

The State Prunes the Banyan Tree: Calibrated Liberalisation in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper investigates the Singapore state's varied responses toward dissent and explores the modes of control employed by the state towards varied dissent. We argue that any attempt to understand the politics of control in Singapore is incomplete without understanding how the state calibrates liberalization as a third primary strategy. This study contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of how hybrid regimes can expand their modes of control. It offers a new framework to understand how tools of dominance are calibrated to adapt to a shifting socio-political landscape and calls for viewing liberalization as a method of extending control.

Introduction

“The problem now is that under the banyan tree very little else can grow. When state institutions are too pervasive, civic institutions cannot thrive. It's necessary to prune the banyan trees so other plants can grow...we cannot do without the banyan tree. Singapore will always need a strong centre...we need some pluralism but not too much because too much will also destroy us. In other words, we prune judiciously.” (George Yeo, 1991)¹

The idea of a liberalising political space has been floated and has remained in Singapore politics since the 1980s. After Goh Chok Tong took over the role of Prime Minister from Lee Kuan Yew, he promised more openness in the way the ruling People's Action Party governed, leading to George Yeo's seminal declaration of “pruning the banyan tree”. Rodan expressed scepticism toward such assertions by Goh, however, as he viewed the liberalising attempts to be directed toward strengthening the regime, more than tolerating dissent (Rodan, 2009, p. 61). After the 2011 ‘watershed’ General Election, there was again hope that the political space would be expanded (K. P. Tan, 2012). The PAP lost a Group Representation Constituency for the first time, in addition to attaining the lowest vote share (60.1%) since independence (E. K. B. Tan, 2012). Similar optimism can be seen in the wake of the 2020 General Election.

¹ George Yeo, “Civic Society- Between the Family and the State” (speech, NUS Society Inaugural Lecture in Singapore, June 20, 1991).

Singapore's political space, contrary to various assertions by ruling elites, is constricted. Restrictions to individual liberties exist, and certain activists/intellectuals are subject to draconian actions. Yet, at the same time, there is variation in the state's response toward protests: some are tolerated more than others. The protest in 2013 at Hong Lim Park toward the Population White Paper, which proposed to increase Singapore's resident population to 6.9 million drew a record 4000-8000 participants, was not subjected to coercive responses, for instance, unlike others. This incident can be contrasted with the Thaipusam protest, which drew a harsher response from the state, and the CPF protest, where the government's response was somewhere in between the two. This paper investigates the following question: why is there variation in the state's responses toward dissent? Choosing the three above-mentioned protest movements that attracted public attention and varied responses from the state, the paper complements a bottom-up approach with the more typical statist explanations. We utilize interviews to account for the activists' points of view.

We argue that to understand PAP hegemony, we must first comprehend *the spectrum of control*. We identify the different gradations on this spectrum of control, which are not mutually exclusive in the first place, and can be used in multiple variations as the state deems necessary. We further argue that the strategy of calibrated liberalisation and its position on the spectrum of control is essential to understanding the approach of Singapore state in maintaining hegemony, together with the regime's oft-mentioned strategies of co-optation and low-level repression (Mutalib, 2004). To be sure, what we are arguing is not that calibrated liberalisation has only begun post-2011. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, during the years of PM Goh, the country had witnessed small, but noticeable efforts at liberalisation. We contend that the calibrated liberalisation which took place after 2011 was in essence the same in nature during PM Goh's time; however, the post-2011 era has witnessed

more debates, discussions and hence activism, partly because of the proliferation of social media. As such, we focus on three events which occurred after 2011. Liberalisation is defined as the expansion of the political space for discourse, or what is termed as “deliberative capacity” of a country (Dryzek, 2009). Here, we contend that liberalisation is a strategy, and does not have to either uni-directional or comprehensive: selective liberalisation can and does take place, and de-liberalisation could also occur. Whether the state liberalizes is dependent on two things: one, the nature of the issue at stake and whether it crosses certain fundamentals, and two, the nature of the activism, and whether it is done in an ‘acceptable’ manner.

