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THE GROWTH OF SINGAPORE’S MIDDLE CLASS AND ITS POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Garry Rodan

INTRODUCTION

Renewed interest instigated by O’Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead (1986) in the relationship between economic development and forms of political rule has resulted in special focus on the political impact of the so-called middle class in developing societies. Various writers have argued that the middle class has played an influential, even decisive, role in the decline of authoritarian rule, especially in the East Asian newly-industrialising countries (NICs) of South Korea and Taiwan where the rapid pace of economic growth has brought dramatic social changes (Koo 1989, 1991; Eung 1989; Chou & Nathan 1987; Tien 1989). At the same time, the fluidity and conjunctural nature of middle-class politics is also observed in the literature, its reforming influence tending to be strongest where alliances have been formed with workers and peasants at strategic moments in the struggle against authoritarian rule (Cheng 1990).

Though Singapore’s rapid industrialisation has been achieved with a stable parliamentary system in place, in contrast with the experiences of the East Asian NICs, a sophisticated rather than totally brutal authoritarianism has nevertheless prevailed. Singapore has effectively been a one-party state since the late 1960s, challenges to the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) being systematically discouraged and restricted (Rodan 1989). However, from the early to mid-1980s, the PAP attempted to project a less authoritarian image, a development coinciding with the assumption to senior posts by Goh Chok Tong and colleagues of his generation. A significant part of the inspiration for this approach appeared to have been a concern that Singapore’s expanding middle class in particular was becoming increasingly alienated from the PAP. Hence, many of the government’s recent reforms have involved attempts to co-opt the professionals and the educated elite.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the nature and depth of middle-class alienation from the PAP and the political consequence of this class’s emergence. Is the Singapore middle class a social force likely to push the PAP in the direction of substantive political change? Or are the aspirations of the middle class likely to be accommodated by changes of the sort initiated by the new leadership? What factors condition the form that middle-class political engagement takes in Singapore? How central is the middle class to current and future political developments in Singapore? Given the substantial empirical and theoretical difficulties inherent in any address of these questions, the observations in this discussion must necessarily be speculative. However, the general argument that follows from these observations is that, to date, the main political significance of the expanding middle class lies in the greater expression it gives to inequalities in Singapore society. To the extent that there has been middle-class alienation from the PAP it is qualified in nature; it certainly does not appear to revolve around questions of equity or social justice, nor does it involve alliances with other classes. For one thing, the middle class’s material interests are well served by PAP rule. At the same time, the effectiveness of the PAP in discouraging independent, non-government organisations, especially outside the formal political process, that engage in contestation over public policy has had a bearing on middle-class politics.

Before elaborating on this argument, we must first clarify the concept ‘middle-class’ and establish the extent and form of middle-class expansion in Singapore.

EXTENT OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN SINGAPORE

Broadly, we can distinguish two approaches to the question of class, one inspired by Marxist-based notions of class as a social relationship and the other informed by stratification theory which employs descriptive and categorical notions of wealth, income, education and status levels as the basis of social distinction. In this essay, the concept of class will conform much more closely to that adopted by Marx because of its greater utility in addressing the above-mentioned political questions raised about Singapore’s middle class.

Nevertheless, the ‘middle class’ is somewhat ambiguous in Marxist terms, since in any direct sense it lies outside the fundamental relationships involved
in surplus extraction. Various contemporary writers have thus attempted to refine this category (Poulantzas 1975; Wright 1976, 1978, 1985, 1989; Carchedi 1977; Mills 1951; Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich 1977). One important discernible theme to the literature is the incorporation of some notion of domination between ‘classes’ resulting from the technical division of labour. The middle class dominates the working class yet is itself dominated by the owners of capital (Burriss 1987). At a more concrete level, most writers agree that managers and supervisors are located in the middle class. Also, most writers consider a range of non-supervisory professional and technical positions belong to this class, with differences remaining over exactly which such positions qualify. This consensus forms the basis of the understanding of the ‘middle class’ used in this essay.

Not surprisingly, the size of the middle class in Singapore is a matter of some dispute, even though most of the debate has been among stratification theorists. One view, found in both academic and non-academic literature, is that Singapore is a ‘middle-class society’. In one case this conclusion was arrived at by observing that ‘middle-class’ occupations accounted for more than half the workforce (Chen 1975, 1978). In another case, it was claimed that three out of every four adult Singaporeans ‘could be labelled middle class by their own commonly accepted criteria of income, housing, education and lifestyle’ (Reader & Wong 1988a, p. 12; 1988b). These authors see consumption patterns and self-perception as important factors in defining class position. Singapore’s political leadership also seems to have a notion of a very expansive ‘middle class’. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and current Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong have both described Singapore as a ‘middle-class society’. Indeed, in 1987, Lee claimed ‘Our society has become 80 per cent middle class’ (Lee in Heng n.d., p. 58).

