A Cautionary Tale:
Diagnosing Singapore’s One-Party State

by

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INTRODUCTION

In 1819, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles of the British East India Company founded Temasek and transformed it from the resource-poor backwater fishing village that it was into Singapore — a thriving and vital economic center in the East. The diverse range of commodities produced in the Malay Archipelago — bird’s nest in Borneo, nutmeg and cloves in the East Indies, and gold in Bali — were consolidated in Singapore, eagerly sought after by the West, and actively traded and distributed to distant markets.\(^1\) Its prominence in the international seafaring trade only grew after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, an event that displaced the Cape of Good Hope and made Singapore emerge as the new port of call for European ships transiting across the Straits of Melaka.

Singapore today is still an economic center, albeit in a different sense: From processing millions of tons of crude oil annually to specializing in wafer fabrication, today it is more significantly a key financial metropolis in Asia. Recently touted as the “New Monaco” and considered the “Switzerland of Asia,” with a sum of private

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wealth estimated at US$ 160 billion,² Singapore is both a playground and tax haven³ for the world’s ultrarich. Far removed from the scrutiny of Western regulators commonplace in the E.U. and the U.S., Singapore is an excellent location for the ultrarich to store their wealth with no questions asked. What continues to attract Multinational Corporations (MNCs), high-net-worth individuals, and foreign investors alike to the small island city is the climate of order, stability, and — most importantly — predictability that have become aspects prized in an economic center after the collapse of world markets in 2008. The sense of control in Singapore, brought about by its draconian laws, which include the banning of chewing gum and caning as a form of corporal punishment, has historically received flak from foreign observers — but in today’s context it is being widely embraced for its positive impact on the country’s seemingly crisis-proof and ever-expanding political economy. All these characteristics of the Singaporean system serve to bolster the city’s relevance as a global economic hub. More significantly, attention is increasingly being paid to the root of it all — namely Singapore’s unique governmental model — as the source of its extraordinary success. This model — a cross between an electoral democracy and a hegemonic authoritarian one-party state — has indeed come to serve as an inspiration for many seeking to combine exceptional economic success with political order and rationality. As Francis Fukuyama in the *The End of History and the Last Man*, put this: “[Singapore’s governmental model] has been justified unapologetically, not just as a transitional arrangement, but as a system superior to

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³ Singapore has one of the lowest tax rates in the world and makes exemptions on capital gains and foreign dividends. Apart from that, it also has relatively secretive private banking laws.
liberal democracy.”4 Today for many not only in East Asia but also in many parts of the developing world, the Singaporean method of governance serves as an alternative way to thinking about the relationship between a government and its people.

Thus Singapore’s relevance to the world is not only confined to the fact that individuals, MNCs and even foreign countries have a vested economic interest in the island nation, but also many others in addition are deeply interested in its method of rule, that has brought about strong and consistent economic growth and social order in a multi-racial society — aspects greatly sought after today in both developing and developed countries. Therefore, the mechanisms which support Singapore’s method of rule — “a unique blend of comfort and central control”5 — are relevant not only to Singaporean citizens but also to the larger international body of thinkers and citizens who are concerned about good governance and the economic and social health of their various polities. Situated in this wider context, the study of the Singaporean government and its social contract with its citizenry is important for the way we imagine political and social theory in the twenty-first century, as it addresses economic crises, social instability, and turmoil — much of which Singapore has managed to evade and emerge fairly unscathed.

In this thesis, I explore the aspects of political stability and economic success characteristic of the Singaporean system, which also form the primary basis of the People’s Action Party’s (PAP)6 political legitimacy. I argue that these two aspects have been largely a result of the PAP government’s adoption of what I shall call a

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6 The People’s Action Party (PAP) has been the ruling party of Singapore’s one-party system from 1959 (even before the country gained independence from Malaysia in 1965), and since then it has remained undefeated throughout all general elections.
thin democracy — one that projects the veneer of a representative democracy in its procedural trimmings but ultimately lacks features crucial for democracy. Although regular elections free of electoral fraud exist in Singapore, the thin democracy practiced there has created a political culture in which its citizens’ consent is predicated on the PAP fulfilling its end of its contract with the Singaporean people, namely, in exchange for their willing obedience, the PAP will provide substantial economic growth and domestic order to them. Because the conduit between the government and its people is intrinsically weak as a result of the curtailment of democratic participation and engagement with the government, citizens give their consent to PAP rule based on nothing more than the fact that it has been known to “deliver the goods” to Singapore. The result is that the PAP government’s success hinges on its delivery of economic performance and political stability — and this, in turn, means that political legitimacy rests on a sense of what this thesis calls its “instrumental acceptance” from the citizenry rather than actually having what it calls their “duty-bound obedience.” The thesis argues that the difference between these two sources of legitimacy is critical not only for understanding the source of the PAP’s continuance in power, but also for appreciating the source of its potential weakness.

Indeed, the thesis argues that the present mode of legitimation is ultimately fragile because the quid pro quo nature of the social contract is put in question in the possible event that the PAP government falls short in its ability to deliver the goods. While the PAP government has to this point consistently been delivering to the mark, this thesis claims that the mechanisms which support Singapore’s stellar economic growth are by nature not necessarily long-term and that they indeed most likely have
a shelf life to them — that while an economic crisis is not inevitable, a slowdown in economic growth is a plausible scenario. Were this to happen, with the result that the PAP government falls short in delivering the goods, the extent of the damage to Singapore would not simply stop at declining growth, but would add along with it political and social problems stemming from Singapore being a thin democracy. In such a scenario, Singapore could well experience a serious political legitimacy crisis along with an economic one. In this case, because the PAP government would have failed to provide its citizens with both economic progress and their democratic participatory rights, it would inevitably face a legitimation crisis — an event in which though it might retain its legal authority by which to govern, it would not be able to perform the ends for which it was instituted. Since this thesis is specifically about the precarious relationship between the ruling party’s political legitimacy and its ability to deliver economic performance, its exploration is principally confined to the political, economic, and social problems in Singapore arising from this association; in no way is this thesis aimed at spelling out all the contradictions and weaknesses of Singapore’s political system.

As a framework for this thesis, I employ the metaphor of a seemingly healthy patient paying a visit to the doctor for a routine medical checkup, as a means to examine the health of the PAP government’s political legitimacy. In Chapter 1, I perform a diagnosis of the PAP method of governance. I note that on the surface it seems that the ruling party has the legitimacy to rule based on the fact that it has been winning elections and that its economic track record is stellar. However, I note that upon closer inspection, things beneath the surface are not as robust as they seem.
Indeed, a series of characteristics pertaining to Singapore’s thin democracy renders the purported political legitimacy of the PAP government vulnerable. In Chapter 2, like a doctor informing the patient of the consequences of his ailments, I spell out the consequences of Singapore’s thin democracy, arguing that the relationship between the PAP government and Singaporean people is ultimately subject to serious disruption because of the instrumental nature of their relationship.

In Chapter 3, I imagine the circumstances in which the patient’s underlying weakness might come fully to the fore. I do this by examining Singapore’s economy. In the course of this examination I acknowledge that on the surface it appears to be in a healthy position in part because of the PAP government’s foresight and planning, which has churned growth numbers and kept the economy abreast of the changing economic tide — thereby reinforcing the regime’s political legitimacy. However, upon deeper examination, I concur with several economic scholars that the operative mechanisms that support Singapore’s growth are vulnerable to various malfunctions that might occur as a result of their finiteness and their exposure to situations beyond their control. Should such conditions occur — and the thesis argues that their doing so is not an implausibility — the effects on the PAP, on the state apparatus, and Singapore as a whole would likely be significant.

The first half of chapter 4 spells out these effects in detail; that is, it explores the consequences of the economic mechanisms that the PAP government relies on, the political implications of the social problems that it must address to keep these mechanisms operating, and the costs of the PAP failing to do so both for itself and for the government more generally. The chapter describes how the possible interplay
among the various economic and social problems, compounded by the fact that the conduit between citizen and state is weak, could result in social chaos for Singapore. The concluding part of the chapter prescribes the medicine that the patient should take to strengthen himself so that he can prevent his possible demise. Thus, the thesis offers certain reforms the PAP government might want to consider in order to shore up the legitimacy of its rule, in a bid to establish a more robust basis of political legitimacy for itself — one that is not so directly subject to the PAP government’s economic performance or the turbulent economic forces it necessarily confronts.

Although it appears that Singapore’s success is breeding more success, and the possibility of a socio-economic crisis thus seems far removed from reality at the moment, the forces that could lead to such an outcome are currently taking shape. Under the right conditions and with an economic slowdown serving as a trigger, the welled up frustrations of the citizenry could implode from within; this would have a catastrophic effect on the state. Since independent Singapore is really the PAP Singapore, in that the identities of the party and the state are indistinguishable from one another, the extent of the damage would not stop at the dismantling of the Party but could conceivably lead to the toppling of the entire state apparatus. This thesis therefore serves as a cautionary tale for the PAP government as it envisages the future of Singapore and its social contract with its citizens: that it be cognizant that the instrumental relationship it has with its citizens, though it has been the source of its success, could ultimately lead to the undoing of not only itself, but also the state. It is also important to stress that the implications of the PAP government’s actions and policies extend beyond Singapore itself; in the same way Singapore’s governmental
system is seen as a developmental model for many countries in the region, the way in which it confronts the limitations and weaknesses of the model will also be seen as an example for others to do likewise.
CHAPTER 1:
DIAGNOSIS OF PAP RULE

In this chapter, I examine the thin democracy practiced in Singapore. I argue that while this form of governance has served to benefit the young city-state’s economy since its relatively recent independence, the inherent lack of features crucial for it to be a full-fledged democracy leaves the PAP government vulnerable to a possible crisis in the near future. In addition, the fact that the characteristics of Singapore’s democracy are merely procedural and offer the citizens simply an impression that they are being represented, situates the PAP government in a precarious position vis-à-vis the citizenry — who ultimately possess the power to determine the PAP’s right to rule. These factors compounded with other characteristics of the Singapore system which serve to undermine its democratic character and render it a limited democracy could ultimately lead to the peril of the PAP government if not addressed correctly.

While Singapore appears to be a limited democracy on the surface, a combination of obvious and less obvious characteristics of the system renders this characterization otherwise. The obvious characteristics of the system that undermine
the democratic character of Singapore include the tweaking of the electoral system and process by the PAP government, the conflation of power between party and state, and the curtailment of civil society. I will show that these “more obvious characteristics” or factors are required for there to be a true democracy such that without them, limited democracy in Singapore is a hollow shell — a situation that I will later show reinforces its vulnerability in times of economic deprivation.

The least obvious and most pressing factor concerns the nature of political legitimacy in Singapore. Since the country’s inception, state legitimacy there has hinged on economic performance or what might be called the citizen’s “instrumental acceptance” of the state apparatus rather than their “duty-bound obedience” to the state. Citizen consent is therefore dependent upon deliverables dispensed by the PAP government that enable citizens to continue to experience their high standard of living, social peace, and continued material well-being. As I will show, this instrumental relationship not only leaves the state vulnerable but it also undermines its pretensions to being democratic.

In the first part of this chapter, I will provide a general diagnosis of PAP governance and explain how it could be seen as a legitimate authority on the surface, given its electoral track record. Thereafter in the second part of the chapter, I will enumerate the combination of more and less obvious characteristics in the system that poses serious questions to the PAP government’s purported political legitimacy. I begin with the most obvious (but arguably the least problematic) of them — (1) tweaking of the electoral system and process; and then proceed to uncovering more “hidden” factors including (2) the conflation of power between party and state, and
(3) the curtailment of civil society; I conclude with the least obvious (but most flawed) feature of the Singaporean system — (4) the citizen’s “instrumental acceptance” of the state. These characteristics reveal that things on the surface are in reality not as good as they appear to be; indeed, they indicate that the present state of political legitimation is more fragile than it might appear, a fragility that has long-term negative implications for political and social life in Singapore.⁷

1.1 ON THE SURFACE

Throughout all thirteen general elections since 1959, the PAP has consistently emerged as the undisputed ruling party and maintained its hegemony in parliament. It has maintained a minimum of 60% of the votes in every election, and by possessing the sheer and large majority of votes, the PAP could be seen to have a clear mandate from the people to rule — today, the PAP occupies 80 out of the total 87 Member of Parliament (MP) seats.⁸ In light of the fact that elections are the only medium in which Singaporean citizens express their consent to the political party they consider most legitimate to lead the Singapore government, winning this mandate implies that it has political legitimacy in the formal sense. According to Thio Li Ann, former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP)⁹ and Law professor at the National University of Singapore, “since elections theoretically provide a peaceful way to oust

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⁷ Because the Singaporean system is premised on a one-party state, party and state are easily conflated since the party’s priorities are often manifested as state priorities and vice versa; I have thus used the two terms almost interchangeably in this chapter.


⁹ The Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme began in September 1990 in a bid to bring more independent voices into Parliament. An NMP is a member of the Parliament of Singapore who is not elected by the people but instead appointed by the President. NMPs are not part of any political party and they ultimately do not represent any constituency.
a repressive or unresponsive regime, repeated electoral success is taken to validate
government practices and policies.\textsuperscript{10} The PAP government seems to have a case of
constant validation. Observing the results from the general elections in the last
decade, the PAP has continued to maintain this majority trend, garnering 75.3\% of the
votes in 2001 (one of its best showings in history), 66.6\% of votes in 2006, and
60.14\% in 2011.\textsuperscript{11} Consequently, while the PAP’s total percentage of votes has been
dropping, it is still accurate to say that the PAP government has the majority support
of Singaporeans to rule, expressed through their consistency in voting the party back
into office and the fact that it has overwhelming majority of the seats in Parliament.

In a survey conducted by the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS)\textsuperscript{12} on Singapore
in 2006, 83\% of the Singaporean respondents expressed the opinion that they see the
PAP as a credible party while only 48\% and 16\% see the opposition Worker’s Party
(WP) and Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) respectively, as credible political
parties.\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, 89\% express that they trust the national government led by the
PAP.\textsuperscript{14} The data presented in the ABS are a compilation of face-to-face interviews

\textsuperscript{10} Li Ann Thio, “Rule of law within a non-liberal ‘communitarian’ democracy: The Singapore
experience,” in \textit{Asian discourses of rule of law : theories and implementation of rule of law in twelve
\textsuperscript{11} Singapore Elections Department, “Parliamentary Elections Results,” \textit{Singapore Elections
\textsuperscript{12} The ABS is an applied research program on public opinion on political values, democracy, and
governance around Asia. An independent study is conducted on each country and each national
research team administers survey instruments to compile the required micro-level data under a
common research framework and research methodology. This to ensure that the data is reliable and
comparable on the issues of citizens’ attitudes and values towards politics, power, reform, and
\textsuperscript{13} Ern Ser Tan and Zhengxu Wang, “Singapore Country Report Second Wave of Asian Barometer
\textsuperscript{14} East Asian Barometer, “Online Data Analysis,” \textit{East Asian Barometer},
http://www.jdsurvey.net/eab/AnalizeQuestion.jsp.
with a representative adult population sample in Singapore, and since it is an academic survey collaborated by academics in Taiwan and Singapore, it is fairly indicative of views on the ground, unlike censuses projected by the local media, that could be biased towards the PAP government’s political agenda. Based on election results and the public’s views, it appears that on the surface, the PAP government has the mandate of the Singapore people and legitimacy to rule, which is further validated by its electoral victories.

The ABS reveals that Singaporeans also have a general preference for democracy. In the survey, approximately 60% express a preference for democracy over other forms of government, 21% give conditional support for authoritarianism and 13% feel indifferent towards democracy. There is a consensus that there should be opposition representation in Parliament, with 82% considering it important to have an elected opposition, underscoring the fact that the PAP should not be the only voice in Parliament. While about 60% admit that there is a general lack of political freedoms in Singapore — in particular, freedom of speech and freedom of association — it is surprising that 82% are satisfied with the way democracy works in Singapore. Furthermore, 84% consider the present PAP government to be by and large a democracy. Given the curtailments of freedom of speech and expression, the

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16 Both the local media and the national newspaper, The Straits Times, are heavy regulated and subject to much censorship by the ruling government in Singapore. The 1974 Newspaper and Printing Press Act legislated state surveillance and control over the ownership, management and funding of local newspapers.
18 Ibid., 6.
19 Ibid., 7.
20 Ibid., 3:4.
results seem to indicate that Singaporean citizens perhaps do not consider aspects like political freedoms a central tenet of democracy. Another possible interpretation is that perhaps citizens reckon the limited democracy in Singapore is efficacious and therefore acceptable, since it has been a key factor behind Singapore’s economic success.

