Contents

List of tables ........................................................................................................ page ix
List of contributors ............................................................................................... xi
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................. xiii

Introduction: Elections and politics in Southeast Asia ........................................ 1
R. H. Taylor

1 Elections and participation in three Southeast Asian countries ..................... 12
Benedict R. Anderson

2 A useful fiction: Democratic legitimation in New Order Indonesia ............... 34
R. William Liddle

3 Elections without representation: The Singapore experience under the PAP 61
Garry Rodan

4 Elections' Janus face: Limitations and potential in Malaysia ....................... 90
Jomo K. S.

5 Malaysia: Do elections make a difference? ...................................................... 114
Harold Crouch

6 Contested meanings of elections in the Philippines ....................................... 136
Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet

7 Elections in Burma/Myanmar: For whom and why? ..................................... 164
R. H. Taylor

8 Elections and democratization in Thailand ..................................................... 184
Suchit Bunbongkarn

9 A tale of two democracies: Conflicting perceptions of elections and democracy in Thailand .................................................. 201
Anek Laothamatas
Elections without representation:
The Singapore experience under the PAP

GARRY RODAN

INTRODUCTION

In Singapore, regular and open elections have existed alongside authoritarianism for decades.¹ In this situation, elections have not given effect to broader democratic representations or processes. Rather, extraparliamentary constraints on challenges to the policies and ideologies of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) have generally rendered elections a stunted political expression—not the periodic culmination of many contests over social and political power, but the only contest. Nevertheless, in the PAP's historical struggle for, and subsequent consolidation of, political supremacy, elections have been a significant institution. They have afforded the PAP government a political legitimacy not enjoyed by other authoritarian regimes, especially important in limiting the impact of external criticism. Ironically, elections have thus enabled the PAP to claim a mandate in operating outside democratic processes between ballots.

There has never been any pretense on the part of the PAP leadership that the formal appearances of liberal democracy in Singapore reflect the actual substance of the political system. In the early years of self-government Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared that "Western type parliamentary democracy has to be adapted and adjusted to suit the practical realities of our position."² Lee expressed deep reservations

¹Under the Constitution, elections are required at least every five years. In practice, the People's Action Party (PAP) has not gone the full five years since 1968, tending to call elections a year earlier than required.
²Quoted in Alex Jossey, Lew Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974), 229.
about the capacity of political oppositions in the Asian context to play a constructive role. Added to this was the view that Singapore, like other developing countries, ran a certain risk with universal suffrage because the requisite strong leadership and policies promoting economic growth could not be guaranteed popular support. Following the failed merger with Malaysia and Singapore's political independence, the imperatives of nation building also entered into the list of caveats about the democratic process. These arguments formed the basis of the PAP's justification not just for a host of constraints on the activities of opposition political parties and dissident individuals in a dominant-party system but also for a virtual merging of the institutions of party and state, which to a large extent afforded the mechanisms to effect such constraints.

The considerable power enjoyed by the ruling elite in this authoritarian system is further rationalized by an elaborate ideology of elitism, which is now deeply embedded in the social structure of Singapore and dominant within the political culture. According to this ideology, Singapore must be, and indeed as a result of reforms by successive PAP administrations actually is, an uncompromising meritocracy. In this view, government as a technical process is emphasized over government as a political process, leading Chan to describe Singapore as an "administrative state." Such an ideology is antithetical to any concept of political representation that emphasizes the obligations of government to reflect and/or respond to the aspirations and concerns of the electorate. Rather, it reinforces a strict Hobbesian notion of representation as the authority to act, an authority in which elections provide formal and periodic acknowledgment of the intrinsic merit of the leadership. This elitism manifests itself not just in a rejection of interest-group representation in the political process, but it also shapes the selection of candidates for the ruling party through an almost exclusive preoccupation with formal educational and technical qualifications. The ide-
ology of meritocracy is thus a rationale for a very exclusive political process.

With the PAP enjoying a parliamentary monopoly from 1966 to 1981, elections were unproblematic for authoritarian rule. However, a sustained electoral decline since the early 1980s, though not suggestive of a change of government in the foreseeable future, has aroused serious concern within the PAP. Yet precisely because elections have been the only sanctioned avenue for political contestation, and because the PAP has itself drawn so readily on their existence for its legitimacy, elections are now entrenched in the political system; they could be emasculated only at serious political cost to the PAP. Instead, the government has responded with a number of institutional reforms to the political system, including the electoral process, and modifications to the ideological justification for a virtual one-party state in Singapore.

Although these responses have their limitations and even contradictions, we should be careful not to overstate the immediate democratic possibilities in Singapore and the role elections might play in this. In particular, opposition political parties remain constrained in their ability to form meaningful power bases. The PAP's continued hostility to any notion of political representation mitigates against the involvement of non-state-sponsored organizations in the political process, however indirectly. But a less recognized constraint is the ideological success the PAP has had with opposition parties themselves. Their implicit acceptance of elitist PAP assumptions about the purpose and process of government also stifles the development of an alternative politics that could find expression through the ballot and offer voters a significant choice. At both the structural and the ideological levels, politics as a process of representation has yet to achieve legitimacy within Singapore.

POSTWAR ELECTIONS AND PAP ELECTORAL DOMINANCE

The attainment of Singapore's self-government and independence was channeled through the electoral process and political parties. After administrative separation from Malaya and Singapore's declaration as a Crown Colony in 1946, a legislative council was inaugurated in 1948, which comprised six elected seats and a further sixteen ex officio and nominated members. New elections in 1951 raised the proportion of elected seats to nine out of twenty-five. However, it was only with the
advent of the Rendel Constitution of 1955 that elections began to assume meaning for the general population. The Rendel Constitution, while retaining defense, finance, and internal security matters in the hands of the governor, introduced automatic voter registration and a new thirty-two-member legislative assembly, twenty-five seats of which were directly elected by the people in April of that year.

Prior to this, the party of the domestic bourgeoisie, the Singapore Progressive Party and the Singapore Labour Party, led by middle-class, English-speaking Indians, had enjoyed electoral success because the process was largely exclusive of the non-English-educated working class and petite bourgeoisie. The early parties failed to reflect anything but the narrow interests and aspirations of the elite. However, the prospect of self-government set in train a flowering of political parties, including the PAP and the Singapore Labour Front—both formed in 1954 and both quickly commanding genuine popular support. The PAP, a convenient alliance between radical representatives of the Chinese working class and a group of English-educated, middle-class nationalists, engaged selectively in the electoral process leading up to 1959, keeping the pressure on for complete, rather than partial, self-government. By the time this materialized, compulsory voting had been introduced. This, combined with a first-past-the-post system, gave the PAP reason to embrace the 1959 elections wholeheartedly. In the event, it won forty-three of the fifty-one legislative seats with 53.4 percent of the total vote.

It should be understood that the establishment of the electoral process and multiparty politics before self-government was not indicative of any common set of political values about the broader political process itself. Rather, elections represented a means by which a party might assert political dominance. Hence, when in office, the PAP felt no constraint in engaging in various violations of democratic principles and had no commitment to the building of democratic political institutions that might support the electoral process.

Despite its resounding win, the early 1960s were years of considerable internal turmoil for the PAP. The intensity of the power struggle between its two economically diverse factions was exacerbated by the issue of merger with the Federation of Malaysia, resulting in the formation in

---


"Five parties contested the 1955 elections and by 1959 there were ten contesting elections for self-government."
1963 of a new party, the Barisan Sosialis (BS). The consequent exodus of the Left from the PAP depleted the party of its grassroots base and threw its electoral viability into question. However, rather than abandon the electoral process, the PAP government exploited its executive powers to impair the capacity of its new formal opponents. Most conspicuous in this was the use of the state-owned Singapore Broadcasting Commission for propaganda and the exercise of the Internal Security Act to intimidate activists in the trade union movement, journalists, and others.9 Understandably, the BS’s base in the trade union movement was a priority target. But at the same time, the government introduced further social reforms in housing and education to cultivate greater support within the working class.