Against this view, a recent work by a group of sociologists at the National University of Singapore contends that prevailing views grossly inflate the extent of the middle class (Quah et al. 1991). These authors caution against reading too much into superficial indicators like consumption patterns. Moreover, they reject any suggestion that ‘social class distinctions have weakened and economic rewards are both high and evenly distributed’ (Quah 1989a, p. 3). For Quah (1991b, p. 71), the idea of a ‘middle-class society’ equates with the appearance of a ‘one-class society’. Yet the study concludes there is ‘no evidence of a concentration of people in one homogeneous “middle” interval’ (Quah 1991c, p. 362). In contrast to Chen’s reading of the 1980 census data, Chiew, Ko and Quah (1991, p. 78) also assert that the proportion of blue-collar or manual workers (production, agricultural and service workers and labourers) amounted to 52.7 per cent, against attempting to expose as myth the idea of Singapore as a ‘middle-class society’.

If the concept ‘middle class’ has inherent difficulties, the concept ‘middle-class society’ is even more problematic. It could be argued, for instance, that rather than the numerical supremacy of a particular class, the distinguishing feature of such a society lies in the dominance of certain values. But this is not a debate worth pursuing any further in this essay, for the middle class need not be the most numerous to have a disproportionate or strategic political influence.

Preliminary data from the 1990 census have been released, providing a better basis for ascertaining the growth in the middle class. There are, however, two limitations to these data. First, they are based on a 10 per cent sample survey, although given the sophisticated sampling techniques employed it is unlikely that the total figures will differ dramatically from the estimates. Second, they are tabulated on a slightly different basis from the data presented in table 4.1. Although they are not strictly comparable, they are useful to gauge general trends.

As table 4.1 shows, the combined share of the total workforce accounted for by administrators, executives and managers, professionals and technicians rose from 7 per cent in 1967 to 11 per cent in 1970 and 13.6 per cent by 1980. Figure 4.1, based on the 1990 census, depicts these combined categories as representing 18 per cent in 1980 and 24 per cent by 1990. This approximates the middle class figure of 21.7 per cent arrived at by Burriss (1991), using International Labor Office data for 1985. The middle class appears, then, to constitute something approaching one-quarter of the workforce in 1990, a figure that represents at least a trebling of the 1957 level.

For a more detailed analysis of the make-up of this rapidly-growing and already substantial middle class, at the time of writing we are still confined to the 1980 census data. As we see from table 4.2, managers were the most numerous individual category within the middle class, followed by architects, engineers, surveyors and teachers.

In Singapore’s case the high economic profile of the state has been a
The growth of Singapore's middle class

Indications that the emerging middle class might bring with it pressure for political change began to surface in the early 1980s. The background to this was the breaking of the PAP's absolute monopoly of parliamentary seats with the success of the Workers' Party (WP) candidate Joshua Jayaratnam in the Anson by-election of 1981. Though this PAP defeat occurred in a predominantly low-income electorate, the subsequent harsh treatment of Jayaratnam and lengthy public denouncements of the principle of parliamentary opposition by Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister Srinathambey Rajaratnam prompted unprecedented expressions of dissent in letters to the local press.

The December 1984 general election results confirmed the apparent shifting mood of the electorate, with a remarkable 13 per cent swing against the government. In the process, not only was Jayaratnam returned with an increased majority, but Chiam See Tong of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), which was just three years old, improved his share of the vote from 40 per cent to 60.4 per cent to take the seat of Potong Pasir. Significantly, Potong Pasir contained a greater share of middle-class voters than Anson. The electorate had about 40 per cent private housing and one of the highest levels of tertiary-educated Singaporeans (Humphrey 1985).

It would be misleading to portray this swing solely in terms of middle-class

significant factor in the expansion of the middle class, through both direct employment and general expenditure. In 1990 there were 128,100 public sector employees. Significantly, though, just less than half of these employees were in statutory boards (Ministry of Trade and Industry 1991, p. 40). Most of these are profit-seeking organisations or, as in the case of the Economic Development Board, quite directly engaged in attempts to seduce or promote private capital investment. So despite government expenditure representing 21 per cent of GDP in 1990 (Ministry of Trade and Industry 1991, p. 28), if we exclude public housing, a relatively small amount of this is devoted to activities like health, social security, social welfare or non-profit-oriented activities outside education. In 1988, for example, spending on social security and welfare represented as little as 2.01 per cent of the total budget expenditure, compared with an international average of around 30 per cent (The South Times, Weekly Overseas Edition [ST WOE] 29 Feb. 1992). The so-called 'new class' housed within the state that neo-conservative theorist Kristol (1978) attaches so much political significance to in the advanced capitalist countries is thus comparatively insignificant in Singapore.