A possible way of understanding the limited democracy practiced in Singapore, is the fact that, although elected officials possess power, they are not “tenured” and consequently, as suggested by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, “there is no guarantee that in ten years’ time, or even in five years’ time” they will continue to be in power.\(^{21}\) Elections are by no means routine; they uphold the citizens’ free will to select their political representatives in Parliament. Consequently, Singaporeans possess the democratic right to elect their representative MPs and the regular general elections every five years ensure that this democratic quality is upheld, even in the event that the results are contrary to the interests of the PAP government. In 2011, after not being re-elected into Parliament by his electoral division, Minister of Foreign Affairs George Yeo lost his cabinet position after having served in politics for twenty years\(^{22}\) — illustrating that the citizens’ votes ultimately do have an impact on election results. Although Yeo was crucial to Singapore’s political leadership in his role as foreign minister, the citizens ultimately had the final say, which was expressed through their votes, and the PAP government respected their decision.

While these measures portray Singapore as an effective democracy, it is simply so in

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the narrow procedural sense and Chua Beng Huat, Dean of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, warns that “this maintenance of the ‘form’ of rights enables the PAP government to counter suggestions of being anti-democratic in principle.”

The ABS reveals, however, that when the choice is down to either having democracy or economic development, 64% of Singaporeans consider economic development more important than democracy, while only 12% feel that democracy is more important and 19% are neutral between the two. The results illustrate that Singaporean people generally place a premium on economic development over democracy. Although the earlier results suggest that Singaporeans have pro-democratic preferences, in reality, they are not inclined to change the political status quo in Singapore since the present system promises to deliver economic progress for the country. As Robert Compton, professor of Political Science at SUNY Oneonta argues, “the source of legitimacy for [Asian states] resides in a cultural construction of politics combined with the modern symbol of legitimacy — economic growth.”

Therefore, for the ruling party to be a politically legitimate authority in the eyes of Singaporean citizens, apart from being subjected to formal and regular elections, it also has to be capable of delivering economic progress to the country.

1.2 BENEATH THE SURFACE

On the surface, although Singapore’s political system possesses elements of a liberal democracy, in reality it lacks certain key institutional characteristics that

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would make the democracy as practiced efficacious. Although Singapore has since its inception been a one-party state ruled by the PAP, opposition parties are legal and they have been known to contest against the PAP regularly in the general elections. Much like the high integrity of the PAP governing administration, which has a reputation of being free of corruption in spite of being in power for an extended period, the electoral process is also relatively free from electoral fraud and tinkering — an aspect which plagues the election process in several democracies in Southeast Asia. To further validate the electoral process, Singapore practices the secret ballot and provides for voter preferences to be expressed without intimidation. However, Cherian George, a Singaporean journalist and senior research fellow at the Singapore Institute of Policy Studies, cautions that although the PAP has subjected itself to elections at the constitutionally-mandated intervals, it has not found the need to limit its power substantially between those elections.\textsuperscript{26} Consequently, the PAP government does not take measures to safeguard the civil liberties of its citizens and it fails to impose checks on its own governmental powers.\textsuperscript{27}

While elections serve the purpose of checking the party in power, they fail to check the scope and limits of the party’s power; the result is that the government can make executive decisions contrary to the interests of the citizenry. Larry Diamond, professor of Sociology and Political Science at Stanford University, labels Singapore an “electoral autocracy” — a state that has “elections without democracy.”\textsuperscript{28} This identification alludes to the notion that while the PAP relies extensively on the

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\textsuperscript{26} Cherian George, “Consolidating Authoritarian Rule, Calibrated Coercion in Singapore,” \textit{The Pacific Review} 20, No.2 (June 2007), 132.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

\end{flushleft}
legitimating power of elections, it is unable to secure the citizens’ allegiance through the process of election — an aspect often a result of them having elected their chosen party into office. The PAP government in essence relies on elements of procedural democracy to legitimize its power without the more substantive elements — such as having the “duty-bound obedience” of Singaporean citizens (an aspect which I will discuss in greater detail later in the chapter). In the words of Terence Chong, a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and coordinator of its Regional Social and Cultural Studies Program, “echoing standards of the patriarchal … state, the PAP state here is able to tell its citizens what is good for them, [and therefore] direct them towards certain actions, and make them accept certain policy decisions, all for their own good.”

Cherian George describes Singapore aptly as an “Air-Conditioned Nation” — “a society with a unique blend of comfort and central control, where people have mastered their environment, but at the cost of individual autonomy, and at the risk of unsustainability.”

Beneath the veneer of limited democracy, a combination of obvious and less obvious characteristics of the Singapore system reveals the PAP government’s political legitimacy could well be in troubled waters. These characteristics of the system stem from direct measures taken by the PAP government to cement its own position and power in order to prevent the possibility of another government being installed. Consequently, the characterizations in the system render the glimmer of democracy that Singapore purports to have as ultimately superficial and lacking in real functionality. The following section examines four problematic areas of the

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30 George, Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation, 15.
Singapore system: it starts with the most obvious factors, the tweaking of the electoral system and process, and the conflation of power between party and state. Thereafter, it looks at less obvious features of the Singapore system, which include the government’s curtailment of civil society; and finally, but most importantly, it details the citizen’s “instrumental acceptance” of the state apparatus. These factors underscore the fact that the limited democracy practiced in Singapore is in itself thin, and thereby lays question to the PAP government’s claim of being a truly politically legitimate authority.

1.2.1 TWEAKING THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND PROCESS

Since there are no limits to the scope of the party’s power, the PAP state is able to define the rules and make changes to the election process as it deems necessary. Electoral divisions in Singapore are drawn up by the Prime Minister and assigned either Single Member Constituency (SMC) or Group Representative Constituency (GRC) status for the purposes of parliamentary and presidential elections. As their titles suggest, in SMCs the electorate votes for a single member to be their MP, while in a GRC the electorate votes for a group of three to six MPs, and the number in each GRC is pre-determined by the President. The GRC system was introduced to the general election process only in 1988; according to the Elections Department, its purpose is “to ensure minority racial groups in Singapore will always be represented in Parliament” in a predominantly ethnically Chinese society. Thus, at least one member in a GRC must belong to a minority racial community — Malay

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or Indian. Today, there are 12 SMCs and 15 GRCs, and the PAP currently represents 10 SMCs and 14 GRCs.

The introduction of the GRC system has posed significant impediments to opposition parties, which mostly have only a small pool of candidates, and thus a reduced number of electoral divisions in which they can contest. The system has put a strain on the opposition parties’ resources and they consequently had to exercise caution in fielding their members in the various electoral divisions. This is compounded by the fact that the PAP government has affixed a “credibility” requirement for potential MPs; “credibility” is defined by Alex Au, a civil rights activist and the creator of *Yawning Bread*, as “that vague sense of trustworthiness, competence, and professional qualification.” Because of this requirement and the fact that opposition parties have a shortage of talent puts them in a fundamentally disadvantaged position each general election. Although the government has played the racial card in offering an explanation for the GRC system, it is quite accurate to say that the system has in effect weakened the electoral eligibility of the opposition.

Another problematic area for the opposition related to electoral divisions is the frequency with which constituency lines are re-drawn and the manner in which SMCs are conveniently absorbed into GRCs at the government’s discretion. The fact that constituency boundaries change especially close to an election raises more questions about whether the GRC system has been used as a tool for

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32 *Yawning Bread* is a widely read critical commentary blog on Singaporean politics and society. It came to prominence after Alex Au posted an iconic aerial photograph of the Workers’ Party rally in the Hougang Single Member Constituency (SMC) depicting thousands gathered to listen to opposition opinion before the 2006 General Election.

gerrymandering.\textsuperscript{34} The Elections Boundaries Review Committee, however, has insisted that the re-drawing of constituency boundaries, when carried out, has been motivated by the need to facilitate and accommodate the changing demographics of the constituency.\textsuperscript{35} Nonetheless, the repeated alteration of constituency boundaries as close as a month before the election period commences is cause for suspicion. Furthermore, the fact that the Elections Department is part of the Prime Minister’s Office and functions as part of the executive branch raises the very likely possibility that this move is a result of the PAP government’s electoral engineering. It is important to note that opposition parties have no influence over how boundary lines are drawn despite having spent years cultivating relations and “walking the ground” with residents; in a swift executive decision, years of work can be nullified, as when an SMC gets absorbed by a GRC. According to Kenneth Jeyaratnam, the Secretary General of the opposition Reform Party, “the PAP’s control over the electoral system and its use of state resources to influence voters including the control of the Elections Department by the Prime Minister’s office, and threats to withhold upgrading from opposition wards have been referred to [in Putin’s Russia] as tantamount to electoral fraud.”\textsuperscript{36}

Apart from manipulating the GRC system in its favor, the PAP has also been known to disqualify opposition candidates from the electoral playing field by launching personal attacks in the form of defamation suits, which has often resulted in

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 106
bankrupting them. When Chee Soon Juan first ran for election in 1997 under the
opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), he was readily dismissed from his position as a lecturer at the National University of Singapore based on what the university claimed to be a misappropriation of university resources. However, it has been suggested before that he was relieved because he was running for the opposition.

In 2001, Chee ran for election again and was sued by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong for publicly challenging him during a campaign rally; the court ruled in favor of Goh and Chee was slapped with a fine of US$400,000. His inability to pay for the damages forced him to file for bankruptcy and barred him from participating in future elections. A similar lawsuit occurred in 1998 when J.B. Jeyaratnam, the first opposition MP, allegedly slandered Goh’s reputation in public, the court also ruled in favor of Goh, and Jeyaratnam was forced to pay for damages totaling US$100,000.

His inability to pay forced him to declare bankruptcy and subsequently saw his exit from Parliament and also made him likewise ineligible to contest in future general elections.

The two incidents illustrate that the PAP government has it in its power to define what exactly constitutes “defamatory” and “slanderous” on the political battlefield. Amnesty International has described the series of events in Singapore to be a “misuse of defamation suits by the PAP” and characteristic of “politically-

37 James Chin, “Electoral Battles and Innovations: Recovering Lost Ground,” in Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years, ed. by Bridget Welsh et al. (NUS Press, 2009), 75.
motivated libel actions.”\textsuperscript{41} As Angela Oon, member of the opposition Worker’s Party (WP) laments, “The PAP has sought to curtail this very ability of the electorate to hold it accountable for its actions by instituting and enforcing measures to intimidate and undermine opposition parties.”\textsuperscript{42} As a result of the PAP’s capacity to define the limits of political attacks during the election period, opposition candidates have to tip-toe around sensitive issues and play according to the ruling party’s rules in order to stay in the competition and avoid disqualifying themselves unintentionally.

Instead of permitting free and open partisan contesting for government leadership, the veneer of a democratic election process in fact serves nothing more than a public renewal of the PAP’s right to rule. The general election functions as a legitimizing device for the PAP; indeed, the party’s repeated wins do show that the party has almost unanimous support from Singaporeans to rule. Yet, in function, the general elections serve as nothing more than a formal procedure in the reinforcement and renewal of the pre-existing leadership in Singapore. According to Cho-Oon Khong, a senior economist at Shell International Petroleum and a scholar in Southeast Asian political economy, “elections [in Singapore] are at best a referendum to gauge public opinion, at worst a test of loyalty to the ruling regime…in neither case are elections a means of asserting popular choice between rival party platforms.”\textsuperscript{43} In other words, general elections in Singapore prevent the possibility of a new party to be voted in on the basis of popular support from its citizens. Simply put, the object of

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
the general election is two-pronged: first, to establish the PAP as a democratically elected government and second; for the PAP government to gauge the extent of endorsement it has from Singaporean citizens.

1.2.2 CONFLATION OF POWER BETWEEN PARTY AND STATE

The PAP is so ingrained in the governmental structure that since the founding of Singapore in 1965 when it separated from Malaysia, party and state legitimacy have been synonymous. Independent Singapore has by and large been a PAP Singapore. The fact that the government has not been led by another party suggests that Singaporeans have, knowingly or unknowingly, been shaped and convinced by the ethos of the PAP to the extent that they cannot imagine another party replacing the ruling PAP. Singaporeans have been so accustomed to the key characteristics and deliverables of PAP governance that another party in power, let alone another mode of governance, is unfathomable. The PAP government has set such a high benchmark for what good governance entails that Singaporeans would not accept anything short of the standards that the PAP delivers on. Terence Chong underscores that “the absence of the competitive politics expected in liberal democracies, together with the sheer managerial efficiency of the PAP has, in public perception, led to the merging of the essential features and mechanisms of the ruling party and state into a cohesive unit where institutional functions, loyalties, and interests are seemingly homogenous in character.”44 Consequently, Singaporeans perceive PAP governance to be the only form of legitimate governance — one wherein there is no conflict between state and

party, and such that the two function seamlessly and efficiently together.

Singaporeans subscribe to the notion that only with the PAP in power can the nation continue to experience material well-being and maintain efficient and effective state institutions.

A key reason behind the PAP’s longevity in power lies in its ability to respond and adapt to the changing times and its foresight in preparing for the challenges that lie ahead. Lee Kuan Yew, founding father and first Prime Minister of Singapore, has described the PAP’s emphasis on self-renewal through the “continual induction of younger men and women of ability and integrity, with high levels…to remain vigorous, sensitive to changes, and never complacent.”

The leadership is renewed through retiring a third of the PAP MPs at each general election for various reasons ranging from age, relevance to emerging conditions, and connectedness with the younger electorate. As such, the PAP consistently possesses what Terence Chong describes as “realism-based understanding of the external environment as dynamic and every-changing,” matched with a “strong political will to self-transform” — allowing it to remain relevant to the needs of Singaporeans today. The party’s commitment to take these steps voluntarily and the fact that it is driven by its own internal political will and not in response to domestic challenges or social dissent makes the PAP-governed state one-of-its-kind compared to other conventional one-party state models.

Larry Diamond notes that the resultant “exceptional stability”

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48 Ibid., 299.
provided by the PAP has enabled Singapore to survive as an electoral autocracy, unlike similar electoral autocracies that existed around the world in the 1960s and 1970s — Senegal, Rhodesia, and Taiwan — which have since been toppled.  

Apart from its dedication to continually renewing the party’s leadership, the PAP has also creatively sought new ways to reinvent parliament and create and manage an “opposition.” In response to the electorate’s desire for greater and more robust parliamentary debate in the 2001 general election, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong made recommendations for the PAP to form its own “shadow cabinet.” A shadow cabinet would be made up of PAP MPs, should there be less than two elected opposition MPs, where they would undertake the role of the opposition and voice alternative views and interests in parliament. This would effectively render the PAP an “intra-party democracy,” an option that China’s Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-led government is presently exploring.

However, these attempts to keep the PAP vital by trying to renew itself and respond to the changing needs of the electorate do not change the basic fact that Singapore remains a one-party state. The PAP’s insistence on having a one-party state stems from its belief that one party in power is vital for the efficient management of the state and it therefore refuses to budge from its bastion of power. Highlighting the nuisance of having a political opposition, Lee Hsien Loong once said, “suppose you had 10, 15, 20 opposition members in parliament — instead of spending my time thinking what is the right policy for Singapore, I’m going to spend all my time

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49 Larry Diamond, “Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” 30.
thinking what’s the right way to fix them.”

As the ruling party in a one-party state, the PAP is thus able to act as the final arbiter and referee in any political, economic, and social issue, whereby its policy decisions are absolute. As a result of this, the PAP continues to see itself, and to be seen by a large percentage of the electorate, as completely indistinguishable from the state, thereby mimicking a totalitarian state — with all the problems such states can have.

1.2.3 CURTAILMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Apart from tweaking the electoral process in its favor and fusing the party with the state apparatus, the PAP government further exerts its control over the state by intentionally keeping civil society weak and thereby keeping it compliant with the interests of the party. The PAP government has readily sought to, in the words of Suzaina Kadir, professor of Political Science at the National University of Singapore, “limit civil liberties and manage change in order to perpetuate development.”

