's part that the calibre of the opposition is limited, there are also substantial problems internal to the opposition camp that hamper it and raise serious doubts about its potential for the foreseeable future. By virtue of their limited size and elitist structures, opposition parties remain highly vulnerable to personality-based disputes at the executive level.

Despite the systematic intimidation facing the PAP's political opponents, and their limitations in personnel, organisational, and programmatic terms, as Table 4.2 indicates, they nevertheless attracted nearly 40 per cent of the total vote at the 1991 elections. This preparedness to support opposition candidates has increased as a growing number of Singaporeans perceive rising material inequalities and take the only meaningful avenue open to protest against this.
the usual idea of 'a freak result' (i.e. the 'accidental' removal of the government through 'protest' votes); thus the desirability or otherwise of opposition per se came into central focus (Singh 1992).

The official memberships of the SDP and the WP approximate to 280 and 2,600 respectively (Registrar of Societies 1995), but the WP figure is a cumulative one which does not separate past from current, paid-up membership. Party cadres number around forty-five for the SDP and sixty-five for the WP. At best, however, fewer than 100 members (including cadres) within either party could be described as active. But if the limited personnel involved are striking features of the two parties, even more remarkable are the organisational structures: both are elitist along PAP lines. As in the PAP model, the executives of the SDP and the WP appoint cadres, who in turn elect the executive.23 There is thus a significant centralisation of power within each party’s structure. So in organisational practice, neither party gives expression to a democratic alternative to the PAP.

Another parallel between the PAP and the major opposition parties is the premium placed on the recruitment of professionals as election candidates.24 In the 1991 elections the SDP fielded only candidates with tertiary education qualifications, even though professionals comprised a minuscule percentage of the party’s total membership (see Vennevald 1992: 8). Part of the SDP’s public celebration at the time it attracted neuropsychologist and Ph.D. Chee Soon Juan into its ranks in the early 1990s was related to this emphasis on educational qualifications. Certainly the bulk of the general population has internalised the PAP’s ideology of meritocracy, and measures the suitability of candidates almost exclusively in these terms. Opposition parties cannot ignore this reality. However, there has been no questioning of this elitism or strategy by the SDP to widen the electorate’s expectations of political candidates. Rather, considerable energy has gone into trying to match the PAP’s credentialism.

By contrast with the SDP, the WP can stake some sort of claim to a conscious ideological position. As its name would suggest, the WP projects itself as the custodian of the working class. Both the WP and the SDP have working-class and lower-middle-class support bases, but a marginally greater proportion of WP membership and leadership emanates from blue-collar backgrounds compared with the SDP (see Vennevald 1992: 11). The WP was formed in 1957 by David Marshall when there was a vibrant trade union movement, although the more radical elements of the labour movement were at that time aligned with the PAP.25 Nevertheless, the party has over the years espoused a philosophical commitment to a social democratic conception of social justice. In the work of proponents of proposals that would benefit the working class, the WP is emphasised for its 'Trade union interests' (ST 6/12, 11–12). The WP also seems to have operated on the basis that Thia Khoon Hwee's (STP), the ageing small business owner from Nanyang (now a senior) might accede to the working class' influencing

### Table 4.3 WP seats contested and WP seats won as a percentage of WP votes cast

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seats contested</th>
<th>Seats won</th>
<th>% of votes cast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WP</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: STP
Note: *Working Class Constituencies

The SDP
the ‘accidental’ removal of the
to the desirability or otherwise focus (Singh 1992).
and the WP approximate to 280
societies 1995), but the WP figure
 satire past current, paid-up
and forty-five for the SDP and
ever, fewer than 100 members
ould be described as active. But
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 the executives of the SDP and
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Juan into its ranks in the early
on educational qualifications.
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s the suitability of candidates
sition parties cannot ignore this
questioning of this elitism or
rate’s expectations of political
has gone into trying to match
1 stake some sort of claim to a
name would suggest, the WP
oking class. Both the WP and
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 membership and leadership
pared with the SDP (see
d in 1957 by David Marshall
ovement, although the more
were at that time aligned with
over the years espoused a
ocratic conception of social
justice. In this vein, a reasonably
detaile party manifesto, largely the
work of party secretary-general Joshua Jeyaretnam,26 outlines a series
of proposed programmes to improve the conditions for lower-income
carers and generally to enhance civil liberties. The rigid streaming
within the education system is also challenged. But at the same time, it
emphasises the need for ‘responsible trade unionism’ and asserts that
‘Trade unions must never be so powerful as to promote sectional
interests at the expense of the rest of society’ (Workers’ Party 1994:
11–12). This sort of language reflects both the political moderation of
the WP and the ideological hegemony of the PAP, which seems so often
to have oppositionists on the defensive. WP Member of Parliament Low
Thia Khiang, for instance, has declared he is not in favour of a minimum
wage (STWE, 2 October 1993: 5). Since Low appears poised to succeed
the ageing Jeyaretnam at the party’s helm at some future point, this
might accentuate the pragmatic direction of the WP. Low, a small
business person who was educated at the former Chinese-medium
Nanyang University, has cultivated support among the ethnic Chinese
working class and appears less wedded to the social democratic ideas
influencing London-trained lawyer Jeyaretnam.27

