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Opposition Coordination in Singapore's 2015 General Elections

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ABSTRACT   *Recent political science scholarship suggests that when opposition political parties are able to coalesce into a united coalition against an authoritarian regime, they will perform better in authoritarian elections, and can more credibly bargain with the regime for liberalising reforms. Yet, most of this literature pays little attention to the variety of ways in which opposition parties cooperate with each other. Drawing on the literature on the bargaining model of war, the author sketches out a theoretical framework to explain how opposition parties coordinate to develop non-competition agreements. Such agreements entail opposition parties bargaining over which political party should contest or withdraw in which constituencies to ensure straight fights against the dominant authoritarian incumbent in each electoral district. The author then applies this framework to explain opposition coordination in Singapore's 2015 general elections, focusing on the conflict between the Workers' Party and the National Solidarity Party.*

Introduction

Singapore's 2015 general elections (GE2015) saw all constituencies contested by opposition political parties against the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) for the first time since independence in 1965. This was due, in part, to the proliferation of new opposition parties in the last decade, and especially since the last general elections in 2011. But, more importantly, the fact that all Singaporeans could vote for the first time was also because the opposition parties were able to coordinate with each other to ensure straight fights with the PAP in almost all the constituencies. There were only three constituencies with three-cornered contests—two of them brought about by independent candidates, and only one a direct result of coordination failure. Why were opposition parties generally able to coordinate successfully with each other in this GE2015? What is the theoretical framework that we can bring to study the success or failures of opposition coordination in Singapore and elsewhere more broadly?

The aims of this article are twofold. First, I propose that we can draw from the well of theoretical knowledge accumulated on international conflict and peace to study the dynamics of opposition coordination. In particular, I suggest that we can utilise the insights from the well-known bargaining model of war to understand the dilemmas of

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opposition coordination, and to generate hypotheses as to why we observe coordination at some times but not others (see, e.g. Fearon, 1995; Reiter, 2003, 2009; Walter, 2009). In so far as much of politics is about bargaining conflict over scarce resources, opposition parties negotiating with each other to come to an agreement on which party should run in which constituency and who should give way is a bargaining conflict over the limited number of electoral constituencies in the country. Such agreements to avoid multi-cornered electoral contests are often known as non-competition agreements.

Second, I aim to describe the strategic interaction between opposition political parties in the run-up to the GE2015 polls, paying particular attention to how the observed behaviours are in line with or tangential to the expectations from the bargaining model of war. I pay specific attention to the sequence of events between the Workers' Party (WP) and the National Solidarity Party (NSP) over their conflict on who should contest and who should give way in the MacPherson Single Member Constituency (SMC).

The next section of the article briefly reviews the existing literature on electoral authoritarian regimes, clarifies the motivation behind opposition cooperation, and describes how the bargaining model of war can help us understand political conflict under anarchic conditions. The subsequent section closely examines the attempts by the various opposition political parties to negotiate and come to a comprehensive agreement on which party should contest in which constituency against the ruling PAP. The conclusion very briefly discusses the challenges for opposition cooperation beyond mere coordination over electoral constituencies.

Opposition Coordination and the Bargaining Model of War

In electoral authoritarian regimes with dominant ruling parties like Singapore, opposition political parties face an uphill battle in their attempts to challenge the ruling party during elections (see, e.g. Magaloni, 2006; Schedler, 2006; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Morse, 2011). While the transparent electoral process means that Singaporeans are spared from the worst of electoral fraud, the grossly uneven playing field continues to stack the odds in favour of the ruling party. The non-independent election commission and the supermajority in parliament allow the ruling PAP to gerrymander the boundaries of electoral districts and manipulate electoral rules to its own advantage (Rajah, 2012; N. Tan, 2013; N. Tan and Grofman, 2014). A compliant media shackled by a biased management's oversight strictly patrols the boundaries of electioneering discourse, ensuring that no criticism of the ruling party is too harsh, and no disparaging of opposition parties is too tempered (George, 2012).

A divided opposition is also advantageous for the incumbent because multiple opposition candidates split the opposition vote. Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi was able to win in the 1992 elections with a 36% vote share because the opposition's vote was split among three candidates. South Korean junta insider Roh Tae Woo also won the country's 1987 presidential elections with only 37% of the votes because the votes were split among four other opposition candidates. Anticipating such effects, autocrats oftentimes seek to co-opt certain opposition voices at the expense of others in order to divide and rule (Lust-Okar, 2005; Gandhi, 2008; Gerschewski, 2013). This age-old strategy is one of the surest techniques of entrenching dominance.

