Singapore: Emerging Tensions in the ‘Dictatorship of the Middle Class’

Garry Rodan

Singapore’s economic expansion in recent decades has been dramatic. Since 1960 its per capita GNP has increased seventeen-fold and now approximates that of New Zealand. The inter-related objectives of employment creation and economic growth through industrialization have long given way to more ambitious aims. For at least the last decade, economic policy has been oriented towards securing technology-intensive niches in the international economy in a range of service and manufacturing industries.

However remarkable Singapore’s economic transformation may be, it has been accompanied by equally important social dynamics. In particular, the economic process has generated changes in class structure and levels of affluence which are manifesting themselves in new lifestyles, cultural patterns and political expectations. The emerging middle class is pivotal in these developments. Official recognition of the changing social face of Singapore is reflected, amongst other things, in more quality of life goals in government development plans. There is also widespread speculation amongst analysts and commentators, that the authoritarian and paternalistic rule that has prevailed under the continuous government of the People’s Action Party (PAP) since 1959, will not be able to withstand the social and political impact of this class’s emergence. Political stability has been one of the enduring and contributing factors in Singapore’s economic transformation and associated status as a newly industrializing country (NIC) since the 1960s. But has Singapore reached a stage in its development where that stability might best be consolidated by political change to accommodate new social forces?

The argument here is that Singapore is indeed undergoing significant change as more members of the middle class assert their preferences and aspirations both socially and in politics. However, it is also argued that the PAP has long ruled as what might loosely be termed a ‘dictatorship of the middle class’: its leadership has not only been pre-eminently middle class, but it has actively promoted the interests and cultivated the privileged social power of that class. Not surprisingly, then, the Singapore middle class represents a force for qualified rather than fundamental political change. Increasingly, members of this class seek greater autonomy from the PAP state in an attempt to take more direct control over their lives. But to a large extent this involves autonomy as consumers, especially of cultural products, rather than autonomy to challenge the distribution of social and political power in Singapore society. Meanwhile, the increasing visibility and prosperity of the middle class has served to heighten class consciousness amongst the rest of the population and contributed to a more critical evaluation of the PAP.

Economic Growth and Social Development

The turning point in Singapore’s economic development was the adoption in the mid- to late-1960s of an export-oriented industrialization (EOI) programme. This was introduced against the background of a failed political merger with Malaysia and, subsequently, the announcement of the withdrawal of British military bases from Singapore. Collectively, these developments represented potential economic disaster for Singapore. However, favourable global trends in investment were to combine with active local state initiatives at the economic, social and political levels.

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These led to Singapore's incorporation into the unfolding new international division of labour in manufactures. Production was for the first time organized on a genuinely global basis to take advantage of differing costs, principally labour costs, across national economies. These developments opened the way for a significant, even if selective, relocation of industrial activity to developing countries.

In the first instance, Singapore entered this structure as a source of relatively cheap semi-skilled labour and was principally a site for the assembly of consumer, notably electrical and electronic, goods. Before long, however, international companies began to move slightly more sophisticated operations to Singapore, though always with the primary aim of exploiting labour cost advantages over traditional production sites in the advanced industrial centres of the world. As indicated in Table 1, impressive growth rates have been sustained in Singapore for over three decades. The success of the EOI strategy has been central to this growth. Direct manufactured exports, negligible in the first half of the 1960s, rose to a value of $47,520 million by 1990. This has largely been facilitated by sharp rises in foreign investment which climbed from a modest $157 million in 1965 to $18,397 million by 1988.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Basic economic indicators, 1960–1990</th>
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<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gross Domestic Product (annual charge by percentage at 1985 market prices)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Per Capita Indigenous Gross National Product ($S)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Domestic Exports ($S million)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Domestic Manufactured Exports ($S million)</td>
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<td>Net Foreign Investment Commitments in Manufacturing ($S million)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cumulative Foreign Investment (Gross fixed assets in $S million)</td>
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<td>Official Foreign Resources ($S million)</td>
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<td>Unemployment Rate (per cent)</td>
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*Except where otherwise indicated, all figures in current market prices.