Table 4.3 Comparative electoral performances of the WP and SDP in general
elections, 1980–91

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WP</th>
<th>SDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seats contested</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seats won</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of votes in constituencies contested</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: STWOE, 1 September 1991: 24
Note: *Workers’ Party merged with Barisan Sosialis and Singapore United Front

The SDP was only established in 1980 under the leadership of Chiam
See Tong, who has held the seat of Potong Pasir since 1984. A party
manifesto did not actually materialise until 1994 when the party’s
acting secretary-general, Chee Soon Juan, authored Dare to Change
(1994). This was subsequently endorsed as the SDP’s official document
but, as with the WP’s equivalent, it could not be said to be the end product of widespread party involvement and debate. Nevertheless, as Table 4.3 demonstrates, in the 1991 election the SDP surpassed the WP in both its share of total votes and the number of parliamentary seats. It has achieved this without any clear ideological or philosophical stance articulated to the electorate. Rather, under Chiam, the SDP has campaigned heavily around the desirability of a check against government arrogance, thus actively cultivating the so-called ‘protest vote’. It has also played on the theme of excessive government charges in areas like health, education, and transport. However, SDP MPs have been careful to distance their calls for more government spending on health, education, and housing from ‘welfarism’, a concept so maligned by the PAP.

Neither major opposition party, then, directly contests the ruling party’s central ideological concepts. This does not necessarily indicate a conscious endorsement of PAP ideology, but it does at least reflect an inability to formulate alternatives: surely an important measure of the PAP’s ideological hegemony.

Ironically, instead of electoral gains by the SDP laying the basis for a more concerted opposition push in the 1990s, at least in the short term it has given rise to a fractious atmosphere. Immediately after the 1991 elections the SDP promoted itself as the symbol of an emerging two-party, not multi-party, system. Predictably this was an annoyance to the other parties (see ST, 13 December 1992: 22). But more significantly, an internal SDP dispute threw the party into temporary disarray. Party founder Chiam resigned as secretary-general in May 1993 and subsequently made a public attack on a number of the party’s central executive committee (CEC) members. This culminated in Chiam’s expulsion from the party in August, a decision which he challenged and which was overturned through the courts later that year. He was thus reinstated as an ordinary SDP member which ensured that, under the constitution, he retained his parliamentary seat. Such was the turmoil in the SDP that pro-Chiam SDP members held their own meeting in August. The gathering voted to retract Chiam’s expulsion, dissolve the CEC responsible for it, and elect a new one in its place. However, pro-Chiam forces lost a further legal battle to have the SDP leadership, now chaired by Ling How Doong, declared null and void. The net effect was that Chiam and his allies had to wait for the next biennial party conference, in January 1995, for a chance to wrest executive control from the other faction. However, they were to fail.

It was thus no surprise when, in mid-1994, Chiam’s sympathiser, Sin Kek Tong, registered an application to form an entirely new party – the Singapore People’s Alliance (SPA), which ‘moderate’ opposition leader Goh Chok Tong (see Chapter 15) described as “a good experiment within the existing system”.

We see now that, had Chiam not split from the PAP, these same opposition leaders, Goh and Chee, would have been in a much stronger position within parliament and able to better represent the public’s aspirations and intentions, if only indirectly. The levels of participation he could have achieved.

