

THE FIRST WAVE

JBJ, CHIAM &
THE OPPOSITION
IN SINGAPORE

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EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON

INTRODUCTION

Democratisation has been described to occur in waves, rather than as sudden bolts, as would be ascribed to political revolutions, for instance. The first wave of a democratic awakening in post-independence Singapore did start though with the bolt of J. B. Jeyaretnam's surprise victory (or, for the People's Action Party [PAP], a shock defeat) in the Anson by-election of 1981. Only one general election before that in 1980, the ruling PAP was still looking at a share of 75.6 per cent of the popular vote with zero representation in Parliament from the opposition. Nevertheless, the momentum of opposition growth in Singapore built up gradually through to the 1984 general election, the first of many elections in Singapore to be called a "watershed," in which Chiam See Tong was also elected in Potong Pasir. After the 1991 general election, and with a record four members in Parliament, the opposition began dreaming of forming the government one day.

But their euphoria was short-lived. After all, the use of the wave analogy also implies an element of ebb and flow. Almost immediately after the opposition victories of 1991, fault lines in the leading Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) rose to the surface, and the party was wiped out of Parliament in 1997. The opposition, as fronted by Chiam, spent the next decade thereafter experimenting with coalition arrangements among themselves.

But it was not until the 2011 general election that the Workers' Party, led by its new leader, Low Thia Khiang, would more substantial gains for the opposition.

What went wrong with the first generation of Singapore's post-independence opposition? This book examines their rise and fall in the period from 1981 to 2011, with the aim of filling a gap in explanations of Singapore politics.

Problematic explanations of Singapore's politics

The old adage that "oppositions don't win elections, governments lose them" suggests incumbency is generally a liability for ruling parties. Although Singapore has always been known to be a *sui generis* case, there is a prevalence of muddled explanations as to why Singapore is that to such a great degree.

One school of thought favours the PAP and credits the longstanding ruling party of Singapore for winning the hearts and minds of the electorate with their policies, which have brought stability and prosperity, and chastises the opposition for failing to get its act together.

Meanwhile, the other school of thought sympathises with the opposition, and blames the PAP for the unfair hurdles and barriers erected against it, such as laws and regulations that restrict funding and the avenues of communication for opposition parties, and for creating a "climate of fear" that discourages more credible opposition candidates from stepping forward. Sometimes, the latter group admits that Singaporeans have been willing to sacrifice some political freedoms in return for political-economic stability.

Writing in 1995, the sociologist Chua Beng Huat asserted that "it should be obvious that the refrain of authoritarianism as the explanation of Singapore's political development in the past three decades is inadequate."¹ His classic text, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, recognised a "polarisation" that has characterised studies on Asian governments, which either "concentrates on a history of authoritarian repression" or "unequivocally praises the regime."²

That situation remains unchanged in some quarters today. Outside of Singapore, observers and researchers from the media, academia and non-governmental organisations tend to be aligned with the latter group. This resonates with the democracy indices by organisations like Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit, which generally rank Singapore far down the list, setting it apart from its peers in the club of advanced economies.

To be clear, this is not to be an apologist for repressive laws, just as it is inconceivable for Chua to be one. Important as they are, those critiques of the Singapore system belong to a different debate. In fixating themselves on Singapore's restrictions on political freedoms and civil liberties, these observers miss the opportunity to offer rigorous explanations on why things have turned out the way they do.

The question is whether their analyses stand the test. Witness how in the aftermath of the 2011 general election, for instance, some scholars of democratisation expounded on the way opposition parties were finding "new energy and backing, as young people flock to social media to express themselves more openly," and how the PAP appeared to be "entering a more vulnerable phase" which would "accelerate when the founding generation of leaders, particularly Lee Kuan Yew...passes from the scene"—only to be proven completely wrong on all counts at the 2015 general election.³ To be fair, by most accounts, the PAP were surprised at their own strong showing that year.

On the other hand, there have been scholars who have theorised Malaysia as one of the Southeast Asian authoritarian regimes where "democratisation by elections" is highly unlikely to happen because their elections are deemed to be so flawed⁴—only to be found scrambling for explanations and qualifications when the opposition Pakatan Harapan alliance won the 2018 Malaysian general election.⁵

To put things in an international context, these misguided analyses were comparable to the abject failure of many leading experts and observers to foresee the results of the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom or the presidential election in the United States that

same year, because of their misreading of the overall ground sentiments.