Driven by this massive infusion of foreign investment for export production, the manufacturing sector's contribution to GDP, which stood at 17.6 per cent in 1960 and dropped further within that decade, climbed to nearly 30 per cent by 1980. As Table 2 reflects, manufacturing is still important, but Singapore's economy has been maturing and diversifying since the 1980s with activities in the services sector, especially financial and business services, assuming an increasingly vital role. The government has actively encouraged this development—partly out of recognition that the EOI strategy has peaked, and partly due to the severe effects in the mid-1980s of a sharp fall in demand for manufactured exports, which highlighted the susceptibility of the existing economic structure. Attention is now focused on the need for greater integration with fast-growing regional economies as a basis for sectoral diversification and further technological upgrading of the economy.

Though there are challenges ahead in Singapore's economic transformation, the prospects for the short to medium term are for continuing prosperity. Certainly with per capita income rising from just $2,478 in 1970 to $18,437 by 1990, expectations have been raised, particularly amongst the generation that has only experienced the buoyant economic times since the 1960s. PAP leaders have done little to dampen such expectations. In 1984, Goh Chok Tong, then deputy prime minister, released his Vision 1999 statement setting the goal of Singapore surpassing the 1984 Swiss standard of living, as measured by gross national product, before the turn of the
Table 2 Gross domestic product by industry, 1960–1989 (per cent at 1985 market prices)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial and Business Services</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport and Communications</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>26.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>16.8</td>
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century. On current projections that will occur ahead of time. More recently, under the 1991 Strategic Economic Plan the target is to catch up with American living standards by the year 2030. In the same year, the government released a blueprint for the long-term physical development of Singapore, the Concept Plan, which contained plans for better homes, more efficient transport, more recreational opportunities and general quality of life improvements. Also in 1991, a complementary government document, Singapore: The Next Lap, tied explicit social and environmental objectives to long-term development plans and strategies.

Table 3 provides some general indicators of the social changes that have accompanied Singapore’s recent economic development. In particular, the last decade has witnessed an almost doubling of the population with secondary or higher education qualifications. Growth in post-secondary education enrolments has been particularly impressive, up from 22,633 in 1980 to 55,562 in 1990. There has also been a noticeable increase in the proportion of females in the labour force, a development that is not just driven by increased opportunity but promoted by the government for economic reasons. The pace of economic growth combines with an ageing population profile to place increasing strains on a limited domestic labour supply.

Table 3 Social indicators, 1980 and 1990

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<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>1980 per cent</th>
<th>1990 per cent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy rate</td>
<td>83.5</td>
<td>90.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults with secondary or higher qualification</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Ownership</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>90.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owners of HDB flats with 4 or more rooms</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Women</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons aged 60 years and over</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>9.1</td>
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One of the most outstanding features of Singapore’s economic and social development has been the role of subsidized public housing. Virtually the entire physical face of Singapore has the imprint of the Housing Development Board (HDB). Its extensive construction programmes have combined with a compulsory national superannuation scheme, out of which Singaporeans are able to pay their mortgages, to produce one of the highest rates of home ownership anywhere in the world. Singapore’s current home ownership rate of 84 per cent substantially exceeds the average for developed countries of about 50 to 60 per cent. The trend is now towards more spacious dwellings as incomes rise. Indeed, with the wealthier segment of the population in mind, the HDB is giving greater emphasis to medium- and low-density housing, including condominiums and townhouses. Some design work is also being contracted to the private sector for the first time to increase the diversity and distinctiveness of different public housing projects.

Rising incomes have of course been reflected in changing levels and patterns of consumption more generally. Table 4 identifies the major consumption trends since the late 1970s. Even taking into account price inflation and the rise in total population from 2.3 million to 2.7 million between 1977 and 1990, there have been
considerable absolute increases in consumption expenditure on goods like housing, food, beverages, clothing and footwear. But equally significant is the noticeable shift in the relative expenditure on different commodities. The proportion of spending on food, for instance, has dropped markedly, while expenditure devoted to leisure and education has jumped. Almost by definition, spending on this latter category is disproportionately accounted for by higher income Singaporeans. Expenditure on education not only includes secondary and tertiary fees but outlays on private tuition. According to one survey, approximately one-third of all students from kindergarten to university make use of private tutors. This alone involves a total monthly expenditure of S$21 million.\(^3\)