The findings of this paper are relevant beyond the city-state of Singapore. Lessons from the case can be applied to understand how civil society operates within hybrid regimes or competitive authoritarian states and could help elucidate the various strategies at a regime’s disposal (Giersdorf & Croissant, 2011). Singapore is a useful case study as scholars such as Levitsky and Way have identified it as straddling between a ‘pure’ and ‘competitive’ authoritarian regime (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Indeed, even pure authoritarian countries such as China employ similarly varied methods of control (Dickson, 2016). While Singapore, and in fact every country, is unique in its own regard, the parallels between methods of control utilized by authoritarian regimes everywhere make the findings of this paper quite plausibly germane in other contexts.

Authoritarian Control and the Singapore State

Authoritarian regimes employ a range of strategies to stay in power and it is a myth that they solely employ repression as a means of maintaining control. Modern authoritarian regimes often engage in constant innovation, seeking to finetune their ability to employ repression in a targeted manner as well as employ new strategies to maintain power (Slater, 2010; Morgenbesser, 2020). Modern authoritarians thus often allow for some dissent, with the overall objective of retaining power. The

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) allows journalists to conduct investigative reporting and expose lower-level officials (Lorentzen 2014) while the Vietnamese Communist Party allows national debates on issues where the party's legitimacy is not directly at stake (Schuler, 2020). Middle Eastern regimes too balance repression with careful co-optation of selected Islamic religious scholars to bolster their legitimacy (Pierret, 2013). Truex (2016) points out how the legislature in China is by no means a rubberstamp for the CCP, and officials do raise policy concerns which citizens have. However, these officials only do so for issues which the government is not too particular about, and do not do so for more sensitive topics such as human rights (Truex, 2016). Dickson's study of the CCP yields similar conclusions, as he discusses the range of strategies employed by the Chinese state, including repression, legitimation, and co-optation (Dickson, 2016). Viewed through these lenses, the strategies adopted by the PAP are by no means unique and share commonalities with other authoritarian regimes.

Singapore's semi / soft / competitive authoritarian nature is well-documented. The country combines features of authoritarianism and democracy in its political process: thus, while elections are regular and free, they are not completely fair (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Mutalib, 2000). Restrictions to individual liberties exist and the state can permeate almost every sphere of a citizen's life (Hamilton-Hart, 2000, p. 199; Slater, 2010).

Yet, it must be emphasized that no regime, however powerful, is ever fully insulated from public pressure. As such, strategies of repression cannot be the sole recourse. Barr (2010) argues that "Singapore's ruling elite runs a *finely calibrated system* of social and political control based on a mixture of monitoring and repression by the state, and self-monitoring and self-restraint by all elements of civil society" (Barr, 2010, p. 335). Excessive coercion is not utilized indiscriminately (Yeo, 2002, p. 213). The state adopts a sophisticated approach toward maintaining control,

retaining a wide range of tools of repression and co-optation, and perpetually refining these methods (George, 2007). Numerous draconian tools are at the regime's disposal, from the Internal Security Act to the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, or even the recently passed Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). The PAP has also shown a willingness to utilize defamation suits against its opponents (Sim, 2011). Many formidable opposition politicians – most notably JB Jeyaretnam and Chee Soon Juan – have been at the receiving end of defamation suits, together with others who are not directly involved with partisan politics but have made allegations which the ruling party find unacceptable. Rajah (2010) offers a comprehensive study of the use of the legal apparatus maintaining PAP hegemony. She avers that the use of broad, wide-ranging laws expands the state's capacity to control (Rajah, 2012, p. 17–18). Again, these approaches bear strong resemblance to strategies employed elsewhere, where autocrats employ innovative methods towards extending control via legal means. (Scheppelle, 2018; Morgenbesser, 2020).