Also, some of these observers have waded into the debate between the “moderate opposition” and the “confrontational opposition” in Singapore, one key theme in this book. The frequent criticism they make of the opposition in Singapore—particularly of Chiam See Tong and Low Thia Khian—is that they are not radical enough, and are not offering a differentiated choice for voters vis-à-vis the PAP; ergo, they have failed to make greater inroads into Parliament or induce substantive political change.⁶ Their observations may be valid insofar as it is a reflection of how powerfully the PAP government has shaped the national narrative of what kind of politics is desirable for Singapore. But they ignore the fact that there is at least one tradition of opposition politics in the West which says that “an Opposition must oppose but not obstruct, it must be constructive, not disruptive.” Those observers also do not address a strategic dilemma facing the opposition in Singapore, to which the political scientist Hussin Mutalib has alluded⁷—if too confrontational, the opposition would lose a considerable swathe of generally contented, middle-ground voters; if too moderate, the PAP’s technocratic superiority would beat them to it where policy prescriptions are concerned.

However, if there is one aspect that makes it problematic, it is how it may affect a factual understanding and analysis of a fateful key event in Singapore’s political history of the opposition, the SDP’s fratricide and fracture of 1993, which we turn to next.

Political history: the SDP’s fratricide and fracture of 1993

While borrowing the analogy of the “democratic wave theory,” this book, however, departs from its progenitors—such as the political scientist Samuel Huntington—in terms of the lens of analysis used. One could look, as Huntington and others have, at socio-cultural and economic factors, or at cataclysmic events such as the fall of Communism in 1989, for the causes behind democratisation in countries around the world.⁸ Yet efforts towards creating a theory of what is it that

promotes or constrains democracy have been inconclusive at best. Scholars of politics and democracy are beginning to admit the futility of propagating ever more theories of democratisation, and are looking instead from the angle of how states like Singapore contain political conflict and contention.⁹

That is when one should also look to *political history*, a study of politics through a linear, path-dependent approach.¹⁰ While structural, socio-economic factors certainly provide a good framework to account for the opposition’s weakness and the PAP’s strength, especially where they relate to the outcomes of elections, this book seeks to fill a vital missing link in solving the puzzle.

When politicians make decisions on how to act, they are more likely to make a cost-benefit assessment of the political choices before them, rather than to ponder over the type of authoritarian or democratic regime they wish to adopt. This relates to what academics call “path-dependency”—what politicians say or do in the initial stages of events can predetermine their actions later on; one action or decision begets the next. And rather than just telling a nice story, the framework of political history also provides us with the whole kaleidoscope of contextual factors of a given political situation.

The story of the SDP’s split of 1993 is that key to explaining the rise and fall of the first generation of Singapore’s opposition. It continues to be an emotive issue among the different quarters in the opposition to this day. As late as May 2016, the PAP has continued to use the event to discredit Chee Soon Juan in the Bukit Batok by-election, casting aspersions on his character, just as it had done back in the 1990s. Chee and his supporters claim that he has been the victim of “gutter politics.”¹¹ On the other hand, the narrative that Chee had betrayed his mentor Chiam continues to hold traction.¹²

Most viscerally, it was after the split in the SDP that it lost its two remaining seats in Parliament at the ensuing general election in 1997, and more than two decades thereafter at this time of writing, it has still not been successful at re-entering Parliament to date. That is not to discount the

PAP's role in erecting hurdles and barriers for the opposition, which Part II ("Besieged") lays out—from the procedural (town councils, the group representation constituency [GRC] system and the elected presidency) to the demonstrative (the "climate of fear" in the aftermath of the arrests under the Internal Security Act [ISA] of 1987 and 1988). Rather, what happened in 1993 was the crux of at least a decade of movements and developments within the opposition camp.

The whole train of events could be traced from Jeyaretnam's disqualification from Parliament in 1986 and the arrests in 1987 of 22 Singaporeans under the ISA, a number of them affiliated with the Workers' Party. Around this time, there was also the exodus of the clique of Wong Hong Toy, the chairman of the Workers' Party who fell out with Jeyaretnam, and then defected to Chiam's SDP. It was Chiam who survived as the sole opposition MP after the ensuing general election in 1988. (Lee Siew Choh, the erstwhile leader of Barisan Sosialis that had merged with the Workers' Party on the eve of that general election, became a Non-Constituency MP.)