This changing consumption pattern also has an international dimension. Not only does it involve greater overseas travel by holidaying Singaporeans, but a considerable expansion in the number undertaking studies overseas, as demand for places in domestic tertiary institutions outstrips supply. In 1987, for example, over 9,000 students were enrolled in educational institutions in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. By 1990, there were 15,300 Singaporeans studying overseas. Given the steep fees involved, the extent of overseas study reflects both a significant capacity to pay for, and the importance attached to, education. Fees for tertiary studies range from between S$2,000 and S$24,000 in Canada to between S$14,000 and S$36,000 in Britain. At one level, this mirrors the growing size of the middle class and attendant values. But this pattern is compounded by the exceptional importance of credentials in 'meritocratic' Singapore. There is probably no other place in the world where formal qualifications represent as much economic or social capital.

The high level of students going overseas for education is part of a larger pattern. An ever-growing number of Singaporeans are also spending part of their working lives outside Singapore as the economy increases in sophistication and various links with the international community expand. In 1990 there were 14,600 expatriate Singaporean workers in various countries. Indeed, so internationally mobile has the population become that in 1991 the government established the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) to facilitate contact with and between Singaporeans abroad. Though this organization was ostensibly created to facilitate Singapore's economic globalization, it is also an expression of the government's concern about, though not necessarily an intended remedy for, its weakening social and cultural control. More Singaporeans are spending time overseas and are exposed to different social and political systems and ideological perspectives that challenge the PAP's world view. Resigned to this reality, the Singapore government is currently exploring the possibility of using satellite television to ensure that Singaporeans
studying and working overseas can still have access to reporting on Singapore and the region that is sensitive to 'South-East Asia's heritage, knowledge base and perspective'. This is one of the contradictions of Singapore's development: the very success of the PAP's economic strategy has reduced the capacity for social control which the party has given such high priority. However, the PAP's political dominance may not be under serious threat. As the above general discussion hints, Singapore's rapid economic growth has ushered in important social developments. Implicit in this discussion is the notion of a sizeable wealthy segment of society emerging to assert itself economically, but also having broader social, cultural and political implications. The role of the middle class is clearly important, but any assessment needs to establish what this term now means in Singapore, as well as its size.

Identifying the Middle Class in Singapore

Broadly, there are two approaches to the question of class, one inspired by Marxist-based concepts 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. Within both popular and academic literature there is a widespread view that Singapore has a substantive middle class. Adopting a stratification notion of class, Reader and Wong have argued on the basis of survey data 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'. The most common conception of middle class in this survey was a household with an income of at least $82,000 per month, owning a three or four-bedroom flat and having somebody in the family with a tertiary education. The possession of a washing machine and the taking of an overseas holiday were also identified as characteristically middle-class. A similar conclusion was drawn from the same theoretical perspective much earlier by Chen. He argued that 56 per cent of respondents in a survey were similarly middle-class. This figure was arrived at by combining his 'upper-middle,' 'middle,' and 'lower-middle,' categories of socio-economic status which he had developed on the basis of income, educational level, occupational status and housing type. Interestingly, both the immediate past prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and the current prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, have described Singapore as a middle-class society. Lee went so far in 1987 as to claim that 'Our society has become 80 per cent middle class'.

On the other hand, not all stratification theorists are convinced that the middle class is so pervasive in contemporary Singapore. Recently, Quah and others have argued that 'there is no evidence of a concentration of people in one homogenous “middle” interval'. In particular, using 1980 census data, they take issue with Chen over the proportion of blue collar or manual workers (production, agricultural and service workers, and labourers), claiming that more than half the workforce (53 per cent) was in this category. More generally they warn against over-emphasis on superficial indicators of class like consumption patterns.