Clearly, then, Singapore has experienced a very rapid middle-class expansion in recent decades. But what have been the political consequences of this dramatic social development?

THE MIDDLE CLASS AND PAP ELECTORAL DECLINE

Table 4.2: Major elements of the middle class, 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>38,569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architects, engineers and surveyors</td>
<td>32,834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>26,479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical, dental and veterinarian</td>
<td>13,309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-government executives</td>
<td>9,471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountants</td>
<td>3,609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government executives</td>
<td>3,292</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Khoo 1981

Fig. 4.1: Occupational distribution, 1980 and 1990

%  

50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0

Prof. Admin. Clerical Sales Production Other

Source: Department of Statistics 1991

Table 4.2: Major elements of the middle class, 1980

<table>
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Source: Khoo 1981
alienation, but certainly the PAP Old Guard’s ideological positions were proving less digestible to the younger and better-educated electorate. The unpopularity of Lee Kuan Yew’s *The Straits Times* (15 Aug. 1984) thesis on eugenics is a particular example. Significantly, in the subsequent ‘Great Marriage Debate’, as it was termed, the columns of *The Straits Times* were replete with letters of dissent and dismay from female graduates, the benefactors of the policies being proposed to ‘correct’ matters. Social engineering and elitism had gone too far on this occasion. The debate testified to the growing confidence among Singapore’s educated middle class to publicly criticise government policy (Rohan 1988, pp. 185–6).

The 1984 election represented a genuine watershed in Singapore politics. In its wake, the New Guard of the PAP, ascendant within the party as a result of a carefully-managed leadership transition process, set out to recapture lost support with special focus on the middle class. The strategy was premised on the idea that a new party image was essential, one that broke from the paternalism and authoritarianism of the past. The substance to the image would be provided by a number of reforms intended to open up avenues for greater consultation with the middle class in the policy process. The new measures were an alternative to any more fundamental changes to the prevailing political culture, which might threaten the one-party state.

**Wooing the Middle Class**

Chief among the reforms by the PAP to open up channels for greater consultation with the middle class were the establishment of a Feedback Unit in 1985, the introduction of Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs) in 1987 and the creation of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in 1988 through a $4 million government grant. The theme to these reforms was the PAP’s determination that dissent and disaffection with government policies, especially by the middle class, be directed through institutions that either the PAP itself controlled, or that had potential to depoliticise policy debate (Rohan 1992). The principal aim was to undercut gains by opposition political parties and to defuse any formative sentiment for a change to the political culture.

The results of the 1988 general election seemed at one level to suggest that the PAP’s strategy was working. The opposition vote increased by a less dramatic 1.7 per cent on this occasion, with the SDP’s Chiam remaining the sole elected opposition MP. The caveat was that in eight seats, of which two were in single-member constituencies and six were in the newly-created group representation constituencies (GRCs), the PAP vote had fallen by 5.5 per cent (ST WOE 4 Sept. 1988). PAP concern about the middle class was soon heightened, however, by figures released in 1989 which documented a massive exodus of Singaporeans. As many as 7,007 families emigrated from Singapore in 1988 (Asian Wall Street Journal 9 Oct. 1989). The problem was beginning to take on an economic dimension, with the most skilled and educated sections of the workforce showing the greatest propensity to leave the city-state. A subsequent study commissioned by the IPS revealed an alarmingly high percentage of young, English-educated, high-income Singaporeans surveyed had considered emigrating. This same group also expressed a disproportionately high belief that the government was not very interested in the views of Singapore’s citizens. Significantly, the same study discovered that nearly two-thirds of all Singaporeans, with little variation on the basis of race, regarded the country as ‘over-regulated’ (Chiew 1990). In particular, there was resentment at the official control exerted over people’s reading and viewing material (Cheng 1990).