To avoid the ruinous costs of vote splitting and to aggregate mass support, vote-maximising and office-seeking opposition parties will often seek to cooperate with each other against the ruling party. One type of opposition cooperation is inter-party coordination on which constituencies to contest and which constituencies to withdraw from to ensure straight fights against the incumbent in a parliamentary election. Through formal or informal processes of bargaining and negotiations, multiple opposition parties can decide among themselves how to avoid competing against each other.

Avoiding vote splitting is not the only benefit to be gained from such non-competition agreements. Withdrawing from certain electoral districts actually makes strategic sense for opposition parties with limited resources because any individual party can more efficiently make use of its scarce resources in a smaller number of districts. The focus should be to mobilise the most opposition votes in the optimal number of districts that is possible to ensure victory in those districts. If an opposition party spreads its resources too thinly across the electoral map, then it may not actually mobilise enough votes in each district to win.

In addition, splitting up electoral districts to ensure straight fights against the dominant ruling incumbent also sends a signal to the electorate of a 'united' opposition. Opposition leaders can claim that they share similar goals of toppling the incumbent authoritarian regime, but eschew specifying exactly what they would actually do if they were indeed to succeed in unseating the ruling party. The credibility of such a signal is likely to be fairly weak, however. On the one hand, opposition parties signal unity by avoiding contests against each other. On the other hand, the claim of unity is undermined by the persistence of individual party labels and the lack of a common electoral platform. If there are any electoral benefits at all from such a modest signal, they are likely to be minimal.

So how do rational political actors come to mutually acceptable coordinated bargains on how best to 'split the pie' among themselves to avoid the dire costs of conflict under anarchy? By anarchy, I refer to the fact that there does not exist an external third-party actor that can enforce an agreement between political actors. While a small but growing literature on opposition party cooperation has focused on the variety of outcomes when opposition cooperation occurs, there is scant focus on explaining the specific coordination dilemma behind such non-competition agreements, especially in parliamentary systems (Howard and Roessler, 2006; van de Walle, 2006; Bunce and Wolchik, 2011; Gandhi and Reuter, 2013; Wahman, 2013; Gandhi, 2014).

I propose using Fearon's (1995) canonical bargaining model of war as a basic theoretical framework to answer this question.[1] The model articulates three main conditions under which conflict occurs. First, conflict occurs when political actors are fighting over an indivisible good. Second, conflict occurs when political actors cannot credibly commit not to fight in the future even when the existing agreement is mutually beneficial for all parties. Third, and finally, conflict occurs when there is uncertainty over the capabilities or resolve of the competing parties.

I set aside the first two conditions in this article because Singapore has a parliamentary system and a very short election campaigning period of only nine days. Multiple electoral districts in a parliamentary system implies that political parties can 'split the pie' in numerous configurations, thus alleviating conflict. A short campaigning period suggests that there is very little to be gained from reneging on any non-competition agreement prior to the polls themselves.

Instead, the most pressing factor that probably accounts for the success or failure of opposition coordination over which party should contest in which constituencies against the incumbent is the *incentives to misrepresent* information about the relative strengths of opposition parties. By strength of opposition parties, I am referring to their perceived popularity among the masses, their perceived internal organisation discipline, and their perceived infrastructural power (Mann, 1984, 2008; Soifer and vom Hau, 2008). A political party's infrastructural power denotes its latent ability to organise and mobilise the citizenry towards particular objectives, such as a mass protest against electoral fraud.

Where there are minimal incentives to misrepresent and high clarity about the relative strengths of opposition parties, we can expect coordinated bargains to be reached. We should envisage that weaker opposition parties readily give way to stronger opposition parties. Relatively stronger opposition parties will insist that they have the right to contest in certain constituencies and refuse to budge. Weaker opposition parties will also be more likely to make compromises with each other because they recognise that everyone is on a similar footing.

Where there are incentives to misrepresent or high uncertainty about their relative strengths, however, then we should observe multi-cornered contests between opposition parties and the ruling party. Small, but old and declining, opposition parties will have the most incentive to misrepresent their relative strength because they want to avoid appearing weak relative to other similarly small but new and growing opposition parties. In denial of their fading existence, they will want to claim more of a share of the pie than they deserve to—that is, they will want to contest in more districts and get others to give way. As Christensen (2000, p. 52) presciently argued in his monograph examining opposition cooperation in Japan, 'small parties in decline often oppose electoral cooperation because such cooperation threatens their very existence'.

