The Evolution of Singaporean Democracy

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Preface

This paper is the culmination of "Democracy in Singapore," a project I carried out during the summer of 2013. As a HAND Foundation Fellow for Menlo School, I traveled to Singapore to study their unique democracy. While I was there, I kept a blog detailing my daily activities: democracyinsingapore.blogspot.com. In addition to visiting Parliament, numerous museums, and an exhibition at the National Library called "Campaign City: Life in Posters," I interviewed a total of six individuals knowledgeable in the field of Singaporean government. I met with Mr. Lim Biow Chuan, a government MP for Mountbatten SMC as well as Mr. Chen Show Mao, an opposition MP for Aljunied GRC, both invaluable sources and true experts in the field. Keith Rodger, Assistant Head of the Australian International School, provided me with the perspective of someone who has immersed in both western and Singaporean society. I also spoke with three people who asked not to be identified due to the sensitive topic of government in Singapore. The first two were civil servants who gave me a peek into the workings of government ministries. The third was a social studies and history teacher who shared the way in which students are taught about government and their country's history. I am grateful to all of these individuals for their time and help in making this project possible. I would also like to acknowledge the many teachers who have provided instrumental guidance and feedback: Mr. Devitt, Ms. Rettburg, Mr. Brown, Ms. Xia, and Ms. Ramsey. Special thanks goes to Mrs. Hanson for being an insightful and supportive project advisor and for her help in connecting me with potential contacts. I am incredibly grateful to the HAND Foundation. Without their generous support, I would not have been able to pursue this investigation.

Democracy and Singapore

Democracy is often defined by the traits of equality, freedom, and rule of law. Yet, as with any ideal, its implementation is rarely perfect. Since all individuals are unique, there is often no absolute equality. Any one person's exercise of freedom is bound to interfere with the freedom of others. These limitations, however, should not discourage society from working towards democracy. Instead, each country should implement self-government in a way that results in the most good for the nation.

Citizens of western countries often believe that their republics represent the best design for government. In addition to disdaining dictatorships, they criticize countries for being quasi-democracies, defined as states that pretend to uphold such values whereas the people do not actually have a say. Singapore is one such country with a negative reputation regarding its freedoms and rights. Since achieving self-government in 1959, Singapore has officially been a parliamentary republic. The People's Action Party (PAP) has always ruled the country with a supermajority in the unicameral Parliament. Their constitution allows limits on freedom of expression and the right to assemble. The Singaporean government has been accused of using tactics to handicap opposition candidates, including filing defamation lawsuits and tightening campaign regulations.

However, Singapore is also one of the least corrupt nations in the world. For example, in 2012, Transparency International ranked Singapore as the fifth cleanest nation its Corruption Perceptions Index, which measures the perceived level of public sector corruption in each country. Singapore scored 87 out of 100. In comparison, the United States ranks nineteenth with

a score of 73.[1] Singapore also has high living standards and an extremely large economy, especially for a country its size. The government has achieved social stability despite the diversity of races, religions, and cultures. The country is about 75% Chinese with significant Malay and Indian minorities and includes Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and followers of many other religions. Singapore is thus an example of a completely different implementation of democracy that has produced impressive results. To understand Singapore's success, it is necessary to trace the history of its democracy and to view the government in conjunction with the circumstances during each time period. Through changes in governing principles, electoral policy, and individual freedoms, Singaporean democracy has evolved over the last few decades to adapt to the needs of the people.

The Need for Survival

The Republic of Singapore came into existence at a time of great uncertainty. After Singapore achieved self-governance from Britain in 1959, it joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 because it would have been extremely difficult for such a small country to survive on its own. However, due to ethnic disputes concerning Chinese and Malays, Singapore seceded in 1965. In addition, Britain decided to withdraw its troops by the end of 1971. According to an anonymous social studies teacher, the fledgling democracy faced threats from its hostile neighbors, had a severe lack of resources, and suffered from economic uncertainty. It was in this environment that Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of Singapore, led the country.