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<th>Table 5 Occupational distribution 1980 and 1990 (per cent)</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and Technical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Admin., Execut. and Managerial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clerical, Sales and Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Production and Others</td>
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Since the study coordinated by Quah went to press, preliminary data from the 1990 census have been released which may clarify the issue. As revealed in Table 5, the combined share of the total workforce accounted for by administrators, executives and managers, as well as professionals and technicians, rose from 18.0 to 24 per cent
between 1980 and 1990. This 1990 share roughly approximates the 21.7 per cent that Burris arrived at in trying to isolate the middle class using 1989 International Labour Office data. Burris employs a Marxist or conflict theorist’s notion of the middle class which is necessarily less inclusive than the one employed by stratificationists. The most conservative estimate of the contemporary middle class thus has it representing about one-quarter of the workforce and rapidly expanding.

However, it is not simply the absolute level of the middle class, whatever its definition, that explains its importance. Rather, it is the influence of the class, both directly and indirectly, over social and political life. Debating whether or not more than half of Singapore’s workforce or population is middle class is thus somewhat misdirected. Certainly, the PAP has been convinced for the best part of a decade that this emerging social force has real political implications and has adjusted its strategy accordingly.

Perceptions of a Middle-Class Political Threat

Since the early 1980s the ruling PAP has suffered a sustained electoral decline. It started with a shock by-election loss in 1981 which broke the ruling party’s absolute parliamentary monopoly and culminated in the loss in the 1991 general election of four of a total 81 parliamentary seats. Though the PAP still enjoys overwhelming political ascendancy, it has been extremely sensitive to the erosion in its support. Throughout this period, the PAP has been convinced that it is the rapidly expanding middle class that has most contributed to the party’s declining fortunes. With an eye to the future, the PAP has given priority to the political management of this expanding social force.

The first suggestion of middle-class alienation from the government came not so much in the 1981 by-election, since it was in the predominantly low-income electorate of Anson. Rather it was in the unprecedented public expressions of dissent from the PAP’s harsh treatment of the lone opposition member of parliament and related government statements about the perils of opposition in general. Never before had the daily English-language newspaper, the Straits Times, published such strident political comment. It was assumed that the defence of liberal political values was primarily coming from the better educated, who tended to be educated in English rather than Chinese.

The subsequent 1984 general election gave the PAP even more cause for concern. The overall swing against the government was a dramatic 13 per cent, which reduced the PAP’s share of total votes to 63 per cent. Due to the first-past-the-post voting system, only one additional opposition seat transpired from this. However, it happened to be the seat of Potong Pasir which contained a far greater share of middle-class voters than Anson, if the high level of private housing and tertiary qualifications characteristic of this constituency are any indication.

The lead up to the 1984 election also provided further testimony to the growing confidence amongst Singapore’s educated elite to publicly contest official policy. Lee Kuan Yew’s eugenics thesis was a particular case in point. He drew attention to differential procreation rates of university educated professionals and relatively uneducated women, arguing that this represented a threat to Singapore’s economy and society. According to Lee, it was the national duty of female university graduates to marry other graduates and reproduce, lest Singapore’s genetic stock degenerate as a whole. Various incentives were proposed to induce a greater sense of ‘national duty’ amongst graduates. Yet the public outcry, principally through the columns of the Straits Times, against such measures was led by graduates themselves who found the whole idea repugnant. This raised the question of whether the elitist ideologies of Lee Kuan Yew were less compatible with the thinking of a younger and better educated electorate.

Without doubt the 1984 election prompted a major reassessment within the PAP. The result was a strategy to recapture lost ground by way of a focused attempt to appease the middle class. The party soul-searching had led to the conclusion that there was a perception of the PAP government as paternalistic and authoritarian, particularly prevalent among the middle class, that would have to be rectified. Accordingly, the PAP embarked on a range of reforms designed to open up avenues
for increased consultation with the middle class in the policy process. Conveniently, this new strategy coincided with an orchestrated leadership transition which gave the appearance that the PAP itself was changing with the times. It was to culminate in Lee Kuan Yew's resignation as prime minister in late 1990 to take the lesser post of senior minister in a cabinet by then devoid of other leaders of Lee's generation.