The rest of this article chronicles the complex developments of opposition coordination in GE2015 in light of the foregoing discussion. As we shall see, the bargaining model of war is a fruitful model to help us understand and explain the outcomes that were observed.

Opposition Coordination in GE2015

A total of eight opposition political parties contested against the ruling PAP in GE2015 in all constituencies across Singapore. They were the WP, the Singapore People's Party (SPP), the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), the NSP, the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA), the Reform Party (RP), the Singaporeans First Party (SingFirst) and the People's Power Party (PPP).

When the report of the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee was released on 24 July 2015 demarcating the number and boundaries of all the electoral districts, opposition political parties immediately swung in to indicate their claims. Newer parties such as SingFirst and the PPP, alongside smaller parties such as the RP and the SDA, were at the forefront of signalling their 'interests' in contesting particular constituencies (Chong *et al.*, 2015a). Yet, just two days later, on 26 July, the WP was the first opposition party to put its foot on the ground. At a walkabout that day the WP secretary-general, Low Thia Khiang, told reporters that it would contest in Marine

Parade Group Representative Constituency (GRC) as well as MacPherson SMC[2] in addition to all the other constituencies that the party had contested in the last election. Workers' Party chairman Sylvia Lim further clarified that the party would contest in a total of 10 districts—five GRCs and five SMCs—or a total of 28 seats (Chong *et al.*, 2015b).

That the WP was the first to specify its intentions on where to contest is not surprising. It is widely acknowledged to be the strongest opposition political party. Except for the WP and the SPP, none of the other parties have had any parliamentary representation since the last general elections in 2011 (see Table 1). The WP had seven elected members of parliament (MPs) and two non-constituency members of parliament (NCMPs)[3] in the previous parliament, whereas the SPP had one NCMP position. It was also the oldest opposition party, having been established in 1957 by Singapore's first Chief Minister David Marshall.

Subsequently, in an effort to resolve competing claims of contest for the rest of the 19 constituencies, an all-party meeting to be hosted by the NSP was scheduled on 31 July. That meeting was later postponed to 3 August at the request of the RP and the SDA owing to some of their key members being unavailable. Nevertheless, so eager were the parties in wanting to resolve competing claims that an informal meeting of six opposition parties was first held at the residence of SingFirst leader Tan Jee Say on 1

Table 1. Singapore's multiple opposition political parties

Party name	Leader(s)	Year established	Immediate past parliamentary presence	Number and type of constituencies contested	Results
Workers' Party	Low Thia Khiang, Sylvia Lim	1957	7 fully elected MPs, 2 NCMPs	5 GRCs and 5 SMCs—28 seats	6 fully elected MPs, 3 NCMPs
Singapore People's Party	Lina Chiam, Chiam See Tong	1994	1 NCMP	1 GRC and 3 SMCs—8 seats	None
Singapore Democratic Party	Chee Soon Juan	1980	None	2 GRCs and 3 SMCs—11 seats	None
National Solidarity Party	Sebastian Teo	1987	None	2 GRCs and 2 SMCs—12 seats	None
Singapore Democratic Alliance	Desmond Lim	2001	None	1 GRC—6 seats	None
Reform Party	Kenneth Jeyaretnam	2008	None	2 GRCs and 1 SMC—11 seats	None
Singaporeans First	Tan Jee Say	2014	None	2 GRCs—10 seats	None
People's Power Party	Goh Meng Seng	2015	None	1 GRC—4 seats	None

Source: Author's compilation from publicly available information, and from Singapore's Election Department website, http://www.eld.gov.sg/election_results_2015.html, accessed 25 September 2015.

August (Leow, 2015; W. Tan, 2015). This informal meeting and the first formal meeting on 3 August resolved many competing claims but were inconclusive.