The split also precipitated the integration of the PAP and the state. This involved more than just an alliance between the PAP and senior civil service bureaucrats who accrued greater power as the public sector’s importance to social and economic development increased. Freed of the necessity to respond to grassroots policy initiatives, and indeed wary of newcomers within party organizational ranks, the PAP leadership transferred and assigned various political functions to the bureaucracy. Over time, the politicization of the civil service resulted in such a close relationship between its upper echelons and the government that the two became almost indistinguishable. Increasingly, recruitment into government occurred via the civil service.10 But more than just asserting the leadership’s control over the party organization, the intermeshing of the government and the public bureaucracy established new forms of social and political control for the PAP. In this project, community centers and Citizens’ Consultative Committees became important institutions through which the policies and values of the technocratic elite were transmitted.11

As the electoral record shows, the above formula managed to hold the PAP in office in 1963 and consolidate its power thereafter. Instead


of weakening the government, the political and economic uncertainty created by the failed merger with Malaysia was used to rationalize new levels of state control in the name of safeguarding the national interest. Lee Kuan Yew stressed the centrality of a “very tightly organized society” in surviving the precarious situation Singapore now faced. Furthermore, the new export-oriented industrialization program had shown significant results by the time of the 1968 elections, with manufacturing employment rising from 45,535 in 1965 to 73,059 three years later. Meanwhile, by October 1966, the PAP’s major opponents, the BS, had withdrawn from the parliamentary process altogether. It called on the PAP to act on eight demands relating to the conditions for serious political opposition, including the release of political prisoners, freedom of speech, and the abolition of detention laws. But if the BS felt it was impaired in the parliamentary process, party leader Lee Siew Choh’s call to advance the “struggle outside Parliament,” which would have tested the full force of the PAP state, never got off the ground. In the 1968 election, the PAP won fifty-one of the fifty-eight seats unopposed and picked up the remaining seven with comfortable majorities. The remarkable subsequent economic transformation of Singapore ensured that the PAP’s electoral stocks remained exceptionally high, with the party averaging 72 percent of the total vote for the next three general elections and a total monopoly of parliamentary seats.

This period of absolute political dominance by the PAP went hand in hand with the institutionalization of rigid hierarchical structures throughout both the political and social spheres, aided greatly by the supportive ideology of meritocracy. This ideology is neatly encapsulated in Lee Kuan Yew’s 1967 observation that in every society there is some five percent of the population “who are more than ordinarily endowed physically and mentally and in whom we must expend our limited and slender resources in order that they will provide that yeast, that ferment, that catalyst in our society that alone will ensure that Singapore shall maintain its pre-eminent place in the societies that exist in South and Southeast Asia.” Very quickly, and without any serious debate over the criteria of merit, formal educational and professional qualifications

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Table 3.1. PAP Legislative Assembly and Parliament Election Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Assembly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955 April 2</td>
<td>25²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959 May 30</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963 September 21</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliament</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968 April 13</td>
<td>7 + (51)³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972 September 2</td>
<td>57 + (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976 December 23</td>
<td>53 + (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980 December 23</td>
<td>38 + (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984 December 22</td>
<td>49 + (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988 September 3</td>
<td>70 + (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991 August 31</td>
<td>40 + (41)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

²Refers to total votes cast, not to votes won.
³The 1955 Legislative Assembly members, and four nominated members were adopted as the almighty royalty. Accordingly, the 1955 Legislative Assembly was elected, not necessarily produced a winner but one that was expected to be the pretense of merit, not removed from system to the upper echelons but directed, so that the party’s able to any broader party elite were of course interlocked.

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The PAP’s parliamentary agenda, when Joshua Jayaratnam had predominantly low-income...
nic uncertainty rationalize new national interest, organized society faced. Fur-
am had shown manufacturing years later. The BS, had called on the of serious po-
ers, freedom of BS felt it was Choh’s call had have tested. In the 1968 sup posed and ities. The re- pany ensured high, with the three general went hand in al structures rea lly by the encapsulated there is some rily endowed limited and that ferment, agapore shall n South and debate over qualifications.

Table 3.1. Parliamentary elections since 1955

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of seats</th>
<th>Number of parties contesting</th>
<th>Party returned</th>
<th>Number of seats won</th>
<th>Percentage of votes won</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Assembly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955 April 2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5 and 11 independents</td>
<td>Labour Front</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959 May 30</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>10 and 39 independents</td>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>53.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963 September 21</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>8 and 16 independents</td>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>46.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliament</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968 April 13</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>2 and 5 independents</td>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>84.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972 September 2</td>
<td>57 + (31)</td>
<td>6 and 2 independents</td>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>69.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976 December 23</td>
<td>53 + (16)</td>
<td>7 and 2 independents</td>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>72.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980 December 23</td>
<td>38 + (37)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984 December 22</td>
<td>49 + (30)</td>
<td>9 and 3 independents</td>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>62.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988 September 3</td>
<td>70 + (11)</td>
<td>8 and 4 independents</td>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>61.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991 August 31</td>
<td>40 + (41)</td>
<td>7 and 7 independents</td>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>59.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Refers to total votes cast, not total valid votes cast.

The 1955 Legislative Assembly consisted of one Speaker, three ex officio members, 25 elected members, and four nominated members.

*Uncontested seats in parentheses.


were adopted as the almost absolute and universal measure of elite enti-
titlement. Accordingly, the primary and secondary education systems embarked on streaming programs to identify and nurture the gifted. This necessarily produced a very competitive and stressful education system but one that was expected to generate excellence and achievement. De-
spite the pretense of meritocracy, access to elite positions in general was not removed from systems of patronage. Within the PAP itself, access to the upper echelons was heavily controlled and anything but competitive, so that the party’s leadership was self-appointed and unaccountable to any broader party forum. The criteria for entry into this political elite were of course internally determined.16

PAP ELECTORAL DECLINE

The PAP’s parliamentary monopoly was not broken until October 1981, when Joshua Jeyaretnam of the Workers’ Party (WP) prevailed in the predominantly low-income seat of Anson. In the subsequent 1984 gen-

eral election, not only was Jeyaretnam returned, but Chiam See Tong of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) won the seat of Potong Pasir—by comparison with Anson, a seat with a greater share of lower-middle-class voters. More important, the PAP suffered a 12.6 percent fall in its share of the total vote. Further but less substantial drops in support for the PAP of 1.12 percent and 2.0 percent occurred respectively at the 1988 and 1991 elections. Given the first-past-the-post system, this translated into just one successful opposition candidate in 1988 and four in 1991. However, the point remains that the PAP begrudgingly recognized the likelihood of restoring its share of the vote to the levels of the 1970s. By 1991, the collective vote of opposition parties was approaching 40 percent. The realistic objective became that of arresting the decline and ensuring the PAP’s ability to condition the form political opposition would take.

