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Singapore in 2014

Adapting to the “New Normal”

ABSTRACT

In the “new normal” following the 2011 general election, Singapore seems poised for further development toward liberal democracy. However, the ruling People’s Action Party is attempting to reinvent itself and regain its hegemonic position, which requires finding credible solutions for very challenging problems to do with policy, communication, and public image.

KEYWORDS: People’s Action Party (PAP), 2011 general election, new normal, hegemony, Our Singapore Conversation (OSC)

REESTABLISHING HEGEMONY

In *Asian Survey*’s review of Singapore in 2011, I noted that the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) received its poorest election results since Independence and thus needed, among other things, to focus on repairing policies in public housing, transport, social security, and immigration. Widespread trust in the government’s competence and benevolence, earned over several decades of successful PAP rule, could no longer be taken for granted. The electorate seemed to have become more adept at using the vote to signal its displeasure, even anger, which provided the opposition parties with new prospects. In this so-called “new normal,” increased political contestation and competition could mean that Singapore will continue slowly to edge toward the liberal democratic ideal, in substance as much as in form.

However, the PAP could not be expected simply to yield the ground. It would certainly make every effort to reinvent itself and regain hegemony in a more resilient dominant-party system that could withstand the contradictory

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forces of profound globalization.¹ For this to happen, the PAP has to find credible solutions for at least three interrelated sets of problems to do with policy, communication, and image. These past few years have seen accelerated efforts to prepare for the next general election, which must take place by 2016.

POLICY PROBLEMS

Performance has been foundational to the PAP government's longstanding authority to rule. The survivalist mentality in the years after Singapore's independence in 1965 was followed by spectacularly high growth rates and incomes leading to the formation of a middle-class society in the 1970s and 1980s. Both factors undergird a social compact in which the people's considerable obedience and support for the government are offered in exchange for the guarantee of material security, stability, and affluence in a well-ordered society inhabiting a clean, safe, and efficient city.

However, the government's success has ironically driven public expectations to very high levels, while officials have found it harder to let go of tried and tested formulas. Indeed, what worked well in the past may not be as effective, or may even be detrimental, in present circumstances. The challenges of being a thoroughly global city have complicated the government's ability to develop, manage, and control Singapore's economy and society. Risk aversion and a still-significant survivalist, developmental mind-set, together with the overconfidence of an entrenched and politically insulated policy elite, have spurred more cautious tweaking than courageous overhauling of policy problems. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in an unprecedented gesture, even apologized to the electorate in 2011 for the policy failures of his administration.

One of these persistent failures has been the infrastructural strain on the public transportation system. Singaporeans complain not only about overcrowding but also about the frequent breakdowns in the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit (SMRT) train system. Announcements about expanding the

1. The PAP currently occupies 81 out of 87 electoral seats in Parliament, which is greatly in excess of a two-thirds majority. However, its share of the general vote in 2011, 60.14%, represents its poorest performance since Independence. The Worker's Party, which was the first and only opposition party ever to win a multi-member constituency (known as a Group Representation Constituency), has firmly established itself as the PAP's most credible rival, having successfully recruited highly credentialed candidates. Other potential rivals include the Singapore Democratic Party, the National Solidarity Party, and the Singapore People's Party, though none of them has won a seat in the current Parliament.

rail network did little to mollify them: the benefits would only be felt in several years' time. Meanwhile, commuters objected to the brazen increase in fares, which seemed to degrade public transport from a public good to a service provided by profit-maximizing companies. The situation was exacerbated when the public learned of the SMRT's decision to allow an elite school to privately charter one of its trains, even though it was during off-peak hours.

The public reaction to the SMRT's decision also reflected heightened sensitivity to increasing income and wealth disparities. As one of the most expensive cities with one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world, Singapore continued to witness social stratification between the haves and have-nots. When a former Miss Singapore Universe contestant mockingly posted a picture in social media of a humble food seller wearing worn-out clothing, her snobbery sparked a flurry of public disapproval. Even though the PAP visibly took the moral high ground in this episode, the general sense of the public has been that the government is an intrinsic part of an establishment that perpetuates inequalities, elitism, and disaffection. This operates through a dogmatic official focus on economic growth and narrow achievement over equity and non-materialistic values.

