

12. OPPOSING A DOMINANT PARTY

Singaporeans want the opposition to check the PAP, not bury it.

IT WAS COMMON in the 1980s to hear predictions that the ruling party's dominance in parliament was in inexorable decline. Extrapolating from the victories of opposition leaders J. B. Jeyaretnam and Chiam See Tong, and the dramatic 13-point swing away from the People's Action Party (PAP) in the 1984 general election, many people expected that the opposition would claim 10 to 20 seats in forthcoming elections, laying the ground for sprouting a genuinely multi-party democracy.

But it was not to happen. At least, not in that century. After general elections in 1991 and 1997, plus a by-election in between in 1992, the 1990s ended with only three opposition members in parliament (and one of them, courtesy of the government's consolation prize of a non-constituency seat). The opposition's share of the popular vote was lower than it had been in the 1980s. To conclude from this that the ruling party is unassailable would be as premature as the 1980s predictions that it was doomed. Circumstances change, and with them, political fortunes. But while the PAP's record of electoral success in the 1990s is no guarantee of future performance, it was not a trivial feat either. The elections were in keeping with the political culture of an Air-Conditioned Nation. They were dominated by a ruling party determined to perpetuate its control by positioning itself as the only entity able to secure a comfortable life for the electorate. In the course of the decade, the PAP made the choice progressively starker for voters: Singaporeans could stick with PAP-style comfort and control, or gamble with their hard-earned assets by voting for the opposition.

PAP leaders would say that their success at the polls is based on good government. Ask the opposition, and they would tell you

that the PAP wins through unfair tactics on an uneven playing field. There is some truth in both claims. An outside perspective, from State Department's 1999 human rights report on Singapore, summarises the duality well: "The PAP has maintained its political dominance in part by developing genuine voter support through honest, effective administration and its strong record in bringing economic prosperity to the country, and, in part, by manipulating the electoral framework, intimidating organised political opposition, and circumscribing the bounds of legitimate political discourse and action."

The retribution meted out to opposition politicians is probably the ugliest aspect of Singapore politics, and the main reason that some political scientists classify the republic as a non-democracy. The authorities' actions are not those of a violent police state that uses threats against life and limb, but a legal-bureaucratic machinery that pins opponents under the weight of criminal prosecutions and civil suits. The government argues that its tough response is intended to keep public affairs clean and honest, and to protect the reputations of national leaders and state institutions against lies. It points to Chiam See Tong and Low Thia Khiang as examples of responsible opposition MPs who have not received any punishment. Instead, those who bore the brunt of the government's political sterilisation programme in the 1990s were Jeyaretnam, Tang Liang Hong and Chee Soon Juan, all men it considered dangerous or defective. The chilling effect of the government's actions, of course, goes beyond these individuals, and cripples the opposition's ability to attract serious candidates.

However, many countries have operated far more fearsome regimes than the PAP, and yet have seen opposition movements rise up and even take over power. The people's fear of government repression cannot, on its own, explain the PAP's electoral dominance. The government's actions against the opposition can be thought of as attempts to still the waters around the ship of state, but what keeps it afloat and on course is a tide of public support. That support is based on social and economic policies that have benefited most

Singaporeans, and given them a vested interest in continued PAP government.

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Since coming to power on a leftist platform in 1959, the PAP has entrenched itself as a centrist party, trying to appeal to an ever broader spectrum of Singaporeans but always maintaining synchrony with the middle ground. This has been achieved through a number of interlocking strategies.

First, turn the middle ground into a large stakeholding class that has an interest in PAP-led economic progress. This is achieved through massive redistributive policies, especially the home ownership and upgrading programmes. Second, give the able something to shoot for, by maintaining a liberal economy that enables high upward social mobility, and a reasonable tax regime that does not punish success. Third, to limit poverty and help the underclass, operate a kind of “co-payment welfarism”, with the state providing safety nets of last resort, but always with an element of individual responsibility to ensure balanced budgets and to stave off a culture of dependency. Fourth, nurture a capitalist ideology so that Singaporeans compete for resources through the market instead of through politics, and so they believe that winners and losers are determined on merit, and not by the political structure. Fifth, because politics is shaped not just by individual households but also by organised interests, practice corporatism: work closely with all major interest groups, especially the unions and business and professional associations. Finally, in case all the above are inadequate, ensure vigilant surveillance, a subordinate press and forceful intervention, to nip in the bud any threats that cannot be contained through other means.

Through the successful application of these strategies, the PAP has held the ground and kept control of government. There remains however, one more front that is much harder to defend—a front where most of the electoral battles of the 1980s and 1990s took place. This is the “opposition for opposition’s sake” line of attack, to which

the PAP is vulnerable even when the ground is with it. Lee Kuan Yew, in the party's 45th anniversary publication, acknowledged this challenge: "You're fighting to prevent the opposition from gaining ground and saying, 'I may not be good enough to form the government but please get me in so that I can check this government.' The attraction of that position is a problem."

