ASIAN BAROMETER

Session IV.   Dominant One-Party Regime and City State

The State of Democracy and Governance in Singapore:

Rethinking Some Paradoxes

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A "hybrid" democracy

In 2006, Larry Diamond was invited to give a public lecture by the Institute of Policy Studies, a Singapore think-tank currently housed in the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Naturally, I was curious to know what Diamond would have to say about the quality of democracy in Singapore, given that its political system has often been described as authoritarian.

In his lecture, Diamond characterized Singapore as a "hybrid" democracy which combines many formal elements of democracy—multiparty electoral competition, universal suffrage, a highly developed rule of law, relatively little coercion in daily life—with many subtle and practical elements of autocracy, such as constraints on the freedom of speech and association. He also noted that the Singapore political system is judged by most observers to have legitimacy and that "a clear majority of Singaporeans believed that it was the form of government that best suited their society" (Conceicao, 2006). Nevertheless, he went on to suggest, as had Inglehart (1997) in his various writings on the impact of postmodernization on political values, that, given the general affluence achieved in Singapore over the last forty years, its population would proceed to expect, if not demand, greater political freedom and competition, and the possibility of replacing their leaders.

This is precisely the Singapore paradox. It looks democratic, even feels democratic to a majority of Singaporeans, who could be classified as middle class (Tan, 2004), yet lurking beneath the surface are practices which ensure that the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), which has won all the elections held in the country since 1959, remains securely in power (Chua, 1995:205).

On its part, the People's Action Party (PAP) government's constant refrain is that it has offered Singapore a good government ruled by competent people with impeccable ethical standards and conduct and who can act as trustees in the national interest (Chua, 1995:35). It can also boast of having consistently delivered economic prosperity and a high standard of living--including the provision of subsidized public housing and facilitating home ownership--despite the many challenges and threats to Singapore's economic survival since the country's independence in 1965. Indeed, its legitimacy hinges to a considerable extent on its output and performance. However, to the PAP leaders, this is an insufficient basis for legitimacy. It would prefer that its rule by "honorable people" who can deliver social and economic benefits to citizens confer on it the moral authority to prescribe and preserve a political system that we have characterized here as a "hybrid" democracy (Yao, 2007:19).

A docile public?

Despite the Singapore political system's appearance of continuity, there is no doubt that political culture and orientations have undergone some changes over the last thirty years, transiting from having a "depoliticized" (Chan, 1975) to a "repoliticized" citizenry (Chan, 1989).

Partly in response to economic changes brought about by globalization and the need to create a "new economy" capable of surviving and thriving in the face of stiff economic competition for capital and talent, the PAP government has sought to encourage creativity, innovativeness, and risk-taking in a population—more specifically, the middle class—which, in Jones and Brown's view (1994:232-233), is more comfortable with operating within the safe confine of bureaucratic rationality and structure. The latter view implies that instead of the much heralded arrival of a middle class seeking "greater autonomy from the PAP state in an attempt to make more direct control over their lives" (Rodan, 1992:370), we would see a middle class which is more inclined towards political conformity and acquiescence (Jones and Brown, 1994:234).

A communitarian democracy

Chua (1998:72), however, argued that this apparent political docility is the manifestation of a rational exchange—"acceptance of an authoritarian/ paternalistic regime" for "betterment of one's material life"—which has time and again been translated into strong electoral support for the PAP government. This suggests that while the PAP government is unlikely to lose its grip on power in the foreseeable future, it cannot take the people's continued electoral support, which it considers a key measure of its legitimacy, for granted.

Hence, when its more than a decade-long single-party rule was disrupted by its losing less than 5 per cent of its seats in Parliament since 1981, the PAP government responded by experimenting with liberalization, in the sense of "the creation of 'space' and the tolerance of dissent at the individual level, if not on a collective basis, though without democratization in the sense of competing bases of power" (Chan, 1993, quoted in Chua, 1998:76).

Chua (1995:192) has described the evolving political system as a "communitarian democracy" characterized by an interventionist state which sees itself as the guardian of collective interests, but which is responsive to "pressure from the ground and moving towards greater consultation and participation in the formation of national consensus and national interests". This non-liberal form of democracy, as alluded to earlier, is ironically compatible with the liberalizing policies of the PAP government to create a "stimulating, non-repressive climate conducive to imagination, innovation and adventure, one that can also attract and retain globally mobile talent" (Tan, 2003:403).

