

**Leviathan Rampant:
The PAP Beyond Lee Kuan Yew**

K. M.

(National University of Singapore)

Abstract

What does the passing of Lee Kuan Yew portend for Singapore politics? In this paper, I consider the implications of his passing in two parts. First, I contend that Lee's passing has not weakened but, arguably, strengthened the People's Action Party (PAP) in the short term since formal institutions, which preserve the party's dominance, remain in place, and political discourses (i.e. informal institutions) remain hegemonic. Second, I expect the PAP to continue its political dominance over the next decade given the aforementioned formal and informal institutionalization. This scenario, however, is predicated on the PAP's ability to surmount key challenges which I detail in the second part.

I: Appraising Giants

It is all too common for social scientists to emphasize impersonal forces at the expense of the personalities that have irrevocably shaped politics. Clearly, *fortuna* and *virtù* defy statistical quantification and are not generalizable.¹ Yet personalities, particularly those of founding fathers, matter because they engage in the herculean task of steering a fledgling country's course, and building state institutions that will outlive their tenures in office. Singapore's founding Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew is widely acknowledged as one such man and, in this paper, I consider the implications of his passing in two parts. First, I contend that Lee's passing has not weakened but, arguably, strengthened the People's Action Party (PAP) in the short term since formal institutions, which preserve the party's dominance, remain in place, and political discourses (i.e. informal institutions) remain hegemonic. Second, while forecasting is fraught with challenges,² I expect the PAP to continue its political dominance over the next decade given the aforementioned formal and informal institutionalization. This scenario, however, is predicated on the PAP's ability to surmount key challenges which I detail in the second part.

II: Dominant Party, Durable Institutions

Institutions, according to Douglas North, are "the rules of the game in a society or, more formally ... the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction."³ The PAP's electoral dominance since independence is a testament to its institutionalization which has seen it acquire

¹ Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): 108-09.

² Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton, [N.J.]: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9-15.

³ Douglass North, *Institutions, Economic Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3.

not only "value and stability," but also "adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence."⁴ Seen in this light, Lee Kuan Yew's passing has had, at worst, a negligible impact on the PAP and, at best, strengthened it further. Through an analysis of the formal and informal institutions which prolong its rule, I first explain why Lee's passing has not weakened the PAP before demonstrating how it has actually shored up the PAP's position.

For starters, Lee's 2015 departure did not weaken the PAP because he had already, through repression and, more importantly, through the erection of institutional barriers, bequeathed the party a weak and highly circumscribed opposition. First, during Operation Coldstore (February 1963), Lee detained key Leftist leaders of the *Barisan Sosialis* under the Internal Security Act (ISA). Regardless of the true motivations behind these detentions,⁵ the decimation of the Left was a watershed event that granted Lee and the PAP a freer hand to entrench their political position in an independent Singapore. Besides the use of defamation suits to cripple opposition parties and "calibrated coercion" against dissenting journalists,⁶ the PAP's adept crafting of formal political institutions in the electoral realm raised the barriers to entry for the opposition. For instance, the introduction of the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) and Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) schemes ostensibly guarantee alternative voices and checks-and-balances in parliament. Yet, the NCMP scheme undercuts the opposition's electoral appeal because they can still be represented in parliament under this "best losers" scheme, whereas the NMP scheme serves to co-opt intelligentsia and potential government critics. By keeping its enemies closer (in a parliamentary setting), the PAP strategically isolates

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 12-13.

⁵ Bilveer Singh, *Quest for Political Power: Communist Subversion and Militancy in Singapore* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2015), 187-88.

⁶ Cherian George, "Consolidating Authoritarian Rule: Calibrated Coercion in Singapore," *The Pacific Review* 20, no. 2 (2007): 128, 31; Bilveer Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore: An Introduction*, vol. 2nd (Singapore: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 47.

opposition demands to a more controlled and sanitized forum.⁷ Similarly, the Group Representation Constituencies (GRC) scheme, which allows for three to six members, is another institutional barrier to smaller opposition parties that traditionally have lacked talented individuals and minority candidates to contest GRCs. In short, these institutional innovations have outlived Lee and they continue to sideline the opposition while maintaining PAP hegemony.