Although it is not the aim of this essay to analyze in any detail the factors accounting for the erosion in the PAP’s vote, the leadership has until very recently operated from the assumption that the rapidly expanding middle class has been pivotal. Certainly in the wake of the 1984 general election there was a perception that Singapore’s younger, better-educated voters were more sympathetic to the PAP’s opponents than the previous generation of voters. The party’s analysis of the 1988 general election also led to a suspicion that Malay voters were disproportionately receptive to the appeals of opposition parties. However, the 1991 election results revealed a different political dynamic. Aside from the SDP’s retention again of Potong Pasir, PAP losses occurred in the seats of Bukit Gombak, Nee Soon Central, and Hougang, with slender government margins in the additional seats of Bukit Batok, Nee Soon South, Braddell Heights, Changi, and Eunos. On top of this, heavy swings against the government were recorded in Ulu Pandan, Jurong, Bukit Merah, and Yu-Hua. Of all these electorates, only Ulu Pandan and Braddell Heights could be described as middle class. Support for the opposition was largely coming from satellite towns on the outer edge of the city center, constituted with average and below-average income and unskilled white- and blue-collar workers had apparently defected in droves, growing inequalities and, to some extent, toward the government for its ethnocentric content. Although there has been a change with the PAP’s repressive and paternalistic style of governance, the knowledge that they are well served by PAP policies and that the electorate was certainly becoming more political. Rather, a growing consciousness of the working and lower-middle classes in conspicuous consumption led to a slowdown in the opportunities for a more rigid opposition.

Although there is room for debate on social classes in contemporary Singapore, the rapid capitalist development in the social and economic changes that have occurred, and cultural dynamics to play a part. The electoral trend necessarily changes the established political formula for some, a coming more socially diverse, was the claim to national-movement structures and ideologies. Could it be the case that political interest?

THE INSTITUTE

The PAP response to the shock was less than gracious. Not only was Jeyaretnam barred from running for Parliament by a new official offensive, but the opposition ran candidates in particular might be attractive.
See Tong of tong Pasir-meridionaleapeutically fell in support of the new government at the time, this transitory effect on the recognized levels of the "class" approach to the political situation. In detail, the leadership has rapidly exiled the e's younger, less-opposed ysis of the voters were tried. How does the dynamic of P Klopp, Hougang, Bukit Batok, Pandan, and Ulu Pandan. Support on the outer

edge of the city center, constituencies with high percentages of people with average and below-average incomes from a range of semiskilled and unskilled white- and blue-collar occupations. To the PAP's consternation, its so-called heartland of Chinese-educated, working-class voters had apparently defected in significant numbers. Rising living costs, growing inequalities, and, to a lesser extent, lingering anamnesis toward the government for its ethnic policies underlay much of this discontent. Although there has been an element of middle-class alienation with the PAP's repressive and paternalistic practices, this has been tempered by the knowledge that their social and economic positions are well served by PAP policies and the ideology of meritocracy. Class factors were certainly becoming more important to voting patterns, but not in the way hitherto perceived by the leadership of the ruling party. Rather, a growing consciousness of inequalities was developed among both the working and lower-middle classes. This was fueled by both a rise in conspicuous consumption among the privileged classes and a slowdown in the opportunities for social mobility as stratification became more rigid.

Although there is room for debate over the political roles of different social classes in contemporary Singapore, there can be no denying that rapid capitalist development in the city-state has generated a host of social and economic changes that have combined with demographic, ethnic, and cultural dynamics to produce a more differentiated electorate. The electoral trend necessarily called into question the effectiveness of the established political formula of the PAP. If Singapore was becoming more socially diverse, was the PAP capable of doing justice to its claim to national-movement status without dismantling its elitist structures and ideologies? Could it be taken seriously any longer in its pretense as the only institution capable of expressing the national interest?

THE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

The PAP response to the shock loss in the Anson by-election was less than gracious. Not only was Jeyaretnam subjected to harsh treatment both inside and outside parliament, but government leaders also embarked on a new verbal offensive against political systems characterized by strong parliamentary oppositions. Concerned that younger Singaporeans in particular might be attracted to the notion of a stronger op-

-qualifications-Singapore's Pop-985), population, a pore's Middle Guard: Social, shire, 1993),
position presence in parliament, Lee Kuan Yew asserted that at best an opposition makes no difference to good government. He went on to warn that “if we are unlucky, like most developing countries, an opposition can make for confusion by raising false expectations of unattainable benefits from greater welfare spending, as in Britain and so many Third World countries.” Lee’s conflation of the principle of oppositions in general with welfare policies reflected another preoccupation of equal importance to the then prime minister. Second Deputy Prime Minister Srimathby Rajaratnam subsequently went even further to claim that “the role of an opposition is to ensure bad government.”

The initial response to the breaking of its parliamentary monopoly, then, was a resolve that Jeyaretnam’s feat should not, and would not, be repeated. This approach simply generated greater public sympathy and admiration for Jeyaretnam and set in train unprecedented criticism of the PAP through letters to the daily, English-language newspaper, the 

Staats Times. Soon the PAP revised its strategy, turning its attention to institutional reforms.

The first such reform involved amending the constitution in July 1984 to provide for a new category of parliamentary member—the non-constituent member of parliament (NCMP)—under which the three highest vote-getters among the unsuccessful opposition could be invited to enter parliament. NCMPs were unable to vote on money bills, bills altering the constitution, or no-confidence motions in the government, but they could speak on these issues and vote on all other bills. The intention was to alter public perceptions of the PAP as intolerant of political opposition and to appease what it suspected was rising sentiment among the English-educated middle class for some form of opposition for its own sake. However, this did not prevent a dramatic swing against the government in the December election of that year. The offer of an NCMP seat after the election was also turned down by opposition parties, who, at this stage, were united in the view that neither their problems nor the problems of the political system could be alleviated by the scheme.

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19 About 200,000 people cast votes for the first time in the 1984 election and more than one-third of the electorate was below thirty years of age.

20 

21Quoted in 


22 This unified position only lasted until the next general election in 1988. On this occasion, the Workers’ Party accepted an offer of two NCMP seats for Francis Seow and Lee Siew Choh. However, Seow was disqualified before parliament convened owing to a tax-eva-
The immediate response to the 1984 election gave expression to the peculiarity of the PAP’s conception of elections and their relationship to government accountability. Lee raised the possibility of modifications to the one-person-one-vote system: “It is necessary to try and put some safeguards into the way in which people use their votes to bargain, coerce, to push, to jostle and get what they want without running the risk of losing the services of the government, because one day, by mistake, they will lose the services of the government.” Rajaratnam virtually chastised the electorate and warned that “if it is an attempt by voters to blackmail the government (to compromise on important issues or principles), then we must show that we cannot be blackmailed.” Soon, however, the PAP’s soul-searching resulted in a strategy, largely under the aegis of the so-called New Guard leaders groomed to take over the reins from Lee Kuan Yew and his generation of colleagues, to accommodate apparent aspirations for a less authoritarian political system. They, and Goh Chok Tong in particular, projected themselves as a force for a more consultative style of government that would take heed of constructive criticism. The substance to the claim was provided by such initiatives as the establishment within the Ministry of Community Development in 1985 of a Feedback Unit, an extraparliamentary institution both taking suggestions from the public and explaining government policies at the grassroots level; the adoption of Government Parliamentary Committees in 1987; the introduction of Town Councils progressively between 1986 and 1991 to decentralize administration of public housing estates and related activities; and the establishment of the Institute of Policy Studies to involve professionals in public policy discussion. With the exception of the Town Councils, the theme of these initiatives was the PAP’s preference for direct dissent from its policies, particularly by the English-educated professionals, either through institutions that it could control or through means by which public policy debate might be depoliticized.

Town Councils, while opening up opportunities for greater participation in public affairs, had another angle to them. Because responsibility for Town Councils rested with the local MP, their establishment gave concrete expression to Lee Kuan Yew’s view that constituencies rejecting PAP candidates should not be insulated from their “bad choices.” So far, no NCMP seats were offered after the 1991 election, so Lee is to date the only person to enter parliament as an NCMP.