It was against this background that one of the more controversial of the government’s initiatives was introduced — a new category of parliamentary members who would be appointed by the President on the advice of a Special Select Committee. Nominated MPs (NMPs) would have restricted voting rights but could speak on any Bill or motion. The intention of NMPs was to provide a non-partisan alternative view in parliament to satisfy the apparent persistent desire in the electorate, the highly-educated members in particular, for an opposition. Again, the idea was to avoid the politics of contestation. These NMPs would ‘concentrate on the substance of the debate rather than form and rhetoric’, as elected opposition MPs were prone to do, according to Goh Chok Tong (*Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, 29 Nov. 1989). It was also supposed to mean bringing quality people with special expertise into parliament. Interestingly, the Feedback Unit Chairman, Chandra Dass, himself one of a number of PAP backbenchers apprehensive about the reform, acknowledged that the Unit’s sessions appeared to suggest enthusiastic support for the idea among professionals and academics (*Singapore Parliamentary Debates* 29 Nov. 1989). In 1990 two NMPs entered parliament, heart specialist Associate Professor Maurice Choo and President and Chief Executive Officer of United Industrial Corporation (UCI) and Chairman of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board Leong Chee Whye.

In addition to the measures to discourage aspirations of political liberalisation involving some notion of a two-party system, the new leadership responded to the calls for a relaxation of regulations in the cultural sphere, including a revision of its film classification system and a commitment to review the censorship code. At the more trivial level, a thirty-two year ban on joke boxes was lifted. But the PAP also tried to present partial privatisation of educational and health facilities as part of a general commitment to opening up choices to individuals, and wending back the paternalistic state. Prime Minister Goh even pointed to the involvement of private sector architects in public housing designs and refurbishing as further evidence of this trend (Goh 1991). There were certainly changes afoot; the question was whether these were of such a nature or magnitude to appease the electorate, especially the alienated elements of the middle class.
THE 1991 ELECTION: REVELATIONS OF A BROADER POLITICAL DYNAMIC

The opportunity to further test the response to the government's targeted reform was to come sooner than most expected, with a snap poll held some two years before required on 31 August 1991. New Prime Minister Goh maintained he needed approval for his recently-announced long-term programme embodied in a document entitled Singapura: The Next Lap (Government of Singapore 1991 ) and a personal mandate for what he proclaimed as his consultative style of government. However, with the results of the election, Goh and the PAP were to discover that alienation from the party was more broadly-based than previously imagined. In particular, the results demonstrated significant working-class discontent with the government, a discontent not altogether unrelated to the emergence of the middle class and the government’s attempts to cater to it. The rapid and increasingly conspicuous material improvements of the middle class have over the last decade coincided with widening inequalities in Singapore society. As will be argued below, this context has a great bearing on the middle class’s political significance and potential.

With just nine days’ notice, opposition parties adopted the unusual but clever strategy of allowing forty-one of the eighty-one parliamentary seats to go uncontested. This was not just for lack of time to marshal resources. The argument was that since a vote for the opposition could not in these circumstances bring down the government, sentiment for genuine, as opposed to a manufactured, parliamentary opposition could be tapped. This approach was vindicated, with the opposition parties picking up three additional seats and further consolidating their hold on the seat of Potong Pasir. In the process, the government’s share of the total valid votes cast dropped from the 1988 level of 63.2 per cent to 61 per cent. However, while there is evidence that middle-class disaffection played some part in the opposition vote, this factor was uneven across electorates and not a dominant theme in the results.

New PAP losses occurred in the seats of Bukit Gombak, Nee Soon Central and Hougang. However, as table 4.3 indicates, the margins in favour of the government in Bukit Batok, Nee Soon South, Braddell Heights, Changi and Eunos were slim. Table 4.4 indicates further that the most substantial shifts against the government additionally involved the seats of Ulu Pandan, Jurong, Bukit Merah and Yio Chu Kang. Of these electorates, only Ulu Pandan and Braddell Heights boast substantial middle-class compositions. The former incorporates many of Singapore’s more prestigious private housing estates and the latter a significant number of older private estates. In both electorates there are high percentages of tertiary-educated (Humphrey 1985). Significantly, though, in the pre-eminent middle-class electorate of Tanglin the PAP candidate secured 68.5 per cent of the vote. Even taking into account the internal differentiation of the middle class, there were clearly other factors than class operating, such as the quality of candidates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Electorate</th>
<th>% of vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chiam See Tong (SDP)</td>
<td>Potong Pasir</td>
<td>69.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Thia Khiang (WP)</td>
<td>Hougang</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ling Hwee Hoong (SDP)</td>
<td>Bukit Gombak</td>
<td>61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheow Chai Chen (SDP)</td>
<td>Nee Soon Central</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwan Yew Keng (SDP)</td>
<td>Bukit Batok</td>
<td>48.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sim Kee Tong (SDP)</td>
<td>Braddell Heights</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Siew Chooi (WP)</td>
<td>Eunos GRC</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wee Han Kim (WP)</td>
<td>Nee Soon South</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohd Jufri Mahmood (WP)</td>
<td>Nee Soon South</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neo Choon Aik (WP)</td>
<td>Changi</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Yong Nguan (SDP)</td>
<td>Nee Soon South</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan Bin Seng (WP)</td>
<td>Yio Chu Kang</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teoh Kim Kit (SDP)</td>
<td>Nee Soon South</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The remainder of the above-cited electorates are generally satellite towns on the outer of the city centre, dominated by three- or four-bedroom Housing Development Board flats. They contain a high percentage of constituents with average and below-average incomes who, keeping the theoretical points made at the outset in mind, might reasonably be described as working-class, given that this category would include clerical and various other non-supervisory white-collar workers. Certainly, again, there were some specific factors helping to explain results in these electorates. In both Nee Soon Central and Bukit Gombak, for instance, there were large numbers of resettled and disgruntled pig, poultry, fish and shrimp farmers and market gardeners who had been adversely affected by government policies to rationalise primary industry on the island. The command of Mandarina by the SDP’s Cheow Chai Chen in Nee Soon Central and of Teo Cheew by the WP’s Low Thia Khiang in Hougang also enabled them to reach out to their electorates more effectively than the PAP candidates.