The post-Lee PAP remains strong because the party has institutionalized processes of elite recruitment and succession, thereby ensuring its continued vitality. By virtue of being the incumbent government, the PAP has the wherewithal to recruit from the public sector, particularly the civil service.⁸ For example, the Public Service Commission—a body that administers government scholarships—is a key pipeline of party talent.⁹ Besides the steady flow of qualified individuals, the party's rigorous and methodical selection process—involving the use of interviews, psychometric tests and tea sessions—is crucial to acquiring the *crème de la crème*. This obsession with party self-renewal manifests itself immediately after every general election with the PAP hunting for the next batch of potential candidates.¹⁰ Moreover, the party's norms of succession promote elite cohesion unlike personalist systems that generate elite disunity because of nepotism and cronyism.¹¹ For one, Lee Kuan Yew's voluntary handing over of the reins of power to his successor Goh Chok Tong, and the latter to Lee Hsien Loong, has

⁷ Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats," *Comparative Political Studies* (2007): 1282-83; Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 79-80.

⁸ Michael Barr, "Beyond Technocracy: The Culture of Elite Governance in Lee Hsien Loong's Singapore," *Asian Studies Review* 30, no. 1 (2006): 3-4.

⁹ Netina Tan, "Institutionalized Hegemonic Party: The Resilience of the People's Action Party (Pap) in Singapore," (2009): 13.

¹⁰ Diane K. Mauzy and R. S. Milne, *Singapore Politics under the People's Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002), 38.

¹¹ Terence Lee, *Defect or Defend: Military Responses to Popular Protests in Authoritarian Asia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 38-42.

established an important precedent of ceding power to the next generation of leaders. The clearest evidence that this succession process has become institutionalized beyond Lee's personal influence is seen from how the second generation Cabinet ultimately settled on Goh, despite Lee's preference for Tony Tan as his successor.¹² Also, the party's internal mechanism of having party cadres vote for Central Executive Committee (CEC) members (who then form the cabinet) is an important democratic procedure that mitigates the political intrigue and purges often associated with dictatorships.¹³ Power struggles that typically bedevil leadership transitions are also curbed through the innovation of keeping retired PMs as Senior Ministers (SM)/Minister Mentor (MM) and senior Cabinet Ministers in parliament. In contrast to opposition parties that are more personality driven,¹⁴ these institutionalized procedures of elite recruitment and succession will sustain the PAP beyond Lee Kuan Yew.

Lee's death did not weaken the PAP because, apart from these formal institutions, informal ones wield immense influence on the electorate. First, the party's penetration of the civil service has institutionalized this idea of "performance legitimacy." While performance legitimacy is often conceived as an outcome—that is, the popular support for a regime which has delivered the desired outputs (i.e. economic development and stability),¹⁵ I analyze it as an informal institution which has been harnessed by the PAP to retain popular support. The party's performance legitimacy discourse is possible because it has politicized the civil service, which theoretically should be neutral.¹⁶ In other words, the PAP attains performance legitimacy through

¹² Kuan Yew Lee et al., *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings [and] Times Editions, 1998), 242-43.

¹³ Tan, "Institutionalized Hegemonic Party: The Resilience of the People's Action Party (Pap) in Singapore," 14-15.

¹⁴ Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore*, 2nd, 50-53.

¹⁵ Alex Chang, Yun-han Chu, and Bridget Welsh, "Southeast Asia: Sources of Regime Support," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013): 29.

