

How Not to Caricaturise Singaporean Democracy

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FORUM ON SINGAPOREANS' POLITICAL ATTITUDES

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Democracy, politics, governance



Democracy: Overarching system
(What and why)



Politics: Means | operating system *(How)*



Governance: Outcomes



Stakeholders: Government (legislature, executive, and judiciary), public service, political parties, Singaporeans, civil society

Can we separate politics from governance?

The public service has to stay out of politics. Public officers cannot get embroiled in political debates or party politics.

You need to stay impartial.

But the public service does not make policies in a technocratic vacuum.

To function effectively, you must understand the political context within which the government functions. You must understand the external strategic environment in which we exist, the national challenges we face, the hopes and concerns of the people, and the overarching national objectives we are striving to achieve.

And you have to embrace these hopes, concerns, and objectives.

Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong
at the Annual Public Service Leadership Ceremony
17 September 2024

Democracy & collective action challenges



How do societies ensure they can thrive and create a better future for everyone?



How can governments must sustain the broad middle ground so that governance and politics are relevant?



How can societies fortify themselves to come out resiliently against the forces that seek to divide and destroy?

Democracy: Self-destructing?

**Remember, democracy never lasts long.
It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself.
There never was a democracy that did not commit
suicide.**

John Adams, letter to John Taylor, 15 April 1814

Attitudes towards democracy



Snapshot (ABS, Wave 6, 2023)



Stable & consistent political attitudes



Broad middle ground, consensus



Political socialisation of attitudes, values, and norms arising from one-party dominant rule from 1959/1963/1965 (though weakening?)

Attitudes towards democracy: Implications



Incremental change in politics (evolution rather than revolution)



Pace of change has to be calibrated and keeping up with political expectations

Nuanced understanding of democracy



Democracy => elections, checks and balances, government responsiveness



Sense of political agency even in a one-party dominant system

State of Singaporean democracy



Development of our own conception and practice of democracy



Direction of travel of democratic development not in doubt



Confidence in autochthonous system that fits our circumstances, needs, and aspirations

Meaning of Singaporean democracy



Procedural *and* substantive understanding – means to an end and an end in itself



Importance of basic necessities and law and order & clean government



Democracy processes not just to elect representatives and government but outcomes of a democratic system are equally important



Performance legitimacy of government critical

Are we an illiberal democracy?

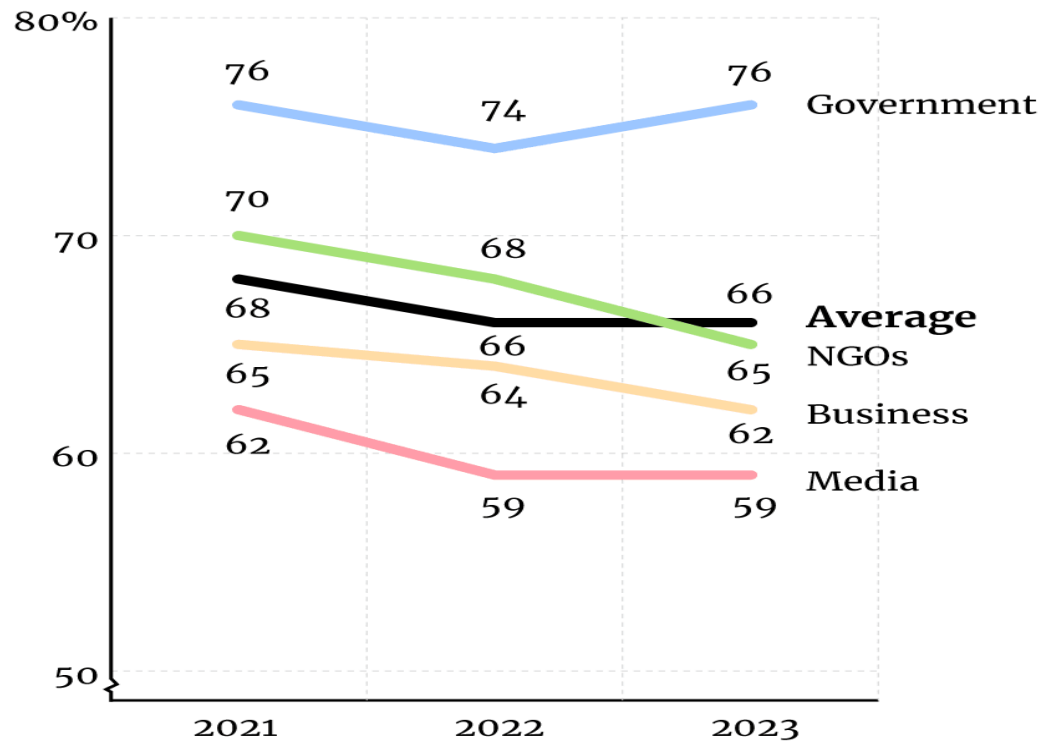
- **Not a surprise that support for democracy here is robust (*cf* liberal democracies)**
- **Growth of importance of democracy vis-a-vis economic development**
- **Inevitable for more emphasis on civic and political rights**
- **Authoritarian detachment follows from understanding of what democracy in Singapore is/ought to be**

Performance legitimacy as key democratic outcome

- **Government and governance that works => performance legitimacy**
- **Robust support for current system flowing from confidence of capability of solving problems**
- **Shared economic growth and social compact**
- **Constitutional constraints that protect the democratic process against itself e.g., GRC & elected presidency, NCMP & NMP**

Centrality of Trust

Trust in institutions in Singapore



Infographic: Rafa Estrada Source: Edelman Trust Barometer 2023



Trends: Singaporean democracy not static

- **Political diversity and competition desired | not a static system**
- ~~Shared~~ **Equitable economic growth and social compact**
- **Authoritarianism not viable in the near future**
- **Threats and risks to status quo**

Evolving political dynamics

Singaporeans' expectations and aspirations are rising, and so too their demands on the government. As growth becomes harder to come by, as revenues becomes less buoyant, and as our politics become more fiercely contested, things can go wrong for us too.

If electoral margins get slimmer, the government will have less political space to do the right things. It will become harder to disregard short-term considerations in decision-making.

The political dynamics will become very different.

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Democracy & policy options

- **Strategic vulnerability a fact of life for Singapore but it need not be destiny (?)**
- **Quest for regional and international relevance on our terms**
- **But imperative for internal stability; fault-lines of race, language, and religion (and local-foreign divide)**

Democracy: A Collective Action Challenge

The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush.

It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.

**Robert M. Hutchins, *Great Books of the Western World (vol 1)*,
ch. 10 (1952)**

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