

20 . FUTURE - PROOFING THE PAP

Internal reform needs future leaders as bold as the Old Guard.

ELECTION SHOCK THERAPY works on the People’s Action Party (PAP), but only up to a point. It makes the ruling party more responsive and hardworking, but not more open or democratic. We saw this dynamic play out in 1991, when the opposition won four constituencies, up from just one (Chapter 5). It was the PAP New Guard’s baptism of fire at the ballot box, and Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong felt such heat he said he would have to change his style. He promised to listen more to the ground—but less to liberals. His previous gestures towards political openness had already been arthritically slow. Post-1991, PAP liberalisation slipped back into its familiar vegetative state (Chapter 18).

It happened again in 2011. The PAP’s weakest-ever mandate amounted to an offer it couldn’t refuse: change, or else. Even before polling day, when it was clear that the public’s mood had soured, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong promised that his team would be “acutely aware that they are servants and not masters, that they are accountable to the people”. At a lunchtime rally at Fullerton, Lee acknowledged that Singaporeans had legitimate grievances concerning transport, housing and other policies. He said sorry. Twice.

The PAP prides itself on being responsive to people’s needs. But in the 2000s, it underperformed. Policymakers focussed on achieving macroeconomic targets and enhancing Singapore’s global competitiveness, but lost sight of how households were coping on the ground. We had Formula 1 racecars zipping past City Hall at 240 kilometres per hour, but MRT trains couldn’t get people to work on time. The new casinos were bussing in tourists more efficiently than our overcrowded hospitals were able to admit patients. Singaporeans were getting the impression that our country was becoming an

attractive playground for the region's middle class and super rich, at the expense of locals' standard of living.

For years, ministers brushed aside citizens' grievances. Officials in that most protectionist of sectors—government policymaking—were insensitive to the woes of Singaporeans facing economic insecurity and intense competition for jobs with immigrants. Able to afford luxury cars, A1 medical care and multiple houses in multiple countries, government leaders seemed unable to relate to ordinary Singaporeans' frustrations with public transport, hospitals and housing.

The government might have spent many more years in denial but for the 2011 election. Jolted by the results, the government ramped up the supply of HDB flats and made them more affordable. With its Pioneer Generation package, it rolled out a generous (by Singapore standards) healthcare subsidy scheme for senior citizens, instantly reducing many families' anxieties over medical costs. It also introduced Silver Support, a pension scheme that does not depend on individual contributions.

Simply by altering the funding formula that the finance ministry was prepared to live with, the government was able to put more buses on the road. It intervened to get SMRT back on track, a process that would later culminate in delisting the company and effectively re-nationalising it. It couldn't slam the brakes on immigration—Singaporeans' number one source of unhappiness—without crashing the economy. But it did slow the inflow enough to get noticed, even at the expense of hurting businesses.

Some progressive policies predated 2011. WorkFare was an earlier response to wage stagnation and a growing income gap, and not a reaction to the opposition's advances. Still, it's fair to assume that the 2011 shock made the government more accepting of a leftward shift in its centre of gravity. It grew less dogmatically neoliberal and blindly trusting of the market, and more willing to intervene to regulate public services and provide social security.

The ruling party's adjustments were rewarded four years later. In the 2015 election, the PAP rode the wave of patriotism generated by the republic's 50th anniversary celebrations and the death of Lee

Kuan Yew. But the main reason why the opposition's pulling power diminished between 2011 and 2015 was that the government had gotten better at doing its job. Enough swing voters decided that the PAP was responding well to the strong medicine of 2011 and could now be dispensed a lower dose. On average, out of every 10 voters, one who had previously voted opposition switched to the PAP.

The 2015 election result underlined the PAP's ability to rebound from rejections at the ballot box without transforming its character. The 2011 setback could have been the occasion for the government to commence long overdue political reforms and remake itself. But, just like in 1991, it chose to stay in its comfort zone: relying on technocratic tweaks rather than internal reform. Although it launched a carefully managed "Our Singapore Conversation" consultation process, it also hardened its attitude to dissent (Chapter 34). Vindicated by its 2015 triumph, the government wrote off liberals as a constituency it could afford to alienate.

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Despite its dramatic recovery, anyone rooting for the PAP should have been troubled by party leaders' lack of deeper introspection. They admitted they made mistakes—but did they know why? The remarkable thing about the 2011 election issues like housing and transport is that they should not have come as a surprise. People had been complaining bitterly about them for years. Despite the government's extensive grassroots network and able civil service, the messages from the ground didn't register until they were translated into votes.