Most importantly, however, people in these electorates had been hard hit by a host of recent increases affecting basic services like health, transport, housing and education, some of which arose out of privatisations partly intended to widen choices for the wealthy middle class. According to one estimate, whilst the consumer price index rose by 3.8 per cent for the first half of 1991, costs in public transport rose by 19 per cent, health charges by 9.9 per cent and education charges by 6.8 per cent (Far Eastern Economic Review [FERR] 10 Oct. 1991). In this climate, elitist policies such as independent schools, the gifted education programme and incentives to encourage marriage between graduates - all of which targeted the middle class — were a source of special irritation. In response to such concerns, in his National Day Rally speech Goh held out the prospect of some expansion in welfare spending, notably in health care and education. It was stressed, however, that...
Table 4.4: Biggest swings against the PAP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>% swing to opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ulu Pandan</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nee Soon South</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hougang</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurong</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nee Soon Central</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bukit Merah</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu-Hua</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potong Pasir</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braddell Heights</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changi</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bukit Gombak</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bukit Batok</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This would not involve levelling (ST, 17 Aug. 1991). In other words, there would be no redistribution from, or dismantling of the privileges of, the middle class. In any case, at an early stage in the election campaign the opposition parties were able to successfully steer debate towards the cost of living and related issues, with Goh’s emphasis on his leadership style largely ignored as an issue.

The contemporary political impact of cost of living increases, and indeed the elitist orientation of public policy, has to be viewed against a background of perceived growing inequality within Singapore. The PAP government has never explicitly had an objective of reducing inequalities in income and wealth; it has instead emphasized economic growth and equal opportunity to contribute to (and thereby indirectly benefit from) this process (Rao 1990). However, the tremendous national economic growth of the country has not reached all citizens. In 1989, the Committee on Destitute Families reported that there were 1300 families living in poverty in Singapore and another 22,000 “barely managing to keep themselves together” (ST WOK, 25 Mar. 1989). An argument has also been advanced by academic Tan Kong Yam (ST, 29 July 1991) that there now exists within Singapore a so-called ‘middle-class squeeze’.

In this context, a hitherto unrecognized disadvantage of the population earns too much to benefit from subsidies yet too little to outbid the top 10 per cent for private property, cars (which are subject to quota) and other limited resources.

In attempting to refute this thesis, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong inadvertently highlighted a larger picture. Citing data covering the period from 1973 to 1978, he showed that the bottom 20 per cent of the workforce improved their incomes by 3.7 per cent in this time, but there were gains of 4.1 per cent for the middle 60 per cent and 4.2 per cent for the top 20 per cent (ST, 30 July 1991). Other official figures give expression to the uneven distribution of income. According to the Ministry of Labour (1990, p. 69), 54.5 per cent of the workforce received less than $800 per month. However, only 13 per cent of professional and technical workers and just 1.6 per cent of administrative, managerial and executive workers fall into this category. At the other end, whereas just 12.6 per cent of the workforce received more than $2000 per month, as many as 39.1 per cent of professional and technical workers and 64.4 per cent of all administrative, managerial and executive workers received this amount.