As the augmented SDP prepared for the next general election, the "by-election effect" was conceptualised and that helped the SDP in no small part to clinch three seats at the 1991 general election.

It was the up-and-coming SDP that Chee Soon Juan, a young lecturer at the National University of Singapore (NUS), chose to join. He was unveiled by Chiam as the "most courageous man in Singapore today" who would contest in the SDP's team in the Marine Parade by-election of 1992, against a PAP team led by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.

Before Chee's entry onto the scene, fault lines in the SDP already had arisen over the issue of running the town councils that the SDP had won in 1991. Cracks were beginning to show in the marriage of convenience between the Wong Hong Toy clique from the Workers' Party and Chiam's SDP. In any case, the town council squabbles set off a series of events that ultimately combusted the SDP within a year—1993, the *annus horribilis* of the party.

Early that year, Chee went on a hunger strike after he had been

dismissed from NUS; it was alleged that he had misused research funds, and these accusations are examined in depth in this book. It was that very public hunger strike by Chee, who had recently become the SDP's assistant secretary-general and effectively Chiam's right-hand man, which inexorably split the SDP leadership into two camps, each of which held conflicting visions for the future of the party.

In the midst of attempts at reconciliation between the two factions, Chiam gave an explosive speech at the Singapore Press Club in which he denounced his SDP colleagues. That was the point of no return for the SDP, leading to the expulsion of Chiam from the party he had founded. Chiam challenged the SDP's decision in court and managed to have his membership of the SDP reinstated, thereby salvaging his parliamentary seat.

Along the way, Chiam's key charge was that Chee had been attempting to usurp his position as leader of the SDP, which Chee has vehemently denied ever since. In tracing the whole series of events in detail, this book reveals the complexities and intrigue of an intra-party power struggle that had set the opposition in Singapore back for almost a generation.

It is always tempting to entertain the counterfactuals. What if the SDP had not split? What if there had been no fights on the town council issues, or if Chee had not been dismissed by the NUS, which precipitated the SDP's fracture? The SDP might have then grown from strength to strength with a formidable team led by Chiam and Chee, perhaps to be met with reprisals from the PAP of the sort in Part II of this book. That may well have halted the SDP's advance, but it would certainly not have wiped it out of Parliament overnight.

Then again, counterfactuals can be an endless exercise in fantasy. We could even ask: how would things have turned out if Chee had joined the Workers' Party instead of the SDP ahead of the 1992 by-election in Marine Parade? That would not have been implausible if one considers how Chee's brand of more radical, rights-based politics has been far more in tune with Jeyaretnam's than Chiam's. But the Workers' Party was of course not the party in the ascendancy in 1992.

Towards a full understanding of the opposition's weakness

For sure, the political history of the Singapore opposition as presented in this book is but one piece in a bigger puzzle in explaining the dearth of the opposition's representation in Parliament.

Hussin Mutalib's 2003 book, *Parties and Politics*, is the seminal study of opposition parties in Singapore. Through extended interviews he conducted with essentially all the key opposition figures in Singapore since the 1960s, he has presented detailed case studies of four opposition parties, including the Workers' Party and the SDP. While emphasising the PAP government's tactics in diminishing and eliminating political opposition, Mutalib's analysis has also strongly indicated a cyclical development of the Singapore's opposition parties in terms of their rise and decline, given the numerous disagreements within and between different opposition parties.

None of these issues are unique to the opposition in Singapore of course. The PAP itself saw its fair share of conflict between its moderate and more left-wing factions from the late 1950s to 1961. And the idea that political parties anywhere in the world are harmonious, fraternal organisations is surely a myth. But Mutalib couples this explanation with the observation that "an affluent Singapore is a major factor to explain the Opposition's failure to undo the PAP's popular mandate."¹³

Furthermore, Mutalib has noted, Singapore's political culture is dominated by what he terms a "caution syndrome" and the "subject" mentality, where the citizenry has some knowledge of the political process but prefers not to participate in politics.