At the second and final formal meeting held on 6 August, it emerged that there were only three unresolved constituencies. Both SingFirst and RP wanted to contest in Ang Mo Kio GRC. But the dispute was not so much about them being unclear about their relative strengths, rather than about which party blogger Roy Ngerg would join (Tham, 2015b). It was revealed that while Ngerg was on the verge of joining the RP, SingFirst had approached him to join their party as well. Ngerg had gained an infamous reputation for himself over the past few years. He first gained prominence through sharp critiques on his blog about how the monies in Singapore's Central Provident Fund, the national mandatory retirement savings plan, were being managed. His notoriety increased when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sued him for defamation in May 2014. In the end, Ngerg contested in Ang Mo Kio GRC under the RP alongside his lawyer M. Ravi and fellow activist Gilbert Goh.

In any case, what was more interesting was the fact that the WP did not turn up to this second and final formal meeting at all. The purported reason was that it had made its intentions clear in previous discussions (Tham *et al.*, 2015). This made it awkward for the NSP because the NSP had competing claims to contest in MacPherson SMC and Marine Parade GRC on account of the party having contested there in the last general elections in 2011. The NSP was established in 1987 and has had no parliamentary presence at all since then, except for the time when its former secretary-general, Steve Chia, was a NCMP between 2001 and 2006. As an old, but small party in decline it had the most incentive to misrepresent its relative strength to differentiate itself from the rest of the small and new parties.

At first, the NSP appeared to want to avoid the ruinous costs of vote splitting. On 10 August, four days after the second all-party formal meeting, the NSP announced that it would voluntarily withdraw from contesting in Marine Parade and MacPherson. While they had made various attempts to contact the WP to negotiate on who should withdraw and who should contest in the two constituencies, the WP ignored them completely. Faced with a stark choice between withdrawing from both constituencies to save resources or contesting in both constituencies leading to three-cornered fights, the NSP chose the former. In explaining their decision, NSP acting secretary-general Hazel Poa said:

> Multi-cornered contests are likely to dilute opposition votes and reduce the chances of a more diverse Parliament. We trust that the WP will send in good candidates and give voters in these two constituencies a choice. (Tham, 2015a)

Yet, nine days later, the NSP did a volte-face. The party's Central Executive Committee announced on 19 August that they would give up on Marine Parade GRC, which was a five-member district, but would contest in MacPherson SMC after all (National Solidarity Party, 2015). The party had reckoned that expending resources to compete in the single-member district was worthwhile, even in the face of a three-cornered contest between itself, the WP and the ruling PAP. Their candidate was Steve Chia.

The NSP's reversal was highly damaging to the party's reputation. Acting secretary-general Hazel Poa resigned due to her disagreement with the decision to renege on the earlier commitment not to contest (Ng, 2015a). Candidate Steve Chia was also roundly

criticised on various social media platforms. Singaporeans lampooned the party and Steve Chia for reneging on such a simple agreement. If the NSP could not be trusted to follow through on its simple promise, how could the electorate believe any of its broader electoral promises when it sought to topple the dominant ruling party? Four days later, on 23 August, Steve Chia withdrew his candidacy, citing the online abuse that he had received (Au Yong, 2015). NSP ultimately fielded Cheo Chai Chen, a former member of parliament for the SDP from 1991 to 1997.

Why did the NSP renege on its earlier commitment to coordinate with the WP by withdrawing from Marine Parade and MacPherson? Recall that the bargaining model of war suggests that this is an outcome driven by a political actor's incentive to misrepresent its true strength, and we can hypothesise that small but old and declining parties have the greatest incentives to misrepresent. That appears to be the case for the NSP. When asked by the media why the NSP decided to contest MacPherson, Cheo replied:

> Everyone was surprised (by our decision to contest in MacPherson). Even experts thought we wouldn't enter a three-corner fight. But this is life and death. If we keep backing down, residents and the general population will think we are very weak. An MP cannot be weak—how are you supposed to speak up for residents if you are weak? (Hon, 2015)

In attempting to misrepresent their strength, NSP party leaders also repeatedly pointed to their mass popularity, discipline and organisational strength. Their various statements and press releases consistently pointed to their previously high 43.4% vote share in Marine Parade, as well as the numerous 'feedback and pledges of support' that they had received. When pressed by reporters, new acting secretary-general Lim Tean said:

> That decision to contest in MacPherson was made a few weeks ago, and we've never departed from that decision. NSP has been the most active party promoting opposition unity. We initiated talks to avoid three-cornered fights. (Kek and Yang, 2015)

In the end, the incumbent PAP won a 65.6% vote share in MacPherson. The WP obtained 33.6% of the votes, and the NSP got a mere 0.82%. Owing to the inability to resolve their coordination problem, both opposition parties failed to maximise their vote share. While the WP solidified its reputation as the strongest opposition party in Singapore, the NSP's reputation took a beating. Cheo Chai Chen also lost his US$10,000 election deposit, having polled less than the 12.5% vote share needed to retain it.

