



## **Singapore: A Depoliticized Civil Society in a Dominant-Party System?\***

by Kenneth Paul Tan

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In Singapore, the People's Action Party (PAP) is the dominant political party, powerful because of its longstanding position of centrality in the state, won through regular but not very competitive elections. In this leading position, the PAP government has attempted, mostly successfully, to activate the people in a civil society that it has endeavoured to depoliticize at the same time. The advent of new media has facilitated a re-politicization of Singapore's civil society and forced political parties, including the PAP, to engage citizens in a lightly regulated but relatively uncensored cyberspace.

### **2. DOMINANT-PARTY SYSTEM**

Political parties in contemporary Singapore serve to aggregate and articulate the various needs and interests in society, seeking power that is legitimized – formally through regular popular elections – at the highest level in legislative and governmental office. In this regard, Singapore is unremarkable.

However, Singapore's democratic elections are, in practice, not very competitive. Although there are approximately 20 registered political parties, most of them are minor and dormant even during election time. One party, the PAP, has dominated these elections since 1959 when it came to power in a newly self-governing Singapore. Opposition party candidates were not able to win any seats in the 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980 elections, and have subsequently won at most four seats in the

1991 elections. Currently, the most significant opposition parties are the Workers' Party that presents itself as an "alternative" party that is in broad agreement with the fundamental principles of the PAP government, and the Singapore Democratic Party that presents a more antagonistic challenge towards the PAP government.

The PAP has been able to win elections for a number of reasons. As an incumbent party in power, it has tremendous resources at its disposal, including the mainstream media that is indirectly under its control. Nearly all the major newspapers in all of Singapore's official languages are published by Singapore Press Holdings, which issues management shares of its newspaper companies to individuals approved by the government. MediaCorp, which is fully owned by Temasek Holdings (a powerful investment organ of the government), owns nearly all the broadcast media stations. More importantly, though the government does not generally practice direct control of media output, several editors and journalists are said to exercise self-censorship.

The electoral system, featuring a first-past-the-post system and multi-member constituencies, favours the dominant party. The PAP government, through its majority in Parliament, has been able to institutionalize constitutional innovations that provide for several non-elected positions, such as nominated parliamentarians and an

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Results of Singapore's General Elections 1968 - 2006 <sup>1</sup>					
<i>Date</i>	<i>No of seats*</i>	<i>Parties contesting ***</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Seats won</i>	<i>% votes won****</i>
13 Apr 1968	7+(51)	2+(5)	PAP	58	84.43
2 Sep 1972	57+(8)	6+(2)	PAP	65	69.02
23 Dec 1976	53+(16)	7+(2)	PAP	69	72.40
23 Dec 1980	38+(37)	8	PAP	75	75.55
22 Dec 1984	49+(30)	9+(3)	PAP SDP WP	77 1 1	62.94
3 Sep 1988	70+(11)	8+(4)	PAP SDP	80 1	61.76
31 Aug 1991	40+(41)	7+(7)	PAP SDP WP	77 3 1	59.31
2 Jan 1997	36+(47)	6+(1)	PAP SPP WP	81 1 1	64.98
3 Nov 2001	29+(55)	5+(2)	PAP WP SDA	82 1 1	75.30
6 May 2006	47+(37)	4	PAP WP SDA	82 1 1	66.60

\* Uncontested seats in brackets.  
\*\* The 1955 Legislative Assembly consisted of one Speaker, three ex-officio members, 25 elected members and four nominated members.  
\*\*\* Number of parties contesting. Independent candidates shown in brackets.  
\*\*\*\* The percentage of votes won is calculated against the total votes cast.

elected president, that, in effect, provide for meritocratic rather than democratic alternatives to traditional party-based opposition in Parliament. It has also been a difficult challenge for the opposition parties to put up a good fight, in part because of inter- and intra-party disagreements and rivalries. Furthermore, the electorate are thought to be satisfied on the whole with the government's performance over the decades – particularly in the areas of security, social harmony, economic development, and the living environment – and, having not known any other government, are not keen to risk Singapore's success by bringing to power an inexperienced party.

The PAP attributes its successful record to its technocratic ability, meritocratic approach to leadership selection, and pragmatic approach to politics and policy. For instance, the party's parliamentary group is mostly made up of members who were talent-spotted, screened, interviewed, and invited into the party and positions of leadership due to their achievements in their own fields and professions, rather than their loyalty and hard work through the party rank and file.

### 3. DEPOLITICIZED CIVIL SOCIETY

Singapore's civil society consists of a range of organizations that are private, civic, and/or political in character. The PAP government prefers to think of civil society as "civic" society, a depoliticized form that is closer to the civic republican model that values citizens' public duties rather than the liberal democratic rights-based model that regards the state with suspicion.

To depoliticize civil society, the PAP government has at its disposal a few repressive laws. The Internal Security Act (1960) enables the government to detain without trial anyone deemed to be a threat to national security. The Societies' Act (1966) requires that civil society groups obtain the approval of the Registrar of Societies to become legal entities. The Registrar may refuse to register societies deemed to be political associations, in cases where there is affiliation or connection with foreign organizations. To avoid problems of refusal or delay, civil society organizations tend to avoid any association with opposition parties.

