ELECTING A RESDISTRICTIVE SINGAPORE

With the rise of opposition parties, government has sought to address voter disenchantedment over social and material inequality.

By GARRY RODAN
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In authoritarian Singapore, the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) inevitably wins general elections, and this Friday will be no different. Yet the result matters fundamentally for the direction of the political regime. Voters will be deliberating as much over how and why good public policy comes about, as what its content is.

Among other crucial matters: Do policymakers perform better with more opposition presence and scrutiny in parliament? Can the PAP ideology of meritocracy yield effective policy responses to Singapore’s current challenges?

Opposition support has risen by a remarkable 15% over the past two elections, with the PAP earning just 60.1% in 2011, its lowest vote share since independence in 1965. Of late the PAP has struggled to address a raft of voter concerns related to social contradictions inherent in Singapore’s particular model of capitalist development.

Growth under the model relies on a continuing increase in both cheap unskilled labor and expensive skilled professionals from overseas. Rapid growth has thus intensified social and material inequalities and increased pressure on the city-state’s infrastructure and environment.

Policy issues in this election campaign closely mirror those from 2011, although the government has not been idle in the meantime. Rather it has ushered in major spending boosts to redistributive social welfare targeting the needy and aged, significant investments in public housing and transport, and a slowdown in the inflow of foreign workers.

Yet these initiatives could work as much in the opposition’s favor as the PAP’s. In 2011, opposition representation in Singapore’s 89-seat Parliament jumped to six seats from two. Now opposition figures such as Low Thia Khiang, leader of the Workers’ Party that holds all six seats, take credit for forcing “a more responsive government that is sensitive to the needs and struggles of the people.” Changes in policy were only possible, he contends, because voters saw the value of balancing against PAP dominance.

“Without co-drivers, Singaporeans keep getting taken for a ride,” he asserts. The Workers’ Party election manifesto urges voters to entrench this trend toward more parliamentary balance, and Mr. Low has estimated that a parliamentary opposition of
20 members could substantially improve Singapore’s political culture.

PAP leaders recognize the danger of this claim and have sought to counter it. Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong likened oppositionists claiming credit for the PAP’s policy turnaround to the fable of the rooster boasting that its crowing caused the sun to rise. According to Mr. Goh, the integrity of PAP members, not “this seductive line of check and balance,” is what matters. “No need for intermediaries, no need for co-drivers—just the people, working directly with the PAP and our team,” he asserts.

Meanwhile, Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam characterizes recent policy measures—especially redistribution efforts that he has driven—as part of a “multi-year strategy” that predated 2011. He identifies 2006 at the start of “a deliberate rebalancing to ensure we remained an inclusive society,” against a background of what he observed as a trend towards rising inequality from the mid-1990s.

Indeed, the government’s Workfare scheme supplementing the income and skills upgrading of some of Singapore’s lowest-paid workers began in 2006. Yet this was also the year that the PAP suffered an 8.7% swing against it at the May general election. Issues of inequality were thematic to opposition campaigns, including the WP-proposed minimum wage and an “unconditional needs-based safety net to ensure that no one who needs help is left stranded.”

To be sure, the existing PAP development model’s reliance on low-cost labor poses a structural problem for swift, large-scale redistributive reform. However, deep ideological roots also influence the PAP’s response to inequality problems. The PAP spent decades lambasting what it labels “Western welfarism” and investing in the idea that the social and political order is and must remain meritocratic.

How far must the PAP depart from these positions to address voter disenchantment with inequality? What are the parameters of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s 2013 projection that government will “play a bigger role to build a fairer society”?

Mr. Low, of the Workers’ Party, argues that the centerpiece of government reform—the Pioneer Generation Package for elderly Singaporeans, costing 8 billion Singapore dollars (SG$8 billion)—is inadequate, especially with regard to health care. The leader of the Singaporeans First Party, Tan Jee Say, similarly contends that new measures announced by the prime minister on National Day last month “just scratch the surface” of providing a proper social safety net.

Mr. Tharman, the finance minister, cautions that free health care and social services can only be sustained by raising taxes, supplemented by profits from the government investment company, Temasek Holdings. Recent but modest increases in income and property taxes underline the PAP’s apprehension about this path.

So do some of the awkward attempts to articulate the essence of the PAP’s redistributive turn. The concept of “compassionate meritocracy” articulated by Mr. Goh, the emeritus senior minister, implies a more generous but still paternalistic ruling elite, as distinct from any idea of citizens’ social or economic rights.

Mr. Tharman, whose advocacy for social redistribution has been the most forceful within government, explained to the BBC in May that he supports not a safety net but a trampoline distinguished by its ability to spring the fallen back up. (Of course on trampolines people bounce up and then fall back down, which isn’t what the minister really wants.)

For all this debate, it is clear that varying forms of social redistribution have now become politically unavoidable. If the PAP cannot win back support on Friday, it may have to go further down the redistributive path. Opposition parties may well offer a helping hand.

Mr. Rodan is professor of politics and international studies at Murdoch University.