Singapore appears to be heading down a path similar to another NIC, South Korea. There, income inequality declined in the first phase of the export oriented industrialisation programme (EOI) in the 1960s with the initial effects of reduced unemployment and general opportunities for mobility. Thereafter, the increasing sophistication of the economy brought with it greater differentials in skills and remuneration (Koo 1985). In Singapore’s case, a fairly distinct dual labour market is emerging now that the first phase of the EOI programme is over. One involves the highly-skilled middle-class professionals, technicians and administrators who are not only in insufficient supply in Singapore but also in the advanced industrial economies. This group can of course command high salaries or seek better conditions overseas. The other market involves a range of semi- and unskilled workers, many of whom are in the manufacturing sector, whose wage cost competitiveness is related to the conditions available to employers in developing countries in the region and elsewhere. The exceptional external dependence of the Singapore economy compounds the problem.

This tendency is not unique to the NICs. However, in varying degrees developed countries have employed political measures, notably through taxation-funded welfare systems, to alleviate the inequitable income distributions (both absolute and relative) associated with the greater differentiation of the workforce. Significantly, in the wake of the election, the PAP has stepped up its efforts to deflect welfare responsibilities to ethnic and charitable organizations in preference to an expanded direct role by the state (Business Times 5–6 Oct, 1991). It has also engaged in a delicate post-election exercise of denouncing its apparent policy preoccupation with the middle class in recent times (ST, WOK 28 Sept, 1991), while at the same time trying not to raise class consciousness in the electorate.

While the actual extent and trend of income inequality may be debated by politicians and academics, leaving aside the even more difficult but no less important issue of wealth disparities, what matters in political terms is how people perceive the distribution of rewards associated with Singapore’s development process. The consumption of the middle class has certainly become more conspicuous in Singapore over the last decade. Consequently, the working class is increasingly viewing in social and economic position with reference to what it sees as the especially privileged middle class and the PAP government’s institutional support of these privileges.

What has the 1991 election revealed? Certainly it reveals a broader political dynamic behind the declining support for the government over the last decade than has hitherto been presumed. The results do not discount some level of middle-class alienation from the PAP, but they do put this in
perspective. Indeed, there appears to be a growing perception within the electorate that the government’s policies are overly-responsive to the interests of this middle class. If there are growing material disparities, it will become more difficult for elitist policies which disproportionately favour the middle class to be rationalised. At the same time, it would be misleading to interpret the election results as the triumph of ‘bread and butter’ issues over questions of political authoritarianism, as some commentators have (Chen 1991, p. 13). Rather, to the extent that the PAP was caught out by the degree of working-class discontent, it is a measure of the inadequate political space for independent organisations, in particular an independent trade union movement, to engage the government in critical debate over policies (Heng 1991, p. 13). This leads us to our final line of inquiry in this essay — the political behaviour of the middle class outside the formal political process.

THE MIDDLE CLASS BEYOND ELECTORAL POLITICS

Where the middle class has played a role in political change in NIGC, it has exerted a significant influence through the formation of independent interest-group organisations. These have included consumer organisations, church groups, student movements, feminist and women’s organisations, employer associations, legal associations and various other civic organisations that have entered into public debate and/or protest over government policy without being formal participants in the electoral process (Lo 1990).

One of the closest parallels with independent organisations active in other NIGCs during the 1980s in Singapore involved religious organisations that campaigned on behalf of workers, notably guest workers. It was work of this nature by Catholic organisations such as the Young Christian Workers’ Movement, the Catholic Welfare Centre and the Catholic Centre for Foreign Workers that attracted special attention by the authorities in 1987 and culminated in the detention, under the Internal Security Act (ISA), of various Catholic social workers and others accused of engaging in a ‘Marxist conspiracy’. In the wake of the arrests the Catholic church closed down these organisations (Haas 1989, pp. 59-60). The government also expelled five Christian missionaries and dissolved the Christian Conference of Asia on charges of involvement in Singapore’s domestic politics (FEER 14 Jan. 1989).

The government was particularly concerned about the extent to which theologically-inspired conceptions of social justice were not only influencing young, English-educated professionals, but setting in train political links between these middle-class elements and the working class. The 1990 introduction of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill to restrict the comment of the clergy in any religious capacity on social and political matters, underlines the PAP’s resolve to determine to end any formative social activism through religious organisations in Singapore.

The official reception to the Law Society’s entry into public debate in 1990, with its comments on the government’s amendments to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, was similarly hostile. Again, the ‘confrontation’ was followed up with legislative amendments and the establishment of a new Academy of Law whose governing body is almost exclusively comprised of government appointees. This development threatened the Law Society’s status and, therefore, its potential influence. The Academy’s ostensible purpose was to raise judicial competence and collegial spirit, but it was also granted vague disciplinary powers with the potential to usurp or rival the functions of the Law Society. Its establishment made it clear to lawyers that the government was displeased with the Law Society. Legislation covering other professional organisations has also been reviewed.