Through a combination of corporatist controls, coercion, and fulfillment of their careerist longings, the government has been able to attain the acquiescence of the large majority of middle-class Singaporeans. The PAP government’s frantic bid to curtail civil society stems from its perception of civil society as fundamentally conflict-ridden and it therefore finds the need to dictate and define the limited spaces

53 Ibid.
for activism and freedom to flourish.\textsuperscript{54} In a bid to perpetuate the paternal state, the PAP government makes every effort to centralize power by using its political power to paralyze civil society and shore up its hegemonic grasp by discouraging the development of political pluralism. The government acts in this way because it sees the potential for social chaos if civil society were to be left unchecked, and its effect on jeopardizing the peace and stability in Singaporean society (aspects it has continually strived to instill).

Terence Chong points to the term “civic society,” a term used by former Chairman of the PAP’s youth wing George Yeo, as a more accurate description of the civil society in Singapore because it “involves an ideological siphoning of competing interests, liberal values, and marginal voices from the public activities of the citizens, leaving only a politically congruent society…that has little need for the application of agency.”\textsuperscript{55} As such, Singapore’s civic society is void of the vibrancy of interest groups and civil associations which would represent the spectrum of ideas, beliefs, and aspirations of the diverse polity. Cherian George draws on the metaphor of a “semi-conductor plant” to describe Singapore society where “technicians are covered head-to-toe in white smocks before entering the air-conditioned rooms, to ensure that they do not introduce foreign particles that would ruin the manufacturing process…[and] geared to high-value productivity, and with all participants agreeing to keep it clean — or stay out.”\textsuperscript{56} George’s colorful illustration paints Singapore civil society as one that is extremely sanitized and a derivative of the paternal state and its singular

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} George, \textit{Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation}, 40.
agenda, rather than a representation of the sum of personalities of Singapore’s multi-
racial and religious fabric.

The PAP so effectively maintains a congruent civil society by portraying itself as non-partisan and above the competition of multi-racial group interests.\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, as a country which ascribes equal national recognition to its three main racial groups — Chinese, Indian, and Malay coupled with the fact that the government makes every effort to incorporate the four official languages — English, Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay, in the daily administration of the state,\textsuperscript{58} implies that the PAP government is cognizant of the multi-racial complexity of Singaporean society. Moreover, given the history of racial riots in Singapore, the PAP government finds it imperative to balance the various interests of the racial groups. The result is peace and mutual recognition between racial groups through the PAP’s deliberate policies. As a central authority, the PAP state claims to transcend the narrow self-interests of racial and religious groups and thereby is able to project itself as a broad and impartial mediator whose policies encompass the varied interests of the multi-racial society. Consequently the PAP state reasons that there is no real need for an active civil society, since there is no contestation of interests between the racial groups.

Apart from addressing the possibility of conflicting interests between different racial groups in society, the PAP government also makes a conscious effort to reconcile state and non-state interests such that there is no need for the individual to struggle against the state. According to Chong, like Hegel, the PAP views civil society as “the realm of self-interests, incapable of governance, designed for the

\textsuperscript{58} One way the PAP government does this is by ensuring that public announcements, government forms, and public road signs bear all the national languages.
achievement of individual, selfish interests.” As a result, in order to keep civil society at bay, the PAP government has from the start regulated local state-society relations by targeting the three major social bodies — trade unions, local press, and academia — such that they all spoke a common language of cooperation and non-confrontation. By neutralizing these social bodies and silencing alternative and competing voices, the PAP in essence declared a conservative ideology that is conflict-shy and devoid of competitive politics. These factors ultimately allow the state to function seamlessly and at a high level of efficiency, that has incidentally become the hallmark of life in Singapore. The PAP government is thus able to perpetuate the paternal state, by maintaining that Singapore would not be the harmonious multi-racial society that it is if civil society were left unchecked.

1.2.4 CITIZEN’S INSTRUMENTAL ACCEPTANCE

The social compact in Singapore makes the state, despite its democratic pretensions, essentially a corporation and the citizens its stakeholders. According to Prime Minster Lee Hsien Loong, his conception of state-citizen relations is one wherein the citizen can say, “I have a stake in it, and it is fair. It’s given me education, it’s given me opportunities, it’s given me basic social safety nets, but it expects me to work and if I work, I get good rewards.” This sets up the citizen-state relationship as one based primarily on transaction intended to secure mutual

60 Ibid., 298.
pecuniary benefit for both parties rather than the citizens identification with and allegiance to the state apparatus. In other words, Singaporean citizens give consent to PAP rule based on an “instrumental acceptance” rather than their “duty-bound obedience.” Muthiah Alagappa, founding director of the East-West Center in Washington, D.C., distinguishes “instrumental acceptance” from “duty-bound obedience”: the former is a result of the state providing “rewards” or material well-being for the citizenry, while the latter is based on a sense of allegiance and the citizen’s commitment to obey the state. Based on Alagappa’s distinction, it is fair to say that “instrumental acceptance,” while easier to attain, is more fleeting in nature because of its dependence on state-deliverables, whereas “duty-bound obedience,” while much more difficult to inculcate within the citizenry, is intrinsically less volatile and longer lasting. Singaporeans recognize the PAP government’s authority because of its ability to dispense economic opportunities and rewards and to do so rather effectively, but the extent of their loyalty stops there. While the promise of material well-being may be a legitimate reason to endorse the PAP, there is little sense of genuine allegiance to the party government, stemming from a social contract that is instrumental and restrictions on citizen involvement in civil society and politics, which could make the party vulnerable in the event that it fails to deliver the goods.

In Lee Hsien Loong’s comment, he describes the PAP state’s ability to provide for its citizens as the basis for its expectation for the citizens’ continued support to the PAP in power. Eugene Tan, professor of Law at the Singapore

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Management University, portrays the social compact in Singapore as one that is
“premised on the PAP government’s obligation to provide jobs and a good standard
of living. So long as it [does] that, the reciprocal duty of the people [is] to vote the
PAP government back to power at every election.” Selvaraj Velayutham, professor
of sociology at Macquarie University, describes the social compact as one where the
PAP government gives a “social gift” to the Singaporean citizens in order to lock
them into a social contract of mutual obligation, and in return it expects them to
“reciprocate the gift of social life it has bestowed upon them” by voting for the party
during elections. As stakeholders in the system, Singaporeans vote the PAP into
power based on the returns that the party promises and which it has historically
delivered on. Similar to the notion of citizens as stakeholders, Chua Beng Huat
identifies citizens as “clients of the state” since they are highly dependent on state
provision of public goods and services. The present social compact is one where
higher return to the citizens implies that the PAP government can demand greater
endorsement from the citizens (in the form of their votes during elections) since what
the state gives, it expects in return.

Rather than giving their genuine consent to PAP rule, Singaporean citizens
merely subscribe to PAP rule because of the benefits in it for them instead of actually
committing their loyalty to the party. Alagappa warns that mere participation in
elections does not constitute consent; rather, for genuine consent, participation must

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Beyond Quid Pro quo in Governance,” in Management of Success ed. by Terence Chong (ISEAS
Publishing, 2010), 89.
64 Selvaraj Velayutham, Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore
65 Chua, Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore, 194.
66 Velayutham, Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore, 192.
be grounded in a “firm belief in the underlying principles” as well as an “active participation in the related institutions and procedures that constitute the system.”  

Under these conditions, Singaporean voting practices do not qualify as expressing genuine consent, and at best, could be described as co-option based on the material benefit supposedly and more generally, actually awaiting them after they confirm the PAP’s power.

Alagappa provides a further and important qualification to what genuine consent entails. He argues that consent is “given to the formal source of commands, not to their content.”  

This means that in situations of true legitimacy citizens cannot make their obedience contingent upon their personal evaluation of the merits or demerits of specific commands or their leaders or the outcomes of these commands. Therefore, because Singaporean citizens’ voting preferences are contingent on the material benefit or content rather than an allegiance to the source of political authority, their preferences in the general elections do not stem from their genuine consent to the ruling regime. In other words, if the PAP government were to lose its ability to deliver the goods, the entire governmental structure, not just the governing PAP, would lose the consent of the citizenry.

Lee Kuan Yew has often described Singapore’s progress since independence as having moved from a “third world situation” to a “first world oasis.”  

While this may be true for the economy, progress in the political and civil society spheres has

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68 Ibid., 24.
been piecemeal. There are consequences to the factors that lie beneath the surface of the Singapore’s system and although they have not posed serious problems to the PAP government’s legitimacy just yet, they have the potential to break the citizens’ trust not only in the party, but in the entire governmental structure as well. Even in the PAP government’s adoption of limited aspects of democracy, it has made several adjustments and interventions to the point where the democratic institutions present have lost their meaning. In the next part, I will explore the consequences of the factors and problematic areas mentioned above and the threat they pose to the PAP government’s political legitimacy. While the PAP may reckon that it can rely solely on its track record of strong economic performance to justify its rule, should it waver in delivering the goods, it would ultimately have to rely on the citizenry’s “duty-bound obedience” to remain a legitimate authority — which I will argue it does not have.
CHAPTER 2: THE TROUBLE WITH A THIN DEMOCRACY

The diagnosis in Chapter 1 reveals that behind the Singapore success story and the PAP’s track record, the PAP government actually hinges on a less-than-optimal legitimacy base because it has forfeited crucial democratic elements. There are potential consequences to the limited democracy that the PAP government has adopted, although they have not manifested themselves in a way that the ruling government has been unable to manage just yet. While the negative consequences of its democracy have not posed problems for Singapore till now, it does not mean that they will always be kept under the lid and always lie dormant. In particular, should the PAP waver in delivering the goods, these consequences would ultimately have a huge impact on political and social life, seeing as Singaporeans have knowingly exchanged their participatory rights for economic progress.
Put simply, the PAP government has unwittingly created traps for itself by pursuing limited democracy. There is a danger in adopting procedural democratic institutions without their substantive mechanisms, and under the right conditions, the government could very well experience a legitimation crisis. In this chapter, I examine the ramifications of the PAP’s adoption of a thin democracy by analyzing the consequences of the factors that keep the conduit between people and government fundamentally weak.

Although the trimmings of democracy exist in Singapore, the PAP does not set out to achieve a democratic state per se. During its state formation and nation building years, specific democratic institutions such as a parliamentary system and regular elections, were not chosen because of their centrality in the creation of a democracy, rather these institutions were selected for their “pragmatic” qualities that enable Singapore to “survive” and develop “efficiently” — notions the state often cites to justify its actions. In an interview with Fareed Zakaria in 2007, in reference to Singapore’s becoming a modern state, its founder Lee Kuan Yew said, “I am not following any prescription by any theoretician on democracy. I work on first principles on what would get me there… I want investments but I’ve got nothing other than skilled manpower and infrastructure; I build up the infrastructure, I educate the people. We have the best educated workforce anywhere in Asia and in the next ten years, anywhere in the world…I go by what is good governance.” Since independence, there has been little effort to increase the power of the people vis-à-vis the state, and civil society has been kept intentionally weak.

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70 Zakaria and Lee, “Interview with Lee Kuan Yew.”
As a hardline pragmatist, Lee prioritized getting things done; to him, political theories on their own are often fueled with extreme messages or abstract concepts too profound for the average person. What mattered to him during his term as Prime Minister was planning and strategizing based on empirical evidence, not vague ideals: “I want the specifics and then I respond as necessary.”

Consequently, the result — the Singapore specimen — is a synthesis of several different political, economic, and social systems that meets the pragmatic needs of the country, rather than an implementation of a singular democratic framework or developmental model. It appears that the Singapore system might perhaps be on to something here, having handpicked the “best” components of various governmental models and being heralded as a “non-democratic but decent state,” with cabinet ministers of utmost integrity and what seems to be a robust economy. Yet a dynamic governmental system like this implies that the associated problems are also unique and a lot more complicated than those in a conventional western liberal democratic model.

A major problem associated with running a state in a technocratic manner is the weak sense of citizen loyalty to the state, because of the transactionary nature of the relationship. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the citizen-state relationship is akin to the one between a corporation and its stakeholders. The PAP government’s obsession with the twin qualities of efficiency and effectiveness has shaped the way they respond to problems: almost as reflex, it either removes obstacles which it defines as in its way (such as the political opposition and a fragmented civil society) or pursues the economically pragmatic option even at the expense of social costs. This approach

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71 Tom Plate, *Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2010), 51.
is not a long-term solution that it can continually employ without incurring damage upon itself and straining the people-government conduit further. In this chapter, I will explore the consequences of the individual factors discussed in Chapter 1 that keep the people-government conduit intrinsically weak: (1) tweaking of the electoral system and process; (2) the conflation of power between party and state; (3) curtailment of civil society; and (4) the citizen’s “instrumental acceptance” of the state. I argue that the risks and potential costs associated with adopting a limited democracy are indeed high for Singapore.

2.1 CONSEQUENCES

2.1.1 TWEAKING THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND PROCESS

Although the PAP government justifies altering election rules and electoral division boundaries as ascribing greater representation to ethnic minority groups in Parliament, the move has in effect put the opposition camp at a severe disadvantage. From the get-go, the PAP enjoys a more advantageous position in the electoral competition since it has a monopoly over the “best and brightest”\(^{73}\) in Singapore and also a stronger track record of winning electoral divisions. On top of the “racial eligibility” requirement, potential teams of representatives from the opposition camp also have to demonstrate what Alex Au describes as “sustainability over the longer-term,” since they can expect to fight a few elections unsuccessfully before winning.\(^{74}\)

\(^{73}\) The PAP rides on its appeal as the dominant party to attract talent, and capitalizes on the Singaporean Civil Service to groom potential members.

The reality of politics in Singapore is ultimately a harsh one for those on the opposition side to the PAP, and they have to muster all in their power to make the best of their handicapped position vis-à-vis the party in power.

By preventing the opposition from participating in the elections through the imposition of stringent eligibility requirements, the PAP government impedes a vital avenue for Singaporeans to voice alternative views and concerns. Elections serve as perhaps the only relief valve for citizens and the single moment every five years where they are permitted to express their judgment pertaining to the performance of the government, and allowed to convey their frustrations about issues. The purpose of elections and the presence of an opposition should have the effect of keeping the PAP government honest and in check, prompting it to think carefully about its proposed policies before passing them. However, the rules and measures that the PAP government have set in place serve to construct an impenetrable garrison wherein any non-PAP party or citizen with an alternative view of Singapore faces tremendous difficulties in entering the political domain. By constricting alternate views from being heard and addressed, the PAP government overlooks legitimate concerns by the citizenry and this leads to the festering of citizens’ discontent towards the regime.

In the last decade, opposition parties have gained a larger following among Singaporeans, because much like them, the opposition has been barred from participating actively in the democratic process and from expressing alternative views to the PAP. As the ABS survey points out in Chapter 1, a large majority of

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76 While this has not manifested itself in a drastic increase in opposition victories in GRCs and SMCs, the gap in votes between the PAP and opposition parties is gradually closing. In the 2011 General Election, the PAP experienced a 6% decrease in total votes compared to their results in the 2006 General Election.
Singaporeans (82%) agree that it is important to have an elected opposition because a parliament dominated by one party creates the likelihood of a herd mentality in the assembly and leaves little leeway for checks and alternative views. Despite these popular opinions, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong maintains that a key aspect of representative democracy in Singapore is electing suitable leaders who are capable of making discretionary decisions on behalf of the people without their ongoing involvement. In 2001, Lee made it clear that the citizen’s role in Singapore’s representative democracy is only to elect the government while the government’s role is to govern and determine what is in the public interest. According to Lee’s description, the citizen’s civic duty stops after he or she votes and the rest should be left in the hands of elected leaders. The elected leaders therefore can determine the public interest without actually consulting the citizenry, and essentially dictate the public good independently without regard to opinions other than their own.

When choosing their MPs, it seems as though citizens surrender, along with their vote, their right to self-determination. Lee Kuan Yew expects Singaporean citizens not to doubt the PAP leadership’s competency once it is in power because he thinks he knows better than the citizenry whether the PAP is capable of determining the public interest: “I am prepared to put my experience and my judgment against all the arguments the doubters can muster.” Lee’s comments characterize Singapore as a distinctly paternalistic state, one with a clear asymmetry of power between the state and the citizens in which the state knows best and citizens must in response obey the

dictates of the governing Sage Kings. In the words of Cho-Oon Khong, the “practice of politics [in Singapore] is not an art but a science in which the technocratic power of the elite, rather than its ability to mobilize the citizenry, becomes the critical factor.” The select few are therefore thrust to an elite position to determine the public interest.