Both quotations from ST, December 24, 1984, p. 1.
however, there is no evidence of inferior administrative performance by opposition-run Town Councils and no public perception of such. That is not to say the opposition-run Town Councils have not had their special problems in dealing with government bureaucracies.24 Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has also indicated that priority in the projected upgrading of public housing estates will be given to constituencies with PAP members.25

These reforms were complemented by the introduction in 1990 of yet another category of MP—the nominated MP (NMP). Up to six NMPs could be appointed to parliament by the president, on the advice of a special select committee of parliament. The voting rights of NMPs were restricted in the same way as those of NCMPs, but their terms would be limited to two years rather than the life of a government.26 As explained by then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, parliament could appoint publicly-nominated people who had excelled or had special expertise in the professions, commerce, industry, cultural activities, social services, or people from underrepresented constituencies, such as women. But unlike elected MPs, these people were expected to be non-partisan. Importantly, the emphasis was on the contribution eminent individuals could make to parliament. It was not the government’s intention to foster the idea of interest group representation. Once again, the PAP was trying to steer disaffection with it away from the formal opposition in favor of co-optation.

The concept of meritocracy permeates and shapes the government’s initiatives even in oppositional politics. The PAP had always objected to the existing opposition on various grounds, but a recurring theme was its poor-quality personnel. Through the NMP scheme, the government projected itself as providing a responsible and, most importantly, capable opposition. However, the major attraction of NMPs for the PAP over the NCMP scheme is that they are an alternative to party representation. The NCMP did not work to dissuade voters from increasingly supporting opposition candidates, but the NMP scheme, government

24Among other problems, opposition-run councils experience inordinate delays in project approvals from authorities. One consequence of this has been the build-up of unspent funds. A recent change to the Town Councils Act has, however, increased the compulsory contribution each council is required to make to a Sinking Fund, thereby limiting the scope for surpluses.
26This does not rule out the possibility of a candidate’s being renominated and reappointed for a further two-year term.

leaders hope, may yet do that.

Initially, two people were an arrangement—a heart specialist at the University of Singapore, Mauri
executive officer of the United In
tional College and also chair of the Singapore Trade
effective officer of the Trade
d Nei.27 Neither made much a
t or attempted to speak on behalf of
t than the life of a government.26 As
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could appoint publicly-nominated people who had excelled or had special expertise in the professions, commerce, industry, cultural activities, social services, or people from underrepresented constituencies, such as women. But unlike elected MPs, these people were expected to be non-partisan. Importantly, the emphasis was on the contribution eminent individuals could make to parliament. It was not the government’s intention to foster the idea of interest group representation. Once again, the PAP was trying to steer disaffection with it away from the formal opposition in favor of co-optation.

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27Leong Chee Whye died in 1993.
28The other MPs include an academ
d high public profile notably through
t Western values in a series of art
criticism. While Teoh has contributed
t made an impact. Among other thi
tic force filial piety—a position that co
ty debates about liberalism.
29Chia created a stir when, after ass
deals with the private sector, he
critically against taking too critical
ive performance by

gation in 1990 of yet
. Up to six NMPs
on the advice of a
ths of NMPs were
their terms would
renment.26 As ex-
Tong, parliament
elled or had spe-
cultural activities,
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NMP scheme has supplanted that of the NCMP.

Initially, two people were appointed to parliament under this new
arrangement—a heart specialist and associate professor at the National
University of Singapore, Maurice Choo, and the president and chief ex-
ecutive officer of the United Industrial Corporation Limited, who was
also chair of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board and former chief
executive officer of the Trade and Development Board, Leong Chee
Whye.27 Neither made much impact on parliamentary debate nor at-
tempted to speak on behalf of particular interests or groups. However,
rather than abandon or downplay the scheme after the 1991 elections,
when opposition membership in parliament rose from one to four, the
government significantly boosted the number of NMP seats to six in
1992, as if to partially counter formal opposition gains and to test the
scheme’s potential seriously.

In the process, the government appears to have modified its original
position on the impartiality of NMPs. Of the next six NMPs, three
indicated a desire to speak on behalf of specific interests before entering
parliament and have acted accordingly, even if an official charade is
maintained that publicly emphasizes individual qualities and statuses of
NMPs. In this group was Kanwaljit Soin, an orthopedic surgeon who is
also a past president of the Association of Women for Action and Re-
search (AWARE), the primary organizational advocate of women’s
interests in Singapore; Robert Chua, executive chairman of the air con-
ditioning company A.C.E. Daikin and president of the Singapore Man-
ufacturers’ Association; and Tong Kok Yeo, secretary general of the
Union of Telecoms Employees.28 Another NMP, Chia Shi Teck, is man-
aging director of the Hesche garment chain and has pursued matters of
concern to local business.29 To differing extents, party and state struc-
tures already incorporate organizations involving business, labor, and

27Leong Chee Whye died in 1993.
28The other MPs include an academic lawyer, Walter Woon, who had already enjoyed a
high public profile notably through his challenging the prevailing official denunciations
of Western values in a series of articles in the local press; and Toh Keng Kiat, a medical
practitioner. While Toh has contributed little to parliamentary debate so far, Woon has
made an impact. Among other things, he has called in parliament for legislation to en-
force filial piety—a position that came as a surprise after his contributions to the earlier
debates about liberalism.
29Chia created a stir when, after asserting that senior civil servants were inflexible in their
dealings with the private sector, he claimed to have been advised by government back-
benchers against taking too critical a stance.
women's groups. The most conspicuous of these is the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), which, on behalf of organized labor, is supposedly involved with the PAP in a symbiotic relationship. The PAP has also long had a Women's Wing, and although it has never been particularly active, attempts were made to revive it in 1988. While local business has never enjoyed an especially sympathetic ear from the PAP, since the mid-1980s there have been attempts to increase the channels of communication between it and the government. The 1992 NMP appointments implicitly acknowledge, however, that such structures have not given adequate expression to the concerns of the groups to which they are linked. That inadequacy should come as little surprise, since these structures—particularly those linking the NTUC and the PAP—were designed to enhance the effectiveness of the government's message and not to solicit ideas about policy.

On the surface, the 1992 NMP appointments appear to concede some measure of legitimacy to the concept of interest group representation. However, this is not the intention of the exercise. There may be a calculation that it is politically expedient to make some concession to certain interests, but this should not be read as indicative of shifting political values within the PAP leadership. Rather, these appointments are a preemptive move to ensure that any disaffection with the government from de facto interest groups does not translate into greater support for opposition parties. In any case, the form of interest representation here remains a very indirect and qualified one. None of this rules out critical individuals' being appointed as NMPs. Indeed, the scheme will have no credibility if NMPs do not demonstrate a sufficient independence of mind from the government. Importantly, though, the government will be able to set the limits of this criticism through its control over appointment.

Alongside the above changes intended to provide alternatives to formal opposition parties, the PAP has also adjusted the rules under which elections are contested and introduced potential constraints on the policy options open to parties that win office. The former involved the establishment in 1988 of group representation constituencies (GRCs), whereby various constituencies are lumped together and contested as a group. Constituents thus have to choose among candidates. At least one in three or four seats for each team involved through the four. The pretext for this is the representation of minority groups, but it would stretch their limits if all the PAP candidates are to be shot down, or otherwise, the troubles would be worse. Ironically, given the effort,马来西亚族 has relatively well inconstituted significant匣子 by the desire to dominate in public housing estates, where they live in these estates, their ethnic composition of etc.

Another change to note is something first publicly announced but not until 1991, however, in this. The new office for senior civil service appointments draws on the consideration of reserves. The explanation was the need to guard against "foreshortened" governance. Incidentally, the new look PAP government is not a non-PAP governor.

Elections without representation

...group. Constituents thus vote for a team rather than an individual candidate. At least one in the team of GRC candidates fielded by a party, or alliance of parties, must be a member of an ethnic minority.\footnote{A} Initially each team involved three candidates, but this has since been raised to four. The pretext for this move was the need to guard against underrepresentation of minority groups. However, opposition parties complained it would stretch their limited resources and open up the scope for weak PAP candidates to be shielded through team membership. Coincidentally or otherwise, the troublesome seat of Anson disappeared in the redrawn boundaries, making way for the GRCs.