The core government principle at the time was survival. Singaporeans were very concerned about basic necessities and worked to feed their families. An anonymous civil servant

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[1] "Corruption Perceptions Index 2012," Transparency International, last modified 2013, accessed September 24, 2013,
http://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/pub/corruption_perceptions_index_2012.

recalled that the government rallied everyone together through water rationing and emergency drills. In this atmosphere of fear, the PAP created the Internal Security Act (ISA), allowing for the detention of anyone without trial.

Similar to perpetual emergency law, the ISA was an undemocratic but necessary tool to exterminate communism and other foreign threats. Without the power to arrest dissidents, PM Lee would not have been able to keep Singapore united. The citizens understood the dire situation that the country faced and did not object to the PAP's stringent measures. The people developed a sense of togetherness and recognized the importance of harmony. Another social factor at play was that Singaporeans were not highly educated and most did not have a capacity to understand complex ideas about government and politics. The aforementioned public official highlighted the fact that the government was the brains of the people. Lee Kuan Yew and his fellow politicians were the most capable Singaporeans at the time and were entrusted to lead the country whichever way they deemed appropriate.

National Campaigns

The National Library of Singapore hosted a miniature exhibition titled "Campaign City: Life in Posters" that covered the history of Singapore's national campaigns. Through artifacts and posters, the display showcased how Lee's cabinet implemented many campaigns with the stated goal of "shaping the people of Singapore for their own good or for the betterment of society and the nation."[2] In fact, there have been more than 200 national campaigns since 1959 that have dealt with socio-economic concerns. The vast majority of these endeavors were concentrated during the period of initial survival challenges. The government framed them as public education drives. These communication and oftentimes coercion strategies reflected the

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[2] "Campaign City: Life in Posters." National Library Building, Singapore. July 4, 2013.

state of democracy in Singapore from the 1960s to the 1980s. The first tactic employed was publicity and propaganda; all media was government controlled. Keith Rodger, the Assistant Head of the Australian International School and longtime resident of Singapore, characterized the media as a form of "brainwashing." The government also used competitions and rewards such as cash prizes and public recognition. The most controversial of the tactics was legislating punishment, in some cases the death penalty, even for offences western democracies would deem relatively minor.

The notorious No Long-haired Males and Anti-drug Abuse Campaigns took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As the name suggests, the government sought to eradicate men with long hair as well as all drugs. At the time, hippie culture was spreading rapidly across the world. Former Minister for Home Affairs Wong Lin Ken had the following to say about the subject, "Hippie dress and long hair are outward manifestations of a state of mind that may lead a person eventually to being hooked on drugs."[3] The government believed hippie culture would lead to the disintegration of Singaporean society. The distrust of such males permeated Singaporean society as a result of the campaigns. In addition to social stigma that came with this deviant behavior, the movement resulted in the confiscation of passports until getting a hair cut and the policy of serving men with long hair last. Legislation passed as part of the campaign included the 1973 Misuse of Drugs Act and 1975 amendment that prescribed a mandatory death penalty for traffickers of 15 grams of heroin or 30 grams of morphine. These extreme measures limited freedom of expression and forced the population into what the PAP claimed was necessary conformity.

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[3] Ibid.

Another noteworthy example is the Stop at Two Campaign. Originating in 1972, women were strongly encouraged not to have more than two children. Women incurred extra fees and inconveniences for the third child onwards. Similar to the long-haired male policy, smaller families got priority over bigger families. The Singaporean government even bordered on eugenics by offering $10,000 for women from lower income groups to get sterilized. The government intruded into its citizens' personal lives and went against the ideas of freedom and equality. However, according to an anonymous public official, the family planning policies were seen as national security issues; even small changes in population would strain the country's resources and cause drastic consequences for the small nation.