By constructing a bleak political destiny for opposition parties and deterring them from contesting in elections, the PAP government hinders a quality opposition from forming. In general, Lee Kuan Yew identifies the opposition as being fundamentally inept and, in Chua Beng Huat’s words, “not worthy compared to the PAP candidates” because of their fundamental lack of “intellectual leadership.” Consequently, the PAP frames voting for the opposition as undermining the national welfare of Singapore because the opposition lacks the PAP’s technocratic intelligence. Goh Chok Tong, Lee’s successor, echoed a similar sentiment during his term; he demeaned the opposition, publicly labeling them in The Straits Times as “crooks and thieves” who would ultimately prove “incompetent administrators of state affairs.” Because of media portrayal and several precautionary anecdotes told by the ruling leaders, citizens have bought into the idea that the opposition in

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79 In Confucian tradition, a Sage King is a leader who is able to combine virtue and wisdom of a sage with the power of a king; his ability to do so consequently characterizes him as the perfection of government.
81 Ibid., 17.
82 PAP members are often former recipients of top government scholarships and have received education in either Ivy League universities in the U.S. or top universities in the U.K, having graduated with top honors and accolades.
83 Goh was quoted as saying in *The Straits Times*, December 13, 1992, “Why, when it comes to national leadership, selection is left to the ‘spectators’ when you never do it this way for a football [soccer] team or other important jobs? Such a process often leads to the election of incompetent administrators of state affairs or worse, crooks and thieves.” Quoted in in Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, 23.
Singapore is “inadequate” and would not be able to represent them well. These measures paralyze the opposition and hamper their efforts at establishing a formidable and intellectually competent party leadership able to spar competitively on a level-playing field with the PAP. Therefore, the PAP is invariably seen as the best choice for Singaporean voters given its monopoly on talent, its track record in leading the country towards economic prosperity, and its maintenance of order in society, in part through its keeping the opposition weak.

The result of muting both opposition voice and the voices of the citizens has given rise to what the PAP describes as “irrational voter behavior” during general elections. While Singaporeans recognize how instrumental the PAP regime’s leadership has been in the creation of economic development and prosperity in Singapore, in the last decade they have used the general elections to provoke the PAP regime, though short of wishing to topple it. They have aggravated the regime by deliberately voting for the opposition in what Chua Beng Huat interprets as “protest votes based on emotions rather than reason.” In response to votes supposedly based on emotion rather than careful consideration, Lee Kuan Yew described Singapore voters’ behavior in the 1991 general election as extremely irrational, and warned that a “freak election” — an event where the electorate unintentionally votes an opposition party into power — might occur. The election would be a “freak” because the electorate’s attitude is deliberately “irrational” and not based on voting the “best and brightest” to form the government. This episode served to prove Lee Kuan Yew’s point that Singaporeans indeed do not know what is in their best interests. On another

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84 Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, 22.
level, the episode also enabled the PAP to claim that voting for the opposition was simply intended to spite the PAP rather than to give genuine support to the opposition.

While it is convenient for the PAP to accuse the electorate of abusing the election process, the casting of “protest votes” ultimately stemmed from a lack of platforms for citizens to express views different from that of the PAP in a non-confrontational manner. As a result of suppressing alternative voices, the voting mechanism becomes distorted and functions as a tool of negative protest — of what the citizens do not want, rather than an expression of affirmative and positive action — of what the citizens truly want. “Irrational” voting behavior is simply one manifestation of the intrinsic lack of avenues for alternative views to be heard in Singapore, and the government’s move to repeatedly silence alternative voices could imply that citizens will therefore have to find new and creative ways to protest.

By adjusting electoral rules, suppressing alternative voices, and ignoring the concerns of the citizens, the PAP government has marginalized itself from the citizenry. Although it seems as if the PAP has the majority of the popular support from Singaporeans, it is important to note that it is derived from the electoral rules and boundaries set forth by the PAP government itself, which puts any other political party at a disadvantage. In the recent general elections, the PAP was by and large viewed as the party to beat instead of the party to support. Outside elections, should any consultation take place between the state and the citizens, the stress is not on the actual feedback given by the citizens but that the government be “seen to be consulting the people”; in the words of a prominent second-generation leader, “I
don’t believe that consultation with the people is a very productive exercise. [Singaporean] people, even with education, tend to be irrational.” The comment sheds light on the PAP government’s perception of the citizens, and its belief that it is more “rational” and “intelligent” than them. Therefore, the electoral tactics employed by the PAP government serve not only to distance it from the citizenry by allowing the only channel of political representation to be through the ruling party, but also in its creation of a cleavage between national concerns and the citizens’ bread-and-butter concerns, by insisting that it knows best what is in the public interest.

2.1.2 CONFLATION OF POWER BETWEEN PARTY AND STATE

As discussed in the previous section, by putting a lid on the citizenry’s concerns and suppressing their ability to opt for an alternative voice in parliament, the PAP runs the risk of antagonizing the citizen body. Also crucial is the way the PAP has become identical with the state apparatus. Because of this conflation between party and state, it is possible that when citizens are unhappy with the PAP and its policies, they will direct their dissent straight towards the state apparatus itself. Since the party and state are interconnected, the party fails in its function as a buffer between citizen and state, and any attacks targeted at the party would willy-nilly also be targeted at the state. In this case, the collapse of the party could possibly involve the collapse of the entire state structure as well. The consequences of this for Singapore would be catastrophic.

Since the PAP has been the ruling government for as long as Singapore has been an independent state, it has been difficult to functionally dissociate the PAP party from the PAP government. Although Lee Hsien Loong attests that MPs (and by extension cabinet ministers) are not “tenured” since they can readily be deposed if not elected in the subsequent election cycle, he overlooks the fact that the PAP party has ultimately been on a “tenure” track since 1959. When the PAP’s “tenure” track was threatened by the growing electoral support for the opposition in the 2006 General Election, Lee Kuan Yew asserted that the army would not hesitate to move in should the PAP fall out of power, which reinforces the idea that the PAP’s office is to be held indefinitely. This is just one of the symptoms of being in power for too long. Perhaps it is also reflective of Lee’s belief that Singaporeans are obliged to vote for the PAP out of a sense of indebtedness to the party for having brought Singapore so far along. In the words of Terence Chong, the Singapore story after all “begins with the moment of anguish, a painful self-realization of an unformed nation, the existential fear for one’s self, followed by the Herculean effort to overcome all odds, and finally, the achievement of success” — all brought about by the PAP and the government it created and led. As a result of this history, where the party ends and the government begins cannot be separated.

Because of the indistinct identity between party and state, it is easy for cabinet ministers to align themselves closer to the interests of the party rather than non-partisan national interests and also to conveniently use state resources to advance the party’s cause. The party and state’s interests are synonymous, such that the policies

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created by the party-led government could therefore be justified in the name of the state and vice versa. According to Ho Khai Leong, associate research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), PAP leaders “unapologetically identify the PAP with the government,” and they see themselves as trustees of the state’s financial reserves and its resources. In the 2006 general election, the PAP government announced the “Progress Package,” a US$2.2 billion extra-budgetary measure, distributed in the form of Workfare Bonuses and Growth Dividends to all citizens, as a way to gain traction for the party among voters before electoral contestation began. Similarly in the 2013 Punggol East by-election, Worker’s Party MP Chen Show Mao accurately pointed out how on the eve of the by-election, the PAP government suddenly unveiled its new public works projects including “200,000 new homes by 2016” and its intention to “double the rail network by 2030.” These were feats that only the PAP could achieve given its ruling party position and its access to state resources, which it could allocate as it pleased. In fact, PAP cabinet ministers have unwittingly viewed the party as a protector, and themselves as Singapore’s moral guardians against the political opposition.

In the hope of running a more fluid Singapore Inc. by further integrating the party and state, the PAP government has expanded governmental institutions and institutionalized them as state apparatus to consolidate the party’s interests further.

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91 Chua, Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore, 22.
92 A term often used to describe Singapore’s corporatist economic development model; comprising Government-linked Corporations (GLCs) tapping on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and partnering together with MNCs. Singapore also takes pride in being run like a corporation, where public administration and bureaucratic affairs are executed with great efficiency.
On the surface, although the PAP claims to create these institutions in order to advance nation-building, it actually uses them as instruments to rule. One such instance is the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) which is said to be a “network of affiliated unions, associations, social enterprises, staff, members and partners working together for the benefit of all working people and their families in Singapore.” In reality, however, it is a tripartite organization between the government, trade union, and workers, with the object of disseminating government ideology down to the workforce as well as serving as a watchdog on labor unions. According to Ho Khai Leong, “the NTUC virtually guarantees the government its public support for all its policies, and this is deemed necessary to ensure harmony and an absence of industrial conflict.” This certainly promotes efficiency, since the overlap between party, government, and state institutions ensures that there is a harmony of interests that would enable the state to operate impeccably.

These state institutions established by the PAP have more than adequately provided what seem to be essential goods and services to the citizenry and to remove them would ultimately be to the disadvantage of Singaporeans. For example, urban planning and upgrading are seamlessly coordinated in Singapore: the Economic Development Board (EDB) first formulates and implements national economic development policy and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) then ensures that

94 Khai Leong Ho, “Political Consolidation in Singapore: Connecting the Party, the Government and the Expanding State,” 74.
95 Ibid.
land-use planning supports the economic directives of the EDB.  

As a result of this synchronization, Henry Yeung, professor of Economic Geography at the National University of Singapore, suggests that the steps to urban change in Singapore are fairly straightforward, “rarely complicated” and devoid of unnecessary bureaucracy. These effective state institutions and elements of coordination become so much a part of everyday life that Singaporeans begin to see them as necessary and indispensable to the running of the state — and synonymous to the state itself. But of course, all this means that the PAP thus becomes indistinguishable from the state itself.

In light of the measures taken by the PAP government to cement its rule through state institutions, the rise of another party would threaten the very foundation of state and government institutions that the PAP has orchestrated. The careful management of party and state interests makes the PAP leadership crucial for the daily running of Singapore Inc.. Worker’s Party MP Low Thia Khiang recognizes the PAP’s importance to the system and despite the Worker’s Party triumph over the incumbent PAP in a 2013 by-election, he cautioned Singaporeans that the Worker’s Party was not yet in a position to form an alternative government or to be the next government, instead reiterating that the opposition party’s role was simply to “make sure that the [PAP] government does its work and [to identify] where the government has shortcomings.”

97 Ibid.
The conflation of party and state also leads to yet another problem — the absence of buffer between the citizen and the state. Consequently, any issues that the citizens have are directed straight to the state rather than the party. This means that should their unhappiness turn to protest or dissent, state structures — no matter how apparently stable — could potentially collapse. However, this would not be the case if party and state were to remain separate, since the party would serve as a safeguard and the party in power could change hands without the risk of the entire governmental structure collapsing.

2.1.3 CURTAILMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Presently, the general election serves as the only relief valve through which citizens can engage in civic participation, either by expressing their concerns to the PAP government or asserting their right to transfer the mandate to rule to an opposition party. Outside elections, OB (Out-of-Bound) markers are enforced by the ruling government and, in the words of Ho Khai Leong, they serve the function of “designating issues deemed too sensitive to be discussed in public for fear of destabilizing or jeopardizing public peace and order.” While there is no official document detailing what topics are exactly out-of-bounds, it is widely understood that religious and racial issues constitute an OB marker and these topics are therefore severely regulated in the public sphere. According to Ho, while OB markers are there to indicate to the citizenry the PAP government’s level of tolerance for intellectual discourse on politics, they severely limit the public space for citizens’ discourse, since

any issue or policy discussed could be construed as a “political issue.”

Consequently, in the words of Suzaina Kadir, “in a state where the autonomous space is severely curtailed by the ruling party, the extent to which civil society can effect political change is curtailed as well.” This leaves the general election period as the only avenue for citizens to engage in civic participation, since at any other time the government limits critical discourse and monitors the topics that are permissible for public discussion.

Curtailing civic participation and imposing restrictions on the citizens’ speech lead the citizens to over-politicize the election period, since it is the only legitimate outlet to voice their displeasure towards the regime without being penalized. This trend of over-politicizing was something even Worker’s Party MP Low Thia Khiang recognized in a press release after the Worker’s Party victory in a Single Member Constituency (SMC). He cautioned that “while democracy is important for political vibrancy, it’s not productive to politicize everything.” As discussed earlier, because of the nature of one-party rule, not only do the PAP’s policies get criticized, but also the entire governmental structure under the PAP potentially comes under fire when citizens convey their discontent. In response to the citizen’s desire for more consultation and participation, Kenneth Tan, assistant dean at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, argues that the PAP responds “by turning schizophrenic, institutionalizing many new spaces of openness and channels of consultation, but also

100 Ibid., 335.
102 Channel NewsAsia, “By-election result can't be taken as trend in future: Low Thia Khiang.”
continuing to exercise harsh instruments of political repression.”

The government is thereby able to give the citizens what seems to be a momentary outlet of relief, such as through holding feedback and dialogue sessions, while continuing to limit their views through a combination of political and ideological instruments of repression. In other words, what appear to be concessions made by the government are in fact tools of further suppression.

Rather than providing outlets for active civic participation, civic society in Singapore is likened to a “banyan tree,” to use the colorful metaphor of former foreign affairs minister George Yeo, “whose pervasive and overpowering reach into society has prevented the development of civil institutions crucial for Singapore’s future.” While the state understands the need to engage with civil society, it wants to do so on its own terms and at its own pace which means loosening its grip in aspects of social and welfare issues while controlling the political space. Yet Kenneth Tan is quick to point out that this does not imply “populism” and that while contributions from the citizens are sometimes considered, it is ultimately up to the government to “frame the agenda of problems and the final say, after all the good contributions have been considered.”

The PAP government fundamentally views both alternative opinions and criticism of the administration proffered by the citizenry as an outright challenge to

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104 Ibid., 109.
106 Ibid., 349.
the intellectual muscle of its scholar officials and an act which undermines its authority to govern. In 1994, the highly-regarded Singaporean writer Catherine Lim published an article in *The Straits Times* entitled, “One Government, Two Styles” where she argued that the PAP government was split into two camps — the people-oriented approach of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and the sterner top-down approach by then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. She suggested that “increasingly, the promised Goh style of people-orientation [was] being subsumed under the old-style, top-down decisions.” Goh did not take this criticism lightly and he responded by demanding that Lim formally enter politics should she want to offer political criticism, “you can criticize us and we would treat you as though you have entered the political arena. If you do not wish to do so, [if] you want to hide in sanctuaries to criticize [and] attack the government, we’d say even though you don’t want to join a party, we would treat you as though you have entered the political arena.” Stressing that politics is serious business and the PAP’s stance of taking its political opponents seriously, Goh went on to add that, “if you land a blow on our jaw, you must expect a counter-blow to your solar plexus.”

The Catherine Lim episode underscores the PAP government’s strong-man psyche and its perspective that a critical opinion by a Singaporean citizen is an assault on the entire administration. One could perhaps argue that the zealous and combative

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108 The position of Senior Minister was created by Lee Kuan Yew for himself after he stepped down as Prime Minister of Singapore in 1990. It is considered a formal political office in the Cabinet of Singapore.
112 Ibid.
response by the PAP was to set a precedent against vocal citizens, who are deemed disturbances to social life, in the future. Ho Khai Leong provides some perspective by suggesting that “it may indeed be the case that expressions of individual opinions carried to an extreme can potentially be dangerous for a system of representative democracy. However one can also argue that they have a stabilizing effect because the voicing of grassroots concerns should be taken into account in policy making.”

The episode also illustrates the political elite’s belief in good political leadership rather than in good citizenry; it consequently does not see a need to open up avenues for civic engagement. The purpose of civil society in Singapore, if any, is to help maintain the political status quo and not to alter it. Yet by continuing to silence the concerns and pouring cold water on their desire for engagement, it does not matter how docile, indifferent or even skeptical citizens are because they would first find creative ways of expressing their discontent such as casting “protest votes,” and eventually find ways to attack the government in much more active and violent means if they think their message is not getting across. It is important to note, however, that no matter how “good” political leadership is, a government is disempowered and loses its quintessential resource when it loses the support of its people.