Ironically, given the declared intent of GRCs, Goh Chok Tong complained after the 1988 general election that a disproportionate number of Malays had supported opposition candidates. Opposition parties did relatively well in constituencies like Eunos and Bedok, where Malays constituted significant minorities. In a 1989 measure that seemed motivated by the desire to dilute the political impact of the Malay vote, the government implemented strict quotas for the ethnic mix of communities in public housing estates.\footnote{B} Because 85 percent of Singapore's residents live in these estates, the government has considerable control over the ethnic composition of electorates.

Another change to the political system is the elected presidency, something first publicly alluded to by Lee Kuan Yew in 1984. It was not until 1991, however, that the constitution was amended to provide for this. The new office involves such powers as the right to veto all senior civil service appointments and government expenditures, which draws on the considerable (currently US$47 billion) national financial reserves. The explanation for this significant constitutional modification was the need to guard against what Lee calls irresponsible (read "welfare-oriented") governments that would go down the path of deficit budgeting. Incidentally, the powers could conceivably be used to curtail any new-look PAP government that chose this course as much as they could restrain a non-PAP government. The new interest in institutional con-

\footnote{A}{\footnote{According to the Singapore Census of Population 1990, Singapore's population of just over 3 million is accounted for by the three major ethnic groups: Chinese 74.68 percent; Malays 13.53 percent; and Indians 7.61 percent.\footnote{This did not require people to move, but meant that people selling flats might have to find a buyer from a nominated ethnic community. The actual quota, controlled at both the neighborhood and individual-apartment levels, puts a general ceiling of 80 percent for Chinese, while 22 percent at neighborhood level and 25 percent at the apartment level for Malays. For further details see FEER, March 9, 1989, p. 24.}}}
strains on, and procedures for, government is thus to some extent a commentary on Lee Kuan Yew’s concern with the possibility of some future internal deviation from established PAP policy fundamentals.

Eligibility for presidential candidacy effectively rules out any individual not part of the PAP establishment. Prospective presidential candidates must have a minimum of three years’ experience in one of the following positions: cabinet minister, chief justice, speaker of parliament, attorney general, auditor-general, chairman of the public service commission, permanent secretary in the civil service, or chairman or chief executive officer of a company with a paid-up capital of at least $100 million (US$62.5 million). A clause in the constitution also permits the presidential commission to grant eligibility for others to stand who do not qualify under the above, but this power can be exercised as much to limit as to open up candidacy. Former opposition MP Jeyaretnam applied unsuccessfully for a certificate of eligibility under this provision.

In the first presidential elections in 1993, the government persuaded a reluctant former auditor-general and executive chairman of POSBank, Chua Kim Yeow, to compete against the otherwise sole candidate—government minister and secretary-general of the NTUC, Ong Teng Cheong. Chua described his candidature as “an act of duty” and stated at the outset that he considered Ong “a far superior candidate.” As it turned out, Chua managed an amazing 41.3 percent of the vote.

The possibility of further significant institutional modification over the longer term was recently fueled by Lee Kuan Yew’s proposal that, in fifteen to twenty years, it might be appropriate to give married men aged between thirty-five and sixty years two votes each—to reflect what he sees as their greater responsibilities and contributions to society. In particular, he is concerned that demographic trends might otherwise result in a disproportional-aged voter population susceptible to welfare overtures.

In reflecting on the various institutional changes to the political process since the early 1980s, two points warrant underlining. First, it is clear that the New Guard PAP leadership is no more relaxed about parliamentary opposition than its predecessors and uses new forms of institutionalized co-optation to stymie support for opposition parties. Second, these various forms of co-optation do not signal any intention

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*See STWE, May 14, 1994, p. 6.*
Elections without representation

on the leadership's part to compromise on the elitist ideology of meritocracy. The case of the NMPs suggests, however, that the PAP's strategy runs a certain risk of inadvertently legitimizing notions of political representation at odds with "meritocracy." The ideological campaigns that have accompanied these institutional initiatives indicate the PAP's awareness of this sort of tension and a firm commitment that there be no challenge to the dominant political culture.

IDEOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENTS

In tandem with the establishment of new mechanisms of co-optation, the PAP set about updating its arguments for a distinctive form of democracy and consolidating its case against liberal democracy. Given the flurry of institutional modifications, the actual principles or values underlying the PAP's alternative to liberal democracy were in need of clarification and elaboration. Here the concepts of "consensus" and "communitarianism" loom large, and the idea of a distinctive "Asian democracy" has been important.

In the 1960s and 1970s, PAP leaders focused on what they saw as the historical and geopolitical obstacles to liberal democracy in Singapore. Reference to such obstacles has not disappeared, although there is necessarily some shift in emphasis. After all, Singapore is no longer the developing country with a problematic political existence it was in the 1960s. Recent statements by the Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, who has taken over Rajaratnam's mantle as chief authority on matters ideological and philosophical, evidence this. According to him, the city-state of Singapore is simply too small to have two or more parties competing all out for government. Yeo has written, "Democracy in Singapore must take into account our need to plan long-term, our small size, our social divisions and the importance of human resource development in maximizing the potential of every citizen." Now it appears that continuing economic development, rather than the problems of initiating it, militates against liberal democracy.

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48It is not the suggestion here that competitive elections among parties are the definitive feature of democracy, only that the PAP's rationale for rejecting liberal democracy has shifted somewhat. For an attempt to define democracy in such a way that liberal democracy is but one variant, see Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, "What Democracy Is... And Is Not," Journal of Democracy 2, no. 3 (1991): 75-88.

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Garry Rodan

In 1988, Goh Chok Tong observed that over the last decade there had been a clear shift in societal values in Singapore, from “communitarianism” to “individualism.” As Goh saw it, the importance attached to collective interests—including national interests—was being downgraded, as self-seeking individuals increasingly adopted values more consistent with so-called Western liberalism. Undoubtedly Goh suspected that the PAP’s electoral decline had something to do with this perceived change in values. Subsequently, not only was there a new verbal assault by the PAP leadership on liberal-democratic models, but the party produced a formal document outlining a set of values that should underwrite Singapore’s political system. A 1991 parliamentary White Paper, entitled Shared Values, identified five values: nation before community and society above self; family as the basic unit of society; regard and community support for the individual; consensus instead of contention; and racial and religious harmony. According to the government, it was simply giving official recognition to established and dominant values, but the debate leading up to the document witnessed widespread reservations and suspicion from the public. The non-Chinese communities were particularly concerned that the Confucian flavor of the so-called shared values represented a new assertion of Chinese cultural dominance.

Clearly, the two most important shared values are nation and community ahead of self, and consensus over contention. They are perceived by the authors to be most directly pitted against liberal values. The former emphasized individual obligations to the state, not rights to be respected by the state. Explicit references to Confucian philosophy were readily used by the leadership to distinguish Singapore’s Asian brand of government. Goh Chok Tong asserted, for example, that obligations to the state along with

many Confucian values are still relevant to us. An example is the concept of government by honourable men (junzi), who have a duty to do the right for the people, and who have the trust and respect of the population. This fits us better than the Western concept that a government should be given as limited powers as possible, and always treated with suspicion, unless proved otherwise. 40

Many observers see leadership in Confucian tradition as a foil to remove the problems which this perspective enlists to incorporate Confucian values to the detriment of the electorate never existed.

The other concern central to the underwriting of a group involvement is the assertion of how consensus might be achieved. The PAP is attempting to political participation of the community, therefore, is not a given, but that consensus exists, but that George Yeo’s reassurances are not enough to govern effectively.