Nevertheless, in the late 1980s and early 1990s there were organisations whose membership and influence expanded, and in which professionals, intellectuals, social workers and other elements of the middle class played a leadership role. The explanation for official tolerance of these organisations lies partly in their apparently non-threatening political nature. But at the same time, their expansion and growing stature have prompted attempts by the PAP to co-opt or counter them and prevent the possibility of genuine and effective interest groups forming.

The Malayan Nature Society (MNS), known since 1992 as the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS), is one of the leading non-government organisations to have flourished in recent times. In part this is because Singapore’s expanding and affluent middle class, including policymakers, have shifted attention to ‘quality of life’ questions (George 1991, p. 14). At the same time, a top-down party like the PAP cannot draw on grassroots party organisations or committees for expertise in these areas. Consequently, the MNS’s Master Plan for the Conservation of Nature in Singapore (Briffett 1990), submitted to the government in October 1990, was largely endorsed by the government and the NSS is currently advising the government on a variety of conservation issues.

The influence of the MNS/NSS, however, also has much to do with its strategy of deliberately avoiding public debate with the government. Its lobbying is done more privately, exchanging letters to newspapers and petitions. The organisation relies on the strength of its documentation and the fact that, with a current membership of 1100, by Singapore standards of voluntary bodies it can claim to represent a relatively sizeable group of people (ST 29 June 1991). Importantly, though, it enjoys no institutionalised access to government. The government certainly appears to be hedging bets with its backing in 1990, through the Ministry of National Development, of the National Council on the Environment (NCE), a private voluntary organisation involving corporate entrepreneurs and chaired by Robert Kwas, the managing director of McDonald’s restaurants (ST 7 Nov. 1990).

Another such organisation is the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) which was established in 1985. This organisation also tries to avoid open contestation of government policy. Indeed, in its first publica-
tion, it was explicitly stated that 'AWARE's strategy is to take a low profile' (AWARE 1988a, p.46). Nonetheless, letters are written to The Straits Times more frequently by AWARE than by the MNS/NSP, and AWARE frequently holds public forums on women's issues. Moreover, the organisation has taken some forthright public positions in opposition to government policy and played a crucial role in the 'Great Marriage Debate', culminating in the production of its first policy paper (AWARE 1988b). This document was taken seriously, leading to a closed-door forum with the Institute of Policy Studies and subsequent adjustments in government policy.

The PAP responded to AWARE's effectiveness by fostering a counter-organisation over which it could exercise more control. In this case, the PAP's Women's Wing was revived in late 1988, having lapsed during the 1980s into insignificance. To date it has had little impact. Understandably, then, the PAP's attitude to AWARE, as it is to the MNS/NSP, is ambiguous. In recognition of the fact that the organisation is in close touch with, and represents a significant body of, public opinion, government ministers readily accept invitations to address the organisation.

Probably the most significant and interesting recent development in the area of non-government organisations, however, involves the formation of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) in 1990. The stimulus for its establishment was a conviction that the existing council for the development of the Muslim community, Mendaki, dominated by PAP MPs, was endorsing rather than challenging a variety of recent policies that were bad for the Malay community. The community response to the AMP's October 1990 national convention, entitled 'Malays/Muslims in 21st Century Singapore: Prospects, Challenges & Directions', was overwhelming. One of the proposals at the convention was for Mendaki to be depoliticised, with Malay MPs surrendering their positions over time in favour of community figures (Chua 1991, pp. 261–2).

Subsequently, the AMP closed membership of the organisation to members of any political party. As an organisation of professionals, the AMP represents a clear case of middle-class activism, yet it obviously cannot be reduced simply to socioeconomic variables. The government's response to the AMP contrasts with its treatment of other challenges or implicit or explicit criticisms of government policy. It has encouraged the AMP's development through the offer of matching funds on a dollar-for-dollar basis for the operations of an alternative to Mendaki, rather than its depoliticisation (Chua 1991, p. 262). The offer has been taken up by the AMP, but only after insisting to the government that this should not compromise its independence. An exception to the general rule for societies, the AMP has no government nominees on its governing board and there are no particular conditions attached to the use of government-supplied money. How do we explain this generous support for the AMP? At least three factors are involved. First, the government appears to think that this direction is preferable to an open and sustained attack on PAP MPs through the attempted transformation of Mendaki. Second, the government itself perceives an opportunity to harness the AMP to the current PAP project of fostering community-based approaches to social welfare. Third, the PAP recognises the strength of Malay perceptions about the community's treatment and regards the AMP as a better vehicle for grievances than opposition political parties. In this instance, then, independence is supportable.