Sociopolitical profile: robust economy, good governance, authoritarian regime

There is a sense that the concept of communitarian democracy is an attractive one by which to understand Singapore's political system, but the fact remains that it is a "hybrid" democracy, rather than a full democracy, even if one accepts or justifies it as an exemplar of "Asian democracy" backed up by "Asian values". In the public lecture noted above, Diamond argued that Singapore has what it takes to make a quick and easy transition to becoming a liberal democracy the moment it decided to do so because it already has "many of the elements of good governance and the rule of law, the ethic of commitment to transparency and public service" (Conceicao, 2006).

The various social, economic, and political indicators suggest that the preconditions are indeed present in Singapore. Singapore has a high GDP per income that is third in East Asia, following Japan and Hong Kong. Moreover, it scores highest on the Rule of Law Indicator (1.82), the Government Effectiveness Indicator (2.20), as well as the Control of Corruption Indicator (2.30).

In contrast, it ranks quite low in terms of the Freedom House Political Rights Score and the Civil Liberty score. For instance, among the Asian Dragons, while both Taiwan and Korea score "1" on political rights, Singapore receives only a "5", along with Hong Kong. In regard to civil liberty, it has a score of "4", compared to "1" for Taiwan, and "2" for both Korea and Hong Kong.

Another indicator of the quality of democracy is "number of effective political parties". Although Singapore has sometimes been described as a one-party state, it may be more accurately characterized as having a "one-party dominance" system. Besides the ruling PAP, there are in existence close to 23 political parties, of which 4 had participated in the recent (2006) general election. One of the 4 active parties is itself an alliance of 4 smaller political parties. It should be noted that in the 2006 general election, the PAP received two-thirds of the popular vote and won 82 seats in the 84-seat parliament. The Workers' Party received 16 per cent of the popular vote and won one parliamentary seat, which it has occupied since 1991, and one "non-constituency" seat. The Singapore Democratic Alliance received 13 per cent of the popular vote and won one parliamentary seat, which it has occupied since 1984.

How do Singaporeans evaluate the quality of democracy and governance in Singapore?

Many observers have made insightful comments about Singapore's political system and culture, but often without the help of generalizable, empirical data on the political orientations and attitudes of Singaporeans and their opinions of democracy and governance in Singapore. Fortunately, the Asian Barometer included Singapore in its second wave surveys in 2006 and thereby provides one of the first comprehensive snapshots of political life in Singapore as perceived by citizens.

Most of the findings reported below should not come as a surprise to observers of the political system in Singapore. For ease of analysis and for making inferences, I have added the proportions of

the responses to the two answer options in each of the items below that best capture the various dimensions of democracy and governance dealt with in this paper. Where the proportions total more than 50% in a particular item, it could be inferred that they indicate the presence of the attribute captured by that item.

Law-abiding government

Table 1: Our courts always punish the guilty even if they are high-ranking officials

By this logic, it can be observed that Singaporeans consider the government to be a law-abiding one, where the government is not a law unto itself, and that high-ranking officials would not go unpunished if they are convicted of crimes (Tables 1 and 2).

	%
Strongly agree	19) 84
Somewhat agree	65)
Somewhat disagree	11
Strongly disagree	2
DK/NS	3
Total	100

Table 2: How often do national government officials abide by the law?

	%
Always	28) 77
Most of the time	49)
Sometimes	16
Rarely	2
DK/NS	6
Total	100

Controlling Corruption

On corruption control, the views of Singaporeans resonate with that reported by Transparency International and with the PAP government's own self-assessment that it is run by "honorable people" (Tables 3 and 4). The former's 2007 report indicates that Singapore is ranked fourth in the world and second in the Asia Pacific region in regard to absence of corruption.

Table 3: How widespread do you think corruption and bribe-taking are in the national government?

	%
Almost everyone is corrupt	0.4
Most officials are corrupt	1.1
Not a lot of officials are corrupt	41)
Hardly anyone is involved	44) 85
DK/NS	6
Total	100

Table 4: In your opinion, is the government working to crackdown corruption and root out bribes?

	%
It is doing this quite effectively	34) 72
It is doing its best	38)
It is doing something	15
It is not doing much	2
DK/NS	11
Total	100

Competition

It is evident from the survey data that Singaporeans consider elections to be largely free and fair (Table 7), with no intimidation of voters and no fraud in the tallying and reporting of election results. However, in regard to whether or not voters have real choices, and parties or candidates have equal access to the media during election time, Singaporeans seem somewhat ambivalent (Tables 5 and 6)

Table 5: How often do you think our elections offer the voters a real choice between different parties/candidates?