The younger group of PAP leaders have made much of the need for a change in the style of government. The measures that they have presented as demonstration of this change include:

- the establishment in 1985 of a Feedback Unit, an extra-parliamentary institution which was intended both to take suggestions from the public and better explain government policies at the grassroots level;
- the adoption of Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs) in 1987;
- the introduction of Town Councils;
- the establishment of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), a non-government think-tank that attempts, amongst other things, to involve professionals in public policy discussion.

The theme to most of these reforms, was the government's desire to channel dissent and disaffection with its policies through institutions that it either controlled, or through which public policy debate could be largely depoliticized. The message clearly directed at the educated professionals was that the government was receptive to constructive suggestions from those with relevant expertise on any policy issue. It was not, however, an invitation to form pressure groups or the beginnings of a more pluralist political culture. On the contrary, the PAP's aim appeared to be to undercut the growing support for opposition political parties by demonstrating how unnecessary they were.

The selective and consultative approach appealed to the ideology of meritocracy that the PAP had so vigorously promoted since the 1960s. According to this view, the most able and talented in society necessarily meant the educated elite, who should be accorded due status and reward. Continuing state paternalism, at least as it applied to the middle class, tended to conflict with this. The apparent opening up of the political process still rested then on elitist assumptions.

Although the 1988 general election result witnessed a continuation of the PAP's electoral slide, this time it was a far less dramatic 1.7 per cent, with just one opposition MP in parliament. The surface evidence might have vindicated the PAP strategy, except that figures released in 1989 revealed an alarming level of emigration. In 1988 alone, 4,707 families emigrated. A subsequent study revealed that contemplation of emigration was especially high among the young, English-educated, high-income Singaporeans who were precisely the target of the PAP's change in approach. The perception of Singapore as an over-regulated society, particularly as it applied to official controls on people's reading and viewing habits, appeared to be a significant factor here. The new leadership's reform strategy had not yet addressed such concerns.

The government responded to the 1988 election by further innovations to pave the way for co-opted involvement in public affairs. This time it introduced a new category of MPs—the nominated MPs (NMPs). They were to be appointed by the president on the advice of a Special Select Committee. The idea was that they would provide a non-partisan alternative view in parliament that would satisfy the evident growing sentiment for an opposition. The Feedback Chairman reported enthusiastic support for the idea from professionals and academics. However, a snap election in mid-1991 soon put the political question of the middle class in a new light.

1991 Election: Wider Basis to PAP Electoral Decline

The official explanation for this early election, some two years ahead of schedule, was Goh Chok Tong's desire to establish a clear mandate for both the long-term programme outlined in *The Next Lap* and his more consultative style of leadership. However, a resounding win would at the same time give Goh some much
appreciated breathing space from the deputy prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, whose rise to the top spot appears inevitable. Goh was confident that his leadership style and vision for Singapore were particularly attractive to the middle class. However, what the 1991 election results showed was that much of the strategy to arrest the PAP's electoral decline had been misdirected. The direct political significance of the middle class had been overstated. The election revealed widespread working-class discontent with the government; a discontent that was only exacerbated by the PAP's special sensitivity to middle-class concerns.

The election was fought selectively by the opposition parties. Of the total of 81 seats, 41 went uncontested. This assured the PAP of government, leaving voters the option of electing a genuine opposition as opposed to the manufactured one presented to them by the PAP through the non-elected schemes. The government's share of the vote dropped from the 1988 level of 63.2 per cent to 61.0 per cent, with the opposition parties picking up three new seats to add to Potong Pasir.

PAP losses occurred in the seats of Bukit Gombak, Nee Soon Central and Hougang, but the margins in favour of the government were also slim in Bukit Batok, Nee Soon South, Braddell Heights, Changi and Eunos. Substantial swings against the government also took place in Ula Pandan, Jurong, Bukit Merah and Yu-Hua. Of these electorates, only Braddell Heights and Ula Pandan boast substantial middle-class elements. To generalize, the support for the opposition parties came from satellite towns on the outer edge of the city centre. They contain a high percentage of constituents with average and below average incomes involving a range of working-class occupations, including clerical and non-supervisory white collar categories. Recent cost of living rises in essential services would have had a particular impact on these people. In the first half of 1991, for example, the consumer price index rose by 3.8 per cent but costs in public transport rose by 19 per cent, health charges by 9.9 per cent and education charges by 6.8 per cent.

