

Donald Low and Cherian George, 2020

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PAP v PAP: The party's struggle to adapt to a changing Singapore

Singapore and the world have changed. It is in the best interests of the nation and the party for the PAP to adapt — with a greater commitment to both economic and political fairness.

The General Elections of 2011 and 2020 herald a shift in the political attitudes and aspirations of Singaporeans. As Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam noted a week after GE2020, Singaporean politics has “changed permanently”. Although the People’s Action Party (PAP) was returned comfortably to power in these elections, the party cannot easily resume governance within the elite-tech-nocratic, paternalistic and authoritarian modes that it is used to. The domestic and external contexts that allowed Singapore’s model of illiberal democracy or soft authoritarianism to succeed, and its technocratic elites to deliver economic growth and social cohesion, are undergoing significant change.

This collection of essays argues that these changes make it more difficult for the government in office to secure legitimacy principally on the basis of performance (e.g. GDP growth, job creation). Increasingly, its legitimacy has (also) to be achieved through systemic fairness and moral suasion. This requires the PAP to remake itself and adapt to a domestic political environment that is more competitive, pluralistic and concerned with fairness and justice, as well as to an external context radically altered by the pandemic.

Following the President’s Address that opened the new term of government, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted the PAP’s capacity for recalibration. “We have not stayed on top all these years by being static but

by adapting to our evolving society and changing needs,” he said. His speech contained promising hints of a willingness to learn from mistakes. He conceded shortcomings in the government’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis: it could have “acted more aggressively and sooner” to curb infections in foreign worker dormitories. He also said the government would not be “ideologically opposed” to strengthening social safety nets, but would assess them pragmatically with a view to fiscal sustainability. Gone was the usual moralising on how (more) welfare would undermine Singaporeans’ work ethic and the fabric of society.

But the Prime Minister’s speech offered no indication that he was ready for a thorough review of the PAP’s approach. Cognitive awareness of the need to adapt does not always translate into action. It is inherently difficult for an elite, technocratic and paternalistic establishment to accept that it must take seriously the critical or contrarian views of those outside it. In times of crisis, it may also seem more urgent to maintain unity. The PM voiced familiar misgivings about excessive political contestation. Somewhat uncharitably, he described those who voted for the opposition while still wanting a PAP government as “free-riders”, and castigated the opposition for encouraging voters to take this approach. The PAP thus persists in perceiving a more competitive politics in negative terms. We share political scientist Kenneth Paul Tan’s view, quoted in the *South China Morning Post*, that is quite legitimate for the public to welcome “a high-quality opposition in parliament as a means of keeping the government on its toes and being more responsive, as a source of new ideas and alternative perspectives so necessary in a complex world where unchallenged assumptions are going to be the cause of our downfall”.

Our argument for the PAP to remake itself is not mainstream opinion within the PAP nor, for different reasons, even among our fellow liberals or progressives. The PAP has rationalised to itself that its large wins in 2001 (with 75 percent of the valid votes) and 2015 (nearly 70 percent) were “outliers”. In the other seven General Elections since 1984, its share of votes ranged between 60 and 66 percent. The 61.2 percent it secured in GE2020 was therefore within its range of expectations, and — contrary to what its critics say — not a sign that the party needs to embark on substantive policy, institutional or ideological reforms. It believes that to maintain a comfortable electoral majority (say, of above 60 percent) it needs only to address the livelihood concerns (especially jobs, housing, health and education) of the working and middle classes who constitute the bulk of voters.

It is also sometimes argued that Singapore is a politically and socially conservative society, and that the average voter is not concerned about the (perceived) unfairness of the political system, the ruling party's authoritarian and high-handed methods, or even the fact that Singapore lacks many of the social protections of advanced economies. This individual cares only about (their own) 'bread-and-butter' issues, which the PAP believes it is uniquely competent to address.

As for the liberals and progressives on the other side of the political divide, most people we know are equally unconvinced by our call for internal PAP reform. They think that Singapore should just give up on the PAP. After all, a still-dominant party has little incentive for self-renewal and adaptation. Given the performance of the major opposition parties in GE2020, the increasing quality and credibility of the candidates they fielded, and the fact that the Workers' Party won a (slight) majority of the total votes in the constituencies it contested, many wonder if Singapore's political future and hopes for democratisation lie in parties outside the PAP.