¹⁶ Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore*, 2nd, 55-56.

political control of the bureaucracy, while also penetrating all levels of society.¹⁷ This politicization is evident from the government's secondment of civil servants to "prepar[e] the ground" before elections, such as the rolling out of the first Town Councils in 1986.¹⁸ Another instance would be the Strategic Policy Office (parked under the Prime Minister's Office), which engages in scenario and futures planning. This office contributes to the public perception of the PAP as a forward-looking party.¹⁹ With the discourse of performance legitimacy arising from the party's infiltration of the civil service, it therefore becomes difficult for citizens to imagine an alternative scenario without the PAP in power since good governance emanates from this fused arrangement between the ruling party and the civil service.²⁰

Furthermore, the "siege mentality" discourse, another informal institution, remains integral to PAP dominance despite Lee's demise. Through this siege mentality, politics is boiled down to a "survival exercise."²¹ Its influence on Singapore's political culture is palpable with Singapore's vulnerabilities, both internal and external, being constantly emphasized in schools' national education programs, national service for Singaporean males and in public forums through the controlled media. This survival complex rallies the population around the PAP. With survival prioritized, even illiberal democracy is seen as bearable and, for some, a necessary tradeoff. This vulnerability discourse also undermines the opposition since discussions on race/religion are considered taboo, thereby limiting their opposition campaign agenda.²² The sociologist George Simmel notes that conflict with an out-group serves to strengthen the

¹⁷ Khai Leong Ho, *Shared Responsibilities, Unshared Power: The Politics of Policy-Making in Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), 254; Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know About Democratization after Twenty Years?," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 134-35.

¹⁸ Barr, "Beyond Technocracy: The Culture of Elite Governance in Lee Hsien Loong's Singapore," 13.

¹⁹ Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore*, 2nd, 45.

²⁰ Hussin Mutalib, *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the Pap in Singapore*, vol. 2nd (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004), 316.

²¹ Heng Chee Chan, *Singapore: The Politics of Survival, 1965-1967* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), 48.

²² Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore*, 2nd, 46, 122.

cohesion of the in-group.²³ It is thus no surprise that with this siege mentality, most voters believe there is little room for error. This collective risk aversion results in strong support for the incumbent party whose pragmatic and judicious governance is seemingly a 'guarantee' against insecurity and uncertainty.

The confluence of these two informal institutions and their impact on the PAP's electoral fortunes are plain from the 2015 general elections. Considering the opposition's gains in the 2011 general elections, it is clear that Lee's presence was not influential enough to placate the frustrations of ordinary Singaporeans. Instead, his blunt assertion that Aljunied GRC would have 5 years to "repent" if they voted in the Workers' Party (WP) opposition team further soured the ground sentiment, galvanizing voters against the PAP.²⁴ Although Lee Kuan Yew's influence on everyday politics had waned considerably in his evening years, his death actually strengthened the PAP's position. The party's strong showing in the 2015 General Elections suggests that the sympathy vote was by no means insignificant. Indeed, while many factors contributed to the swing towards the PAP,²⁵ the public affection for the late political giant readily connected with the PAP's urgent appeal for a strong mandate so as to introduce the next generation of leaders who will continue Lee's legacy of good governance.²⁶ Similar to the case of India's Congress Party, where the death of Indira and Rajeev Gandhi resulted in sympathy votes for their successors,²⁷ Singaporean voters' sympathy, gratitude (driven by performance legitimacy), and fear of the unknown (i.e. siege mentality) coalesced to favor the PAP.

²³ Georg Simmel, "The Persistence of Social Groups," *The American Journal of Sociology* 3, no. 5 (1898): 681.

²⁴ "Reasons Behind Aljunied Swing," *AsiaOne*, 9 May 2011.

²⁵ Tommy Koh, "Ten Reflections on Ge 2015," *Straits Times*, 17 September 2015.

²⁶ Yuen-C Tham and Charissa Yong, "Shaping Singapore's 4th-Gen Leadership," *AsiaOne*, 4 October 2015.