Perhaps the most erudite theoretical analysis of coercion and its calibrated nature in Singapore is Cherian George's concept of *calibrated coercion* (George, 2012, 2007). George focuses on two points: firstly, a constant expansion of the methods of control, and secondly, exercising of self-restraint in using these tools to minimize political cost (George, 2007). George notes that while the PAP consciously practices self-restraint, it does so without ever surrendering its most repressive tools like the ISA (George, 2012, p. 99).² The PAP has further managed to adroitly utilize the strategy of co-optation (Rodan, 2006, p. 4). It has managed to both formally and informally co-opt both individuals and organisations into the state machinery, from former government critics to religious organisations (Abdullah, 2013). The literature on authoritarian

²George, "Freedom From the Press,"99.

regimes is replete with the realization that repression is costly, and hence must be used sparingly, and these governments often try to not use repression freely, even if it remains a valuable option (Dickson 2016).

Calibrated Liberalisation: Understanding the Concept

We build on the existing literature by introducing the concept of a ‘spectrum of control’, different calibrated strategies of coercion, co-optation and liberalisation can be employed. These stratagems are used (often simultaneously) in different doses to address various cases of dissent.

Liberalisation, in the context of this paper, is a conscious, sophisticated strategy of control, in which the state chooses to step back from the public sphere, to allow for active discourse and participation by civil society. However, as the term ‘calibrated’ suggests, the state selectively steps back from certain issues being discussed in the public sphere. That means that calibrated liberation represents an attempt to not merely liberalise for the sake of higher ideals, but to liberalise in a calculated manner, and in certain spheres, with the purpose of maintaining overall control (Chua, 1997). In other words, calibrated liberalisation is a strategy employed by authoritarian regimes to maintain power, since their ultimate objective is not to remain authoritarian, but to retain control (Slater and Wong, 2013).

This paper contends that a strategy of calibrated liberalisation does not stand alone, and that the Singapore state’s calibrated approach to political control almost always involves an adjustment of various strategies in tandem: coercion, co-optation and liberalisation. Coercion of course, is the most politically costly of the three, and the state uses it judiciously. Still, it has no qualms utilizing such tactics when it needs to: for instance, the invocation of POFMA against many opposition individuals after the legislation was passed (Abdullah, 2020). Co-optation proves to be a less

costly, and politically palatable, approach toward maintaining control (Abdullah, 2013; George, 2005). Increasingly, (selective) liberalisation becomes a viable strategy. Calibrated liberalisation is also more than episodic, even if it is most reflected in specific episodes: the government decides whether to liberalise in a calibrated way based on principles and issues, not mere protests, and if it does so for a protest, the space for further activity in that issue area is expanded. Calibrated liberalisation is also instructive as it is more than just deciding not to be punitive: by allowing for a protest to be held, a signal is sent to civil society activists that the both the issue at hand and the manner of protest is acceptable, and hence, liberalisation is allowed to take place, within those specific spheres.

Calibrated liberalisation must be understood within the preceding discussions. The question then arises: when would the PAP selectively liberalise?

We postulate that calibrated liberalisation occurs when issues fundamental to its legitimacy are not at stake. Here, two facets to its legitimacy are identified. The first is the integrity of the leaders. For the PAP, this is a non-negotiable matter: for anyone who impugn the character of the PAP ministers, they should be prepared to defend such allegations in court or face the full wrath of the law (Rajah, 2012, pp. 17–20; Mauzy & Milne, 2002, pp. 134–136). People who allege that the PAP is corrupt, or has engaged in an abuse of power, would be dealt with summarily, and the party makes no apologies for adopting such a harsh approach in this regard. The party has always maintained that as a small country, the most important resource it has is the quality of leadership, and no stone must be left unturned to ensure that not only leaders are not corrupt, they are not perceived to be so.

The second concerns race and religion. The party's legitimacy has been in large part built around the fact it has ensured stability in the country, both economically and socially. The regime has

always asserted that race and religion are fault-lines in society, and that these forces need to be consciously and conscientiously managed (E. K. B. Tan, 2008, pp. 58–59; Abdullah, 2013, pp. 1182–1183). The government has always adopted an ultra-cautious approach toward racial and religious matters, and any whiff of racial-religious discontent would be immediately tackled. The state is more than ready to utilize coercive measures in this regard. Ultimately, the government views itself as the final arbiter when it comes to racial and religious matters and is not willing to tolerate challenges to its authority on these matters (Prakash, 2020; Vasu & Prakash, 2018). Race and religion, and the personal integrity of the leaders, are the two red flags when it comes to decisions on liberalisation. In these two spheres, the state has not embarked on liberalisation. In spheres which do not directly affect the legitimacy of the regime in these forms, it is more willing to liberalise in a calibrated manner.