An underlying belief in this volume is this: it is premature to abandon hope in the ruling party. For one, the PAP is likely to be the only viable governing party at the next two General Elections; this means we can expect the PAP to be in power for the next 15 years. That is simply far too long for our politics to remain unreformed, and it is in the interest of Singaporeans that the party adapts rather than atrophies. The party is also not a monolith; latent elements within are capable of remaking it. Above all, we believe that what promotes good governance in the long run is a healthy dose of political competition. A fitter, more adaptable PAP is good for opposition parties, forcing them to raise their game. And to the extent that the ruling party pursues reforms that facilitate democratic deliberation and fairer competition, Singaporean politics will become more open and contestable, and create the norms for a peaceful transition of power (if and when this occurs).

For the PAP itself, the quality of its electoral victories matters more than their margins; its moral legitimacy is in greater danger than its formal mandate. But while the reforms suggested here boost the PAP's moral legitimacy, they may not be in the immediate or short-term interests of an incumbent that has been in power continuously for more than 60 years. They will only be pursued if the party's leadership acknowledges that the inherent unfairness of Singapore's illiberal democracy works against not just the nation's but also the *party's* long-term interests. Political protectionism shelters the party from the competition, scrutiny and pressure that would increase its chances of long-term success.

Reform requires the PAP to accommodate Singaporeans' desire not just for more diversity and alternative voices in Parliament, but also for greater socioeconomic equality and systemic fairness. After all, if a diversity of parliamentary voices was all that Singaporean voters wanted in GE2020, the increase in the number of Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs) from nine to twelve should have sufficed to discourage them from voting for the opposition. Yet it wasn't.

What has changed?

For more than 40 years after independence, the PAP government thought it got Singapore's politics right by simply minimising it. Apart from periodic elections, the PAP drove out many aspects of democratic politics from public life. It saw governance as a rational pursuit that should only be minimally subject to democratic contest and political competition; instead, it should be undertaken by an enlightened elite insulated from political pressures that they believed would lead to extremism, demagoguery and populism.

Singapore's highly managed democracy allowed a system of technocratic governance, dominated by elites, to formulate rational, far-sighted policies. Any politics or contest of ideas was kept largely *within* the establishment and among trusted elites, a state of affairs described by political scientist Chan Heng Chee in the 1970s as the "politics of an administrative state". This technocratisation of the state was accompanied, even facilitated, by the use of selective coercion against (perceived) threats to PAP dominance. The PAP's ideological and political hegemony was therefore not without victims: dissenters and critics, including even moderates viewed as troublesome, were often dealt with harshly. Most citizens, however, accepted trading away competitive politics and many of the liberties of ordinary democratic societies for a supposedly exceptional government that delivered the good life.

In the wake of GE2020, and in a world profoundly altered by the pandemic, the government can no longer take citizens' political quiescence and compliance for granted. Neither can it assume that it has a monopoly of good ideas to ensure Singapore's success in a world likely to be buffeted by the forces of deglobalisation, efforts to diversify supply chains, the longer-term trend of decarbonisation, and intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. These forces are likely to create a more complex and vexatious external environment for Singapore.

Domestically, demands for political participation and engagement have

risen. The political culture is becoming more contested and competitive, and people are much less likely to accept bullying or high-handedness by an all-powerful state machinery. Society is democratising even if PAP elites have no intention or desire to open the system for wider political participation.

That the PAP received a “clear mandate” and maintained its overwhelming parliamentary dominance is hardly the whole story of GE2020. Just on the votes alone, the election was closer than many realise. If 6,223 voters — fewer than the number of passengers riding through an MRT station in a 10-minute peak-time window — had voted for the opposition in West Coast and East Coast GRCs, the opposition would have won 20 elected seats, double the current number. The PAP’s overall vote share would still have been above 60 percent, but the complexion of the results would have been very different.

Effective governance also requires more than a comfortable electoral or parliamentary majority. Governments need to mobilise collective action, which cannot be done without trust and moral legitimacy. This is why simply focusing on the numbers — “who cares what the vocal minority says, the silent majority don’t care” — does not tell the whole story. PAP’s failure to capture the imaginations of those who do care limits its capacity to govern ably.

How should Singapore’s system of elite, technocratic governance — arguably needed more than ever in a pandemic-disrupted future — adapt to these realities? We suggest that good governance is possible in a democratising Singapore, but only if the PAP government accommodates and adapts to new societal and political realities. In the next decade or so, the most plausible scenario in which good governance is sustained is that of an internally reformed PAP. Such reforms must be undertaken on two levels: policy and political.

Performance legitimacy after the pandemic

Reforms at the policy or technocratic level are probably more straightforward — not because the underlying issues are easy to address, but because they mostly do not depend on the government achieving far-reaching political or ideological change. The changes discussed are well within the PAP’s ideological range.