Lim Biow Chuan, a PAP MP for Mountbatten SMC, defended the campaigns as a way of uniting uneducated people behind a common set of social values. In the context of hard times and widespread illiteracy, the people let the government assume control of almost everything, resulting in a relatively undemocratic but likely necessary period of Singapore's history.

The Transition to Pragmatism

1990 was the year that Lee Kuan Yew stepped down as Prime Minister. He had served a record 31 years. In his place, Goh Chok Tong started to be more consultative and aware of the people's views. According to multiple interviewees, he was not as direct and unyielding as Lee Kuan Yew had been. He included more people and views in his decision making process. Since Singapore was now a prospering nation, the leadership slightly relaxed its grip. The core principle of government shifted to the idea of pragmatism. Through programs such as the Central Provident Fund, a required retirement savings plan, the government portrayed long-term planning as the key to success. No longer were Singaporeans fighting to survive. Nevertheless, they still needed to stay ahead and remain alert.

The desire for free speech was starting to emerge. Now that most Singaporeans led comfortable lives, they had time to think about other issues that affected them, and some wanted to voice their opinions. In response to this gradual change, the government created Speaker's Corner in 2000, a place modeled after London's Hyde Park. Singaporeans are allowed to speak to fellow citizens at this venue only if they first inform the government of their topic and steer clear of comments concerning race and religion. Keith Rodger noted that although the Corner was not frequently used in its first years, the government's decision to implement a free-speech area reflected a step forward. Rodger also emphasized, however, that the non-Internet media remained restricted to government disseminations alone.

Electoral Changes

This era featured the development of many electoral policies that make Singapore's democracy unique. Although the first two changes happened under Lee Kuan Yew, they can be broadly categorized into this second era of Singaporean government in which the nation adopted a more relaxed attitude. In 1984, Parliament passed a constitutional amendment introducing Non-constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs). These MPs are the best performing losing candidates from the opposition party and do not represent a constituency. Mr. Lim, conveying the government's perspective, argued that they are giving the opposition an opportunity to express their views. It is true that in the initial survival period, the government would not have even acknowledged dissenting opinions. Thus, this new electoral scheme had its merits. However, Chen Show Mao, an opposition MP for Aljunied GRC, contended that the PAP is merely trying to seem fair in the public eye without giving up control of Singapore. By introducing NCMPs, the government eliminated a key opposition argument, namely that the oppressive PAP did not allow different perspectives to be expressed in Parliament. Additionally,

the NCMP system does not fit with democratic values. NCMPs do not represent any Singaporeans but somehow still have the right to serve as legislators.

The second development was that of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) in 1988. Teams of legislators, of which one must be from a minority race, are elected to represent an extra large district. The PAP claims that they adapted the electoral system to make it more fair for the minority racial groups. Mr. Chen, as a member of the Worker's Party (WP), countered that minority representation was not a problem before 1988 and that the GRC system actually singles out race as an important electoral factor. The opposition disputes the PAP's motives as the government party can introduce unknown candidates and pair them with important ministers, thereby obtaining an electoral advantage. GRCs also take more resources to contest, a challenge for the underfunded opposition. From a standpoint of democracy, this development limits equality in two ways. First, they allow the PAP to more easily hold onto power and deprive the opposition of a level playing field. Second, each vote is suddenly not worth the same. Singaporeans in Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) only get to elect one representative while those in GRCs elect from 3 to 6 legislators.

The last change concerning the election of MPs was in 1990 when the government created Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) that are appointed by the President. They only serve for 2.5-year terms, half of a normal MP's term, and provide non-partisan views. Representing the government's position, Mr. Lim claimed that this scheme expanded the range of viewpoints in Parliament. However, it is again questionable in light of democratic principles. Voters cannot hold the appointed members accountable. These three electoral changes exemplify Singapore's experimental and novel approach to democracy. Besides hinting at possible PAP motives for holding on to power, the introduction of NCMPs, GRCs, and NMPs reflect how

Singapore's system of government progressed in response to the lack of opposition MPs, the racial and religious issues, and the limited opportunity for different perspectives.