The election result was a rude awakening for the PAP. Its leaders had largely taken the support of the predominantly Chinese-educated working class for granted, presuming that it was the backing of the affluent English-educated that might be more tenuous over time. Yet in a climate of rising public and private transport, health and education charges, the government's various elitist policies that especially benefited the middle class were a source of particular irritation to the working class. Policies such as: the establishment of expensive independent schools; the gifted education programme which provided privileged treatment for early achievers; the partial privatization of public health services to enable the more affluent to exercise greater consumer choice; and incentives to encourage child rearing through graduate marriages were all unpopular. The 1991 election seemed to reflect a growing class consciousness and perception that Singapore's dramatic economic development had led to increasingly inequitable outcomes. But in the election campaign Goh Chok Tong emphasised that any levelling of society through welfare would be counter-productive.

Whether or not Singapore's more advanced economic phase is associated with an acceleration of inequalities in wealth and income is a contentious point. Undeniably the gains from Singapore's economic development have been widespread. Nevertheless, in 1989 the Committee on Destitute Families reported that 1,300 families in Singapore were living in poverty. More public attention has focused on the plight of middle-income earners. A local academic, Tan Kong Yam, suggested that a hitherto unrecognized disadvantaged 20 per cent of the population earns too much to qualify for government subsidies, yet too little to outbid the top ten per cent for private property, cars and other limited resources. In attempting to refute this, the deputy prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, cited data covering the period 1972–1988 which showed that whereas the bottom 20 per cent of the workforce improved incomes by 3.7 per cent, this contrasted with 4.1 per cent for the middle 60 per cent and 4.2 per cent for the top 20 per cent. Inadvertently, he had highlighted the relative deterioration of the lowest income groups.

In a subsequent attempt to redeem his argument, Lee produced data which showed that the annual income growth in the decade 1980–1990 witnessed greater gains by blue collar workers at 5.6 per cent, compared with 4.3 per cent for clerical workers and 3.1 per cent for professionals. As for absolute inequalities, Lee drew on the World
Development Report 1991 to make the point that by international standards Singapore enjoyed low levels of income inequality. The problem for the latter part of the argument was that the data were derived from surveys conducted mainly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. 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 has remained roughly the same. Indeed, he points 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'.\textsuperscript{1,2} Yet the same study notes that when income distribution is considered on an individual basis, using data on CPF contributions and taxpayers, larger but not dramatic increases in income inequality are revealed.

Whilst the picture on inequalities may be clouded, what matters in political terms are people's perceptions and a greater awareness of income differentials does seem to be surfacing in Singapore. Certainly, with over half the population receiving less than S$800 per month, some luxury items remain frustratingly elusive for many Singaporeans. The exorbitant cost of a private car, which might be supportable on social and environmental grounds, is nevertheless one significant source of consumer anxiety. Private vehicles are subject to quotas in Singapore and attract heavy premiums. Recently the government introduced Certificates of Entitlement (COEs) for private vehicles which are subject to competitive bids. Valid for ten years, COEs ranged in May 1992 from S$17,200 for a vehicle of 1,000 c.c. capacity or less to S$32,000 for luxury cars. This cost is on top of the price of the car. For many Singaporeans, then, despite the improvements in living standards over the last ten years, they are still no closer to being able to afford a private car.

Just as in other countries that have undergone a major economic transformation, inequalities in wealth and income in contemporary Singapore are now more visible. The conspicuous consumption of the middle class unavoidably takes on a political significance that is beginning to manifest itself in greater discontent than in earlier stages of development. Then, so many Singaporeans were simply grateful to have stable employment and steadily rising incomes. Now the working class is increasingly viewing its social and economic position with reference to what it sees as the especially privileged middle class and the PAP government's central role in institutionalizing privileges.