The Chiam affair, and the hostile and infighting that had gone with it, threw into relief the tight control over opposition activity that the PAP established. The Chiam affair had exposed the fissures in the tight control that the PAP exercised over its members and the National Trade Union Congress (STWOC, or ‘the obedient body’). The case of Chee Soon Juan, who was contesting the People’s Action Party (PAP) under Chiam’s leadership, and thus had no formal membership of the party, has also left its mark on relations between labour and the government, as well as on the establishment of the Workers’ Party.

At one basic level, the Chiam affair had cost the PAP valuable seats in the country’s legislature, and Chee might well have enjoyed a successful career. But Chee’s personal prominence has been significant in helping to unveil the cause-and-effect relationships that are at the heart of Singapore’s political culture, and that, in many ways, is the saddest lesson of the Chiam affair.
could not be said to be the end ent and debate. Nevertheless, as the SDP surpassed the WP number of parliamentary seats. ar ideological or philosophical ther, under Chiam, the SDP has ability of a check against governing the so-called ‘protest vote’. cessive government changes in order. However, SDP MPs have more government spending on alfarism’, a concept so maligned in, directly contests the ruling is does not necessarily indicate, but it does at least reflect an ly an important measure of the by the SDP laying the basis for 1990s, at least in the short term e. Immediately after the 1991 e symbol of an emerging twol y this was an annoyance to the 2: 22). But more significantly, into temporary disarray. Party general in May 1993 and sub- number of the party’s central This culminated in Chiam’s cision which he challenged and lis later that year. He was thus which ensured that, under the ry seat. Such was the turmoil rs held their own meeting in hiam’s expulsion, dissolve the one in its place. However, pro- have the SDP leadership, now ll and void. The net effect was for the next biennial party ce to wrest executive control to fail.

94, Chiam’s sympathiser, Sin m’ an entirely new party – the Singapore People’s Party (SPP). According to Sin, the SPP would be a ‘moderate version of the SDP’ (ST, 6 July 1994: 3). This ‘moderation’ was elaborated on when Sin (as quoted in STWE, 24 December 1994: 15) declared: ‘We see no ideological conflict with the ruling party. We see no need to be confrontational for no good reason. . . . For opposition politicians, the greatest challenge is to admit that the PAP is a good government.’ Like the SDP and the WP, the SPP also emulates the PAP cadre system. The SPP invited Chiam to join the SPP when parliament is next dissolved (ST, 22 November 1994: 19), since under the constitution he would lose his seat if he left the SDP in the meantime. At the time of writing, Chiam has not publicly declared his intentions, but his strong personal following in Potong Pasir means that he could also feasibly consider contesting the seat as an independent.

The Chiam fiasco reflected differences between himself and the CEC that had previously been manageable, even if that meant him being outvoted within the executive on various matters. His preference for tight control over the party was complicated by the SDP’s electoral success, since it translated not only into other SDP MPs but the establishment of further opposition town councils. This opened up avenues for alternative power bases within the party. It was, however, Chiam’s unsuccessful attempt to censure Chee Soon Juan for conducting a hunger strike in protest against being dismissed from the National University of Singapore which brought matters to a head (STWOE, 19 June 1993: 24). For Chiam, Chee personified a less obedient style he feared was gaining ground in the SDP. Furthermore, Chee was committed both to widening the agenda of public debate and contesting the PAP’s policies more forcefully than was usual in the SDP under Chiam. In particular, Chee challenged the PAP on the fundamental and sensitive issue of rising inequalities, a theme initially, but less systematically, taken up by party colleague Ling How Doong. He has also led an aggressive public challenge to the PAP over its close relations with the military regime in Myanmar and proposed the establishment of a human rights commission in Singapore to ‘ensure the Government does not abuse its powers’ (STWE, 30 July: 5).