The PAP government, however, would argue that it has not been monomaniacally obsessed with growth. Rather, it has been helping to raise up Singaporeans who have not benefitted from the purported trickle-down effects of high growth. The Central Provident Fund (CPF) system of mandatory savings for retirement has been refined over the decades to ensure that citizens take personal responsibility for their welfare. Failing that, they can count on family and community support, and only in the most severe cases on limited government handouts. The system has been criticized, however, for not adequately meeting the financial needs of retired Singaporeans. This is partly because typical citizens have much of their CPF savings locked into home mortgages within the public housing system. This shortfall also stems from significant increases in the cost of living.

To deal with this problem, the government launched a new package to assist the so-called Pioneer Generation, the approximately 450,000 people who were at least 65 years old in 2014 and had become citizens before 1987. The package included higher subsidies for medical treatment, lower premiums for a new national insurance scheme called MediShield Life, and various top-ups to the medical expenses component of the CPF.

Singaporeans have linked many current problems to the government's liberal immigration policies beginning in 2006 that opened the floodgates to an influx of foreigners. The problem goes deeper than that. Out of a resident population of 5.5 million, approximately one million are low-paid migrants mainly working in construction or live-in domestic service. This cheap labor-intensive approach has left significant sections of the economy and society over-reliant on low-wage labor, often exploitatively so. Lacking much incentive to invest in technology and skills, the economy has shown relatively low levels of productivity. In recent years, government policies have been aimed at gradually reducing this overreliance by making it more expensive to hire migrant workers, imposing quotas on firm-level employment, and requiring employers to demonstrate that they strove to hire qualified Singaporeans before turning to foreigners.

Singapore is a heavily developed industrial economy that leverages on its international reputation as a major financial and transshipment center. Following almost five decades of continuous economic expansion, its per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is higher than that of nearly all the G20 countries, while the state's heavy penalties against corruption have earned it accolades from global monitoring bodies. The mainstays of the economy are exports—particularly in consumer electronics, information technology products, pharmaceuticals, and complex petrochemical derivatives—and a burgeoning financial services sector. However, on the flip side, observations about Singapore's low level of value-added growth have been made since 1994. Intensified immigration to supply low cost labor as a means to boost economic activity in lieu of industrial innovation and entrepreneurial activity has clearly been part of this problem. Thus, in more recent years, the government has attempted to establish a new growth path that focuses on raising productivity.

For the whole of 2014, the economy was estimated to have grown by 2.8% year on year since 2013. Economic growth slowed from 5.2% in 2011 to 1.3% in 2012, and hovered at less than 5% from 2013 to 2014, a result of the continuing doldrums in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) markets. Early diversification into the booming Chinese and Indian markets in the past 15 years has yielded results in the form of increased visitor rates and a large dose of asset management activity from major Chinese and Indian growth areas.

Between 2012 and 2014, the unemployment rate stayed under 2% for most quarters. Although this is considered much lower than the current OECD

average, the prevalence of low-paid foreign labor has depressed Singapore's wages and earned the voting public's ire.

The grudging reliance on foreign workers has sparked unusually xenophobic behavior among Singaporeans, many of whom had otherwise been tolerant of strangers in their cosmopolitan midst. Citizens started to object vigorously to what they perceived as the bad behavior of foreigners and their unwillingness to fit into Singapore society. A two-hour riot that broke out in the Little India District at the end of 2013 drew public attention to the problems of migrant workers. The riot, involving approximately 400 workers from India and Bangladesh, was sparked by a fatal traffic accident in which a private bus knocked down a possibly intoxicated worker from Tamil Nadu, India. Police arrested 27 workers for rioting with dangerous weapons. The public pointed to overcrowding, simmering racial tensions, and poor working and living conditions of migrant workers as possible contributing factors. A Committee of Inquiry later concluded that it was not these factors, but a mixture of alcohol intoxication, misunderstandings, and psychological dispositions that had contributed to the riot. Drinking alcohol in public places within Little India, since the riot, has been prohibited during the weekends.

Beyond these issues, Singapore has seen increasingly polarized debates in civil society on the possible decriminalization of homosexuality and rising tensions between urban redevelopment and heritage preservation efforts, among others.

COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

Following the disappointment of the 2011 general election, the PAP government started to focus on improving its communication of policies, which it continued to believe were basically sound and simply misunderstood. One aspect of this has been for government leaders to better use social media. Their challenge has been not only in dealing with articulate detractors and mischief-making "trolls" but also about presenting themselves in a style that is appropriate to an essentially anarchic space, where hierarchies and public deference no longer apply. Bureaucratically factual arguments issued in lofty and absolutist tones from an assumed position of superiority, with the aim of defeating the opponent rather than winning over hearts and minds, is a style much associated with the technocrats of the political establishment. In social media, this style appears even more pompous and becomes the easy target of

ridicule. The sense of semi-anonymity, strength in numbers, and articulate ideological leadership helps embolden participants in cyberspace. Collectively, they are able to transform fragmented complaints about Singapore into coherent counter-hegemonic discourse that makes critical sense of their street-level experience. Also, cyberspace has become a massive, highly accessible, and easily disseminable archive from which participants may expose mistakes, deceptions, and hypocrisies in what public figures say and do.

Face-to-face engagement has also continued to be important to the government. In September 2012, it launched Our Singapore Conversation (OSC), a year-long, national-level public-engagement exercise. There had been three others in the past. OSC engaged a total of 47,000 participants who signed up to join a total of 660 structured but mostly open-ended forums at 70 different venues; the discussions were mostly aimed at sharing ideas for a Singapore that participants would like to see in the near future. Carefully recorded and analyzed, the first phase of discussions yielded a set of themes, concerns, and perspectives that informed the agenda for second-phase discussions focused on finding policy solutions. In this second phase, government ministries and community organizations took the lead in managing the forums. Resulting from these were a number of policy changes in the areas of housing, health, education, culture, and transport. The final report, released in August 2013, featured 12 perspectives, five core aspirations, and personal accounts. The prime minister's annual National Day rally speech announced several major policy changes in housing, health, and education, noting that they were influenced strongly by the OSC process.

The public regarded OSC with some skepticism. Thus, when not even halfway through the process, the government released a White Paper entitled "A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore," citizens pounced on this as another example of patronizing government behavior. The White Paper's plan referred to a 2030 population target of 6.9 million. This enraged much of the current population, prompting around 3,000 people to join a public protest, greatly facilitated by the use of social media.

IMAGE PROBLEMS

The Population White Paper gaffe also had much to do with the PAP government's image problem. Decades of successful rule, once admired by a citizenry grateful for broad tangible benefits, have also strengthened

officials' sense of self-importance, transforming a pragmatically adaptive outlook into a dogmatic, risk-averse adherence to convention, regardless of changing circumstances.

To many ordinary Singaporeans, the government appears not only elitist and narrowly rational, viewing the world through the lens of cold technical analysis and hard data, but also arrogant and dismissive of ordinary experiences that matter to people. Officials' blistering style of engaging dissenters, including the liberal resort to *ad hominem* arguments, can seem much like bullying. The continued governmental resort to lawsuits to deal with critics reinforces this image; it also laces the public sphere with unnecessary anxiety, limiting the incentive for more active citizen participation.

In September 2014, the government prohibited the public screening of a documentary by internationally acclaimed Singaporean filmmaker Tan Pin Pin. Officials accused her of presenting a one-sided portrayal of Singapore's political exiles as innocent victims, and condemned the film as unbalanced, untruthful, and a threat to national security. In doing so, the government reasserted its monopoly on Singapore's history, criticizing the power of art to (mis)lead audiences with emotiveness and sensationalism. Singaporeans resented the fact that they were not allowed to exercise their own judgment, and many traveled abroad to see the film.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Singapore's foreign relations often presents vivid occasions to reinforce the survivalist mind-set that portrays Singapore as perpetually vulnerable. In 2014, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur once again took opposite sides of the bargaining table, this time on the issue of the Southern Johor Iskandar Development Zone. Rapid economic expansion with real estate development and the proportioning of valuable land parcels for multinational investment ran into trouble across the Johor Straits separating Singapore from Malaysia because of inadequate environmental assessment. Singapore protested against the maritime pollution and ecological effects it would face. The popularity of Iskandar real estate developments was also directly linked to stratospheric real estate prices in Singapore.

Also in 2014, Jakarta decided to name two naval vessels after deceased Indonesian marines involved in a *Konfrontasi* [Confrontation]-period bombing attack in Singapore's business district in 1965. The martial symbolism

touched the raw survivalist nerve of the PAP state and deepened concerns that Singapore was, in the eyes of Jakarta, still “a little red dot,” as described by former Indonesian President B. J. Habibie.

Given this entrenched survivalist-developmental mind-set, the PAP’s prospects in the next general election will depend greatly on its ability to adapt to the conditions of the new normal, which will require an honest rethinking of its policies, communication, and image, as well as an appreciation of how these three aspects are deeply intertwined.