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2.1.4 CITIZEN’S “INSTRUMENTAL ACCEPTANCE”

Even though, as a result of the contractual nature of the social compact in Singapore, Singaporeans have a stake in the system, their allegiance to the PAP government is by nature thin. The PAP government is highly calculative in its relationship with the Singaporean people; economic performance and material offerings are the bedrock of their dealings. Whenever an election season comes, the PAP government never fails to hark back to its economic track record, and it also seizes the opportunity to announce public upgrading projects and dispense workfare bonuses in a bid to “sweeten the ground”\footnote{Ho, “Singapore: Campaigning for the Future,” 298.} and thereby persuade citizens to renew the party’s political mandate. In so doing, it reduces both its “herculean” nation-building efforts and its creation of a “first world oasis from a third world situation” to a kind of simplistic material leverage on the Singapore people rather than adopting the experience as a national ideology and the basis of Singaporean identity. Consequently, Singaporeans perceive good governance simply as one which simply delivers the goods rather than one they can personally identify with and align themselves closely to because they feel a sense of duty towards it. As Muthiah Alagappa argues, “good performance can generate moral authority…[but] performance itself is too narrow a basis of authority. Governments relying excessively on performance will be vulnerable to challenge on the basis of greater rewards.”\footnote{Alagappa, “The Bases of Political Legitimacy,” 42.} In other words, by legitimizing its rule purely through economic performance and material benefit, the PAP fails to cultivate a deeper relationship with
the Singapore people, and the partnership based on immediate gain rather than loyalty can be seen as a short-term contract.

Alagappa raises a hypothetical scenario where a party could possibly challenge the ruling party on the basis of greater rewards, and depose it. However, I would like to propose another more likely scenario, one where the ruling PAP falls short of delivering economic performance; such a case could lead to the party’s downfall. With its cadre of intellectual technocrats, the PAP is arguably the political party with the highest caliber to lead Singapore’s economy and it is unlikely that opposition parties would contest it in this area. However, because Singapore’s economy is so connected to the global economy, the PAP government’s own efforts are limited and Singapore’s economic performance is inevitably dependent on the performance of the wider and more erratic global economy.\textsuperscript{117} In spite of the measures taken by the government to create a robust economic system, it is still susceptible to global forces that are beyond its control. Therefore, should there be a global economic crisis and the PAP government be unable to cope with it, the possibility of the citizens revoking their acceptance of PAP rule during that time, is high. As Alagappa argues, “performance cannot substitute for political beliefs and thus has only an indirect impact on a regime’s legitimacy.”\textsuperscript{118} In short, because of the fleeting nature of performance-based legitimacy, citizens are likely to give up on the PAP once it fails to hold up its end of the bargain.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 43.
The PAP is aware of the kind of thin allegiance and limited loyalty that the citizens have towards the regime, but rather than finding ways to develop a thicker allegiance based on duty within the citizenry, it perpetuates this thin allegiance through fabricating “mini-crises.” The PAP government consistently paints a rather bleak future for Singapore in spite of the country’s stellar economic track record, warning time and time again of an imminent social or economic crisis, in part to guard against complacency but on a deeper level to maintain the citizenry’s reliance on the state apparatus. According to David Birch, author and political commentator, “[the] discourse of crisis is one of the main strategies adopted by the Singapore government to maintain its ideology of control, anchor its people to the nation and create a climate of domestic uncertainty about the fragility of the state and the economy.” In other words, the PAP government employs various fictitious crises so as to create a climate of vulnerability and thereby forcibly encourage citizens to be absolutely reliant on the state apparatus in every situation. In so doing, the PAP can portray its intervention in an almost messianic light—as both powerful and necessary.

Carl Trocki, professor of Asian Studies at Queensland University of Technology, suggests that these “mini-crises” ultimately allow the PAP even “greater license to cite emergency circumstances to extend further controls over society and the economy.” However, these measures taken by the PAP government do not alter the fact that the citizen’s loyalty to the ruling party is essentially contractual, and therefore weak.

By attempting to shore up the citizen’s thin allegiance to the party via encouraging further material dependency on the state, the PAP government is not preparing for the occasion when and if it fails to deliver. Alagappa suggests that while a command-obedience relationship could be legitimate, political order has to be rooted in shared norms and values.\textsuperscript{121} In Singapore, however, this condition is not met and rather than shared norms, mutual benefit and utility are the foundation of the social compact. The PAP government’s promotion of societal and religious harmony coupled with the refinement of one of the best public education systems in the world have been for the sake of creating better economic efficiency and productivity. This idea is in large part due to the firm belief of Lee Kuan Yew, the chief architect of the PAP and founding father of modern Singapore, that “increased wealth and revenue can solve many economic, social and other problems.”\textsuperscript{122} However, dangling the carrot can only do so much for the PAP in garnering an ardent following. What matters most in shoring up allegiance as Alagappa suggests, is the sense of personal belief in the party, in which the PAP is severely lacking.

The consequences and problems associated with the thin democracy practiced in Singapore are real threats to the entire governmental structure, if one of the bolts or screws in the roaring Singapore engine falls out of place. The fact that the entire system — political structure, economy, and civic society are so integrated implies that a blow to one area will result in damages to the others as well. Due to the citizens’

\textsuperscript{122} Plate, Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew, 194.
“instrumental acceptance” of the ruling PAP, in the event that the government wavers in delivering the goods, it is very likely that the citizens would abandon the party and change their allegiance.

Since the political legitimacy of the PAP by and large hinges on economic performance, in the next chapter I will examine the bases of the PAP’s delivery of economic progress thus far, and whether it is reasonable to expect it to continue delivering in the same way. Moreover, I will examine the extent to which it can sustain economic growth in order to pacify the citizenry’s growing desire for democratic and civic participation. The question I hope to address in the next chapter is whether through a series of events and a change in circumstances on the ground, Singaporean citizens would begin to value democratic participation more than material well-being.
CHAPTER 3:
PERSISTENCE OF SINGAPORE’S ECONOMIC GROWTH

In a span of less than forty years, Singapore’s economy, touted as the “Miracle at the Center of the World,” has achieved such staggering growth rates despite its complete lack of natural resources that it has become the envy of both developing and developed countries alike. Ranked first overall in the “ease of doing business” in a 2012 survey by the Milken Institute (the U.S. ranked fourth), Singapore is as rich as the U.S. on a per capita basis. Today, some forty international banks have regional headquarters in Singapore — including the Swiss bank Julius Baer, Citigroup’s private banking headquarters outside the U.S and Standard Chartered Bank’s global banking headquarters — with an estimated sum of private wealth valued to the ring of US$160 billion. Moreover, despite not being an oil-producing country, Singapore is the world’s third largest oil refiner,

124 Ibid.
indicating that hundreds of thousands of barrels of the precious raw material get processed on the small island daily.\textsuperscript{126} These factors have made Singapore a hub for international trade and financial services and a crucial player in the global economy. In fact, Linda Lim and Lee Soo Ann, both Singaporean academicians specializing in the intersection between economics and business, observe that Singapore’s economy has outdone itself by evolving from being “a recipient of inward foreign direct investment from rich developed countries [in its earlier days] to a provider of outward portfolio investments to these same countries”\textsuperscript{127} — making its contribution in a global capacity.

At the same time, however, Singapore’s economic performance has been described as nothing short of a “miracle” wherein its economic growth trajectory follows a “fable-like” narrative.\textsuperscript{128} Critics of Singapore’s economic model like Paul Krugman have warned that Singapore’s miraculous economic growth has been based very much on “perspiration rather than inspiration” and that its success is premised on the kind of government “mobilization of resources [that] would have done Stalin proud.”\textsuperscript{129} While Krugman’s figure of speech is hyperbolic, he alludes to the notion that Singapore’s economic expansion and growth ultimately stem from a growth in “inputs” rather than a growth in “output per unit of input,” which leads to an intrinsically short-term growth phenomenon. Krugman, together with Singaporean economists and scholars, suggest that the exponential economic growth that

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{127} Linda Y.C. Lim and Soo Ann Lee, “Foreign Participation in the Singapore Economy” in Management of Success, ed. by Terence Chong (ISEAS Publishing, 2010), 152.
\textsuperscript{128} Paul Krugman, “The Myth of Asia’s Miracle” Foreign Affairs 73 Iss.6 (Nov/Dec 1994), 70.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
Singapore is experiencing technically cannot continue in the long run because the mechanisms it relies upon have a fixed capacity without room for expansion.

In the first part of this chapter, I examine the factors that make the Singaporean engine appear to be doing just fine on the surface. In the second part, I analyze the critical factors and operative mechanisms beneath the surface which support the Singapore Inc. engine, and evaluate whether Singapore’s economic model can continue to sustain the growth numbers it has been producing. I argue that there is a growing contradiction between “economic progress” and “national unity” that reveals itself in three dominant ways: (1) input-driven growth; (2) the crowding out effect; and (3) crises stemming from Singapore’s links to the global economy. As argued in the earlier chapters, the PAP government’s political legitimacy hinges dominantly on Singapore’s economic performance; consequently, the PAP’s ability to deliver the goods will determine whether Singaporeans ultimately vote for the party at the polls. Therefore, if Singapore’s present economic model is not viable in the long-term, not only would the entire economic system be in danger of failing but it will also pose questions to the PAP government’s political legitimacy.

3.1 ON THE SURFACE

Singapore gained independence in 1965 against its will: It was expelled from the Federation of Malaysia. The separation left Singapore with no natural resources to tap whatsoever, denied access to the Malaysian hinterland, and left with a growing population to house and feed. These were the major challenges the PAP government had to face; indeed, Singapore’s immediate independent years were largely marred by
rather bleak prospects, and the PAP’s immediate goal for Singapore was merely “survival.” As Chua Beng Huat suggests, the result is that in the post-independence period, “the necessity of economic growth had been ideologically raised to the ‘only reality,’ [and] any process that contributed to the economic growth was therefore ‘practical,’ indeed ‘necessary’ for the survival of the nation.”

During the post-independence period (crucial for nation-building) from 1965 to 1975, the PAP government formed an alliance with international corporate capitalism to create a thriving manufacturing industry and according to Carl Trocki, it was largely successful and gave Singaporeans full employment and domestic prosperity.

In the 1980s, observing that the manufacturing industry had reached its saturation point — a fact revealed through the rising labor costs — the government was quick to adapt and shift its attention to the creation and expansion of local Small-and-Medium-Enterprises (SMEs) in a bid to diversify its economy and in the process it emerged as the first Newly Industrialized Country (NIC) in Southeast Asia. Under the PAP leadership, Singapore was freed from its prior dependence on the region; indeed, it established international collaborations and thereby forged capital and trade links with partners worldwide.

In the 1990s, undeterred by a lack of natural resources and burdened by a surplus of human resources, the PAP government steered the vision of an advanced “knowledge-based” economy driven by skilled capital. In 1991, the developmental blueprint “Industry 21” was conceived in which Singapore’s economy would rely on twin engines of growth: creating high value-added manufacturing industries and

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130 Chua, Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore, 19.
131 Trocki, Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control, 160.
132 Ibid., 175.
focusing on export-oriented services. At the same time, the PAP government also started to transform Singapore’s physical landscape by developing the relevant infrastructure in the form of “clusters” of high-value activities as a way to attract multinational investments into Singapore, especially in infant industries — such as biomedical sciences and pharmaceutical, financial services, and medical services.

In the process, Singapore managed to diversify its industries by tapping into both the monetary and technological investments of multinationals. By 2000, these multinational investments, coupled with other capital-intensive investments pushed the share of foreign ownership of the Singapore economy to 40 percent of the GDP. This meant that Singapore was not only an attractive destination for potential foreign investors to invest in, but also a country in which many international businesses already had a vested interest. The PAP government was thus able to create value in this sleepy seaport by looking beyond its immediate vicinity to the world at large for opportunities, and through the construction of a budding metropolis, attract the investment and expertise of multinationals.

Under the PAP government, Singapore weathered a number of major economic crises and kept the economy relevant and abreast of the changes in the global economic climate. With the PAP at the helm, Singapore rebounded effectively from two financial crises in the last two decades and avoided a crippling blow to its domestic economy — a plight that befell most of her neighbors. In 1998, one year after the Asian Financial Crisis, the GDP growth rates for most Asian countries were

134 Lim and Lee, “Foreign Participation in the Singapore Economy,” 145.
135 Ibid.
negative; Japan (-2.1%); South Korea (-5.8%); Malaysia (-7.5%); Thailand (-8%); but during this same period Singapore experienced a positive growth of 1.5%.\textsuperscript{136} About a decade later in 2009, the year after the 2008 World Financial Crisis, a similar phenomenon occurred; although Singapore’s GDP recorded a growth rate of -0.8%, it fared much better than its neighbor countries, Malaysia (-1.6%) and Thailand (-2.2%).\textsuperscript{137} A year later in 2010, Singapore was back on its path to economic prosperity, achieving a stellar GDP growth rate of 14.5%, a figure almost twice that of Thailand (7.8%), which came in a distant second in the Asia roundup.\textsuperscript{138}

Singapore’s prompt recovery was not a stroke of luck but was possible only because of the PAP administration’s effective management of the crisis. The PAP’s ability to manage the crisis and turn around economic problems in very short periods of time has undoubtedly also played an instrumental role in legitimating its authority. Its success in handling the two economic crises is an indication that the PAP government is a highly capable administration, one that the people can rely on in times of need. Consequently, in the words of Yeoh Lam Keong, senior research fellow at the Singapore Institute of Policy Studies, “[this success] has earned the Government the credibility and mandate it needs to implement difficult social and economic policies time and time again.”\textsuperscript{139} The PAP’s track record has kept it in power for the last forty-seven years and continues to legitimize its political rule today.

Today, Singapore Inc.’s engine carries on roaring as it continues to operate like a private enterprise, with its two guiding principles being profits and efficiency.

\textsuperscript{137} ASEAN, “ASEAN Community in Figures 2011,” 4.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} Lam Keong Yeoh, “Rethinking a New Social Compact for Singapore,” in ETHOS Issue 3 (October 2007), 7.
According to Linda Low, a Singaporean academic and former economist at the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), “Singapore’s success criteria remain embedded in total development-oriented policy-making and effective policy-implementation.” With the PAP government in a position of complete control over the domestic economy, it operates from a centralized position in planning, orchestrating, and executing strategies that have resulted in the most profitable and efficient outcome for the Singaporean economy. By continuing to deliver a steady rise in the standard of living of Singaporeans, the government is able to hold its citizens to their end of the bargain as stakeholders obliged to work industriously — maintaining the level of efficiency and producing only the best results possible.

In a bid to incentivize productivity and efficiency, the Singapore Productivity Innovation Boards (SPRING) developed a scheme to award private and governmental firms and organizations the Singapore Quality Award to promote organizational merit and to commend outstanding business performances. On the surface, the award seems to give businesses Singapore’s “world class” stamp of approval and boost their credibility; however, it also serves to keep businesses dynamic and prevent stagnancy in the workplace, working like an invisible hand that compels executives and managers to achieve their annual Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The award scheme is therefore an instance in which the PAP government is able to monitor and review business performances of both private and government corporations —

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140 The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) is Singapore’s central bank and financial regulatory authority.
142 Ibid., 168.
143 A Key Performance Indicator (KPI) is an industry jargon for performance measurement. It originated in the private sector but now is widely used in the public sector in Singapore as a way of evaluating whether employees and managers alike reach their objectives and goals.
procedure commonplace in any private enterprise to ensure optimal productivity, reinforcing the PAP government’s nature as a highly efficient and productivity-driven enterprise.

3.2 BENEATH THE SURFACE

The PAP government has sought to combat both economic stagnancy and worker complacency by encouraging not just mere performance but growth performance. As discussed earlier, economic growth was a major vein in the Singapore lifeline during its “survival” period where it was a case of do-or-die. Linda Lim and Lee Soo Ann, go on to suggest that the notions of “economic progress” and “national unity” were mutually reinforcing during Singapore’s nation-building years post-independence period up till the early 1980s. However, over time, the pursuit of economic growth for the sake of survival evolved into a kind of chronic obsession and became exalted as the dominant national ideology (determined by the elite few on top) where the resultant public policies — political, social, and economic — were simply a derivative of that obsession.

While economic growth is a crucial aspect of development for any country, there is a danger that it can be pursued to the extent that the welfare of its people is jeopardized. Lim and Lee describe the PAP government developing “growth fetishism,” where its preference was for the fastest and easiest route to economic growth in which the supportive mechanism was “people for growth” rather than

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144 Lim and Lee, “Foreign Participation in the Singapore Economy,” 150.
“growth for people.” Consequently, the originally mutually reinforcing notions of “economic progress” and “national unity” could very well run counter to each other. Moreover, as part of Singapore’s laissez-faire capitalism and its focus on service-related industries, increasing global competition in new service industries may lead to the commodification of people as objects.