²⁷ Christopher Candland, "Congress Decline and Party Pluralism in India," *Journal of International Affairs* 51, no. 1 (1997): 28.

III: Whither the Leviathan?

In light of the informal and formal institutions discussed above, the more appropriate question to consider after the 2015 General Election is not "why did the PAP win a landslide victory?" but more so "why would the PAP *not* win one?" With the deck stacked in favor of the incumbent, I expect the PAP to continue its dominance as long as it continues to build on and creatively adapt Lee's legacy. As such, I highlight two key challenges that the PAP has to surmount to ensure its political longevity.

Nicholas Taleb argues counter-intuitively that decades of stability are ironically deceptive (i.e. pseudo-stability) since they conceal deep structural vulnerabilities arising from political decay.²⁸ This challenge of institutional decay is surmountable if the PAP ensures its institutional adaptability through a broader recruitment of elites from all sectors of society. Meritocracy (qua principle) remains an invaluable legitimizing idea for the regime,²⁹ but the meritocratic system has increasingly been called into question due to rising inequality and social immobility.³⁰ Ensuring that political institutions remain adaptable requires tweaking the meritocratic system to encompass a broader definition of talent that has a maverick streak and can provide alternative views.³¹ The problem, however, with the current technocratic system is the fact that, besides the undisputed innate talent of elites, other factors such as personal connections and processes of elite socialization are significant determinants of political influence.³² For a party so dependent on performance legitimacy, a more diverse and dynamic civil service/PAP is integral to its

²⁸ Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Gregory E Treverton, "The Calm before the Storm Why Volatility Signals Stability, and Vice Versa," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2015).

²⁹ The notion of political meritocracy—the belief that "political power should be distributed in accordance with ability and virtue"—has very much taken root in Singapore's society. See Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6.

³⁰ Donald Low, "Good Meritocracy, Bad Meritocracy," in *Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus*, ed. Donald Low and Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), 52-54.

³¹ Eddie Teo, "What 18 Year Olds Tell Us About Singapore's Future," *Straits Times*, 10 October 2015.

³² Barr, "Beyond Technocracy: The Culture of Elite Governance in Lee Hsien Loong's Singapore," 13-14.

electoral performance. This goal can only be achieved by reforming an outmoded meritocratic system to better account for different starting points and other accruing inequalities.³³

Finally, against the opposition's discourse of First World politics requiring contestation and checks-and-balances, the PAP needs to aggressively and consistently promote its version of Singaporean exceptionalism. If exceptionalism is accepted by citizens, the opposition's framing of itself as a counterweight to the government will be less persuasive because a Singapore that is exceptional *cannot* and *need not* be compared with other developed countries. This nation-building narrative would be a fitting capstone for the two prevailing discourses of "performance legitimacy" and "siege mentality," advancing the party's existing fusion with the state to include a fusion with the nation. If successful, the PAP's ideological control via coercion would then morph, in Gramscian fashion, to be more decisive by consent.³⁴ Even as economic growth rates decline,³⁵ the PAP's proclamation of Singaporean exceptionalism would crucially retain public support while serving as a bulwark against the "subversive" idea of liberal democracy.

IV: A Leviathan in the House

Overall, Lee Kuan Yew's death did not weaken the PAP but actually strengthened it. No doubt, Lee's role in the party was indispensable during the early decades of independence and his death at that time would have clearly weakened the party. Still, as Lee consolidated his grip over the party, state, and nation, the institutionalization of the PAP as the dominant party in Singapore took on a life of its own. Seen in this path-dependent light, Lee's importance as an individual

³³ Vincent Chua, "Social Networks and Labour Market Outcomes in a Meritocracy," *Social Networks* 33, no. 1 (2011): 9-10; Mario Luis Small, *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 178-80.

³⁴ Beng Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (New York; London;: Routledge, 2002), 2-5.