Calibrated liberalisation became a necessary part of the state’s repertoire especially after 2011. Following the 2011 General Elections (GE), many were optimistic about impending political change. Observers discussed a shift towards a *new normal* with a more liberal version of politics (Tan, 2012). Some speculated that 2011 would “likely be regarded as the starting point of (an) epochal political transition” (E. K. B. Tan, 2012, p. 265). Others interpreted the elections as demonstrative of unhappiness with the PAP (Ortmann, 2011, p. 153).

While the 2015 election was more typical of the PAP’s dominance, it does not seem to have reversed the ‘lesson’ that the government had to learn in terms of showing humility. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the 2015 GE, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said he was “deeply humbled” by the victory.³ He admitted that “issue in this election has been the desire for diverse

³ “Good result for PAP but an excellent result for Singapore’: PM Lee,” Channel NewsAsia, Sep 12, 2015, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/specialreports/sgvotes2015/latest/good-result-for-pap-but/2121698.html>.

voices to be heard and given more weight” and the government had to be more open to differences, while maintaining the system.⁴ This message of humility and openness was later repeated by the Prime Minister in two open letters to the PAP MPs and on the party website. Other key leaders within the PAP also adopted ‘humility’ as an important feature of governance. Ambassador at Large Chan Heng Chee noted in her analysis of the 2015 election results that “in the ‘new normal’ of Singapore politics, expect the ‘old normal’ but with an electorate that is now more demanding, seeking participation (a voice), and more accountability than ever before.”⁵ Her observations ring even truer after GE2020, where the opposition won a record ten seats, and the PAP’s vote share was reduced to 61.2%. These elections seemed to impress upon the political elites that more humility and willingness to listen were needed. A strategy of calibrated liberalisation in which the state increasingly recedes strategically thus becomes increasingly vital so as to accommodate the aspirations of citizens while retaining control.

The calibrated liberalisation approach has some obvious benefits. Firstly, it allows for an outlet for the venting of sentiments and angst. In this way, citizens need not express their unhappiness through other means, or worse – from the PAP’s perspective – at the ballot box. Secondly, it provides a good gauge of public sentiments on certain issues. This would give the government the feedback it would need to reconsider certain policies.

A few characteristics of PAP’s calibrated liberalisation strategy need to be emphasized. Firstly, while a strategy of calibrated liberalisation can be both proactive and reactive, since 2011, it has usually been used in a reactive manner. The state considers the sentiments on the ground

⁴ “Good result for PAP but an excellent result for Singapore’: PM Lee,” Channel NewsAsia, Sep 12, 2015, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/specialreports/sgvotes2015/latest/good-result-for-pap-but/2121698.html>.

⁵ Chan Heng Chee, “The strategic voter in the ‘new normal’”, *The Straits Times*, September 19, 2015.

(physically and online), and then decide on pursuing calibrated liberalisation. The state has always attempted to define the boundaries of acceptable dissent, and has been quite successful in doing so. A culture of self-censorship has thus been created amongst the citizenry, as fear of state reprisal forces people to think many times before saying anything mildly controversial (K. P. Tan, 2007). A reactive approach to liberalisation makes activists unsure if the state is going to adopt a coercive response or would be more liberal in dealing with them.

The second key characteristic of calibrated liberalisation is to respond in accordance to the level of threat, which is determined by the issue the protest is about, and who exactly are involved. For matters which do not threaten the state's legitimacy, more room for dissent is allowed. If a protest movement is spearheaded by non-controversial activists, those without affiliations to political parties or who do not have a record of butting heads with the government, it is more likely to be tolerated. The third characteristic of calibrated liberalisation is that it is seldom used by itself. This strategy therefore often involves both stepping back and allowing for contestation and activism in the public sphere, and with coercive and co-optative strategies as well. We introduce the notion of a spectrum of control to help understand the concept of calibrated liberalisation.