Put together, these aspects characterize Singapore as materialistic and infatuated with growth, where the fine line between statistical economic growth and the betterment of its citizens’ lives becomes blurry. This growing contradiction between “economic progress” and “national unity” manifests itself in three distinct ways: (1) input-driven growth; (2) the crowding out effect; and (3) crises stemming from Singapore’s links to the global economy. Incidentally, these three aspects also represent significant problematic areas of the Singaporean economy which the PAP government has created for itself, and Singaporean economists and scholars like Linda Lim, Lee Soo Ann and Linda Low have warned of the dangers of leveraging these factors as the basis of economic progress. These potentially problematic areas reveal that Singapore’s economic model is ultimately not as robust as it claims to be, and suggests the possibility of this miracle growth eventually reaching a point of exhaustion.

\[145\] Ibid., 155.
\[146\] Low, “Exploring New Engines for Growth,” 175.
3.2.1 INPUT-DRIVEN GROWTH

Singapore’s economic development is distinguished from other Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) because of its sheer dependence on foreign multinational companies rather than local private enterprises, combined with the state dominance of what is a market economy. The rapid pace of development of Singapore’s economy, according to Lim and Lee is due to “simple factor accumulation” (similar to Krugman’s postulation) — the increase in such inputs as capital, labor, skills and technology to produce greater output, without yielding higher productivity or increased efficiency in the use of resources. Since Singapore has fundamentally scarce factor inputs of its own, it largely depends on factor accumulation accrued from the influx of foreign multinationals in order to achieve rapid growth. Krugman classifies factor inputs as growth in employment, in the education level of workers, and in stock of physical capital (machines, buildings, roads etc.) which is different from factors leading to productivity growth such as better economic policies and increases in knowledge. The effects of input-driven growth and productivity-driven growth are similar, and it is at times difficult to distinguish the driving mechanisms of a country’s economic growth. Singapore’s move towards a more knowledge-based economy in the 1990s saw an emphasis on “knowledge” in the employment of more technological knowledge rather than the kind of knowledge associated with productivity-driven growth. Krugman uses the following example as a point of illustration: “A man with a bulldozer can dig a ditch

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147 Lim and Lee, “Foreign Participation in the Singapore Economy,” 146.
148 Ibid.
faster than one with only a shovel, but he is not more efficient; he just has more capital to work with.”¹⁵⁰ In the case of Singapore, economic growth has by and large been predicated on capital — foreign capital.

From a technical perspective, the effects of productivity-driven growth at the outset may be slower than that which is catalyzed by input-driven growth, but on aggregate it has a far longer-term effect than the latter. By relying on input-driven growth, Singapore continues to depend on factor inputs in order to sustain this type of growth and therefore requires a steady and ever increasing stream of foreign companies and investments into the country. In spite of the continued foreign inflow, Krugman is quite insistent that the extent of growth from inputs is finite in nature and what has worked in the past will not always work in the future — “Singapore’s growth has been based largely on one-time changes in behavior that cannot be repeated.”¹⁵¹

Aside from the inherent limits to input-driven growth, there are also certain consequences which accompany the resultant catalytic growth. Choy Keen Meng, Singaporean economist at the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), warns of costs associated with this form of “vigorous economic growth”; which include “increased output volatility” and the “amplification of business cycles”¹⁵² — in the long run, these effects have the potential to distort a country’s macroeconomic indicators as well as to exaggerate the effects of economic slowdowns and turnarounds. Despite the state’s dominance over the economy, economic ebb and

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 72.
¹⁵¹ Ibid.
flow as well as the business cycle are phenomena that the PAP government can neither fully predict nor regulate. While input-driven growth may have had most relevance to the Singaporean economy when it was still emerging, it is imperative that it updates itself so as to be a viable system in the long run; according to Linda Low, “Schumpeterian creative destruction as the market’s way to cope with risks and opportunities will show in time that doing nothing is not an option in an era of constant change.”

3.2.2 THE “CROWDING OUT” EFFECT

A recent article in The Atlantic about Singapore’s miracle growth notes that “at a time when the United States is debating building a wall to keep out Mexicans, Singapore’s wealth is [still] predicated on attracting business and foreign workers.”

Although Singapore is as rich as the U.S., its wealth is primarily derived from foreign channels — indeed very little of it actually comes from within. The PAP government’s emphasis on all things foreign — capital, investments, and workers — leads to what Lim and Lee describe as a “crowding out” effect on both domestic enterprises as well as local labor (who also comprise a significant portion of the indigenous electorate). The result of this is that Singaporeans end up competing with foreigners for jobs and rather than kick-starting their own ventures, they continue to be hired by foreign multinationals because of the state’s economic

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154 The Atlantic, “Singapore: Miracle at the Center of the World.”
155 Lim and Lee, “Foreign Participation in the Singapore Economy,” 150.
policies. Consequently, this creates a domestic political economy grounded on PAP state-mediated globalization which empowers and enriches foreigners and the state more than it does the average local citizen.\textsuperscript{156} Hence, while the influx of foreign multinationals was initially welcomed with open arms by Singaporeans because they provided job opportunities, technological resources, and potential business partnerships, they are increasingly being looked upon as a threat and competition to local enterprises.

Despite the average local citizen’s predicament, the PAP government insists that it knows best what is in the country’s best interest. In the words of Linda Low, “entrepreneurial PAP operates on a government-\textit{must}-know-best philosophy (not merely government-knows best) to ensure Singapore’s small size and exposure to trade and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) are turned into strengths.”\textsuperscript{157} Moreover, the fact that Singapore’s economy has been recording strong positive numbers also serves as an added legitimating tool for the PAP government, allowing it to hark back to its successes and implementation of its economic planning and policies. Yet the question which remains is: what is the point of economic growth if it does not always lead to the betterment of lives for all Singaporeans?

While the PAP government has claimed that its vision for Singapore “is a fair and inclusive society, where every citizen has a rightful place and the opportunity to fulfill his or her aspirations,”\textsuperscript{158} in reality there is a growing rift among Singaporeans — and oddly, this is something which the government knowingly exacerbates. During

\footnotesize{
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{157} Low, “Exploring New Engines for Growth,” 159.
\textsuperscript{158} PAP, “PAP Manifesto 2011.”
}
his National Day Rally Speech in 1991, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong employed the term “heartlanders” to describe the predominant number of Singaporeans who were supposedly rooted to their locales, and to distinguish them from “cosmopolitans,” Singaporeans who are globally mobile. “Heartlanders,” who presumably take up blue collar jobs like taxi-drivers, factory workers, and contractors, were portrayed by Goh as hardworking and sincere, and as ultimately playing a “major role in maintaining [Singapore’s] core values and social stability.” “Cosmopolitans” on the other hand, who are more adaptable and receptive to globalization, are well-educated and relatively more proficient in the English language, were identified by Goh as the “economic dynamos [of Singapore]” who seized economic opportunities and employment abroad. By virtue of their higher education level and niche skill set, “cosmopolitans” often take up managerial positions and their salaries are significantly higher than the average “heartlander.”

While Goh’s purpose was meant to underscore the importance of both “heartlander” and “cosmopolitan” in Singaporean society for the different contributions they make, instead it served to accentuate the stark realities and contradictions of both segments of society. The “cosmopolitan” has fundamentally more opportunities and greater social mobility than the” heartlander” and occupies a more privileged standing in Singaporean society as a result of his greater economic contribution compared the “heartlander.” Furthermore, Singapore’s recent fixation on

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159 Every year as Singapore celebrates its independence day on August 9, the Prime Minister will deliver a National Day Rally Speech (publicly broadcasted) addressing the results Singapore has achieved in the last year and project future government plans and policies for the year ahead.

producing professional, managerial, executive and technician (PMET) jobs — most of which would be accorded to “cosmopolitans” and foreigners — has created a perception that such jobs have an element of prestige affixed to them and are distinguished from the low-skilled occupations often occupied by “heartlanders.”

The result of unequal opportunity and this growing perception of status symbols attached to one’s occupation and job could likely lead to societal fragmentation and the possible creation of “two Singapores.”

Besides the seemingly unfair playing field between Singaporeans, the PAP government has also perpetuated the difference in opportunities accorded to Singaporeans and foreigners as a result of its economic policies. Eric Tan, a Worker’s Party candidate for the 2006 General Election, once mused about Singapore as a “6-star hotel” where the elite are “either managers or guests” and both “foreigners and elite locals” are patrons who “use the country as a good place to make money.” While the “guests” have “no ownership and have no desire to contribute to the running of the hotel apart from paying high room rates,” and when “it becomes uncomfortable they move out,” the rest of the Singaporeans serve as “worker bees” in the establishment and “work hard for their children and dream that they will become managers of the hotel.” He acknowledges that while this hotel is undoubtedly a “good one,” it is ultimately “home to no one.”

In its attempt to become a global financial

162 Foreign Minister George Yeo once used the term “two Singapores” to describe the effect of a growing social divide as a result of resentment and unnecessary opposition between Singaporeans.
163 Eric Tan quoted in Lim and Lee, “Foreign Participation in the Singapore Economy,” 149.
hub which boasts first class business amenities and a buzzing nightlife scene.\textsuperscript{164} Singapore has increasingly evolved into a global city meant for the expatriate community and elite locals rather than the average local citizen — who make up the majority of Singapore’s population and the electorate — reinforcing the notion of locals facing the “crowding out” effect.

3.2.3 SINGAPORE’S LINKS TO THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Singapore has “international business sewn in its DNA.”\textsuperscript{165} As a result, as the world becomes increasingly integrated and interdependent, so likely will Singapore’s prominence increase in the global economy. The country’s reputation for orderliness, safety, and having English as its official business language continues to make it one of the most viable financial and investment centers in Asia and, indeed, the world. However, this is a double-edged sword for Singapore because as the economy transforms and is integrated into the global economy at large, its economic success becomes intrinsically and indisputably tied to the world economy — which is fundamentally volatile in nature.

This can be seen in the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Despite the safeguards Singapore put in place, it succumbed to paralyzing effects of this crisis. According to Soek-Fang Sim, a professor of International Studies at Macalester College, the notion of a “regional crisis” was something which PAP Singapore could not evade, because

\textsuperscript{164} Zakaria and Lee, “Interview with Lee Kuan Yew.”
\textsuperscript{165} The Atlantic, “Singapore: Miracle at the Center of the World.”
it was simply beyond the control of the state. As noted earlier, it is important to acknowledge that Singapore rebounded much better than her neighbors (which recorded negative growth numbers), with a positive 1.5% growth in 1998, one year after the crisis. However, Sim is quick to pose the question that “if the crisis was [something] regional and beyond the control of the state, how could it be conquered by the PAP or any other government?” She reckons that the PAP government achieved the “remarkable feat” of portraying itself as having overcome a fundamentally regional problem and Singaporeans bought into it. Similarly, this was something which the PAP government also contended with in the World Financial Crisis in 2008, in which it employed the same kind of ideological-engineering to make itself appear as though it had discharged its messianic duty, a strategy Sim describes as the “defining of material reality by monopolizing (and not allowing alternative) definitions of what constitutes the nation’s a priori needs.” In truth, the PAP government exploited the crisis — something it had no control over — and claimed it effectively rode out the crisis through a combination of good leadership and stop gap measures it had instituted. As Singapore’s economy becomes more inextricably tied to the global economy, this is just the tip of the iceberg of further crises — both regional and global.

While the PAP government pulled off a “remarkable feat” in 1997 and once again in 2009, there is ultimately only so much the government can do to mitigate macroeconomic stabilization issues. There is neither a perfect recession-proof

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167 Ibid., 153.
168 Ibid., 154.
industry that the PAP can absolutely rely on, nor can the PAP government have constant and complete control over critical success factors.\textsuperscript{169} The PAP government’s success in the management of Singapore’s economy should not be taken for granted; while it can leverage economic performance to legitimate its political rule for now largely because it has the endorsement of the middle-class in society, it is important to note that many are falling through the cracks of the economic system and suffering from low wages and the rising cost of living — a predicament faced especially by “heartlanders.” If left unaddressed, this segment of society that is overworked and frustrated with the way they are being sidelined could eventually serve as a counter argument to the PAP government’s claim of having delivered the goods in the form of securing a life of material well-being for all Singaporeans. In the words of Linda Low, “a human face needs to emerge from the Singapore economic model for a greater sense of socialistic wealth distribution, because Singapore Inc. must win people’s hearts as much as it must win global MNCs for success.”\textsuperscript{170}

Singapore’s exponential and consistent rate of economic growth in the last decade has made it appear like a viable economic system for other countries in Southeast Asia. The country’s economic development thus far has proven the skeptics, who believed that such a method was only feasible in the early economic development stages, wrong. In fact, it appears that Singapore’s economic model, based on the numbers it has been producing, is extremely relevant to the modern

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{169} Low, “Exploring New Engines for Growth,” 175.
\textsuperscript{170} Linda Low, “Exploring New Engines for Growth,” 175.
\end{footnotesize}
world especially since its performance presently exceeds that of other leading and resource-rich countries. This is all reinforced by the fact that financial accounting and reporting go through very thorough auditing, and the statistics that are published by Singapore are ultimately reflective of the ground realities of the economy. This is an important aspect to note especially for trade-intensive countries, since trading giants like China have been known to distort their numbers in order to appear economically booming for the sake of attracting foreign investors and companies. Consequently, Singapore’s numbers are not an exaggeration of present realities and it does appear that on the surface, Singapore’s economy is healthy and humming along just fine.

Yet the mechanisms which support this growth are also the economy’s weaknesses, because they threaten the social fabric of Singapore, and as some scholars have argued, have an intrinsically finite growth capacity. In the process of pursuing the larger national agenda put forth by the PAP government, the interests of a number of Singaporeans have been displaced. While “economic growth” and “national unity” were originally mutually reinforcing notions, present economic growth seems to undermine the social fabric of Singapore because of a myriad of factors: the extensive reliance on foreigners, the widening income gap between the rich and poor, and the transformation of Singapore into a haven for expatriates and less of a home for locals. All these factors lead to a growing sense of disenchantment among Singaporeans towards the country. Moreover, the sheer reliance on foreign input and the global economy situates the country in a rather precarious position since its success is inevitably derived from how foreign countries are doing — something out of its control. The PAP government should be cognizant that these problems are a
natural outgrowth of an increasingly globalized nation-state relying extensively on foreign sources in order to pursue economic growth. Consequently, it should be wary of legitimating its rule almost exclusively through such economic performance. By virtue of the fact that Singapore is evolving and becoming increasingly globalized, the PAP government could do a number of things: besides attuning itself closer to popular sentiment, it could also re-examine the factors underlying its success, and work to create a more robust basis of political legitimation.
The PAP government has consistently delivered economic progress to Singapore and has transformed an insignificant red dot on the map into one of most formidable economic powerhouses in the world. The development that Singapore has achieved in the last 50 years was no simple feat especially since it was initially strapped for both natural resources as well as capital. Yet beneath the veneer of the “economic miracle,” the mechanisms which support Singapore Inc. are not as robust as they appear to be. The reliance on primarily input-driven growth is not a long-term strategy it can adopt indefinitely; its dependency on foreign firms, investments, and human resources stunts both local creativity and the flourishing of local enterprises, and limits its sources of wealth to purely external channels; and finally, its ties to the global economy makes it susceptible to both international and regional economic crises.
While the PAP has relied principally on delivering the goods to legitimate its political authority, and while it has faced neither problems pertaining to its legitimacy nor the threat of a legitimation crisis just yet, it should rethink the basis of its political legitimacy as it contemplates the future. Simply dangling the carrot and having a quid pro quo corporation-stakeholder relationship with its citizens creates a purely instrumental and material bond with the citizenry based solely on utility and nothing more. Cherian George argues that the consent given to the PAP government by Singaporean citizens is ultimately based on “instrumental acquiescence and their not-unfounded faith that the government will continue to deliver the rising standards of living.”171 Yet what if this faith in the PAP government’s ability to deliver the goods were shaken — how would that affect Singaporeans’ “instrumental acceptance” of the ruling PAP? It would not take an economic meltdown for the citizens to lose faith in the ruling government; a gradual slowdown has the potential of jolting their confidence. It is this “jolt” that might tip the balance of the citizen’s support of the PAP government and cause them to be receptive to the possibility of an alternative government, since the basis of their relationship with the government is ultimately “instrumental acquiescence” and not “duty-bound obedience.”