Paradoxically, the stronger the PAP government gets, the more the opposition's call seems to make sense. Singapore voters decided in the 1980s that they wanted some opposition in parliament. They would not be dissuaded, despite all the PAP vitriol poured on Jeyaretnam when he broke its monopoly. In the 1990s, the opposition-for-opposition's-sake argument was the single most important dynamic shaping the election strategies of both PAP and opposition.

The first round was won by the opposition, which seized the initiative in the 1991 polls with its "by-election effect" strategy. It realised that swing voters liked the idea of having more opposition in parliament, but were also receptive to the ruling party's dire warnings that a freak result might boot the PAP out of office—an outcome that these voters did not want. The opposition found a way to assure voters that they had nothing to fear. Its candidates contested less than half the seats, returning the PAP to power on nomination day, and transforming a potentially high-stakes general election into a less risky "by-election". The strategy had other decisive effects. The fact that the various parties managed to coordinate their actions gave the impression that the opposition was getting its act together. And, perhaps most important of all, the PAP, without a persuasive response to the "by-election effect", was put on the defensive from the start of the campaign to the end.

On August 31, voters elected three new opposition MPs: the Singapore Democratic Party's Ling How Doong and Cheo Chai Chen, and Low Thia Khiang of the Workers' Party. Chiam See Tong retained Potong Pasir with an improved margin. Overall, the PAP's vote share slipped from 63.2 per cent to 61 per cent. The eight-month-old Goh Chok Tong Government, riding its manifesto, The

Next Lap, had assumed that the ground was “sweet”. Now, it was stunned and embittered. Low, mobbed by reporters and supporters at the Raffles Institution counting centre, declared: “This is the beginning of the next lap.”

In 1992, Goh called the by-election in his own ward of Marine Parade GRC, to replace Lim Chee Onn with Teo Chee Hean and to give voters another chance to demonstrate their support for the new prime minister. Ironically, this genuine by-election, contested by the SDP, was also an effective counter to the opposition’s “by-election effect” strategy. Since the prime minister’s own seat was at stake, Goh said, “This by-election has become a general election.” It was therefore not the occasion for swing voters to vote for opposition for opposition’s sake. The SDP countered, accurately, that Goh’s defeat would not mean the end of PAP government. The PAP could simply pick another leader and carry on. Once again, the opposition was in the curious position of reassuring voters that they would continue to be served by PAP government. Marine Parade voters, however, were in no mood to get rid of their famous incumbent, and seven in ten voted for Goh and his team on polling day.

The PAP’s fundamental dilemma remained. Singaporeans wanted the benefits of PAP government nationally, but, locally, they were prepared to elect opposition candidates to check on the ruling party in parliament. In their more magnanimous moments, government leaders were prepared to acknowledge that a little parliamentary opposition was not a bad thing. Lee conceded that opposition MPs occasionally provided sparring practice for the PAP, and kept the government on its toes. But, of course, the PAP was not about to make it any easier for the opposition to claim those seats.

One way to raise the hurdle was to turn single-seat constituencies into group representation constituencies (GRCs). In 1988, there were 42 single-seat wards and 13 three-member GRCs. By 1997, only nine wards were single-seat. The other 74 seats were organised into GRCs, each with between four and six seats. The rules were the same for all parties, but of course put at a disadvantage those that found it harder to field large numbers of candidates. There was another way

in which large GRCs helped the PAP. In a small constituency, a single pocket of unhappiness, such as a few HDB blocks unhappy with a particular neighbourhood problem, can be assiduously courted by the opposition candidate to produce a decisive swing against the PAP. In a GRC, on the other hand, such localised factors are less significant. The larger the electoral battleground, the more likely its votes would tend to match the national pattern, which is in favour of the PAP by a comfortable margin.

A second way the government found to reverse the by-election effect and give local battles the significance of national elections was to channel the benefits of good government through local representatives. This would lend the power and prestige of PAP government to even its backbenchers. Since the mid-1980s, government had sensed that one key reason why the opposition-for-opposition's-sake argument was so compelling to voters was that they did not really have to live with the consequences of electing an opposition MP. MPs were representatives you sent to the national parliament; they did not manage municipal affairs. They could appeal for improved services for their wards, but since the central government agencies were generally well run and rolled out standardised amenities for all neighbourhoods, MPs made little or no perceptible impact locally. Thus, opposition-held wards would continue to benefit from efficient PAP government.