The fact that the conflict between the WP and the NSP was the only conflict among all the opposition parties points to the general success of the rest of the six opposition parties in resolving any disputes among themselves quietly within the two formal meetings. This verifies the hypothesis that small parties that are clear about their relative strengths will have little incentive to misrepresent their true strengths, and will be able to come to agreement on who should contest where. The PPP contested only one GRC with four seats because it was the newest opposition party to be formed, having been registered only about two months before the campaign. The SDA also contested in only one GRC with six seats, having suffered from defections from its alliance in the 2000s

and the poor results of its leader Desmond Lim in the Punggol East by-elections in 2013, where he garnered only 0.6% of the votes. Other equally small political parties contested about 10 seats each, accurately reflecting the relative size and status of their respective parties.

Conclusion: Beyond Opposition Coordination

The specific puzzle of pre-electoral opposition coordination may appear peripheral to the larger story of the PAP's continued dominance. After all, such coordination did nothing to obstruct the PAP from eventually winning 83 out of the 89 seats on offer, and almost 70% of the total vote share. Indeed, the WP's Sylvia Lim even hypothesised that the fact that all constituencies were contested for the first time resulted in 'push-back' from voters who were wary of the PAP's potential exit from government (Loke and Ong, 2015). Yet, if we do not appreciate how opposition political parties organise themselves, we will not able to comprehend the nature of the regime that may eventually replace the PAP.

The effort of opposition parties to coordinate and split the electoral districts among themselves should be viewed as only the first step towards a broader collective action effort to unseat a dominant regime. Opposition political parties in other electoral authoritarian regimes often form coalitions with common policy platforms in an attempt to send a more credible signal to the electorate that they are a viable alternative to the ruling party. Malaysia's Barisan Alternatif, Pakatan Rakyat and Pakatan Harapan coalitions are examples of such coherent, but potentially fragile, coalitions. At other times, moreover, opposition political parties or factions even merge into a single new opposition political party. Cambodia's Cambodian National Rescue Party and Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party are clear examples of opposition leaders and activists who sacrificed their individual party or factional vehicles to coalesce into one single party organisation and party label. Suffice to say, why opposition parties in some countries get stuck at bargaining for electoral districts while others pursue deeper forms of cooperation is a puzzle that has remained unresolved.

In the recent past, Singapore's opposition parties have indeed tried to pursue deeper cooperative arrangements than mere district coordination. The SDA was formed in 2001 through a coalition of the SPP, the NSP, the Singapore Justice Party and the Singapore Malay National Organisation. Workers' Party leader Low Thia Khiang recently revealed that his party was 'under a lot of pressure' to join the SDA at that time, but he eventually chose not to because his party had different objectives from the other parties (Ng, 2015b). Without the WP, the coalition made little headway against the PAP, and is largely a spent force with the withdrawal of the NSP in 2007 and the SPP in 2011.

In the final analysis, the Singapore opposition's exertions to develop a non-competition agreement among themselves should be viewed less as any altruistic endeavours to forge a vague image of 'opposition unity' and more as the empirical manifestation of the strategic calculus and action on the part of rational political actors. Everyone wants to maximise their chances of electoral victory against the PAP. The only trouble is that they have to react strategically in relation to each other.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. For a critique of Fearon's bargaining model of war, see Kirshner (2000).
2. Singapore uses a mix of single-member districts and multi-member districts. In multi-member districts, candidates contest as a team under a common political party. Voters vote for individual party teams. The winner is decided by simple plurality vote, as in the single-member districts.
3. The NCMP scheme was introduced in 1984 to allow for the 'best-losing' candidates from opposition parties to have a seat in parliament. While they enjoy the same rights as fully elected MPs to debate and vote on bills in parliament, they are not allowed to vote on certain legislation, such as constitutional amendments or supply bills. On 27 January 2016, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced in parliament his intention to amend the constitution during his term in office to extend full voting rights and powers to NCMPs. NCMPs, as like the current fully elected MPs, will have the right to vote on no confidence motions, supply bills, constitutional changes, etc.

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