At one level, the SDP’s recent turmoil might be seen as a necessary price to be paid in its transformation to a more serious alternative to the PAP which is less personality-based and more programme-based. Chee might be seen as a potential catalyst in this scenario. Certainly Chee’s persistence in the wake of financially crippling lawsuits against him and the loss of his university position does suggest a dedication to the cause of opposition politics. The highly personalised attacks directed at him from the PAP seem to indicate an equal dedication to
neutralise him.\textsuperscript{33} However, if the SDP is to mount and sustain a more meaningful challenge, it will have to undergo major reform, including not just a better-developed programme but the establishment of less elitist internal party structures. There is still no sign of this. Moreover, it would appear that even Chiam’s SDP adversaries have reservations about some of Chee’s directions, and his influence within the SDP in broadening the policy agenda may be waning.\textsuperscript{34}

Broadly, the significance of the social transformation of Singapore for opposition political parties has been indirect rather than direct. Like the PAP, the opposition parties place strategic emphasis on securing professional candidates, but the middle class is disinclined towards involvement in political parties in general and opposition parties in particular.\textsuperscript{35} But the emergence of a sizeable and relatively privileged middle class has heightened awareness of income and wealth differentials among the less privileged. At the current juncture, neither the government nor opposition parties want to be seen as pandering to the middle class. Based on the assumption that issues like environmentalism and gender equality are the preserve of the middle class, the opposition parties have made no serious attempts to base their appeal on these concerns. Rather, they concentrate on what they see as the bread-and-butter issues central to the working class. While at one level this is entirely understandable, since the middle class is a ‘natural’ constituency for the PAP, the broad-based support for the Friends of Senoko campaign, for instance, challenges this neat conceptual dichotomy, demonstrating that large numbers of working people place a high value on Singapore’s natural environment.\textsuperscript{36} If opposition parties are to exploit more effectively the political potential of changing identities and interests associated with Singapore’s social and economic transformation, a more sophisticated strategy is required.

CONCLUSION

We see from the above that while economic development has indeed set in train new social forces, the political manifestations of this are complex. Certainly important processes of political change are taking place in Singapore, but these do not yet include the re-emergence of a substantive sphere of non-state political space. Rather, the predominant direction of political change has been towards an expansion of the state itself. New and more specific forms of political co-optation are being developed in response to the challenges of increasing social differentiation and rising material inequalities. While this response may generate contradictions, it remains to be seen whether these are unmanageable.

We have already seen how Singapore has transformed itself from a small and relatively isolated state into an important regional player, and how this has influenced the scope of political activity. With the growing assertiveness of new social forces, we can expect a greater role for groups of this nature in the country’s political life in the future. This would, however, require political space to be created. The few of us who have very close social ties with the current administration may be better suited to developing a radically different, yet still perhaps different, political model for Singapore. It is important to pursue this model in order to avoid the type of political space that has been used to undermine our political democracy.

In the absence of any new opposition parties, the current limited political space is still constrained by the need to key aspects of political life to operate in a relatively elitist sphere. The role of opposition parties in Singapore must also be recognised. Its long-term viability remains a matter of concern.
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onomic development has indeed tical manifestations of this are s of political change are taking t include the re-emergence of a space. Rather, the predominant wards an expansion of the state political co-optation are being ages of increasing social diff- ies. While this response may be seen whether these are unmanageable and whether or not the government’s attempts to alleviate material inequalities are successful. It is certainly not inevitable that social pluralism arising out of advanced capitalist production in Singaporre will translate into a more expansive civil society – especi- ally one that attempts to overturn hierarchical and elitist structures.

We have also seen, though, that some very conditional independent political spaces have surfaced as select groups and individuals project their activities in line with official rhetoric about greater openness. Toleration of political activities by ‘non-political’ organisations is occurring in spite of the Societies Act, but these spaces are tenuous, lacking the state’s explicit legal protection emphasised by Bernhard (1993) in his notion of civil society. The threat of their closure constantly looms. Nor do they involve horizontal ties between different sectors of society (Stepan 1985: 336), least of all with political parties. These social forces are politically weak and unable to impose themselves on the state. Nevertheless, the process currently in train will still require periodic clarification from the government on the limits to the political space available to them.

The few independent groups attempting to influence public policy have very moderate political objectives. This is important in their current ability to undertake informal political activities. If there is to be a greater political relaxation in future, this factor will be central. In previous phases in Singapore’s history when social forces have attempt- ed to assert themselves politically through independent organisations, a radically led working class has been pivotal. The current phase is different, with a relatively privileged and conservative middle class pursuing independent political space. Neither the interests of the PAP nor capital are fundamentally threatened by such a development. Importantly, the elitism that has been institutionalised by the PAP does not appear to be under direct challenge from these groups.