But the implications of a slowdown extend beyond the PAP itself. Because of the conflation of party, state, and economy, and the fact that economic performance is a key basis of the PAP’s political legitimacy, the consequences of Singapore’s economic problem areas have severe implications for the entire political realm. Should one of the mechanisms of economic growth give way or should a crisis —

social, economic, or political — occur, stemming from the government’s own economic policies, the government itself could very well face a legitimation crisis.

In the first part of this chapter, I explore the potential of a crisis or an economic slowdown; I argue that the PAP’s political legitimacy is indeed in a fragile position. Since this is primarily a political analysis and not an economic one, I will mainly consider the potential political consequences of sources: (1) those deriving from the so-called “crowding out” effect; and (2) crises stemming from Singapore’s links to the global economy.\(^{172}\)

In the second part of this chapter, I describe how the possible interplay between the various economic and social problems, compounded by the fact that the conduit between citizen and state is weak, could lead to social chaos in Singapore. I argue that while such a scenario seems inconceivable given Singapore’s present political stability, under the right circumstances, the various forces could cause friction and possibly spark a social revolt, especially since there is a lack of pre-existing institutional outlets for citizens to express their dissatisfaction with and to the government. I also allude to the fact that since social dissent is ingrained in Singapore’s recent history, and should the PAP government not take steps to shore up a stronger bond with the citizenry, history could very well repeat itself.

In the third part of the chapter, I go on to suggest possible aspects of the Singapore system that the PAP government might want to consider reforming in order

\(^{172}\) I will not examine the possible problems that derive from input-driven growth; addressing these would involve delving into deeper economic analysis than is possible in this thesis. Nevertheless, I recognize and acknowledge that a slowdown in input-driven economic growth could also negatively affect the PAP’s political legitimacy.
to shore up the legitimacy of its political rule. These measures include: (1) making a conscious effort to demarcate the line between party and state; (2) improving the strength of the democratic system by allowing free and fair elections; and (3) permitting a civil society to form in a bid to create alternative relief valves (other than elections) for the citizenry to express their views. I argue that the PAP government should strongly reconsider the modus operandi of the social compact and take these necessary steps in a bid to develop a thicker relationship with the citizenry — one that is ultimately based on “duty-bound obedience” rather than “instrumental acceptance” and therefore one not as subject to fluctuating market forces.

Purely depending on economic performance situates the PAP government directly in the center of the economic tidal wave and consequently subjects its political legitimacy to the ebb and flow of the tide. The strength of the PAP’s track record and its continuous efforts at bolstering economic success do not change the fact that its relationship with the citizenry is fundamentally contractual in nature. By creating this situation, the party has failed to evoke a deeper sense of loyalty founded on allegiance in Singaporean citizens, to the party and to the state more generally. As Selvaraj Velayutham observes, “the ‘we-ness’ [in the Singapore identity] is not the kind of passionate or emotional national identity which people imagine they might fight and die for, nor does it summon a strong sense of difference in the fact of cultural otherness…beyond the material experiences of nationhood, there is an
absence of a uniquely Singaporean identity.”\textsuperscript{173} — This is an ever more pressing challenge that Singapore faces as it becomes increasingly globalized.

4.1 CONSEQUENCES OF ECONOMIC GROWTH MECHANISMS

4.1.1 THE “CROWDING OUT” EFFECT

While the economic policies created by the PAP government have led to overall economic growth and rapid economic progress for Singapore at the macro level, on the micro level it has been done at the expense of the average citizen. Given Singapore’s size, the constant influx of “foreign talent”\textsuperscript{174} has led to severe congestion on the small island. Singaporean citizens not only have to compete among themselves but also with foreigners in a variety of areas including housing and job opportunities. The once modest-sized foreign population in Singapore has increased exponentially in the last decade; in 2012, foreign nationals made up about one-third of Singapore’s population.\textsuperscript{175}

Because of the perceived correlation between foreign talent and economic growth, Parliament recently endorsed a Population White Paper to increase Singapore’s population to 6.9 million by 2030, through the further relaxation of

\textsuperscript{173} Velayutham, \textit{Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore}, 175.

\textsuperscript{174} A term coined by Lee Kuan Yew to describe foreign workers who “value-added” to Singapore’s increasingly complex and ever globalizing economy as a result of Singapore’s “brain-drain” problem and the fall in fertility rates.

immigration policies and allowing the influx of more foreigners. Flabbergasted and frustrated by the government’s move, some 5,000 disgruntled Singaporean protestors marched to the Hong Lim Speaker’s Corner to protest against the PAP government’s White Paper on Population less than a week after the Paper was approved in February earlier this year. Reuben Wong, professor of Political Science at the National University of Singapore, stressing the significance of the event in Singapore’s history and referring to the protest as “the largest protest in decades…[and] also the first one where anger [was] directed squarely at the government.” In response to the increasing sense of being crowded out of their own country, Singaporeans are, in Velayutham’s words, “afflicted with a sense of personal anxiety and vulnerability.”

On the micro level, many Singaporean citizens are getting outmaneuvered by foreign talents because of the PAP government’s emphasis on sustaining Singapore as a global hub and by appeasing and retaining these talents. As argued in Chapter 3, the landscape of Singapore is fast evolving into a “hotel” for foreigners and less a home for local citizens. Velayutham suggests that “the foreign talent policy has been construed by the government as inextricably linked to Singapore’s long-term

177 The Speaker’s Corner in Hong Lim Park is an area allocated by the government for Singaporeans to demonstrate and speak freely about topics, excluding those that might incite ill-will between racial and religious groups. Individuals or groups who want to use the area have to first register with the Police their intent to do so and get approval before using the area.
179 Ibid.
180 Velayutham, Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore, 186
economic survival and sustainability in the age of globalization," and these foreign talents are therefore prized over the average Singaporean citizen for their economic contribution to Singapore’s economy. Yet, unlike the citizens who have a vested interest in the nation of Singapore, foreigners simply flock to Singapore because of economic opportunities and lack the kind of commitment that citizens have. Many Singaporean citizens therefore fear that when the economy goes south, foreign talents would not hesitate to pack up and leave for greener pastures. Rather than risk being displaced from their position in society, an increasing number of middle-class Singaporeans have taken the pre-emptive step and migrated to other countries like Australia, in order to ensure their social status and economic well-being.

With the significant entry of foreigners into Singapore in the last decade and still more expected in the near future, the small city-state has to contend further with its basic physical space constraints. As a result of the fixed and limited space in Singapore, coupled with a growing population of foreigners, the cost of living is getting higher, a fact indicated in the prices of houses and cars — both of which are considered luxury items in Singapore. In a recent CNBC article, it was reported that a Honda City costs about US$ 120,887 in Singapore with the Certificate of Entitlement (COE) slapped onto it, while the same car costs only US$ 29,000 in

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181 Ibid.
182 Ibid., 187.
183 Ibid., 179.
184 The Honda City is a Japanese-made car sister to the Honda Civic (widespread in the US) and commonplace on the streets of South and East Asia.
185 The Certificate of Entitlement (COE) is a premium tax imposed by the government associated with owning a car in Singapore. There are only a limited number of COEs and Singaporeans have to bid for the deed after having purchased a car in order to operate the vehicle on Singapore roads.
neighboring Malaysia.\textsuperscript{186} In terms of housing, more than 80\% of Singaporean citizens live in government subsidized flats\textsuperscript{187} — ranging from one to five room flats — while only a minority of 18\% live in private housing. The average price of private homes is going upward of US$1 million per unit.\textsuperscript{188}

While foreign talents are paid a premium and given allowances to cope with the high cost of living, the same cannot be said for the average Singaporean citizen — who scrimps and saves to purchase a new flat in order to start a family. Based on the numbers projected in the Population White Paper, it is estimated that by 2030, the percentage of Singaporean citizens would drop from 62\% to 55\% of the total population,\textsuperscript{189} indicating a significant percentage drop in native local representation. Moreover, unlike Singaporean males who have to perform mandatory National Service for two years, foreigners are exempted from it and they still enjoy most of the benefits of life in Singapore. As Linda Lim and Lee Soo Ann note, “the PAP government has placed an emphasis on the newly favored sectors like life sciences, finance and medicine, and thereby created disproportionately more jobs for foreigners than for locals at all skill levels, and the only way this can be sustained is through massive immigration.”\textsuperscript{190} The PAP government has thus created a metropolis predicated on foreign expertise and immigrants such that without them, Singapore Inc. would not be able to continue to operate as successfully.

\textsuperscript{188}Velayutham, \textit{Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore}, 177.
\textsuperscript{189}“White Paper Singapore 2013 - Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s Speech,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yT1Pzu1RF_8.
\textsuperscript{190}Lim and Lee, “Foreign Participation in the Singapore Economy,” 153.
Rather than conveying their discontent towards government policies privately to one another as they traditionally have done, a number of Singaporean citizens have taken an active stance and publicly expressed their opposition to the Population White Paper in solidarity. The fact that the protest at the Speaker’s Corner took shape so quickly is something remarkable considering the state of paralysis that civil society is in, and also in the face of the PAP government’s zero tolerance towards petty complaints from the citizenry. A Singaporean citizen against the White Paper shared her views that “[since] the government does not give allowance for people who are different from them… my perspective is, I’m different, I don’t want to toe the line, and that’s why we have to speak up and push through until something happens.”

While the protest of the Population White Paper was an independent and one-off event, it nevertheless shows that Singaporean citizens are increasingly unafraid of openly confronting the PAP government and its planned policies, especially when they feel susceptible to losing their standing — economic and social, in a home that they feel is becoming ever more foreign. The sentiment at the protest represents a departure from the citizen’s adoption of “managerial speak” — the traditionally widely accepted PAP government’s articulation of particular constraints and unique problems experienced by Singapore and its proposed solutions for them — to an adoption of their own “independent speak.” Consequently, the shift away from simply accepting government policies at face value to questioning the feasibility of its policies represents a growing movement of Singaporean citizens who refuse to cower


192 Velayutham, Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore, 166.
under the shadow of the PAP and instead choose to take a stand openly. While these are only the preliminary steps for a civil society to form organically, it is an important one, because it represents a distinct break away from a citizenry that was once pacified.

4.1.2 SINGAPORE’S LINKS TO THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Singapore’s economy serves as a textbook example of the perks associated with being connected to the global economy. However, as part of a larger network of economies and markets, it also opens itself to both the peaks and troughs of the global business cycle and the various regional and global economic crises that have become more commonplace since the 2008 World Financial Crisis happened. While Singapore managed to deflect most of the negative effects of both the 2007 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008 World Financial Crisis because of the safeguard measures put in place by the PAP government, it might not be spared from the damages the next time round. Relying almost entirely on foreign trade and markets, Singapore’s economy is subject to the demand, market activity, and slowdowns of its trading partners. As Lim and Lee argue, “inevitable or not, the nature of the Singapore economy’s articulation into the global economy poses challenges for the state…precisely by making itself indispensable to the global capital and talent which it has welcomed to the economy.”\textsuperscript{193} While Singapore’s economy appears to occupy an impressive position on the world stage, and the PAP government has substantial

\textsuperscript{193} Lim and Lee, “Foreign Participation in the Singapore Economy,” 150.
reserves locked away as foreign investments to serve as a buffer for a rainy day, the 2008 Crisis serves as a cautionary tale of the inherent turbulence and the sheer unpredictability of global markets wherein even the strongest economy can topple over in an extremely short span of time.

Singapore’s miracle growth was in part due to the PAP government’s urgency and eagerness to achieve economic growth. This put Singapore on the fast track of growth premised on tapping factor inputs and substantial government intervention in the economy. One of the easiest routes to economic growth is simply through the addition of inputs of foreign capital, labor, and skills — yet to what extent is this growth sustainable in the long run? Choy Keen Meng argues that “productivity gains,” while leading to a slower pace of economic growth, is ultimately accompanied by “less macroeconomic volatility,” and thus is a route to economic growth that is arguably more sustainable in the long run. Lim and Lee echo Choy’s observation seeing the PAP government’s economic policies associated with fast-track economic growth as “big bets” where the “costs of failure are much higher, arguably requiring even greater state control to maintain social stability.” Consequently, the PAP government has had to intervene on numerous occasions through macroeconomic stabilization policies in order to mitigate the undesirable effects of the impact of foreign market activity on Singapore.

The fact that global markets are volatile and have proven themselves unstable and unpredictable, coupled with the warnings from several scholars that Singapore’s

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194 Ibid., 154.
input-driven economic growth would eventually reach the end of its wick, suggests
that the Singapore economy might not be in as healthy a position as it appears to be.
While an economic meltdown similar to the one that the U.S. faced in 2008 is not
impossible, a more plausible scenario could be a slowdown in the growth and
performance of Singapore’s economy. The PAP government has often employed the
“crisis narrative” and the “survivalist mentality” in order to induce a climate of
uncertainty and to encourage Singaporean citizens to cling tightly and depend ever
more on the PAP’s political apparatus for guidance, but perhaps the present state of
Singapore’s economy is not far off from the “resource-poor small island nation cast
adrift in the potentially hostile waters of a turbulent region”\textsuperscript{198} that it once was. After
all, Singapore depends almost completely on foreign resources, and its neighboring
economies are in heated contest over certain of its primary production functions.\textsuperscript{199}

4.2 A RECIPE FOR DISASTER

As illustrated throughout much of this thesis, the mechanisms which support
Singapore’s success in economic development and which also maintain social order
are not as robust as they appear to be. In particular, the dependency on foreign talent
and its effect of displacing Singaporeans from their position in society has recently
sparked widespread fury amongst the citizenry. The crowding out effect is
compounding the problem of falling birthrates in Singapore as the cost of living rises

\textsuperscript{198} Lim and Lee, “Foreign Participation in the Singapore Economy,” 142.
\textsuperscript{199} Malaysia and China are in intense competition over Singapore’s 10 percent global market share in
semiconductor foundry wafer output and the fact that it hosts the world’s top wafer foundry
companies.
exponentially in the tiny city-state, forcing couples to rethink the feasibility of having children and leading to a downsizing in the nuclear family unit. The protest against the PAP government for the Population White Paper is merely a foretaste of the swelling discontent felt by the citizenry towards the ruling regime. The active vocalization of discontent directed straight at the PAP government is not insignificant because it symbolizes that the citizenry are no longer simply standing on the sidelines and immediately recoiling when confronted by the PAP government and its planned policies.

Not only does the PAP government deliberately silence the citizenry, but its move to also weaken the opposition (who often represent the bread and butter issues of the marginalized citizenry) means that there are fundamentally no formal institutional outlets outside elections for the citizenry to voice their frustration or disagreement with government policies. In between elections every five years, the PAP government does very little to heed the needs of average Singaporeans, and only when election season comes does the Party make a conscious effort to address ground issues and appear to accommodate the needs of its constituents. In addition, the enforcement of Out-of-Bound (OB) markers — the limits to the topics of dialogue that citizens can publicly engage in — and the way in which the PAP government has delineated boundaries for political discourse exclusively to those who affiliate themselves with political organizations, renders civil society paralyzed in its ability to contribute meaningfully to the political system. Consequently, what is left for a citizenry longing for political engagement and an avenue to express their discontent towards the regime is either to abandon the PAP Sovereign or revolt against it.
Though Singapore’s economy has had a phenomenal streak in the last few decades, with the dynamic forces of globalization in motion and the opening of emerging markets, Singapore’s growth numbers might not always remain positive. This is an aspect Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is aware of as he cautions Singaporeans to have realistic expectations of Singapore’s growth possibilities in the upcoming years — especially since Singapore is “now more developed economically that it was 10 or 15 years ago and it can no longer grow as rapidly as before.”\textsuperscript{200} Despite his cautionary note, Lee remains optimistic about the future of Singapore’s economy. However, with its links to the global economy and utter dependency on foreign markets and resources, the economy is constantly being tied up with the economic performance of its trading partners. It is something about which the PAP government does not have complete certainty, much less control over. While it appears that Singapore’s economy is in a relatively safe position for now, with government scholar officials making calculated investments and seeking every opportunity to diversify the country’s investment portfolio, the financial crisis in 2008 illustrates that an economic collapse could well occur without warning and almost abruptly — a testament to the unpredictability of the business cycle.