The Spectrum of Control

The spectrum of control refers to a range of varied strategies that can overlap and can be used together to deal with any particular protest. The spectrum of control is arranged according to level of draconian measures adopted by the state: with liberalisation at one end and coercion at the other. Co-optation is placed in the centre as co-optative strategies can co-exist with both liberal and coercive features (Abdullah, 2013). Co-optation refers to the incorporation of individuals and/or organisations into the state machinery (Abdullah, 2013), and is thus different from liberalisation.

Essentially, these various theoretical strategies of coercion, co-optation and liberalisation all exist at separate points on a single spectrum of control.

Next, we will investigate three protest movements: the National Library Board (NLB) incident in 2014, the Central Provident Fund (CPF) protests in 2013, and the Thaipusam saga in 2015 to understand the state’s utilization of calibrated liberalisation as part of a broader approach of control. Using the concept of a spectrum of control, it is argued that government strategy towards these protest movements may be put in the form of the following table.

#	Protest	Calibrated Liberalisation	Calibrated Co-optation	Calibrated Coercion	Red Flags
1	NLB Protest	High	Low	Low	Absent
2	CPF	Medium	Medium	Medium <i>-Focused upon individual activists</i>	Personal integrity of political leaders - Limited to the accusations of an individual protestor
3	Thaipusam	Low	Low	High	Race/Religion

Figure 1

Each of these cases provide some fascinating insights into the state’s overall strategies of managing protest and dissent. The National Library Board Protest involved an issue on which the state had no firm stance, and was willing to allow contestations on, which was homosexuality. The Thaipusam protest by certain members of the Indian community was not taken lightly as it involved a religious community asserting its demands to the state. The Central Provident Fund saga is instructive, as it highlights the complexities of understanding state responses toward these protests, as will be explicated later.

The National Library Board Protest: Calibrated Liberalisation in Practice

In July 2014, a furore erupted after it was revealed that, upon the request of a conservative citizen, the National Library Board (NLB) had removed two children's books from its collection, for not promoting themes which did not conform to the traditional definition of a family unit. The books were deemed to be normalizing same-sex relationships. A third book was subsequently removed. NLB said that it took a "pro-family" and "cautious" approach for the children's section.⁶ The decision was roundly criticised by civil society groups and activists. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the Minister of Communications and Information backed the NLB's decision, suggesting that the decision had been made after deep consideration and that it was based on "community norms".⁷

Despite widespread criticism from civil society groups and activities, the Minister's support appeared to strengthen the NLB's resolve. While its initial response of withdrawing the books could be seen as mildly forceful, it followed up by announcing its decision to pulp the books after withdrawing them, instead or selling or donated them, as per the norm, due to apprehensions that the books were inappropriate for young readers. The move, apart from making a firm interpretation of public morality, also clearly picked policy guidelines over public sensitivity.⁸

Predictably, this only served to exacerbate public disapproval, as more sections of the public as well as academics, writers and members of the arts community began to vocally protest the pulping of books. Notable artists and authors also began to boycott events supported by the NLB. Playwright Ovidia Yu stepped down from the steering committee of the Singapore Writers Festival while other writers like Dr Gwee Li Sui, Dr Adrian Tan, Mr Felix Cheong and Mr Prem Anand withdrew from a NLB panel discussion.⁹ In a similar vein, three designated judges for the

⁶ "NLB pulls two children's books that 'don't promote family values'", Today Newspaper, July 9, 2014.

⁷ "NLB's decision to withdraw books based on 'community norms': Yaacob.", TODAY Newspaper, 12 July 2014.

⁸ NLB saddened by Criticism. But it is not changing decision to remove three 'unsuitable' children's books: CEO.", The Sunday Times, July 13, 2014.

⁹ "NLB's decision to withdraw books based on 'community norms': Yaacob.", TODAY Newspaper, 12 July 2014.

Singapore Literature Prize stepped down and released a critically worded condemnation of NLB's actions (Tay, 2015, p. 12).