	%
Always	13) 49
Most of the time	36)
Sometimes	28
Rarely	16
DK/NS	8
Total	100

Table 6: Political parties or candidates have equal access to the mass media during election period

	%
Strongly agree	5) 51
Somewhat agree	46)
Somewhat disagree	22
Strongly disagree	19
DK/NS	8
Total	100

Table 7: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election?

	%
Completely free and fair	30) 86
Free and fair, but with minor problems	56)
Free and fair, with major problems	4
Not free or fair	2
DK/NS	8
Total	100

Participation

Electoral participation

The findings on electoral participation suggest a rather low electoral participation. Only 10 per cent said that they had attended a political rally, and the proportion that had tried to influence someone else's decision on a party or candidate is even lower, at 3 per cent (Tables 9 and 10). The high proportion (62 per cent) indicating that they voted in the last election is not a meaningful one, given that voting is compulsory in Singapore (Table 8). I can say with certainty that the 32 per cent who did not vote live in districts where there were no contests.

Table 8: Did you vote in the most recent general election?

	%
Yes	62
No	32
NA	3
DK/NS	3
Total	100

Table 9: Thinking about the most recent general election, did you attend a campaign meeting or rally?

	%
Yes	10
No	89
NA	0
DK/NS	1
Total	100

Table 10: Thinking about the most recent general election, did you try to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party?

	%
Yes	3
No	96
NA	1
DK/NS	1
Total	100

Political interest

Interest in politics ranges from low to ambivalent (Tables 11 and 12). The latter suggests a fair degree of passive interest, following the news, rather than involvement in more active forms of political participation.

Table 11: How interested would you say you are in politics?

	%
Very interested	2) 23
Somewhat interested	21)
Not very interested	38
Not at all interested	37
DK/NS	1
Total	100

Table 12: How often do you follow news about politics and government?

	%
Everyday	29) 50
Several times a week	21)
Once or twice a week	27
Not even once a week	14
Practically never	9

DK/NS	1
Total	100

Political efficacy

By the same token, the extent of political efficacy is also rather low (Tables 13 and 14). Taken together, the 3 components of political participation suggest the presence of some degree of apathy.

Table 13: I think I have the ability to participate in politics.

	%
Strongly agree	2) 22
Somewhat agree	20)
Somewhat disagree	52
Strongly disagree	23
DK/NS	9
Total	100

Table 14: Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on.

	%
Strongly agree	12
Somewhat agree	58
Somewhat disagree	18) 28
Strongly disagree	10)
DK/NS	3
Total	100

Vertical Accountability

Tables 15 and 16 probably betray to some extent the non-democratic aspects of Singapore's "hybrid" democracy. Most of the 51 per cent who indicated that "people have the power to change a government they don't like" only marginally thought so. The proportion who felt that "people could hold the government responsible for its actions" between elections made up only 38 per cent of Singaporeans. However, Singaporeans seem quite confident that the government would rarely, if ever, hide information from the public (Table 17).

Table 15: People have the power to change a government they don't like.

	%
Strongly agree	6) 51
Somewhat agree	45)
Somewhat disagree	31
Strongly disagree	14
DK/NS	4
Total	100

Table 16: Between elections, the people have no way of holding the government responsible for its actions.

	%
Strongly agree	6
Somewhat agree	48
Somewhat disagree	24) 38
Strongly disagree	14)
DK/NS	8
Total	100

Table 17: How often do government officials withhold important information from the public view?

	%
Always	6
Most of the time	20
Occasionally	41) 64
Rarely	23)
DK/NS	11
Total	100

Horizontal accountability

However, a large majority of Singaporeans believe that there is sufficient checks and balances on the government (Tables 18 and 19). In general, the lack of accountability, both vertical and horizontal, does not appear to be an attribute of Singapore's political system. My sense is that Singaporeans perceive the government to be authoritarian, but not lacking in accountability.

Table 18: When the government breaks the laws, there is nothing the legal system can do.

	%
Strongly agree	3
Somewhat agree	29
Somewhat disagree	35) 62
Strongly disagree	27)
DK/NS	6
Total	100

Table 19: To what extent is the legislature capable of keeping the government in check?

	%
Very capable	18) 78
Capable	60)
Not capable	13
Not at all capable	1
DK/NS	8
Total	100

Freedom

Tables 20 and 21 indicate quite clearly that Singaporeans are apprehensive about speaking out and joining with others collectively in pursuit of common political agenda. Perhaps, they are deterred by how the governments respond to criticisms from individuals and the restrictions placed on civil society organizations (Ooi and Koh, 1998).