The substantive and cultural underpinnings of consensus

46STWGE, September

st decade there had been "communitarian" values that were being downplayed. Goh suspected with this perceived new verbal assault but the party that should have been the White Paper, before community society; regard and end of contention; government, it was dominant values, widespread reser-

The other core PAP value, nation and community ahead of self, was central to the rationale behind the various institutions of co-optation, prescribing a particular form of oppositional politics devoid of interest group involvement. The document, however, did not address the question of how consensus is to be determined or what structures or processes might be involved. Clammer notes that the political culture the PAP is attempting to institutionalize through Shared Values is antithetical to political pluralism and leaves little room for significant political participation other than that sanctioned by the PAP. Consensus, therefore, is not so much a working out of compromises between different interests and perspectives as an ideology that represses differences per se. What matters in political terms, though, is not that consensus exists, but that governments can portray their policies in this light. George Yeo's reference to democracy as "a process which forces governments to engage the enthusiasm of increasing numbers in order to govern effectively" is perfectly consistent with this.

The substantial recent ideological investment of the PAP in the concept of consensus not only reflects concern about the possibility of further

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4Cotton, "The Limits to Liberalization," 320. Also see Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley, eds., Management of Success: The Moulding of Singapore (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 1096, which challenges the notion that Confucianism has been central to Singapore's economic success.
4Chua Beng Huat, "Towards a Non-Liberal Communitarian Democracy," unpublished paper presented at Murdoch University, June 9, 1993, also makes the point that the mechanisms for consultation that might evidence the commitment to arriving at consensus don't exist. However, he sees democratic potential in this to the extent that the government's rhetoric may yet come back to haunt it.
opposition party gains; it also has important implications for the interpretation of election results. While on the surface the number of votes for opposition parties may appear unthreatening, especially if many of these votes are actually protest votes against the PAP rather than wholehearted endorsements of opposition parties, they nevertheless testify to the absence of consensus. As Chua puts it, “Electoral support is thus not about how well the opposition parties do but rather how united is the nation behind the PAP leadership and the party’s self-conception as a ‘people’s movement’.” It is thus difficult to see how the PAP’s brand of consensus can be reconciled with strong opposition political parties.

The simultaneous and heightened attacks on “Western liberalism” are tied to the PAP’s attempt to reinforce the ideology of meritocracy. Its fear is that Singapore’s meritocratic structures would be a casualty of any notion of representation legitimizing interest groups as political actors. The leadership and the government-owned media take every opportunity to depict the economic decline or stagnation of countries with liberal-democratic systems as a fundamental consequence of the responsiveness of governments to the misguided and self-proclaimed rights of individuals and groups. Possibly the second most pejorative term (after liberalism) in the PAP lexicon is “welfarism,” seen as the quintessential manifestation of this process. Hence, Prime Minister Goh refers to “the democratic distemper which afflicts peoples whose economies have become sluggish because of subsidies.” Liberal societies are also seen to be in a broader moral or social decay and here much store is made of neoconservative critiques from within that invariably lament the decline of values supportive of more hierarchical social and political orders.

The PAP’s fear of welfarism is more a political than an economic one. Although the categories of social security and welfare in the Singapore budget represent a minuscule component of total expenditure, the proportion of government spending on education and housing is well above world average. For example, the average Singaporean has a disposable income of $70,000; however, the government is making a conscious effort in redressing the socio-economic disparity that has been repeatedly vilified by its talented elite. As Goh points out, “If you stop subsidies, the PAP slogan on community solidarity and social cohesion will be reduced to a certain resounding call for democracy against the voice of the rich.

Yet at the same time, as evidenced by the policies of the PAP, welfare has a direct appeal to the poorer strata of the community. This is perhaps why, according to some development analysts, the percentage of the population below the poverty line remains at 50 percent or more. The PAP has built its political identity in securing the vote of these lower income families. The typical PAP supporter is a parent of young children, who has been promised to provide for his family through the Provident Fund.

This slogan “Toward a Non-Liberal Communitarian Democracy”


5This slogan “Times on Hong Kong: The Poor, The Rich, the Middle,” in which the writer, Juan, in what political order, including “Poor,” “Rich,” and “Middle,” to expand the politics of economic and social development in the upper classes.” (February 9, 1993, p. 5). There...
Elections without representation

world averages. In fact, Prime Minister Goh estimated in 1993 that an average Singaporean owning a three-bedroom flat would receive about $70,000 in direct government subsidy over a lifetime. What the government has resisted is the principle of redistribution as a means of redressing social and economic inequalities. Such a course, it has repeatedly warned, would kill the goose that lays the golden egg—the talented elite upon whom all Singaporeans are dependent. According to Goh, "If you level down society, you want everybody to be equal, you are not sharing prosperity. You are sharing poverty." Hence, a new PAP slogan has been popularized in an attempt to dampen debate about social and economic inequalities: "the politics of envy." There is a certain resonance here with Plato’s derisive reference in Republic to democracy as the government not of the people but of the poor against the rich.

Yet at the same time, and in the wake of the 1991 election, which evidenced significant alienation from the PAP by low-income voters, the PAP has actually embarked on programs and policies that, however indirectly, amount to increased welfare spending targeting those on lower incomes. For example, through its dollar-for-dollar sponsoring of ethnic community organizations established to assist lower-income Singaporeans—namely Mendaki (Malay), Sinda (Indian), and the Chinese Development Assistance Council—the government is allocating several hundred million dollars per year now in welfare spending. Voluntary welfare organizations can receive up to 80 percent of construction and 50 percent of operating costs from the government, as well as state help in securing land and premises at nominal cost and in granting tax exemptions. The government has also extended direct assistance to low-income families through the Small Family Scheme. In cases where parents each earn below $750 per month, the government is now committed to providing a grant of $800 per year into the mother’s Central Provident Fund for twenty years or until she reaches forty-five years of age.

9. Also see Goh’s country Debates Singapore sarees on his govern-

10. "Forum" column of The Straits Times on February 17, 1993 by the assistant secretary-general of the SDP, Chee Soon Juan, in which a number of points were made about the unequal benefits of Singapore’s prosperity. This aroused stern criticism in parliament from various PAP members, including Prime Minister Goh, who claimed that if the SDP “succeeded in pushing the politics of envy, Singapore would go down the drain. The middle class will envy the upper classes. The poor will envy everyone else” (as quoted in STWOE, March 13, 1993, p. 5). Thereafter, PAP MPs and journalists have used the phrase with great frequency.
Garry Rodan

age, whichever is earlier. The grant is conditional, however, on the family's size being limited to two children, and thus it has a significant social engineering element to it. In another gesture of positive discrimination in favor of the underprivileged, the government has paid the December monthly service and conservancy charges for lower-income people living in public flats for both 1992 and 1993.

But although it is prepared to spend more money alleviating the conditions of the poor—and, of course, keen to capitalize politically on this—it simultaneously condemns welfarism. There are several inter-related reasons for the government's extreme sensitivity over debate about social and economic inequalities and its eagerness to distinguish its role in welfare from that of Western counterparts. Certainly Singapore's leaders are convinced that there is an economic imperative underlying the case for meritocracy. As Prime Minister Goh reiterated, "It is this practice of meritocracy in the civil service, in politics, in business and in schools, which has allowed Singaporeans to achieve excellence and to compete against others."³⁵ But more fundamental political considerations underscore the hostility to welfarism. None is more serious than Goh's concern that "the disadvantaged do not expect and cannot demand that they be looked after by the State as a matter of right."³⁴ The notion of rights evolves a very different set of political relationships. Most important, it calls into question the political preeminence of experts in the policy process because it is grounded in a notion of political representation as a legitimate aspiration in public policy that is unrelated to any technical credentials.

POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Aside from the general pervasiveness of the PAP state, 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 sympathetic government-owned and -controlled domestic media.³⁵ 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 would-be partisans illustrates the misuse of research by-election in 1992.