Blame groupthink. Ministers' collective pro-market mindset seems to have shut out appeals for more compassionate interventions and convinced them that their way was the only way. If they fail to address this flaw, they could end up being blindsided again. There were already signs of this as early as 2013, when the government published its Population White Paper, *A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore*. The same government that was tinkering away to improve various policies post-2011 somehow managed to bungle what it had announced as its most critical task in the new parliament.

Public attention instantly zeroed in on a number that the White Paper cited as a planning parameter: 6.9 million. Most Singaporeans had grown up in a country with half that population. The current population of 5.3 million already felt unbearable. But here was the government saying it was planning for 30 per cent more people by 2030. The debate on the White Paper never got past that number. Even the PAP's own backbenchers choked on the figure. The government was forced to beat an embarrassing tactical retreat, accepting an amendment to its motion in parliament and shelving the toxic 6.9 million figure.

In its White Paper, the government presented its arguments for population growth mainly in the same macroeconomic terms that people had grown suspicious of. It referred to GDP growth as if its benefits were self-evident, forgetting that Singaporeans needed assurances that growth would trickle down to them. Economic policy is supposed to be people-centric, but the document's focus on a "sustainable population" made it seem as if people were just inputs to make the economy more "dynamic".

Like its pre-2011 policy missteps, what was most striking about the White Paper debacle was how the PAP was the last to see trouble coming. From a distance, it was like watching someone, head down, engrossed in texting his mates on his smartphone, striding purposefully on a wide and empty pavement, straight into a lamppost. The government could have been more mindful of the environment and adjusted its route to reach its desired destination. It should have placed Singaporeans' quality of life front and centre, and worked much harder to demonstrate to citizens that they would enjoy quantifiably better housing, healthcare, schooling, transport and amenities by planning early for a larger population.

The White Paper's failure could only have been due to officials blocking out alternative views during the lengthy policy formulation process, and mistaking the echoes of their own voices for robust debate. As a result, they were not in sync with the public and did not know how to engage it when the time came. Businessmen as well as politicians who work in competitive settings eagerly seek out worst-

case scenarios and counterarguments to help them refine their plans. In contrast, Singapore's dominant executive is able to tolerate contrary viewpoints only in small, diluted doses. Only this could explain how it misfired with a document as important as the Population White Paper.

The PAP's resilience at the ballot box thus conceals deeper flaws in its model that, if unaddressed, will degrade the quality of government. The remedy is a more open, albeit messier, democratic political process. This would certainly slow down the government's work. But if it means averting avoidable mistakes, that's not a bad thing.

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Many Singaporeans I've discussed this with believe the PAP is incapable of reforming itself. Perhaps much stronger electoral shock therapy will do the trick. It is often the case that authoritarian regimes liberalise when they are cornered. Once they realise they are on the brink of spending the coming years out of power and on the receiving end of the state's coercive tools, they suddenly discover the merits of checks and balances.

The PAP might therefore engage in a flurry of democratic reforms when an opposition victory is no longer unthinkable, but a very real possibility. Nobody knows better than the PAP how incumbents could use Singapore's existing laws, regulations and administrative procedures to make life difficult for their challengers. It would want to blunt those tools or place them out of the executive's reach before it's too late. Having the Elections Department under the Prime Minister's Office is perfectly acceptable to the PAP as long as the PM can only come from their ranks. If that is no longer guaranteed—and they are haunted by nightmare visions of a Prime Minister Pritam Singh of the Workers' Party, say—they may suddenly see the wisdom of delinking the elections regulator from the executive branch. Similarly, the government's power under prevailing press laws to plant loyalists at the helm of the national media won't look so attractive when it faces the realistic prospect of a non-PAP government making Gerald Giam editor of *The Straits Times*.

The longer the PAP waits to institute democratic reforms, the

greater the risk that it would be doing so from a position of weakness. It would have less say over the new institutional arrangements that it's being pressured to introduce. In contrast, by reforming long before it has to, the PAP can ensure it remains the main force in Singapore's new order. Do it tomorrow, and the PAP would still win by a landslide because the opposition wouldn't have had the time to build itself into anything that resembles an alternative government.