Subtle changes also happen every five years with each general election. The electoral department may shift the boundaries of districts as it sees fit and has discretion when it comes to the number and race of candidates for GRCs. Even Mr. Lim of the PAP concedes that there have been accusations of gerrymandering. Voting is mandatory in Singapore, and citizens have the day off to vote. Mr. Chen brought up the fact that all ballots have a serial number. While the government claims the only purpose is to eliminate fraud, it is concerning that the government could theoretically track how every citizen votes. Such alarming facts serve as a reminder that Singapore's electoral system is not fully democratic.

Hope, Heart, and Home

The third period in the evolution of Singaporean democracy can be defined with the rise of Lee Hsien Loong as Prime Minister in 2004. Although he is the son of Lee Kuan Yew, he has, according to an anonymous civil servant, adopted a different message for the people. He emphasizes that Singaporeans need hope for the future, heart to be emotionally connected as one people, and home, a feeling of belonging to the nation. The focus of government has thus drastically changed from concrete, tangible, and practical matters to an idea of emotional connection. The Singaporean history teacher portrayed the shift in the following manner: With the large majority of the populace well educated and knowledgeable of other perspectives, the government has to be more accommodating of what its citizens say. For the first time, ministers are taking public transport with everyday people to better understand their perspective.

The PAP is no longer ruling unchallenged. The 2011 elections saw a strong performance by the Worker's Party, which won a record 6 out of 87 contested seats in Parliament. Due to the

fact that political participation and literacy are improving, government MPs now have to work to get reelected. The government is generally more helpful and consultative, allowing constituents to express their views to MPs during weekly Meet the People Sessions and to write to agencies. In fact, Mr. Chen shared that due to monumental dissatisfaction regarding a 2013 resolution on Singapore's population and immigration policy, the PAP actually agreed to amend it. This type of accommodation was previously unheard of.

Although citizens now have more influence over the government's decisions, Singaporeans disagree on how well their government is doing. The anonymous educator distinguished between the older and younger generations. Older citizens remember the challenges of the 1960s and appreciate the role of the PAP in transforming Singapore into the prospering nation it has become. Meanwhile, the younger demographic is much more skeptical. The advent of the Internet and especially of social networking sites like Facebook has opened up Singapore to a lot of differing perspectives. International news sites have given people an outside view on world events and even their own country. Many people have stopped accepting the PAP's messages in blind faith and have learned to think for themselves. In this way, there is pressure on the government to perform and to prove that it is worthy of ruling Singapore.

Conclusion

In this day and age, Singapore is most definitely a democracy. Even if its implementation limits equality and freedom to a certain extent, the country has changed over the years to serve the needs of its people. One of the drawbacks of Singapore's democracy is that most people are not truly involved in the political process. The restrictions on free speech limit the ability of citizens to enact substantial change. However, the benefits include efficiency and effectiveness. Without endless debates and obstructionism, Singapore has always been able to respond quickly

to crises in the world. As Mr. Chen explained, "the ship of democracy turns slowly." The more

people at the steering wheel, the slower a country is able to change direction. Singapore is

effectively steered by a handful of leaders who, over the decades, have gradually started listening

to their passengers' voices.

Mr. Lim believes that the Singaporean government has been successful in promoting a

shared vision of unity among a racially and religiously diverse populace. He argued that giving

up certain individual rights for the betterment of society and of the nation is what Singapore is

about. While Lim's statements are true, the evolution of Singapore's democracy proves that

change is possible if not inevitable. So far, Singapore has managed to take incremental steps. It

remains to be seen how far the country will progress in the areas of fairness and free speech. One

thing is for certain. Singaporean democracy will continue to evolve in response to the needs and

demands of its people.

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