The opposition political views the government as a dispenser of corporate business interests, directly, with operations, a political potentates, as a legitimate political in general, political opposition. But can more be the prosperous and democratic challenges?

Although there is an opposition in Singapore,³⁶ and promoting national Solidarity, Singapore seeks seats from the process in 1992. Given that the required nine-day...

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³⁶The 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 Asiaweek, September 25, 1992, pp. 45–55.
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Elections without representation

court by government members serves as a strong negative example to
would-be participants in the political process. The sacking of a Na-
tional 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 is likely to have reinforced the belief that
opposition politics remains a personally risky affair. In a city-state where
the government is not only a substantial employer, but also the major
dispenser of commercial contracts, there is a perception that careers and
business interests can easily be jeopardized by association, however in-
direct, with opposition parties. Third, and this is not completely unre-
lated, as a legacy of decades of authoritarian rule, alienation from
politics in general is high in Singapore. But despite these and other
odds, opposition parties have made some progress over the last decade.
But can more substantive gains be made in the near future? And what
are the prospects of elections becoming a more meaningful exercise in
democratic choice in Singapore?

Although there are twenty-two registered opposition political parties
in Singapore, many fewer are consistently active in contesting elections
and promoting their causes. Those that are include the SDP, WP, Na-
tional Solidarity Party, Singapore National Malay Organization, and
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 struc-
ture and resources and are comparatively dormant between elections.
Given that the PAP usually provides little more than the minimum re-
quired nine-days' notice of election, campaigning itself is often a brief

56Lee Kuan Yew himself has sued as many as thirteen people for libel (Stan Sesser, "A
Reporter at Large (Singapore)," The New Yorker, January 13, 1992, p. 64). The most
noteworthy case is that of J. B. Jayaretnam, whose latest spat with Lee Kuan Yew cost
him a total of more than S$800,000 in damages and costs after he was found guilty of
defamation for comments at an election rally in 1988.

57The PAP itself is worried about the implications of this for its own organizational future.
It has recently set up Young PAP in an attempt to stimulate more interest in the party.
See Yeo, "Young PAP," 10-29.

58For a discussion of other odds, see Chan, Dynamics of One-Party Dominance, 185-220;
and R. S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy, Singapore: The Legacy of Lee Kuan Yew (Boulder:

59At the time of writing (August 1994), a breakaway group within the SDP has made
application to form a separate party—the Singapore People's Party. The official recog-
nition of this party would bring the total to twenty-three. For a discussion on the moves
to form the Singapore People's Party, see STWE, July 9, 1994, p. 4. Some considera-
tion has also been given to a merger between the WP and the National Solidarity Party, but
as yet this has not transpired. See STWOE, January 9, 1993, p. 15.
affair. Cooperation between opposition parties in determining who will contest which electorate has been one way of maximizing limited resources. Significantly, the most successful opposition strategy was that of the 1991 general election in which the government was unopposed in just over half (forty-one) of the total (eighty-one) seats. On this basis, the PAP could not play up the idea of a freak result (that is, the unforeseen removal of the government through protest votes), and the desirability or otherwise of opposition per se came into central focus.

The current official memberships of the SDP and the WP are 491 and 2,557 respectively, but active membership must be distinguished from mere registration. Only about 100 of these within the WP, and even fewer within the SDP, could be described as active. Party cadres number around sixty-five for the WP and fifty-two for the SDP. But if the limited personnel involved are striking features of the two parties, even more so are the organizational structures: Both are elitist along PAP lines. Like the PAP model, the executives of the SDP and the WP appoint cadres (referred to as organizing members in the case of the WP), who in turn elect the executive, referred to as the central executive committee in the case of the SDP and the council in the WP case. There is a significant centralization of power within each party's structure. In organizational practice, then, 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. This is part of the reason behind the special importance attached by the SDP to the recent attraction of neuropsychologist and Ph.D. Chee Soon Juan into its ranks. Certainly much of the general population has internalized the PAP's ideology of meritocracy and measures the suitability of candidates almost exclusively in terms of formal educational qualifications. Opposition parties cannot ignore this reality. Yet, the elitist assumption underlying such an expectation is not a matter of serious political contest. They try to match the PAP's credentials. In the 1991 general election, much was made by the SDP that its nine candidates all boasted tertiary education qualifications.

Of the two major parties, the WP comes closer to an explicit ideolog-

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60Registry of Societies, Singapore, 1993. These figures predate the formation of the Singapore People's Party.
61The proposed Singapore People's Party also intends to adopt a cadre system.

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determining who will maximize limited region strategy was that ment was unopposed e) seats. On this basis, result (that is, the unest votes), and the de nte central focus.
d the WP are 491 and be distinguished from in the WP, and even . Party cadres number SDP. But if the limited parties, even more so along PAP lines. Like se WP appoint cadres he WP),61 who in turn tive committee in the. There is a significant ure. In organizational democratic alternative r opposition parties is ionals as election can l importance attached logist and Ph.D. Che emeral population has d measures the suita of formal educational is reality. Yet, the elit ot a matter of serious dentials. In the 1991 its nine candidates all to an explicit ideolog- e the formation of the Sin a cadre system.

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<td>% of votes in constituencies contested</td>
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*Workers' Party merged with Barisan Sosialis and Singapore United Front
Source: STWOE (September 1, 1991): 24

tical posture. Since its formation in 1957, the WP has, as its name suggests, projected itself as the custodian of the working class. However, while it is philosophically guided by a social-democratic conception of social justice, it is by no means a radical party. It produced a reasonably detailed party manifesto for the 1988 election that outlines a series of proposed programs to improve the conditions for lower-income earners and to enhance civil liberties generally. The rigid streaming within the education system is also challenged. At the same time, it emphasizes 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." The importance of the private sector is also underlined, with a commitment to "ensure that the public sector does not crowd out local entrepreneurs through unfair competition."62

The SDP though not established until 1980 under the leadership of Chiam See Tong, who has held the seat of Potong Pasir since 1984, has now surpassed the WP in terms of the percentage of the vote it attracts and the number of parliamentary seats it holds. However, whereas the WP may appear a little confused about its ideology, the SDP does not seem to have consciously addressed the question at all. It has campaigned heavily for the desirability of a check against government arrogance, thus actively cultivating the so-called protest vote, and played on the theme of excessive government charges in areas like health, ed-

62 For further discussion of the Workers' Party see Chan Heng Chee, "Political Parties," in Quah, Chan, and Seah, eds., Government and Politics of Singapore, 164–7; and Carolyn Choo, The PAP and the Problem of Political Succession (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk, nd), 50–75.
ucation, and transportation. But the SDP has not yet articulated any clear alternative vision for Singapore—either in concrete policy terms or in terms of political philosophy. Until very recently, it did not actually have a document even approximating a party manifesto. In recent SDP calls for more government spending in health, education, and housing, it has voluntarily distinguished these reforms from welfarism. Chiam has also gone out of his way inside and outside parliament to praise the PAP for its achievements. Accordingly, Chiam has been spared the hostile treatment meted out to Jayaratnam by the PAP.