Political scientists Dan Slater and Joseph Wong call this scenario "democracy-through-strength"—when authoritarian governments realise that most people willingly support them for their performance, and decide to open up their politics without waiting for a revolutionary or electoral reversal of fortune. Their research on East Asia has found that this is not a far-fetched storyline. It's basically the path Japan, Taiwan and South Korea took. Slater and Wong muse that the PAP is even better placed to benefit from democracy-through-strength than the dominant parties in other Asian societies.

So far, Singapore's leaders have lacked the confidence to operate in a wide-open contest with opposing ideas. But anyone who wants the PAP to remain relevant must hope that reform-minded leaders will emerge in the fifth-generation leadership. Perhaps, with time, even in the fourth. This new vanguard within the PAP might realise that coercion is not the way to get the best out of any society. If people are merely acquiescent, they won't be inspired to fight for the common good. Increasingly, those who don't feel positively engaged can just disengage from public affairs and privatise their lives.

New, visionary leaders may understand that the PAP needs to adapt to an environment that it cannot control as easily as before. Singapore is being impacted by other states and foreign corporations that we can't even call external factors anymore, because we are such a global city. In many respects—financial flows, especially—they blend into our economy and society so completely that it is hard to distinguish the local from the foreign. The global has become not just more penetrating but also more complex. Adjusting to a risen China after two centuries of looking West requires political skills comparable to the PAP Old Guard's.

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In short, Singapore and its policymakers are in a new world, more fluid, diverse and competitive than anything we've known before. I've not come across anyone anywhere on the political spectrum who doesn't share this prognosis. The disagreement is only over how our domestic politics should adapt. So far, every generation of PAP leaders has been convinced that our external challenges demand unity on the home front. Not just in terms of a national resolve to protect Singapore militarily, but down to the level of forcing a consensus on domestic issues. They believe an uncertain world requires the PAP to preserve its dominance as long as possible. They consider the complaints of liberals to be rather childish, as if only those who have represented the country against foreign adversaries count as real men.

PAP leaders believe they cannot afford to adapt to freewheeling domestic political contention. The truth is, they can't afford not to. It would make them sharper global players. Top football clubs in the European Champions League wouldn't be half as good if they didn't face strong opponents in their domestic competitions. Every wannabe Real Madrid needs a Barcelona. Of course, political polarisation, gridlock and instability are serious problems in many countries. But Singapore faces the opposite danger. Our leaders are dangerously insulated from politics. When they swim out from their protected local pond into the wide-open ocean, they may lack the skills to deal with sharks they can't domesticate.

A new, clear-eyed generation of PAP reformers could come to appreciate this, resulting in a tension within the party. Self-delusion will urge sticking with the old formula: snuff out challenges to PAP dominance using less than democratic means. Self-confidence will recommend more open political competition, on the grounds that the PAP doesn't need dirty tricks to remain a leading force in Singapore.

In more typical political parties, leaders with different visions are allowed to compete for influence, build a base within the party, and eventually bid for the party leadership. This competitive process allows those with bold new ideas to move from the fringes to the centre. It allows parties to carry out revolutions from within to

keep up with the times. Unfortunately, the PAP is not set up for transformative regeneration. It is constituted to protect itself from internal competition. This accounts for the party's extraordinary cohesion and stability thus far. But it could also produce paralysis.

The PAP's best hope lies with men and women with the wits, guts and entrepreneurial skills of the republic's first generation of leaders, ready to respond to the call of their times with a bold new vision that would reenergise their party and country. This team would face a Catch-22. They cannot reform the PAP until they reach the top. But they cannot reach the top unless they shelve their reformist ambitions. It's only with the blessings of godfathers within the current leadership that they will get anywhere.

This is the irony of the national movement that is the PAP. The party built by formidable individuals like Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam would today repel such iconoclasts. The Old Guard had to fight multiple foes to build a strong party. A 5G leadership may need to be as determined and creative if it wants to remake the PAP. We have to hope that the current incumbents heed the same advice they regularly give to citizens, that we should avoid burdening the next generation with our self-serving decisions. Political reform may not be in the short-term interests of current PAP leaders who have grown comfortable with the status quo, but if they do it soon and manage it right, it will help their successors secure Singapore's long-term interests.

This essay is based on "Reforming the PAP" and "From 2011 to 2015", from *Singapore, Incomplete*.

On democracy through strength, see: Dan Slater and Joseph Wong, "The Strength to Concede: Ruling Parties and Democratization in Developmental Asia", *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 3 (2013): 717–33.

For an in-depth reform agenda, see Donald Low and Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh, *Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus* (NUS Press, 2014).