³⁵ Hussin Mutalib, "Illiberal Democracy and the Future of Opposition in Singapore," *Third World Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2000): 331-32.

began to matter less and his passing in 2015 cannot be seen to have weakened the PAP. Formal and informal institutions of coercion, inhibition, and persuasion have kept and will continue to keep the PAP in the driver's seat. Indeed, all political systems are subject to political decay,³⁶ but if the PAP reforms the current meritocratic system to preserve its institutional adaptability and successfully promotes its narrative of Singaporean exceptionalism, we can be assured of its continued dominance not just for this decade, but for many more to come.

³⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 546.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barr, Michael. "Beyond Technocracy: The Culture of Elite Governance in Lee Hsien Loong's Singapore." *Asian Studies Review* 30, no. 1 (2006): 1-18.
- Bell, Daniel. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Byman, Daniel L., and Kenneth M. Pollack. "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In." *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): 107-46.
- Candland, Christopher. "Congress Decline and Party Pluralism in India." *Journal of International Affairs* 51, no. 1 (1997): 19.
- Chan, Heng Chee. *Singapore: The Politics of Survival, 1965-1967*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Chang, Alex, Yun-han Chu, and Bridget Welsh. "Southeast Asia: Sources of Regime Support." *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013): 150-64.
- Chua, Beng Huat. *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. New York;London;: Routledge, 2002.
- Chua, Vincent. "Social Networks and Labour Market Outcomes in a Meritocracy." *Social Networks* 33, no. 1 (2011): 1-11.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.
- Gandhi, Jennifer. *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Gandhi, Jennifer, and Adam Przeworski. "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats." *Comparative Political Studies* (2007).

- Geddes, Barbara. "What Do We Know About Democratization after Twenty Years?". *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115-44.
- George, Cherian. "Consolidating Authoritarian Rule: Calibrated Coercion in Singapore." *The Pacific Review* 20, no. 2 (2007): 127-45.
- Ho, Khai Leong. *Shared Responsibilities, Unshared Power: The Politics of Policy-Making in Singapore*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003.
- Huntington, Samuel P. *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968.
- Koh, Tommy. "Ten Reflections on Ge 2015." *Straits Times*, 17 September 2015.
- Lee, Kuan Yew, Fook Kwang Han, Warren Fernandez, and Sumiko Tan. *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings [and] Times Editions, 1998.
- Lee, Terence. *Defect or Defend: Military Responses to Popular Protests in Authoritarian Asia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- Mauzy, Diane K., and R. S. Milne. *Singapore Politics under the People's Action Party*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Mutalib, Hussin. "Illiberal Democracy and the Future of Opposition in Singapore." *Third World Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2000): 313-42.
- . *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the Pap in Singapore*. Vol. 2nd, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004.
- North, Douglass. *Institutions, Economic Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- "Reasons Behind Aljunied Swing." *AsiaOne*, 9 May 2011.

- Simmel, Georg. "The Persistence of Social Groups." *The American Journal of Sociology* 3, no. 5 (1898): 662-98.
- Singh, Bilveer. *Politics and Governance in Singapore: An Introduction*. Vol. 2nd, Singapore: McGraw-Hill, 2012.
- . *Quest for Political Power: Communist Subversion and Militancy in Singapore*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2015.
- Small, Mario Luis. *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, and Gregory E Treverton. "The Calm before the Storm Why Volatility Signals Stability, and Vice Versa." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2015): 86-95.
- Tan, Netina. "Institutionalized Hegemonic Party: The Resilience of the People's Action Party (Pap) in Singapore." (2009).
- Teo, Eddie. "What 18 Year Olds Tell Us About Singapore's Future." *Straits Times*, 10 October 2015.
- Tetlock, Philip. *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* Princeton, [N.J.]: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Tham, Yuen-C, and Charissa Yong. "Shaping Singapore's 4th-Gen Leadership." *AsiaOne*, 4 October 2015.