Broadly, then, we can cite some evidence of increased activity by independent organisations. However, the preconditions for engagement in policy debate are still quite restrictive and far well short of approximating political pluralism.

**CONCLUSION**

It would appear that while there is a degree of middle-class alienation from the PAP it does not extend to a concerted attempt to transform political life in Singapore. Neither in formal politics nor civil society is there any indication of such an attempt. This, however, should not be surprising, for even in Taiwan and South Korea the middle class has been a reluctant even if significant player in the process of political change. In those cases, the existing regimes had the effect of radicalising the masses to a point that threatened the overall stability of the state. Such a situation hardly exists in Singapore. Instead, the regime, whose executive is pre-eminently middle class, has preserved over much more stable political conditions. Moreover, rather than suppress electoral politics, the PAP has successfully exploited the process to marginalise opponents and channel dissent. Independent organisations operating outside this process, especially those that might mimic the pattern of cross-class alliances in other NICs, have been effectively curbed.

The above analysis suggests, however, that the emergence of a sizeable and conspicuously affluent middle-class in Singapore has not only occurred alongside increased material disparities (whether absolute or relative), but that these disparities are to some extent structurally linked to the nature and stage of Singapore's economic development. This poses an important set of political questions that affect both the middle class and the PAP-dominated state. Certainly it places the ideology of elitism under increased strain and gives greater visibility to the relationship between the state and the middle class. The political challenge for the PAP, therefore, is not only to address the issue of inequality, both real and perceived, but to do this in a manner that does not inadvertently raise class consciousness.

**NOTES**

1 The data in table 4.1 are tabulated on the basis of the Singapore Standard Occupational Classification 1978 whereas the latest census is tabulated on the basis of the Singapore Standard Occupational Classification 1990. The latter attempts to use 'skill' as a major basis for distinguishing different occupational categories.
2 In an attempt to adapt the International Standard Classification of Occupations to the task of measuring the middle class in East Asia, Burls (1991, p. 20) estimates that approximately 20 per cent of the salaried employees and wage earners in the categories 'clerical and related workers' and 'sales workers' would be comprised of supervisors and government executive officials.

3 However, new occupational groups and titles give some sense of the dynamic nature of middle-class expansion. New occupational groups include computing professionals, financial analysts and related professionals, assistant engineers, finance and sales associates, professionals, business service agents and trade brokers. New titles include research assistant, database administrator, automation engineer, ecologists, fund manager, foreign exchange dealers, computer technicians and plant tissue culture technicians (Department of Statistics 1991, p. 6).

4 This was to be extended to six NMPs in 1992 when the terms of Choo and Leong expired. See FEDER 24 Sept. 1992.

5 The SPP Election Message, for instance, formulated a range of charges and cost increases in recent years and drew attention to the extremely high salaries of government ministers in comparison with those of such countries as the USA, Japan, the UK, Australia and China.

6 Hence, great store is made of the fact that the bulk of Singapore's middle class is English-educated not Chinese-educated, and that Chinese-educated elements of the middle class have special status pertaining to the downgrading of Chinese culture within Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew has also emphasised the special disadvantage of the Chinese-educated in the rapidly-changing economy owing to their limited capacity to undergo retraining, since programmes are predominantly in English instruction (3 Feb 14 Oct. 1991). This sort of discourse is neither new nor without foundation, but in a context of increasing income inequalities it remains to be seen if its political effect is constant.

7 In a subsequent attempt to redeem his argument about income distribution trends, Lee Hsien Loong produced data which showed that the annual income growth in the decade 1986-90 witnessed greater gains by blue-collar workers at 5.6 per cent, compared with 3.3 per cent for clerical workers and 3.1 per cent for professionals. As for absolute inequalities, Lee drew on the World Development Report 1992 to make the point that by international standards Singapore enjoyed low levels of income inequality (3 Feb 18 Jan. 1992). The problem was that the data were derived from surveys conducted mainly in the late 1980s and early 1970s (World Bank 1991).

However, a recent study by Rao argues that between the early 1970s and late 1980s the degree of inequality in Singapore's household income distribution remained roughly the same. Indeed, he pointed out that 'The top 10 per cent of the families have an income share of a little over 30 per cent which is not too far from the range of 24-31 per cent in OECD countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s' (Rao 1990, p. 147). Yet a similar study notes that when we look at income distributions on an individual basis, using data on CPF contributions and taxpayers, larger but not dramatic increases in income inequality are revealed.

8 AWARE's other notable intervention in public debate involved a challenge to a statement by Lee Kuan Yew about the possibility of a return to polygamy to arrest the decline in Singapore's population growth.

9 The proceedings of this convention have been published. See National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals 1991.

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