Table 20: People are free to speak what they think without fear.

	%
Strongly agree	6) 38
Somewhat agree	32)
Somewhat disagree	37
Strongly disagree	23
DK/NS	2
Total	100

Table 21: People can join any organization they like without fear.

	%
Strongly agree	5) 46
Somewhat agree	41)
Somewhat disagree	32

Strongly disagree	20
DK/NS	3
Total	100

Equality

This variable relates to an outcome of the political system. Tables 22 and 23 indicate that a large majority of Singaporeans believe the government treats people equally and ensures that their basic needs are met. This attribute is important in that it contributes to social and political stability.

Table 22: Everyone is treated equally by the government.

	%
Strongly agree	12) 68
Somewhat agree	56)
Somewhat disagree	19
Strongly disagree	10
DK/NS	3
Total	100

Table 22: People have basic necessities like food, clothes, and shelter.

	%
Strongly agree	22) 83
Somewhat agree	61)
Somewhat disagree	14
Strongly disagree	3
DK/NS	1
Total	100

Responsiveness

Singaporeans generally think of the government as responsive to their interest, needs, and concerns (Tables 23 and 24). This confers on the government a high degree of legitimacy, perhaps even moral authority.

Table 23: How well do you think the government responds to what people want?

	%
Very responsive	9) 67
Largely responsive	58)

Not very responsive	29
Not responsive at all	2
DK/NS	3
Total	100

Table 24: How likely is it that the government will solve the most important problem you identified within the next 5 years?

	%
Very likely	7) 55
Likely	48)
Not very likely	35
Not at all likely	5
DK/NS	5
Total	100

Summary of Quality Assessment

The frequency tables above convey a very good sense of how Singaporeans evaluate the state of democracy and governance in Singapore. The mean scores on the constructed scales covering the entire range of attributes provide further reinforcement for our observations in the previous section.

Table 25: Means of Composite Variables

Composite Variable	Mean Score (Standardized)
Law abiding government	0.43
Controlling corruption	0.68
Competition	0.17
Electoral participation	-0.50
Political interest	-0.04
Political efficacy	-0.30
Vertical accountability	0.08
Horizontal accountability	0.34
Freedom	-0.15
Equality	0.32
Responsiveness	0.15

It seems clear that the political system does well on the various dimensions of good governance: rule of law, controlling corruption, horizontal accountability, responsiveness, and equality. However, it is only marginally positive on vertical accountability, an attribute betraying some degree of authoritarianism.

In regard to the quality of democracy, it can be seen that Singapore's political system scores somewhat low. While elections are perceived as free and fair, there appears to be no real alternatives. Perhaps, the real dampener is the low score on political freedom, which may have led to voter apathy. Whatever the case may be, it makes sense to examine Singaporeans' satisfaction with and support for democracy as well as the extent of their diffused support for the regime.

The correlation matrix below (Table 26) suggests that high quality governance and democracy as well as positive economic condition will engender greater satisfaction with democracy as it is practiced in Singapore. It seems that political participation does not matter as much. More or less the similar pattern can be found for diffused support for the regime, except that personal economic condition and even electoral participation and political efficacy, though in a negative direction, appear to have some statistically significant impact on this dependent variable, a measure of regime legitimacy.

One plausible inference, at this stage of the analysis, is that Singaporeans who are satisfied with democracy as it is practiced in Singapore or who indicate some diffused support for the regime are likely to expect high quality governance, democracy, and economic performance. Is it then still possible to argue that good economic performance matters more than democracy and good governance matters more than democracy in producing legitimacy?

Table 26: Correlation matrix of good democratic governance, economic performance, and support for democracy

	Satisfaction with Democracy	Support Democracy	Reject Authoritarianism	Best for Country
Law abiding government	.280**	.061	.054	.274**
Controlling corruption	.147**	.124**	.004	.186**
Competition	.382**	.052	-.185**	.282**
Participation	--	--	--	--
Electoral participation	.039	.076*	.070*	-.074*
Political interest	.000	.043	.049	-.025
Political efficacy	-.065*	.072*	.176**	-.218**
Vertical accountability	.158**	.155**	-.010	-.019
Horizontal accountability	.268**	.052	.102**	.221**
Freedom	.171**	-.057	-.146**	.192**
Equality	.264**	.002	-.034	.322**
Responsiveness	.343**	.037	-.075*	.229**
Country's economic condition	.138**	.023	.050	.129
Personal economic condition	.173**	.000	.147	.144**

Note: **correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * significant at the 0.05 level.

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