For instance, it is very possible that Singapore’s economy will experience a slowdown in economic growth in the next decade due to the limits of internal input-driven growth and the effects of an external global economic slowdown. As Lee underscores, “there will be good years when we should go faster and there will be

other years which are tough, when we will do more poorly."²⁰¹ That being said, this does not change the fact that Singaporean citizens continue to expect the PAP government to continue to deliver since they have traded their democratic participatory rights for a high and predictable level of economic progress. The nature of a quid pro quo relationship ultimately demands a one-for-one exchange. Therefore, in the event that there is a dip in the PAP government’s ability to deliver, it cannot insist on depriving the citizenry of their participatory rights at the same level that it has until now. Given the delicate social situation in Singapore at present with citizens contesting the rising cost of living, the fear of being displaced by foreign talents, and a growing discontent towards the PAP government, a decline in economic performance could exacerbate the situation further and possibly lead to de-legitimation of the ruling PAP. The effects of a decline in aggregate economic performance should not be underestimated in light of the number of annual work hours that Singaporeans put in in a year, a staggering 2,307 hours in 2009 (the highest number of hours worked that year worldwide), with South Korea coming in second at 2,259 hours²⁰² — it should therefore come as no surprise to the PAP government that the citizens expect a proportional return on the amount of work that they put in. The fact that the social contract dictated by the PAP government is based on an “instrumental acquiescence” with its rule in large part due to its delivering of the goods, when that criteria is not met, it follows that citizens have the right to revoke their thin sense of allegiance from the regime. Consequently, the amalgamation of the

²⁰¹ Ibid.
economic and social problems that have been described could plausibly lead to the citizens abandoning the PAP.

The result of swelling frustration and unmet expectation might lead citizens to question not only the legitimacy of the ruling PAP but also the entire state apparatus. Because of the conflation of party and state, the extent of damage to the Singapore system should the citizenry abandon the PAP would likely not stop there as anger would also be willy-nilly directed against the state apparatus as well. Then, not only would the PAP be deposed but the entire Singapore society would also be thrown into a flurry of chaos as governmental structures that once held precedence would be identified squarely with the PAP and likewise be abandoned along with it. While this is a scenario perhaps unimaginable for both Singaporean citizens and observers of the Singaporean system around the world, it is the interplay of social and economic problems, coupled with the fact that the conduit between people and state is weak that makes this situation a possibility.

Social disorder and its crippling effects on society are something that Singapore is all too familiar with, having had episodes of civil unrest interwoven in its not too distant history. During the period immediately after World War II in 1945, social dissent was widespread and according to Carl Trocki, “Singapore was virtually aboil with social and political ferment. Labor unions, political groupings, student groups, and other movements challenged status quo… [even] the previous agencies of control found it difficult to retain their positions of power.”\(^203\) Furthermore, business groups were devastated by the effects of post-war economic ruin as Singapore’s

economic situation was completely opposite from what it is today. In 1955, because of long work hours, low wages, and dismal working conditions (issues still relevant today), workers from the Hock Lee Bus Company organized a strike which erupted in a bloody riot leaving 4 people dead and 31 injured; this forced the Chief Minister to institute Emergency Regulations in order to keep the situation under control.\textsuperscript{204} In the 1960s, a series of racial riots marred the social fabric of Singapore society and led to hostile tensions with neighboring Malaysia, because the nature of the conflicts was religious and primarily between Christians and Muslims.\textsuperscript{205}

Indeed, while the PAP’s pragmatist approach has resulted in spectacular economic performance, and also the successful regulation of Singapore’s multi-ethnic society, wherein the notion of social strife seems almost impossible,\textsuperscript{206} the history of Singapore has shown that under the right circumstances and the interplay of certain forces, social chaos could very well materialize. In fact, Singapore’s economic progress has been predicated on this social order that the PAP government has carefully instilled — the climate of peace and stability that have become the hallmark of Singapore culture — luring investors and companies alike to the shores of the island-nation detached from the rest of East Asia. Indeed, while economic performance leads to short-term gain for the country, it is ultimately political stability that will secure the longevity of Singapore’s commercial relevance in East Asia and the rest of the world. In the words of Chua Beng Huat, “while economic development is necessary for political stability, political stability is in turn necessary for economic

\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 117.
\textsuperscript{206} Chua, \textit{Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore}, 50.
development.” The problem is that the political stability that Singapore currently enjoys is dependent, as this thesis has shown, on the continuation of economic success and political acquiescence — neither of which is guaranteed as Singapore faces changing economic and political conditions. In light of this, the question arises, what might Singapore in general, and the PAP in particular, do to protect itself from the sort off scenario that might well occur in the future?

4.3 WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

While both the economy and Singapore society appear to be healthy — under the right conditions the cracks within the system could very well give way and lead to severe political, economic, and social problems for Singapore. The PAP government has set the benchmark so high for itself through its constant delivery of economic performance that anything below that mark could potentially lead Singaporean citizens to question whether it can still deliver the goods; and based on that, whether it is still in a position to hold total political control and rule legitimately. Therefore, while the notion of economic growth correlates directly with the citizenry’s acceptance of PAP rule, a dip in growth numbers could lead to a more than proportional weakening of the ruling PAP’s political legitimacy. Hence, it is fairly accurate to say that the present political legitimacy of the ruling PAP is intrinsically weak.

207 Ibid., 49.
As a result of the citizenry’s “instrumental acceptance” of PAP rule, the sense of “we-ness” that Velayutham describes in times of crisis and distress is absent. One reason why Singaporean citizens still cling to the ruling PAP in those times is simply because of its ability to ride out the crisis rather than out of a sense of allegiance to the party. However, as argued earlier, there are impending and possible situations in which the PAP government could very well not be capable of managing; in particular when several of the cracks give way simultaneously in which it would have neither economic growth, material wealth, nor social order to leverage to gain acceptance from the citizenry. In contrast, if the citizenry had a sense of “duty-bound obedience” to the PAP, their consent to PAP rule, as Alagappa has noted, would be “given to the formal source of commands, not to their content.”

This basis of political legitimacy is far superior and more robust as compared to “instrumental acceptance,” especially in today’s world, because it is both recession-proof and crisis-proof at the same time.

In a National Day Rally Speech in 2005, newly installed Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong championed the need for Singapore to embrace change and evolve or face extinction, “What will Singapore be like 40 years from now…I can tell you it must be a totally different Singapore because if it is the same Singapore as it is today, we’re dead. You may want to be the same, but you can’t be the same. Therefore, we have to remake Singapore — our economy, our education system, our mindsets, our city.”

Singapore’s economy is a solid testament to this constant upgrading and renovation that the PAP government has undertaken. However, the same cannot be

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said for politics and civil society in Singapore, both of which still have several curtailments attached to them, and mirror the status quo of Singapore during its developing years. One way the PAP government could address the problematic mechanisms of economic growth would be to focus on new economic policies and target new engines of growth; however, this does not address the fact that performance-based legitimacy is fundamentally weak and prone to abandonment by its citizenry in times of trouble. In the same way the PAP government has kept Singapore’s economic system relevant to the external global economy, it needs to do the same internally with the political and social system in order to shore up its political legitimacy especially in the face of complex and often unpredictable global forces. Three such reforms recommend themselves: (1) demarcate the line between party and state; (2) institute free and fair elections; and (3) promote the development of civil society. Let me discuss each of these in turn.

4.3.1 DEMARCATE LINE BETWEEN PARTY AND STATE

While the integrity of political leadership and foresight to anticipate problems are both aspects of good governance (both of which the PAP has), equally important is a sense of political maturity to pursue the country’s best interests over those of the party. The current conflation of party and state is such that there is no way for the Singapore system to function independently without the PAP at the helm. As argued in Chapter 2, the party should serve as a buffer between citizen and state such that the party could fall without the entire state apparatus collapsing along with it. The current
fusion of party and state in Singapore’s context implies that should the PAP fall as a result of losing control in an election, the legitimacy of the entire state structure would also be questioned since it has arguably been used as a political tool by which the PAP exerts its control.

While it is important to recognize that the separation of party and state would entail remodeling the entire governmental structure and would also likely be at the cost of bureaucratic efficiency, it is nevertheless a quintessential step to take. The likelihood of failure in the PAP government’s economic growth mechanisms, although not immediately noticeable, is a plausible scenario in the foreseeable future. Should that happen, both the political legitimacy of the ruling PAP and the legitimacy of the state structure would come under attack and lead to a situation teetering on anarchy. This was the case in the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 where Egyptian protestors not only brought down President Hosni Mubarak and his entire government but also effectively suspended the constitution and forced parliament to dissolve. This occurred as a result of more than a month of chaos and bloodshed in the capital of Cairo.  

In light of this, the PAP risks not only losing office but the entire state structure; in this way the string of government institutions and statutory boards that citizens rely on would also be in jeopardy.

Practically speaking, one way to distinguish where the party ends and where the government begins is for the PAP government to proactively move away from a one-party system towards a multi-party system rather than risk having it enforced on

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211 Statutory boards of the Singapore government are organizations that have been given autonomy to perform an operational function and usually report to one specific government ministry.
its governmental structure through revolutionary means by the citizens. In order for this to be enacted, it would require political maturity on the part of the ruling PAP, an aspect already bolstered by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s belief that Singapore’s system has to evolve or face extinction. What appears as a weakening of the PAP’s hegemony over state structure and the party’s interests, in effect serves the nation’s best interests because it creates an independent governmental structure that is able to withstand the tide of a ruling party collapse. Therefore, if the PAP government truly knows best what is in the nation’s interests, it would recognize that it is in the Party’s long-term interest to take the necessary steps towards relinquishing control over the entire governmental structure by considering sharing this power with other political parties.

4.3.2 INSTITUTE FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

Elections occur regularly in Singapore but the PAP has historically lacked competition in contesting for the Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs) and Single Member Constituencies (SMCs). The ruling PAP takes intentional steps to stymie the opposition from contesting in the electoral divisions through a combination of gerrymandering, defamation suits, and coopting of local talent. As a result of this, Singapore opposition parties lack the electoral eligibility and human resources to contest in several of these electoral divisions. The PAP has had numerous walkovers because of the lack of formidable opposition in these wards or simply because of a lack of opposition showing. As Jothie Rajah, research professor
at the American Bar Foundation, suggests, “rather than coming to power through the unalloyed ‘rule of law’ legitimacy of the ballot box, the PAP’s path to power involved the ‘rule of law’ legitimacy of the Internal Security Act’s muscular capacity to remove alternative leaders\textsuperscript{212} and spokespersons for the disaffected from the public domain.”\textsuperscript{213} Singaporean voters therefore do not have an opportunity to assert their rights to choose their representatives either, because the PAP has stunted the political opposition or their votes are registered by default to the PAP when there is no contestation (as a result of the PAP’s intimidation).

These factors contribute to the citizens’ “instrumental acquiescence” to their Members of Parliament (MPs) and restrict the fostering of a deep conviction towards their elected representatives because there is no sense that they have fought for their representatives and the ruling party to be in office. If the purpose of elections in Singapore is simply for the PAP to renew its political leadership by default without the citizenry actually fighting on its behalf for its office, then Singaporean citizens would not feel that they have a stake in political life at all. Indeed, the PAP’s silencing of the political opposition does benefit it in the short run, but in the long run it has the potential to backfire against the Party especially in the likely event in which the PAP fails to deliver. When that happens, the PAP cannot turn to its contract with its stakeholders and leverage the fact that it has provided them with “opportunities and has given them basic social safety nets.”\textsuperscript{214} While the present one party rule and one party candidacy in elections gives the veneer of order in Singapore — an aspect

\textsuperscript{212} This is in reference to the Internal Security Act clamping down on the protests organized by Chee Soon Juan and his political party, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP).
\textsuperscript{213} Rajah, Authoritarian Rule of Law, 287.
\textsuperscript{214} Lee Hsien Loong’s articulation of the social compact as described extensively in Chapter 1.
of the system highly prized by the present political administration as well as global investors, Karl Marx has warned before that every society’s greatest strength eventually turns out to be its most fatal weakness\textsuperscript{215} — in this case, the pursuit of social and political order at the expense of suppressing alternative views could reach a threshold and the worst could happen. As a result of this ‘instrumental acquiescence,’ it is not surprising that the citizens’ sense of loyalty to the country and the party is thin, and Singaporean citizens do not hesitate to migrate to foreign countries in crises or simply when the cost of living at home rises precipitously.

Elections in Singapore are in fact one of the most powerful ways to evoke Alagappa’s articulation of “duty-bound obedience” in the citizenry. If citizens were allowed to choose their representatives through free and fair elections wherein opposition parties could contest on equal footing with the PAP, then they might feel loyalty to the party in a way they presently do not. In that case, the votes that Singaporean voters cast would be indicative of their real and affirmative choices rather than merely a result of the electoral engineering instigated by the PAP government. Making elections a genuine contest would enhance the strength of the democratic process and the citizen’s sense of stakeholding in the system — leading citizens to cultivate a \textit{thicker} sense of allegiance to the party they end up choosing and the state apparatus. Should the economy go south or should a crisis — political or social — occur, then Singaporean citizens would not simply abandon the state apparatus but abide in it closely because the ruling government would have the legitimate consent of the people through and through.

4.3.3 PROMOTE CIVIL SOCIETY

Finally, in a bid to foster a deeper sense of stakeholding in the Singaporean system in the citizenry, the PAP government should re-consider its stringent curtailments placed on civil society and permit the organic formation of civic associations that might seriously engage Singaporean citizens. The fact that Singaporean citizens have cast “protest votes” against the PAP during elections in the past in order to get the government’s attention indicates that there is a dire lack of outlets for them to engage the ruling regime. Cherian George argues that Singaporeans citizens are evolving to “more sophisticated consumers of public services and systems” as they become “more critical and demanding and more aware of their rights and interests.” Should the PAP government be resistant to change, the worst that could happen for the nation would be a scenario similar to the Egyptian Revolution when all the frustrations of the citizenry that have welled up reach a boiling point because they had no other outlet.

The PAP government needs to realize that promoting the welfare of Singaporean citizens is not comprised only of meeting their material and economic needs but also supporting their social well-being. Good governance is not simply about the provision of jobs or putting food on the table for families, but also being attuned to their non-economic needs. In the words of Lee Hsien Loong, “navigating these problems is not just a matter of getting the policies right but of communication and persuasion, being sensitive to Singaporeans’ concerns and yet not losing the

bigger picture. In other words, the human aspects of leadership in government.”

For Singaporean citizens, this entails creating adequate relief valves for them to express their discontent to the government outside the election period, so that they would not abuse the democratic elections to convey their anger. The PAP government should re-consider the feasibility of the banyan tree and its far-reaching branches over civil society especially in the long run, because it works against the shoring up of stakeholdership in the citizenry.

The PAP government’s tactics of suppression have become outdated as it has arrived at a new ideological threshold, beyond survivalism and pragmatism. The question of how to enlist thicker allegiance and a deeper sense of “we-ness” in the Singapore system is something it needs to address at the present hour when the country is still at peace and experiencing stability. As Henry Yeung advocates, “[Singapore as a] global city should not be viewed as an end-state phenomenon or some kind of achievement, but should be seen as an evolving process.” Therefore to remain relevant to the needs of the citizenry, these reforms to the Singapore system are extremely vital.

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219 Yeung, “Globalizing Singapore: One Global City, Global Production Networks and the Developmental State,” 118.
As the “Miracle at the Center of the World” that has experienced an
impeccable run both in its economic success and maintenance of political stability,
Singapore is constantly breaking new frontiers. Its influence extends far beyond its
immediate shores: it has trail-blazed the “Asian Tigers” and its prolonged success and
its seeming invincibility from economic crises have made it the object of many
countries’ envy and reverence. However, these strengths could well be the source of
the governmental model’s weaknesses. Under the right conditions, what seem to be
iron pillars that support the economy and the legitimacy of PAP could plausibly cave
in. As much of this thesis has shown, the PAP government’s employment of cooption
and control are not long-term tools that it can continually employ, even if these
political and social restrictions are accompanied by economic prosperity. After all,
“the Air-Conditioned Nation’s balance of comfort and control,” according to Cherian
George, “has a built-in obsolescence that will eventually require a retrofit.”
Therefore, in the same way that the Singaporean economy has been subject to several
reviews and updates, both the political and social spheres in Singapore require a
“retrofitting,” too — because if left hardening into obsolescence, the PAP
government could necessary undo the accomplishments it has achieved in the last half
a century in Singapore.


ASEAN. “ASEAN Community in Figures 2011.”


——— “White Paper Singapore 2013 - Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Speech.”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yT1Pzu1Rf_8.


PAP. “PAP Manifesto 2011.”


html.


University of Michigan Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. “Summary of Asian Barometer Study Methods.”
http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/23920#summary.