We saw some reforms in the aftermath of GE2011, in which the PAP won 60.1 percent of the valid votes, its lowest share since independence. A chastened PAP appointed Tharman Shanmugaratnam as the Deputy Prime Minister and allowed him to drive policy reforms in health financing, retirement security, support for the working poor and low-income older citizens,

and skills upgrading. On issues that had contributed to the erosion of support, the government also responded with policy fixes to alleviate public unhappiness. In public housing and transport for instance, the government ramped up development to meet rising demand, while it addressed labour competition from foreign workers with tightened immigration and permanent residency requirements. These policy changes helped the PAP to reverse its slide in electoral support in the General Election of 2015.

A more challenging set of policy issues is involved in adapting the social compact for a pandemic-disrupted world after GE2020. While the supplementary Budget measures rolled out in response to the pandemic-induced recession were laudable, these were emergency measures providing short-term relief to workers and employers. They did not represent a significant shift in long-held governmental assumptions on the relationship between growth and equality, the impact of social protection on economic competitiveness, and the appropriate balance between individual responsibility and public provision.

The current social contract was appropriate for an era characterised by favourable demographics, rapid economic growth, rising incomes across the board, and a society that was relatively homogenous in terms of education attainment. In such a context, policies that prioritised or emphasised individual responsibility, high savings, lean social safety nets, and public housing (rather than income transfers) as the de facto instrument of redistribution were largely successful in ensuring growth with equity. This, in turn, created a benign political environment, giving the government room to pursue long-term, pro-capital and growth-oriented policies. It was only minimally constrained by societal demands for fairer distribution of the fruits of growth.

All this started to change in the 2000s: Singapore's population began to age, social mobility slowed, economic growth became more erratic, a higher influx of foreign workers and immigrants contributed to anxiety and insecurity, and the fruits of growth were distributed far more unevenly than before. These forces were largely external, but they made it much harder for Singapore to achieve the equitable growth that it could sustain before the turn of the century.

Meanwhile, the global financial crisis of 2007-2009, growing strategic distrust between the US and China (expressing itself in trade war in 2019) and the 2020 pandemic may end the forty-year period of globalisation from which Singapore benefited. We should now expect slower globalisation (or even deglobalisation), the diversification of supply chains (possibly undermin-

ing Singapore's role as a major hub in global trade) and decarbonisation, as countries reduce their dependence on fossil fuels. Economic growth already slowed after the global financial crisis; it could slow further now.

Slower growth means that economic performance is less likely to be the major source of legitimacy for the PAP that it has been in the past. The growth-oriented, pro-capital policies of the pre-pandemic era have to be significantly adapted. Increasingly, legitimacy must come from the PAP government's ability to reform Singapore's social compact for this new era. In particular, a greater emphasis on social equity, on prioritising the interests of labour over capital, requires the government to expand social protection significantly and to redistribute more aggressively than before.

There are signs that parts of the PAP recognise this. Two weeks after GE2020, Senior Minister Tharman said that the post-COVID-19 world requires "a certain activism" on the part of the state, and that programmes like unemployment insurance may have to be considered if "we face a situation like many other advanced countries face, where there is a large number of people who are unemployed for a long period". While rejecting the conclusion that states have to be bigger, he argued that governments have to be more activist, and "be very good at the most important things (they) should be doing". These remarks resonate with the Prime Minister's observations (discussed above) that the PAP government would consider strengthening social support.

A conservative sceptic may argue that an expansion of social protection invariably reduces economic competitiveness and erodes Singapore's growth prospects. This need not be so. To begin with, the effect of more social protection on economic performance is an empirical question. What is more important than the level of social spending is the way the programmes are designed, and the incentive effects they create. Among developed countries for instance, it is not the low welfare spenders of southern Europe that are the most prosperous or competitive, but the high welfare spenders of Germany and the Nordic countries. This is not to suggest that more welfare spending leads to more competitive economies and higher growth, but simply to point out that the relationship between the two is complex, defying simple, linear or reductionist arguments. Policy-makers should approach these issues with an open mind, subject their existing biases and assumptions to critical scrutiny, and be prepared to consider previously unthinkable solutions.

Even if we face, at some point, a trade-off between more equity and economic growth, it is not immediately obvious that we should always choose the

latter. Economic growth is not something that societies should pursue in an unfettered, unquestioning way. To the extent that it comes with distributional, environmental or other social costs, growth should be tempered, moderated and balanced with other things that citizens care about. The pandemic should have made this obvious.