Civil society is seen to be depoliticized not only because these laws make Singaporeans apprehensive, but

1 Source: Sylvia Lim, "The Future of Alternative Party Politics: Growth or Extinction?" in *Renaissance Singapore? Economy, Culture, and Politics*, ed. Kenneth P. Tan (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007)

also because of the widespread belief – expressed in everyday conversations, letters to the press, public forum discussions, etc - that the majority of Singaporeans are apathetic, individualistic, materialistic, and pragmatic rather than idealistic. Since the PAP government has been so successful at developing Singapore from a Third World to a First World country in just a few decades, the majority of Singaporeans do not see the need for a civil society of organizations that are not as technocratic, professionalized, and capable as the strong state.

The “grassroots sector” is a constituency-based, closely interconnected network of leaders, committees, and voluntary members who belong to organizations that may be described as either party-political structures or para-state (non-political) structures. The latter consist of Community Development Councils at district level, Community Centre Management Committees and Citizens Consultative Committees at electoral constituency level, and Residents Committees at neighbourhood level. These committees are supervised and supported by the People’s Association, a statutory board chaired by the Prime Minister and, in turn, supervised by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). Town Councils are local administrative units whose primary responsibility is to look after the municipal concerns of larger groupings of electoral constituencies.

The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), a peak organization to which most of Singapore’s labour unions are affiliated, is closely associated with the PAP. Many of its top office-holders are PAP members, parliamentarians, and even cabinet ministers. Its leaders are part of a tripartite arrangement with the government and employers federations to maintain industrial peace. The National Wages Council meets every year, as part of Singapore’s tripartism, to formulate national wage guidelines. While labour unions used to be adversarial in the 1950s and 1960s, the NTUC has since been a leading force in making Singapore a stable pro-business environment that is attractive to foreign investors.

There are hundreds of voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs) in Singapore whose role is primarily to do with social service delivery. A large proportion of these VWOs come under the umbrella of the National Council of Social Services (NCSS), an agency of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth, and Sports (MCYS). Of particular interest among these VWOs are the ethnic

self-help groups: Chinese Development Assistance Council for the Chinese who make up 75 percent of the population; Yayasan Mendaki and the Association of Muslim Professionals for the Malay-Muslims who make up about 15 percent; the Singapore Indian Development Association for the Indians who make up 8 percent; and the Eurasian Association for the Eurasians who make up less than 2 percent.

Although the PAP government tries to depoliticize civil society, it nevertheless wishes Singaporeans would come forward as active citizens to participate in the life of the nation. In this regard, the PAP government has organized at regular intervals national consultative exercises such as the National Agenda in 1988, Singapore 21 in 1998, and Remaking Singapore in 2003. Through these official national discussions, the people were called forth to feel responsible for matters that are important not only for themselves but for the larger national community. The agendas, however, are always set and controlled by the PAP government.

There are also a number of advocacy groups that champion particular causes and try to influence policies by engaging with the PAP government. For instance, the Nature Society (Singapore) successfully spearheaded popular efforts to persuade the government not to build over Tanjung Chek Jawa, the wetlands on one of Singapore’s islands, which is home to several ecosystems. The Singapore Heritage Society, on the other hand, was not successful in its efforts to lead a campaign against the demolition of the old National Library building which held very fond memories for many ordinary Singaporeans growing up in a rapidly changing urban landscape. Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) has been working to advance the rights of foreign domestic workers in Singapore. A critical moment in the development of advocacy groups in Singapore was in 1999 when several groups formed a network called The Working Committee in order to build capacity and social capital.

#### 4. NEW MEDIA

While Singapore’s civil society appears to be rather depoliticized on the surface, its online manifestation is much more politically active, even aggressive. Through websites, blogs, news portals, YouTube, facebook, and twitter, civil society activists engage in critical online discussions and challenge the traditional mainstream media

through alternative reporting. Satirical postings and short films have become popular sources of oppositional views. Activists have been able to mobilize a wider group of citizens for action. The political parties, including the PAP, have also joined the bandwagon and are trying to engage with the people, particularly the younger generation, who are often regarded as having different values and sensibilities from those of the founding generation.

While it is tempting for a strong government to impose censorship on new media, the PAP government has decided to regulate this space with a light touch. Since it is technically difficult to completely censor anything in cyberspace, such attempts would actually give more publicity and credibility to the censored.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Singapore's civil society is best conceived in terms of a dynamic and hegemonic relationship with the state, rather than a static relationship. It is possible to classify a large proportion of civil society organizations as institutionally created, directed, supported, or co-opted by the PAP government, leaving very few that could be regarded as independent, resistant, or oppositional. Nevertheless, the relationships are not static, but the result of

negotiations, compromises, and struggles that are rarely explicit.

Even though it is a high-capacity government that is relatively autonomous with regard to social forces, the strong PAP government has never been able to control every facet and detail of life in Singapore. It is not difficult, though, to identify several examples of how the government has attempted successfully to shape institutions and ideologies – and to use force and repression in the last instance – in order to encourage behaviour that will credibly maintain its position in power and capacity to use this power for what it deems to be in the national interest. As civil society grows in size and capacity and its activist repertoire expands into new media expressions, the government will face many more difficult challenges in securing its hegemonic position. It will certainly need to continue co-opting oppositional forces, learn new strategies of engagement, and impress the electorate with continued socio-political stability and economic growth, while taking seriously rising concerns about social justice, cultural diversity, and political space. The PAP will very likely continue to be in government for the next decade at least, but it will more than likely soften in style and evolve into a more conciliatory, sensitive, and inclusive government.

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