In other countries where real or perceived problems of inequality have accompanied economic development, extensions to the welfare state have been adopted to alleviate social and political pressures. In Singapore, by contrast, the PAP is adamant that no such path will be followed. Viewed in the narrow sense, government spending on social security and welfare in Singapore is minute by world standards. In 1988, for example, it represented just 2.01 per cent of total budget expenditure, compared with an international average of around 30 per cent. However, the proportion of government spending on education and housing is well above world averages and incorporates substantial public subsidies of private consumption. Generally, though, subsidies are not means tested. So it is not the principle of subsidization that irks the PAP, but rather the deliberate redistribution of income and wealth to the detriment of the 'high fliers'. For the PAP, this runs totally counter to the idea of a meritocratic society. The constant official theme in Singapore is that only with due reward to the able can the rest of society be pulled along.

A key political question for the PAP is just how the perception of inequalities will be managed in the absence of a more expansive welfare state. Understandably, the middle class has shown no interest in the deliberate redistribution of wealth and income to the benefit of the relatively disadvantaged. But heightened class consciousness in Singapore will mean that the PAP's pursuit of policies and ideologies that particularly serve the interests of the middle class runs the risk of arousing greater antagonism.

**Nature of Middle-class Alienation from the PAP**

The 1991 election results have put middle-class discontent with the PAP into perspective. To reiterate an earlier point, it does nevertheless appear that there are aspirations among the middle class for greater personal autonomy and less official
regulation of their lives. The grievances are not so fundamental as to lead to outright rejection of the PAP, but they do represent a pressure for change nonetheless.

Just prior to the 1991 election, there were tentative steps towards a relaxation of some official constraints in the cultural sphere in response. The most important development was the revision of the existing film classification system which resulted in the introduction of a Restricted (R) category of movies for viewers above the age of eighteen. The introduction of R-rated movies in July 1991 boosted cinema attendances by half a million in that month and even more in August. It was a flood of 'sexploitation' films, largely from Hong Kong, that accounted for most of this new interest in cinema. Changes resulted so that only films considered to have artistic merit were allowed to be screened without censorship, and to people over the age of twenty-one rather than eighteen. Ironically, the bulk of the increased cinema clientele attracted by soft pornography came from the Chinese-educated working class. Importantly though, even after the change it was possible to view a controversial and overtly political film like Spike Lee's Do The Right Thing. In explaining the government's liberalization of film classifications, the prime minister made the point that since Singaporeans now travel widely outside Singapore it was no longer possible in any case to totally control viewing.

The relaxation of censorship, however, has been uneven and lacking conviction. There have been few relaxations for the print media. Playboy, for example, is still banned, even though the Singapore government now has a small indirect commercial interest in its publishers. Restrictions continue on foreign publications such as the Far Eastern Economic Review, and books that take too critical a view of politics in Singapore. The government's intervention to stop publication of the 23 November 1991 edition of the local monthly, Women's Affair, for mild criticism of PAP women MPs served as a reminder that things had not changed dramatically. The profits of book shops in neighbouring Johor Bahru which are frequented by Singapore's English-educated middle class are likely to be swelled by the PAP's sensitivity for a while yet.

Mild as this liberalization is, it represents an attempt by the government to increase consumer choices—in this case in the cultural sphere. A similar reasoning applies in the efforts to diversify public housing and public health services. All are examples of reduced state paternalism used by government leaders. In these latter cases, however, the choices opened up by such measures are contingent upon individual resources and are necessarily more meaningful to the middle class. This may be the respect in which the increasingly affluent middle class in Singapore exerts pressure for a change in the role of the state.

Interest Groups and the Middle Class

It is thus argued that the middle class does not pose any direct political threat to the PAP, but instead is a major beneficiary of PAP rule. However, the existence of a substantial middle class can also have implications for the form that politics takes. In other NICs, the middle class has exerted a political influence through the formation of independent, interest group organizations. These have included consumer organizations, employer associations, church groups, student movements, professional associations and other groups that have entered into public debate and/or protest over government policy without participating in the electoral process. In Singapore, though, the PAP has been outstandingly successful in limiting political engagement to direct, formal processes. At the same time, the more sizeable middle class has manifested itself in the expansion and formation of organizations that might at some latter point assume a greater political significance. These include the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS), the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) and the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP).