Moral legitimacy after GE2020

The second area of reform lies in the political realm. Here, the PAP needs to rebuild its moral legitimacy.

For more than 50 years, the PAP government secured broad-based support on the basis of its performance. This is now changing. Singaporeans now care also about the fairness of our political system and the sufficiency of checks and balances. Trust in government can no longer be assumed; instead, it must be earned through (procedural) accountability, transparency and fair processes. The Workers' Party did well in the 2011 and 2020 General Elections mainly because its appeal for balance and diversity in Parliament — to provide a check on the government, scrutinise its policies and demand greater accountability — struck a chord with the electorate.

After the PAP's large win in GE2015 (with its vote share increasing by nearly 10 percent), the appetite for policy reforms seemed to fizzle out. Instead of the equity-enhancing reforms associated with the PAP government of 2011-2015, the 2015-2020 period was characterised by political manoeuvres that many see as motivated by a deep insecurity, and a desire to tighten the party's grip on politics. These included the change to the Constitution that reserved the Presidential Election in 2017 for Malays; the enactment of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) in 2019; persistent attacks on the Workers' Party's (mis)management of Aljunied-Hougang Town Council; the PAP's normalisation of populist nationalism to attack and vilify critics, including a few outspoken private citizens who pose no political threat; and efforts to demonise the Prime Minister's siblings and sister-in-law.

So even as the PAP entered the pandemic election asking for a “strong mandate” to look after Singaporeans' jobs, health and livelihoods, the hardball tactics of recent years had left a bitter aftertaste among voters, even a sense of revulsion. During the campaign itself, the PAP's bullying tactics and police reports by its supporters against the WP's candidate in Sengkang GRC, Raeesah Khan, also reinforced the impression of unfairness among some middle-ground voters who might have otherwise voted for the PAP.

For this reason, we disagree with the prescription, made by many in the PAP, that to maintain a comfortable electoral majority in future elections, the party need only create jobs and address the livelihood concerns of working-class and middle-class Singaporeans. This might be a reasonable conclusion *if* the political process in Singapore was already mostly fair and competitive — and viewed as such by the majority of Singaporeans across the political spectrum. But the PAP went into GE2020 on the back of an unprecedented drawdown of past reserves (of about S\$50 billion, equivalent to just over 10 percent of GDP) to support jobs and livelihoods. It is hard to imagine a more salient or powerful reminder of the PAP’s capacity to take care of people’s material needs — health, jobs, livelihoods. If, in spite of this, nearly 9 percent of voters swung against the PAP (a bigger swing than in GE2011), the reasonable conclusion must be that some swing voters also care about political fairness and social justice.

Psychologists have found that people are concerned not just about their absolute levels of income, but also fairness. For example, people have a strong equity bias: in repeated experiments of the Ultimatum Game, participants consistently placed a high premium on what they perceived to be fair outcomes, to a point that seems irrational. The upshot of all this is that the PAP should aim to deliver not just economic security, but also a fairer, more contestable political system.

Ideological change

Finally, many reforms suggested in this volume require the PAP to be open to ideological transformation. The PAP’s underlying ideologies of elite governance, the primacy of economic growth, and Singapore’s inherent vulnerabilities are less inspiring and increasingly dissonant for many Singaporeans. Whatever the usefulness of these ideological assumptions (or “hard truths”) in preventing Singaporeans from becoming soft, the PAP government needs to expand its repertoire of narratives to connect with the increasingly large number of well-educated Singaporeans bred on the non-hierarchical, egalitarian ethos of the internet.

As noted above, a commitment to fairness — not only economic fairness, but also political fairness — is critical. Indeed, fairness is one of the most important foundations of a good society. Fairness also means that the PAP must move beyond its reliance on performance legitimacy — that the government’s mandate is gained primarily through good performance — to embrace procedural or systemic legitimacy.

The PAP government also needs to rethink how it implements elite governance, so that Singapore can continue to benefit from an expert-led administration that makes policy based on rational analysis, empirical evidence and long-term thinking. This should be Singapore's enduring advantage in a post-truth world where many societies have grown so disdainful of establishment institutions that they deny science and turn to demagogues. To enjoy broad-based support and trust, an elite government must do more than just dispense goodies, which would eventually compromise the long-term goal of restructuring the economy for a post-pandemic world. Instead, the state needs to provide citizens with what some scholars call "ontological security" — a sense of order, continuity and meaning, in a world that is changing too quickly and unpredictably for most. For many societies, it is already too late: too many citizens have given up on their democratic institutions and found solace in narrow ethno-religious identities, which may help individuals and families, but often cause division and hate when thoughtlessly scaled up to the national level.