In the absence of a more expansive civil society in Singapore, opposition parties will remain relatively isolated social entities and limited political forces. But as we have seen, these parties are also constrained as ‘oppositional’ by their inability to develop alternatives to key aspects of PAP ideology. Indeed, whether oppositional forces operate inside or outside the formal political system, alternatives to elitist values and structures would be necessary if authoritarianism in Singapore were to be effectively challenged. What the above account underlines is that authoritarian rule in Singapore may be far more adaptable to dramatic social transformations than is generally recog- nised. Its long-term future is by no means assured, but projections of imminent demise are certainly premature.
NOTES

* I thank Kevin Hewison and two anonymous referees for helpful critical comments on an earlier draft of this work. I am also grateful to the various individuals within social and political organisations in Singapore who cooperated during my research.

1. The concept of civil society employed here is consistent with that advocated in Chapter 2 which draws on Bernhard (1993). It involves systematic attempts to exert an influence over the exercise of state power by independent organisations. Therefore, these organisations, quite distinct from civic organisations, are routinely engaged in political attempts to advance members' interests. However, in addition to the legally recognised independent political space emphasised by Bernhard, civil society can include independent political spaces that are tolerated and given de facto rather than formal legal recognition.

2. Much of this has a regional focus and involves projects requiring significant intergovernmental negotiations; this has involved China, Vietnam, and the so-called Growth Triangle embracing the neighbouring states of Johore in Malaysia and the Riau Islands of Indonesia.

3. Overseas investments in the hotel and tourist development industries feature prominently among domestic-based groups.

4. Of the current eighty-two registered employee trade unions (Department of Statistics 1994: 71), only nine are not affiliated with the NTUC: Airline Pilots' Association; Film Industrial Employee Union of Singapore; Reuter Local Employees' Union; Senior Officers' Association of the PUB; Singapore Catering Services Staff and Workers' Trade Union; Singapore Motor Workshop Employees' Union; Singapore Middle School Chinese Teachers' Union; Singapore Tobacco Employees' Union; Singapore Transport Vessels Workers' Association.

5. As of 1996, Stephen Lee, president of the Singapore National Employers’ Federation and managing director of Great Malay Textile Manufacturing, is also an NMP.

6. The government is greatly concerned about demographic trends towards an ageing population and the welfare implications of this. Lee Kuan Yew has suggested that at some later point it might be sensible to give two votes to married men with children. That way, according to Lee, the bias of the electorate would be corrected in favour of taxpayers who would have to foot the bill to support greater welfare (Staies Times Weekly Edition (STWE), 14 May 1994: 6).

7. In letters to the Forum pages of the Staies Times, writers complained about the costs of handphones, and subsequently diabetes test strips, in Singapore compared with Australia. Executive director of CASE Tan Bee Lan replied with the view that: 'Consumers in Singapore cannot expect to earn high salaries and have low cost for their goods and services' (ST, 3 June 1995: 35). One contributor took CASE to task for the methodology underlying this position (see ST, 6 June 1995: 28) and also maintained that 'CASE, as an independent association for all consumers here, should be more objective and look seriously into the real reasons behind the absurd price difference' (see ST, 14 June 1994: 28). Another contended that a consumers' association has 'both an educative and a protective function', but that 'affordability' is
a personal choice which CASE need not debate (see ST, 14 June 1995: 28). Even the editorial of the Straits Times (22 June 1995: 28) weighed in with criticism of CASE for appearing to defend big business ahead of consumers.

Between 1954 and 1991 it was known as the Malay Nature Society (MNS) and acted as a Singapore branch of the parent organisation. Formal separation and a name change occurred in 1991.

This included playwright Kuo Pau Kun, NMP Kanwaljit Soin and prominent architect Tay Kheng Soon.

Thus, neither the Socratic Circle nor The Roundtable permits members of political parties to join their organisation.

One of the NAC's major functions is pairing artists with corporate sponsors and providing its own direct subsidies.

Two plays in the mould of critiques of social engineering and bureaucratisation by TheatreWorks' Kuo Pau Kun, a former political detainee, are The Coffin Is Too Big For the Hole and No Parking on Odd Days. Examples of plays addressing the gender issue include Ovidia Yu's The Woman in the Tree in the Hill and Three Fat Virgins Unassembled, and Eleanor Wong's three plays The Joust, Exit, and Mergers and Accusations. Both Yu and Wong deal with lesbianism in their works. Significant examples of work focusing on taboos regarding sexuality include Michael Chiang's Private Parts, which deals with transsexuality, and David Henry Hwang's M Butterfly on homosexuality, as well as the works of Yu and Wong on lesbianism.