The NSS has flourished in recent times in part because Singapore's expanding middle class, including policymakers, have shifted attention to quality of life considerations. Lacking the party structures to generate the appropriate expertise, the PAP has thus made use of the NSS's Master Plan for the Conservation of Nature in Singapore submitted to the government in 1990. Importantly, NSS lobbying is
done privately, with letters to newspapers and petitions eschewed to avoid public disagreements with the government. Although it has a membership in excess of a thousand, the organization's legitimacy derives not so much from its right to exist as a pressure group but because it can be seen to have a technical expertise that can be drawn upon by the government. AWARE was established in 1985 and similarly tries to avoid open confrontation with the government. Nevertheless, letter-writing to the *Straits Times* is used more frequently by AWARE and public forums on women's issues are also held. Moreover, in the case of the 'Great Marriage Debate' arising out of Lee Kuan Yew's statement on eugenics, AWARE did adopt a critical public stance on the government's proposals. The middle-class character of this organization is underlined, however, by the low priority accorded the question of foreign maids in Singapore. There are more than 65,000 foreign maids in Singapore, working for low wages and lacking the rights and representations enjoyed by domestic employees. Monthly levies of $S300 apply on top of wages of around the same level. Of course, it is the middle class who particularly benefit from their availability.

The AMP is the most recent of such organizations, having been established in 1990. The existing council for the development of the Muslim community, Mendaki, was seen to be too dominated by the PAP to adequately represent Malays. Being an organization of professionals, AMP represents a clear case of middle-class activism, but the PAP appears to have restricted its potential as an independent organization by having the AMP accept matching funds on a dollar-for-dollar basis for its activities. The government's object is to steer the AMP towards apolitical community development work.

Clearly these organizations are not fundamentally threatening to either the PAP or the political system. However, they do exist outside the more direct structures of political cooptation described earlier. To that extent, the more substantive middle class appears to have facilitated organizations that could at some latter point proliferate and complicate the process of cooptation.

**Conclusion**

Singapore's rapid economic development has set in train important social changes. In particular, it has fostered the emergence of a substantial middle class with significant purchasing power that expresses itself in new lifestyles and aspirations. However, the PAP government has always been dominated by leaders with professional backgrounds who have seen a crucial economic role for this class. Moreover, the middle class has enjoyed elevated social status through the ideology of meritocracy promoted and institutionalized by the government. In fundamental terms, there is no reason for the now sizeable middle class to seek drastic political change.

Nevertheless, its increased affluence and associated conspicuous consumption have given greater visibility to class differences in contemporary Singapore. This has resulted in heightened class consciousness manifesting itself in closer scrutiny of the PAP's policies by the electorate. The political significance of the emerging middle class lies then mainly in its indirect effects, rather than its own immediate role. But this should not be underestimated. Unless addressed, it has the potential to further reduce the PAP's parliamentary dominance.

At the same time, the considerable international mobility of the middle class, whether through education or work, exposes it to a wider range of ideas and threatens the traditional effectiveness of the PAP's methods of social, political and ideological control. The PAP leadership does not need evidence that such exposure translates into pressures for substantive political and social change to feel uneasy about this. Rather, any diminution of control is in itself a matter of concern for the PAP. It may be hoping to compensate for this loss of control to some small extent through such initiatives as the Singapore International Foundation and satellite transmission, but clearly the context within which it attempts to socialize the population has altered significantly. So if the middle class represents a political threat, it is to the customary levels of social, political and ideological control of the PAP through its capacity as a conduit to a broader, international community. This
is, of course, a limited threat. After all, due in no small part to the efforts of the PAP, the social and economic power of the middle class is now structurally embedded in Singapore. The consolidation of this power, however, may be better served by less direct political means than in the past. The PAP is only slowly realizing that the period of the ‘dictatorship of the middle class’ has outlived its usefulness.

1. The US dollar (US$) exchanges for about (S$) 1.6 Singapore dollars.
9. V. Burris, 'Late industrialisation and class formation in East Asia' paper presented at *Emerging Social Forces in Asia* Conference, Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, September 1991.
12. Sumiko Tan, 'No basis to say that there is a middle class squeeze: B. G. Lee', *Straits Times*, 29 July 1991, p. 1.