Anti-establishment resentment in Singapore is nowhere near as intense. Though it is narrowing, a window of opportunity remains for the PAP to build a more resilient consensus around its model of elite governance. This requires more attention than it has ever given to the *processes* of governance, and not just its results. The state must balance its elite technocracy with democratic deliberation. It has to build a political system that citizens recognise as fair, and not rigged in favour of incumbents. It also has to change its attitude towards critics and detractors, recognising that in a more complex and uncertain world, today's contrarian voices may be tomorrow's conventional wisdom. Within the state, the executive branch must be stopped from brushing aside checks and balances as easily as they currently do. And in the PAP, leaders must rediscover the wisdom of a 'broad church' mentality, and abandon the ideological fortress they have built over the last two decades.

The PAP can thus transform its model from one of elite government dominated by the executive to an elite-led democracy with more accountability and participation. This will not be enough to satisfy Singaporeans who want an even flatter system, but such an evolution would be beyond the PAP's DNA. In the short to medium term, an elite-democratic model offers the party the best hope of both being itself and doing good.

The starting point of this reappraisal must be a recognition that Singapore's educated middle class has become more fragmented, more diverse and hetero-

geneous, and less cohesive ideologically and politically. The constant drum-beat on Singapore's vulnerability, and how important it is that the leadership comprise a carefully selected elite, may only alienate many able Singaporeans, and hold back citizens and the country from fulfilling their full potential.

The first move may well be for the PAP Ministers to take a (large) step back, open up the space for policy and political debate, and see their role as that of a facilitator, convenor and aggregator (of ideas and diverse views). To nudge the process along, the government must liberalise its hitherto restrictive policies on information. For Singaporeans to be engaged in the dilemmas of governance, they must first be aware of those trade-offs. This requires broader societal access to the policy considerations and data currently available only to policy-makers. An open and inclusive democratic polity needs a more transparent information environment.

The PAP also needs to find a new narrative that resonates with younger Singaporeans. At our level of prosperity, a narrative founded mainly on the country's vulnerabilities (important as that may be given geopolitical constraints) is unlikely to inspire many Singaporeans. More than ever, the national narrative must shift to what makes a good society: fairness, equality and resilience.

Structure of the book

The essays here make the case for bold reforms in a progressive, even liberal, direction — not only in policy, but especially in politics. We try to recognise the tensions inherent in a party that has been mostly unchallenged ideologically and politically for 60 years. This is not to say that the party's authoritarian predilections will inevitably lead it to suppress competition. Indeed, we have put this volume together precisely because we think that the party's capacity to adapt is potentially stronger than such tendencies.

The essays are organised in three parts. Part I examines Singapore's environment after the events of 2020. GE2020 points to a changed political culture, while the pandemic has altered our operating environment in far-reaching and profound ways. Emerging from it, we will be pressed to adapt to a radically transformed world. Policy tweaks by the PAP — its usual response to electoral shock — are unlikely to suffice. Future-proofing the party — and increasing Singapore's chances of long-term success — will also require a transformation of our politics.

Part II explores contentious issues related to economic and social justice. As this book was finalised, Parliament debated the President's Address. Much

of that debate centred on inequality and redistribution, a minimum wage, and how current policies on foreign labour affect the interests of Singaporean workers. These technically complex questions, further complicated by questions of ethnic diversity and identity, defy easy answers. We suggest some paths forward.

Parts III makes the case for greater democracy, accountability and tolerance of dissent. We argue that the complex issues confronting Singapore in a pandemic-disrupted world require a newfound willingness on the part of the PAP to engage with uncomfortable ideas and dissenting views. A maturing polity also necessitates a more mature PAP — one that is comfortable with the rough-and-tumble contestations of democratic politics, accepts society's demands for voice and accountability, and avoids the temptation to demonise and vilify its opponents.

We conclude with an essay appealing to the PAP's better angels, arguing that Singapore's future depends on the party's ability to temper our system of elite governance with democratic deliberation and engagement. The pandemic, the sharp recession that followed it and the longer-term disruptions caused by COVID-19 call for 'whole-of-society', not just 'whole-of-government', responses. These require the government to tap on the ideas of an increasingly diverse population, and to embrace an inclusive civic nationalism that welcomes the contributions of all — including critics and dissenters — rather than the reactionary, exclusive and populist nationalism that has been unleashed in recent years.