This political culture has been conceptualised by Chua Beng Huat as a form of "communitarian ideology" that emphasises society over the individual, which challenges the notion that modern democracies would necessarily develop into liberal societies that privilege individual rights, as suggested by many Western observers. In Chua's study of Singapore's public housing system, state capitalism and multiracial policies, he has outlined the pervasiveness of the Singapore state and its social redistributive policies.¹⁴

Two series of books on particular elections in Singapore have provided some of the most compelling analyses on the opposition as they relate to the workings of Singapore's politics. Derek da Cunha's *The Price of Victory* and *Breakthrough*, on the 1997 and 2011 general elections respectively, examine the electoral tactics and personalities of the PAP and the opposition against the background of economic and other election issues, coupled with a study of the election rallies that were held during that campaign, to arrive at his analysis of the election results and trajectory of Singapore's politics. While political scientists and analysts are not soothsayers, it is prescient for instance how da Cunha wrote in 1997 after the wipe-out of the SDP from Parliament about how "a window of opportunity, or a vacuum, exists for a new political party to come to the fore," made up of "professional and educated individuals with a commitment to politics in general," with the implication that such a new party would take a moderate rather than confrontational approach towards the PAP.¹⁵ Although not exactly a new party, it was a new leadership of the Workers' Party that found the winning formula in long lead-up to 2011 general election.

Kevin Tan's and Terence Lee's edited volumes *Voting in Change* and *Change in Voting*, on the 2011 and 2015 general elections respectively, brought together researchers and observers who examine issues and perspectives similar to what da Cunha had done, and including survey data where available. These two series of books notably eschew any overbearing framework of theories of democratisation cited earlier in this introduction that, as I have argued, are not well-suited to explaining Singapore's sui generis brand of politics.

The present predicament of Singapore's opposition parties also has its roots in earlier history. Writing in 1970, Thomas Bellows, regarded as the pioneer of academic studies on the PAP and, by extension, Singapore's politics, had offered an explanation of the opposition's decline through the 1960s. While acknowledging that the detentions under Operation Coldstore in 1963 had seriously crippled the main opposition Barisan Sosialis, Bellows identified Barisan's Chairman Lee

Siew Choh's decision to pursue an extra-parliamentary strategy of "mass struggle"—and the resultant "doctrinal struggle" within Barisan Sosialis that tore it apart—as the ultimate nail in the coffin for the opposition. Lee's foolhardy declaration of Barisan's boycott of Parliament starting from December 1965 "removed the party from what might have been its most effective position of influence"¹⁶ and, as we would see in hindsight, essentially guaranteed the PAP's monopoly of Parliament for the next 15 years. This was all the more odd given that it was Lee Siew Choh himself, as Bellows pointed out, who presented very compelling reasons why a strategy of "mass struggle" would fail in Singapore when he was still PAP assemblyman in 1961, albeit from the standpoint of a Communist mass struggle then. Lee's reasoning was three-pronged—that it would be impossible to have a Communist Singapore without a Communist Malaya; that the anti-Communist forces in Singapore were militarily superior; and that the entrepôt economy of Singapore was "inextricably linked up with, and entirely dependent on the goodwill of anti-Communist countries."¹⁷

The similarities between Barisan Sosialis's predicament in 1965 and the SDP's in 1993 are uncanny, perhaps a vindication of Mutalib's observation of the cyclical pattern of development of opposition parties in Singapore. After the train of events involving Chiam's expulsion from the SDP, the party embarked on a strategy of what Chee Soon Juan described as "civil disobedience"—during which the SDP had never succeeded in getting into Parliament, even though other opposition parties did.

Conclusion: a second wave?

By writing of a first wave of democratic awakening in Singapore, the natural question would be whether a second wave is already on-going with the victories of Low Thia Kiang's Workers' Party in 2011, and how a second wave could ebb and flow like the first. For a credible study of that, some time and distance would be more than desirable. Low is covered only tangentially in this book, even though his parliamentary career began in 1991 in the midst of the first wave, though that is certainly not

an indication of the impact on Singapore politics he has made. Rather, it is because Low's leadership of the Workers' Party since 2001 has taken such an independent life from Jeyaretnam and Chiam for that to call for a separate account.

Meanwhile, the experiences and lessons of the first wave, and the questions they pose to us, should offer us much material for reflection.