

**SINGAPORE
PERSPECTIVES2020**
Politics

Singapore Perspectives 2020

Politics

Monday, 20 January 2020

Sands Grand Ballroom, Sands Expo and Convention Centre

PANEL I
Paths Taken

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SPEAKER

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**PAP as PERENNIAL PARTY-IN-POWER:
FROM OLD GUARD TO 4G**

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LAM Peng Er

- Singapore's Founding Fathers: Lee & his Lieutenants (LL)
- “Die was cast”: LL set template of good governance in Singapore.
- Values & ideals of meritocracy, non-corruptibility, multi-culturalism & ethnic equality.

- Old Guard harnessed dynamism of capitalism, open economy & foreign investments but tempered it with “socialistic” benefits for masses (housing, education & health care etc.)
- Singapore’s equivalent to fundamental “land reforms” is superb public housing program which created a property owning working & middle classes.

- Arguably: LL were “revolutionaries” (public housing, nation-building/ national identity, national conscription, bilingual language policies etc.) while 2G, 3G & 4G leaders were/ are technocrats who kept the flag flying.
- Style of governance may change but fundamental values remain essentially the same.
- Indeed, Singapore system/ model of governance is firmly entrenched today. But what about the future in a turbulent world?

Duverger's life cycle theory of dominant political parties

- French political scientist Maurice Duverger: *“The dominant party wears itself out in office, it loses its vigor, its arteries harden. It would thus be possible to show ... that every domination bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction”*.
- But PAP seemed to have defied Duverger's prediction thus far.

Puzzle: why did the PAP succeed in maintaining its one-party dominance since 1959?

- Quality of its leaders: ability to attract talent & smooth handling over of political baton.
- Institutions, norms & blueprint of governance established by Old Guard: resonated with electorate.

- PAP' successful economic stewardship coupled with distribution of material benefits for masses.
- Majority of voters find life in Singapore rather tolerable on the whole even if there are unhappiness with specific public policies e.g. public transportation & immigration policies.

- History & “path dependency”: Opposition party *Barisan Socialis*’ blundered by boycotting 1968 GE → PAP monopoly of parliament.
- Singapore’s first-past-the-post-electoral system without *proportional representation* has benefited dominant PAP.
- PAP is impressive at grassroots: e.g. MP’s conscientious meet-the-people sessions.

- PAP: a very disciplined cadre party --- not faction-ridden.
- PAP's advantage of perennial rule: symbiotic ties with state machinery & NTUC, influence on media, & extended its hegemonic values to society.
- PAP: an incumbent party maintaining its relative autonomy from lobby groups/ special interests e.g. big property developers.

PAP: THE ROAD AHEAD?

- Singapore has an estimated “war chest” of more than \$1 trillion in its national reserves (*Straits Times*, 20 February 2018).
- Future PAP government can prudently dip into national reserves (with consent of Elected President) if need be --- in the wake of black swan events, domestic challenges & external threats.

- Simply put: PAP government has financial wherewithal to weather crisis.
- Singapore society will be more pluralistic, global & diverse in values & interests in years ahead.
- PAP must evolve & adapt: from party which addressed “politics of survival” to “politics of aspiration” & identity among a more diverse, better educated & cosmopolitan electorate.

- Arguably, PAP has become more “socialistic” in recent years to stay in power e.g. offering more material benefits to working class, older workers & retirees etc. (E.g. More housing subsidies, rise in bursaries for pre-school & tertiary education, Merdeka generation package including healthcare subsidies)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- 1) PAP's hegemonic control of political narratives & facts: Will POFMA (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act) be effective?
- 2) Can PAP resolve PMET (Professional, Managers, Executives & Technicians) problem, address rising social inequality & attract support of millennials?
- 3) Will top PAP leadership remain united in post-Lee Hsien Loong era? Can PAP afford a Team B without tearing party asunder?

4a) On political elitism: Can PAP's governance evolve from a small elite circle to greater political participation & transparency in governance e.g. let citizens know the value of our national reserves?

- Can citizens have greater access to information & statistics from state bureaucracy?

4b) Can a small political elite circle make mistakes?

- **YES:** e.g. electoral backlash in GE 2011 over immigration, housing & transportation.
- In years ahead, is there an inherent danger for PAP & Singapore if a small elite circle were to make major mistakes?
- Is Singapore putting all our “political eggs” in one basket? What if a future PAP Team A fails?

4c) Will PAP's "natural aristocracy" in the future be based on "nobility of character" rather than privilege of birth & political dynasties?

5) More formidable political challengers to the PAP? Can opposition parties attract talent in greater numbers & offer a narrative which counters PAP's hegemonic/ ideological discourse?

- Trillion \$ question: can PAP in the decades ahead avoid **Duverger's theory** that all dominant political parties will eventually be thrown out of power?

Sorry ...

... I'm not clairvoyant

Thank You

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