Neither major opposition party represents a coherent ideological alternative to the PAP, and certainly neither directly challenges or scrutinizes the PAP’s central ideological concept of meritocracy. While this need not mean that there is a conscious acceptance of the PAP’s ideology, it does at least reflect a limited ability to formulate alternatives. This is a potent aspect of the ruling party’s hegemony. Ironically, the recent success at the polls by the SDP has brought with it problems and challenges that render the immediate future a more difficult one. First, the PAP has gone all out to expose the deficiencies of the SDP as an alternative party, particularly in view of the absence of any coherent economic policy statement. Apart from a broad, declared aim to achieve economic union with Malaysia, little has been proposed. Second, tensions among the opposition parties surfaced after the 1991 election, with the SDP promoting itself as the symbol of an emerging two-party, rather than multiparty, system. Third, an internal SDP dispute threw the party itself into disarray. The immediate electoral prospects of the SDP, if not

63The first attempt at something like this was a 156-page book written by an acting SDP secretary-general, Chee Soon Juan (1994), and entitled Dare to Change.
64See the speech by SDP MP for Nee Soon Central, Cheo Chai Chen, in Parliamentary Debates Singapore, 59, no. 9, March 10, 1992, columns 683–4.
65See, for example, STWOE, December 12, 1992, p. 4; ST, December 12, 1992, p. 26; and ST, December 17, 1992, p. 22. In a sensational move, Chiam resigned as secretary-general of the SDP in May 1993 and subsequently made a public attack on a number of Central Executive Committee members. This culminated in Chiam’s expulsion from the party in August 1993, a decision that, under the Singapore Constitution, required him to vacate his parliamentary seat. However, Chiam took out an injunction that held his seat until a court challenge against the expulsion was decided in Chiam’s favor in late 1993 (ST, December 11, 1993, p. 1). The effect of this was that Chiam retained his parliamentary seat but was only an ordinary member of the SDP, as opposed to being either on the CEC or a cadre. Other legal writs were exchanged between factions, including an unsuccessful attempt by pro-Chiam forces to have the collective leadership headed by Ling How Doong declared null and void (STWE, May 7, 1994, p. 12). Not surprisingly, Chiam’s supporters moved in mid-1994 to form a separate party, the Singapore People’s Party (STWE, July 9, 1994, p. 4).

the opposition more generally, the SDP leadership had to respond effectively to the significant changes in the political context. The SDP constants in Singapore have always been the insistence that there be a clear line drawn between political parties and groups or organizations. This has crucial implications for the way in which economic, social, ideological and political parties or philosophies are presented to the electorate. A rigid distinction between the SDP’s economic policies and the PAP’s social policies is the domain of party politics, and it is the function of the PAP to demonstrate that the SDP lacks the experience and competence to govern effectively.

This atmosphere of competition makes it very difficult to sustain, in the absence of support bases comparable to those in the United States, a coherent political expression to the electorate. The control over organizational structure is in the hands of the party leadership, and the party’s organizational structure is adjusted to fit the needs of the party’s leaders. But peak employer organizations and other groups in areas like urban issues are also out of the hands of the SDP, which has resorted to non-state-sponsored co-ordination and accommodation.
Elections without representation

the opposition more generally, are not likely to have been aided by this splintering.

If the recent relative electoral success by opposition parties has thrown up immediate problems, their continued separation from social bases remains a major obstacle and one that will complicate their ability to respond effectively to some of the challenges just identified. One of the constants in Singapore politics throughout the leadership transition has been the insistence that political and nonpolitical activities should remain clearly demarcated—at least so far as this involves opposition parties and groups or organizations outside the PAP’s extensive umbrella. This has crucial implications because civil society is a site for various economic, social, ideological, and religious conflicts. But challenges to PAP policies or philosophies not transmitted through formal opposition parties are rarely tolerated by the ruling party. The activities of nongovernment organizations of all types are subjected to strict controls through the Societies Act, first introduced as law in 1967, which enforces a rigid distinction between political and nonpolitical activities. In the wake of public positions taken by the Law Society in the late 1980s, legislation covering professional organizations was also amended to enforce further the government’s insistence that, in the words of then Minister for Communications and Information Wong Kan Seng, “public policy is the domain of the government. It isn’t the playground of those who have no responsibility to the people, and who aren’t answerable for the livelihood or survival of Singaporeans.”

This atmosphere of sensitivity to the activities of nonstate organizations makes it very difficult for opposition parties to cultivate the sort of support bases common to parties in liberal democratic societies. In such societies, political parties play a fundamental role in giving selective political expression to the interests and views emanating in civil society. The control over organized labor exercised by the PAP has obviously, and quite intentionally, undercut the social base of any other political party hoping to lay claim to the representation of the working class. But peak employer bodies, professional organizations, and interest groups in areas like consumer affairs, environmentalism, and women’s issues are also out of bounds for political parties. Generally speaking, non-state-sponsored civil organizations are poorly developed in Singa-

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63Asianweek, June 15, 1985, p. 20.
64Only nine of the eighty-one registered employer trade unions are not affiliated with the NTUC. Singapore Ministry of Labour Annual Report, 1993, p. 19.
pore because of the pervasiveness of the paternalistic state, which has stifled community initiatives. Lately, however, some independent organizations have emerged and achieved reasonable public profiles in advancing concerns. The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) and the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) have, for instance, not only developed significant memberships by Singapore standards, but made strong representations to government on policy issues. The continued development of these organizations and the preparedness of the government to tolerate them are, however, contingent upon observance of the restrictions laid down in the Societies Act. The NMP scheme may increasingly become a mechanism through which the government attempts to co-opt such organizations, preemptioning the need for proscription under the Societies Act. Co-optation, it should be noted, is not without its attractions to nongovernment organizations where no effective alternatives are immediately available. Where co-optation takes forms like the NMP scheme, however, there is the risk of inadvertently legitimizing a politics that acknowledges representation for distinct interests—precisely what the PAP is determined to avoid.

Whatever the tensions in the PAP’s management of these organizations, for the time being at least, it will remain very difficult for the establishment of even loose functional links between the activities of nongovernment organizations of any ilk and opposition political parties. For opposition parties, however, such connections are prerequisites for the development of more mass-based, rather than elitist, organizational structures and access to resources useful in the formation of detailed alternative policies.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued in this chapter that elections in Singapore have never been indicative of any shared political culture supportive of democracy. They have, nevertheless, served a very important function in the legitimation of the PAP and are now a seemingly permanent feature of the political system. This is not to suggest that the ruling party does not have reservations about elections. Indeed, it retains a deep mistrust in the judgment of the bulk of electors, whom it believes could be so easily seduced by a less honorable and less rational political opposition. In guarding against this possibility, the PAP has embarked on a range of measures at both the institutional and ideological levels, which further
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Singapore have never tribute of democracy. nction in the legiti- anent feature of the ling party does not a deep mistrust in es could be so easily tical opposition. In arked on a range of evels, which further condition the form that opposition takes. These measures are intended to simultaneously defend and consolidate rational decisionmaking and the ruling party’s political supremacy. Increased social heterogeneity and a population that is more educated, in both the general academic and electoral senses, have apparently only reinforced the PAP’s reservations about electoral politics.

Underlying the various initiatives in the last decade is a resolve by the PAP that the political process must not move toward the incorporation of any notion of representation that compromises the structures or ideology of “meritocracy.” It is this ideology that rationalizes the hierarchical social and political order built up over the last three and a half decades in Singapore. Yet without a challenge to the elitism embodied in meritocracy it is difficult to see how the political process can be altered in such a way as to render elections a more meaningful exercise in democracy. So long as government is regarded the preserve of experts, the permissible extent and form of political opposition, both formally and informally, will necessarily result in restricted choices available to the electorate. But, at the same time, opposition parties themselves have found it difficult to break out of the PAP’s ideological framework, in no small part because of the institutionalization in Singapore of a comprehensive set of mutually supportive ideological concepts in which meritocracy is pivotal.

Despite the obstacles to an effective challenge to elitist politics under the PAP, the increasing diversity and plurality of Singapore society is nevertheless likely to place greater pressure on the PAP leadership to demonstrate its capacity as the only valid expression and competent adjudicator of the national interest. Current tendencies suggest this will be accommodated through more extensive mechanisms for co-optation rather than the tolerance of a genuine civil society. If the apparent contradictions in this process prove manageable, electoral politics may become even more a political epiphenomenon.