

Singapore's Evolving Political Economy

Capitalism & the Technocratic State

Significance of the Model

- Ideological utility for debates in developed and developing countries alike.
- Combines state capitalism & globalisation.
- Cohesive one-party state controlled by technocratic political and bureaucratic elites.
- Dynamic authoritarianism: more participation, less contestation. Constantly refining institutions & ideology.
- Contradictions of model generating new challenges: dependence on foreign labour; income inequalities; social spending.

Westminster Appearances

- Formally a Westminster (unicameral) parliamentary democracy. No local government.
- However, systemic obstacles to political competition with ruling PAP: electoral gerrymandering; domestic media monopolised by state-linked companies; use of ISA & litigation to silence critics; restrictive laws on freedom of expression/assembly.
- A one-party state fusing bureaucratic and political power, marginalising parliament from the real policy debates.
- Non-democratic political culture institutionalised, including moral accountability and consensus representation.

Origins of Authoritarian Rule

- PAP was the political face of the anti-colonial movement, comprising different factions.
- A marriage of convenience, principally between English-educated middle class & Chinese-educated leftists who controlled mass organisations (trade unions, cultural & student organisations).
- PAP split in 1961: Barisan Sosialis (Socialist Front) forms, support from some elements of domestic business.

A New PAP Power Base

- Repressing opponents one part of PAP political strategy; other public housing to boost electoral support of working class.
- Broader development agenda elevated the importance the civil service, which became the new power base of the PAP.
- GLCs and statutory bodies would be a key recruiting ground for PAP leaders. No role for opponents in the power structure.
- State capitalism flourished alongside increasing globalisation.
- Temasek Holdings: S\$242 billion portfolio in 2016; GIC S\$250 billion according to Sovereign Wealth Institute.

Moral Accountability

- Conformity to received codes of behaviour assumes pre-eminence in evaluating the conduct of power holders.
- Righteous conduct for moralists ranks alongside individual liberties for liberals and popular control for democrats.
- PAP leaders believe they have created a meritocratic elite with moral integrity, obviating the need for political accountability between elections
- Constrained horizontal accountability. No role for independent civil society watchdogs.

Classical Republicanism

- LKY in 2008: 'The system is there, but the system cannot run on a continual injection of inadequate, mediocre men; you need top men, able men to choose able people to join you, to make sure that at every level you have the most able, the most meritocratic (people) in charge.'
- Thus, the moral character and integrity of the elite is the primary check against abuses of public office and corruption.
- Escape of high security detainee & policy failures in last decade have put the idea of a meritocracy under critical public scrutiny.
- Barr (*The Ruling Elite of Singapore*, 2014: 128) argues there is 'significant discrepancy between the national elite's extraordinary capacity for self-perpetuation and self-defence, and its less than impressive level of competence.'

Consensus Representation

- New institution building began following 13% swing against PAP in 1984. This would include a role for the civil service in facilitating public policy consultation.
- The idea has been to provide alternatives to oppositional politics, guided by a technocratic conception of policy as 'problem solving'.
- PM Lee Hsien Loong: 'In a rapidly changing environment, much of the valuable information is held by the people at the frontline. Policymakers must draw on this knowledge to understand realities on the ground, and reach better solutions.'
- By-passing democratic authority to represent; mechanisms for genuine consensus lacking.

Feedback Unit

- FU established in 1985, relaunched as Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home (REACH) in 2006.
- Facilitates engagements between government departments and the public.
- 2004 changes to the Instruction Manual of the Civil Service require a paragraph in all policy proposal memoranda to cabinet to outline related prior public consultations.
- Public administrative institutions afford structures for influencing who can participate and how.
- Opportunities to promote the atomisation of citizens as political actors and the compartmentalisation of their concerns.

Consultation: How and Who

- Traditional and online feedback channels: toll-free hotline; SMS; email; Discussion Forum; Facebook Page and Twitter. Also face-to-face engagement sessions such as public forms, dialogue sessions, Listening Points (roving feedback booths). Also 'strategic partners' among community, civic, grassroots, professional and welfare organisations and PAP-affiliated organisations such as the NTUC.
- Supervisory Panel sets broad directions. PAP minister invariably chairs Panel (currently the Minister of State, Prime Minister's Office & Ministry of Manpower, Mr Sam Tan).
- Remaining members a mix of other government MPs, members of PAP-affiliated organisations and GLCs, including media organisations, various individuals from private sector, universities and civic society.

Select Policy Influence

- In 2005, *Closing the Loop and Shaping Our Home: Turning Ideas into Reality*, FU detailed 20 instances of feedback from these groups it claimed were instrumental in changing policy. Mostly in health.
- The 2002 recommendations of the Feedback Group on Best Practices in Political Governance for Singapore fell on deaf ears. It called for: an independent electoral commission to level the playing field; transparency and accountability for GLCs; measures to ensure legal and judicial impartiality; reforms to foster freedom of association and greater access to media for opposition parties.
- The rise of social media as a forum for critical views would lead to the establishment of REACH to try and counter this.

Boosting Consensus Representation

- May 2011 election precipitates a shoring up of consensus representation. The PAP's vote share slipped to 60.1% -- worst performance since independence in 1965.
- Accelerated growth under PAP's capitalist model resulted in one of the most unequal income distributions in the developed world and absolute poverty levels of an estimated 10-12% by 2011.
- In 2012, PM Lee announced a 'new strategic direction for Singapore' that would involve striking a 'new balance in our social compact.' In the same speech he announced: a 'national conversation on Our Singapore to define what sort of country we want and how we can achieve it', to be led by Minister for Education Heng Swee Keat. The result was OSC, a 12-month enquiry starting in October 2012.

OSC

- OSC different in scale, forms, and methodology of public consultation from anything before. Estimated 47,000 people participated in over 660 dialogue sessions involving 40 organisations.
- Channels of engagement included those: centrally organised by the government; organised by grassroots organisations and unions linked to the government; and organised by select interest groups, civil and civil society organisations, and companies.
- Dialogue sessions were conducted in 75 different locations, including small groups in coffee shops. Additional feedback was received through 1,331 email threads, 4,05 Facebook wall posts, 211 private messages and 73 YouTube videos.
- Key role by civil servants facilitating consultations.

OSC as Political Strategy

- Government and establishment people dominated the OSC committee under Minister Heng. Opposition politicians, civil society actors, and leading bloggers critical of the PAP were conspicuously absent.
- More open exercise permitting normative debate, but no concrete recommendations in *Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation*.
- Coupled with opposition de facto boycott of OSC, enabled the government maximum discretion to link its subsequent policies with OSC processes.
- Direct consultation with the PAP and its feedback institutions, rather than more independent, competitive alternatives depicted as the way to address public concerns.

2015 Poll Joy for PAP

- September 2015 polls delivered the PAP 69.9% of the vote – up by 9.8% and 83 of the 89 seats.
- PAP presented greater social spending as listening to the people; bypassing oppositional politics depicted as delivering.
- Reserves drawn on to expand social spending.
- Heng declared that the ruling party needed to ‘engage even more extensively and even more deeply.’ More work for REACH.

Conclusion

- Singapore model defined by a technocratic de facto one-party state. This fundamentally shapes the context of the civil service.
- No economic or political retreat of the state, but continual challenges inherent to the tensions of the model.
- The political space of the state will continue to expand.
- Civil service likely to be kept busy in administrative incorporation of politics into the state.