Robert Yeo is a leading Singapore playwright/producer and also a member of the Censorship Review Committee.

The show went over the time specified on the permit.

Performance art operates from a working script rather than a tight script, allowing considerable scope for spontaneity. Forum theatre was developed by the Brazilian Augusto Boal through his Theatre of the Oppressed programme. It employs a technique of involving the audience in scenes intended to overcome oppressions meaningful to the participants. See Yeo (1994: 58-9)

It was reported in the Sun (Malaysia) that the academic and media communities in Singapore were speculating about a letter by a prominent academic addressed to cabinet supposedly denouncing individuals in the press and cultural establishments as "cultural subversives". See Kuttan (1995: 4)

The two articles were 'The PAP and the People - A Great Affective Divide', STWE, 10 September 1994: 13, and 'One Government, Two Styles', Sunday Times (Singapore), 20 November 1994: 12.

Chan reminded readers of the Prime Minister's observations after the 1991 election which contrasted the views of 'vocal English-educated liberals' and 'the more conservative views of the HDB majority'.

The editor of the Straits Times, Leslie Fong, publicly acknowledges his pro-government stance and makes no apology for it. For comments by Fong and a general discussion of the press in Singapore see Astweek, 25 September 1992: 45-55.

The most noteworthy case is that of J. B. Iyeranetnam whose most recent spat with Lee Kuan Yew cost him a total of S$740,000 in damages and costs after he was found guilty of defamation for comments at an election rally
in 1988. However, since 1972, eleven separate civil actions have been taken against known opposition figures.

21 When Chee came forward to contest the by-election, he was the first academic to run as an opponent to the government since the 1960s. His then SDP chief, Chiam See Tong, described him as the 'most courageous person in Singapore today' (as quoted in the Straits Times Weekly Overseas Edition (STWEO), 12 December 1992: 5).

22 The retention of these parties as registered organisations does enable the government to point to an apparently healthy degree of political pluralism.

23 Under their respective constitutions, the SDP Central Executive Committee (CEC) comprises up to twelve elected members and six co-opted members; the WP can have up to fifteen appointed Council members and a further six co-opted positions.

24 This observation is partly based on interviews with the executive leaders of the WP and SDP.

25 The party remained dormant for much of the 1960s, but was revived in 1971 by Joshua Jeyaretnam.

26 This manifesto was first produced for the 1988 election and subsequently updated in 1994. See WP (1994).

27 One of the significant features of the 1991 election results was that all three new opposition MPs — Low, SDP's Cheo Chiat Chen and Ling How On — were not only bilingual, speaking Mandarin and English, but also had a command of Chinese dialects. Since then, the PAP has decided to promote the use of dialects by its own MPs and candidates, where possible.

28 The SDP produced a one-page leaflet for the 1991 election, entitled SDP Election Message, which itemised some of the cost increases in these areas and also compared government charges in health with those for comparable services in the private sector.


30 Chiam is on record as having likened a political party to a military outfit, contending that it is necessary for one person to give the orders. See STWE, 17 July 1993: 7.

31 Chee's attacks on inequalities led to the charge from the PAP that he was peddling the 'politics of envy'. See Chee's letter to the Forum column of the Straits Times on 17 February 1993 and a subsequent response by 2nd Organising Secretary of the PAP Matthias Yao in STWEO, 27 February 1993: 23 and comments in parliament by Prime Minister Goh reported in STWEO, 13 March 1993: 5.

32 Ling pushed this theme in the 1991 election campaign.


34 Interviews with Chee's executive colleagues revealed some apprehension over his challenges to the PAP on human rights and foreign policy questions.

35 The PAP itself is worried about the implications of this for its own organisational future. In 1993, the party's youth wing was revitalised and renamed Young PAP. At the time, Young PAP's chairman, George Yeo, offered the inducement that people joining Young PAP could take positions different from the party's central leadership. See ST, 26 April 1993: 20.
separate civil actions have been taken at the by-election, he was the first government since the 1960s. His then him as the ‘most courageous person traits Times Weekly Overseas Edition’.

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Unlike wealthier Singaporeans, they have less ability to travel abroad to compensate for any downgrading of the domestic natural environment.

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