The government attempted to alter this dynamic. In the 1988 election, Chiam's PAP challenger told Potong Pasir voters that he would build them a swimming pool if elected. They responded by giving Chiam an increased margin of victory. More significantly, the government devolved estate management from the Housing Board to town councils chaired by MPs. In the 1991 election—the first since town councils were all in place—the PAP reminded HDB residents that they were electing not just parliamentarians, but also town council chairmen who would have a direct role in maintaining and improving their neighbourhoods. The warning didn't seem to work, and for a while, it looked as if town councils would be a non-factor in elections. Indeed, some Singaporeans argued that the

threats would backfire on the PAP by alienating disaffected voters further. The 1991 election results seemed to support that theory.

In the following general election, the government raised the stakes and named a wide range of programmes that would be rolled out partly in relation to voter support. Decentralised vote counting would even allow it to measure the level of support in individual precincts within a constituency, and adjust programmes accordingly. This time, the inducements played a major role. The terrain had changed in two critical ways since 1991. First, 1997 was the first “upgrading” election. The government had launched its multi-billion-dollar programme to rejuvenate old HDB estates before the previous elections, but it was only later that voters were able to see the results for themselves. The main upgrading programme, the interim upgrading programme and the selective en-bloc redevelopment scheme were attractive, generous packages. HDB residents did their sums, and most figured it was a good deal. “When is our turn?” became the number one question asked of ministers on their constituency visits. Government statements that the odds in this lottery were tied to electoral support did not fall on deaf ears.

Second, residents were more receptive to the inducement of estate-enhancement because of an almost obsessive anxiety over property values. In 1991, the value of one’s home was a more long-term issue. Apartment-owners were content to know that it was appreciating steadily. But property prices shot up in 1993 and 1994, and suddenly the relative value of one’s flat became an immediate and real concern. If the price of one’s home did not rise as quickly as other properties’, one’s ability to move to a better home would be hard. Homeowners had to take seriously the government’s threat to place HDB precincts in opposition wards lower on its upgrading schedule. At a place like Toa Payoh Lorong 8—a street split between Chiam’s ward and PAP-held Toa Payoh GRC—the difference made was already clear. On the PAP side were upgraded blocks with sparkling new finishes. Across the invisible constituency line, neighbouring blocks built at the same time looked dilapidated.

Given these new factors, I predicted in mid-1996 that Chiam would suffer a sharply reduced margin of victory, and that Ling and Cheo—who had come in on extremely slender majorities—might lose their seats entirely. This was exactly what happened on election day, January 2, 1997. Of course, the upgrading effect was not the only factor. Voters were also punishing Chiam and the SDP for the ugly infighting that been going on non-stop for three years. Clearly, however, by linking the local vote to a host of social and economic benefits previously dispensed nationally, the PAP had found a powerful counter to the opposition-for-opposition's-sake argument.

It was not a strategy that endeared it to the public. The Roundtable political discussion group, in a swift post-mortem, pointed out the inherent unfairness of the strategy. For one, PAP candidates vary in quality, and some might frankly deserve to lose to an opposition challenger. To inflate the stakes with government programmes and services was to rob voters of their democratic choice. The Roundtable observed that “the election was won convincingly, but not on sweet ground”, as the PAP had benefited from “large numbers of grudging votes, rather than genuine support”. Leslie Fong, the editor of *The Straits Times*, put it more starkly in his “Thinking Aloud” column: “The PAP, playing hardball as it had never played before, was out to pin voters down, to ram home the point that they had much at stake... Put graphically, it did not matter that a voter cursed the PAP under his breath for threatening or blackmailing him even as he marked the cross for the ruling party—as long as that vote went to the PAP.”

The government was unapologetic. In a letter replying to the Roundtable's analysis, it wrote: “Upgrading depends on growth and surpluses. Surpluses require good and sound government pursuing long-term policies that can generate growth and wealth for all. Good government can endure only if people vote for it. So voters who help to elect a good government are making a valuable contribution to Singapore. Those who vote against good government, and yet hope to benefit from it, are free-riding on those who vote for good

government. We must give people an incentive to support good government with their votes, instead of free-riding on others. This is both necessary and right.”

Following the 1997 election, the government intensified the process of decentralisation, to turn electoral divisions and their MPs into microcosms of the republic and its government. In 2000, the prime minister announced a plan to divide Singapore into five or six Community Development Council (CDC) districts, each with its own mayor appointed from among the PAP MPs serving the area. The role of CDCs would be enlarged to include more and more functions previously carried out by government ministries. In democratic terms, the plan appears attractive: CDCs can be more responsive to local needs, and the devolution of authority away from a single centre can also help institutionalise democracy. It is typical of the PAP approach that has kept it in power: win-win solutions that are good for the people in their everyday lives, and good for the PAP when it goes to the polls.