This social disapproval revealed itself most thoroughly in an innovative protest on the 13th of July, 2014 when around 400 people gathered to register a peaceful statement of protest against the NLB's actions by arranging for copies of the withdrawn books available to the public for perusal.¹⁰

The protest was organised through the Facebook group, *Singapore's Parents Against Library Censorship*, which had been set up in the aftermath of the NLB's decision.

The protest was novel for several reasons. Firstly the organisers, writer Jolene Tan, 31, and Ms Germaine Ong, 30 took pains to make plain that they had no interest in engaging in a unruly or disruptive protest of any kind.¹¹ They did this by framing the protest in family-centric terms with both organisers, as mothers of young children, organising around the concept of bringing young kids together to read in a reading-group like fashion, much like activities organised at the library.

The event, titled 'Lets Read Together' was carefully orchestrated as planned. For an event organised in protest, there were no public speeches, slogans chanted or signs denouncing the NLB or the government. Instead the protestors set up a reading corner for the children and highlighted the willingness of many parents to read these allegedly inappropriate books to their children. Stuffed penguin dolls, symbolizing one of the books, *Tango Makes Three* were set up and displayed in a highly visible fashion along with the banned books. The event received significant publicity and press attention and was attended by many luminaries from the arts scene as well as noted civil society activists.

¹⁰ "A novel protest gets read out at the library." *My Paper*, July 14, 2014

¹¹ Interview with protest organizer, 27 October 2015

Concurrently, a debate raged online between more conservative and liberal sections of society. Many netizens, sympathetic to the protest changed their profile pic to picture of three penguins with a caption saying, 'Free my library' (fig. 5). Facebook groups and blog articles championing either cause also proliferated the social media landscape and the national spreadsheet, The Straits Times, noted that that the NLB saga had attracted the highest number of responses via letters to the Forum page of the newspaper, cementing its place as the most contentious and fiercely debated issue in the public sphere.¹²



Figure 2

Another unusual observation was the notable difference of opinion within the political leadership of the PAP. While Minister Yaacob Ibrahim and Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean publicly defended the NLB, other leaders within the government voiced dissatisfaction with the decision. Most notably, Member of Parliament Hri Kumar, expressed disapproval with the NLB's decision to pulp the books in a Facebook note titled "Pulped Friction".¹³ Hri Kumar's willingness to criticise

¹² "It's about who decides what's right or wrong." *The Sunday Times*, Jul 20, 2014.

¹³ "MP Hri Kumar disagrees with NLB move to withdraw children's titles." *TODAY Newspaper*, Jul 17, 2014.

NLB's decision after principal leaders in government had defended it, is truly *sui generis*. Rarely does the party allow for a public show of disunion of opinion within the ranks of the ruling elite.

Hri Kumar's public declaration of disapproval, along with the incidents that we have observed following NLB's initial decision allows us to make certain contentions. Firstly, the state's willingness to tolerate open debate on the NLB saga adumbrates that it does not perceive the issue to be of key importance, capable of destabilizing its overall control and legitimacy (Chua, 2014, pp. 26–44). Any such issue of core importance would not be allowed a public display of disagreement within the PAP. That the state did not consider its core interests threatened by the saga was also evident from the fact that the robust debate both online and within the mainstream media took place without its looming, pervasive presence. Unlike the other case studies employed in this study, there were no discernible attempts at coercively controlling the conversation or to co-opt the conversation through highly regulated official channels and grassroots networks. When the political leadership did offer opinions, they were neither imperious nor uniform. The state had performatively stepped back and allowed for a vociferous public debate without its pronounced presence. It had acquiesced to an organised protest (albeit a highly tame one) outside the designated boundaries of Hong Lim Park for the first time since independence. Organisers of the protest expressed surprise at the ease in which they received a permit from the Police and the NLB to stage the protest at the Central Public Library atrium.¹⁴ The state simply did not seem willing to employ their usual cocktail of coercive and co-optative strategies to control a heated public debate.

We thus contend that there was a distinctly observable strategy of calibrated liberalisation at play. The choice to allow for an active debate without actively policing it allowed for the government

¹⁴ Interview with protest organizer, 27 October 2015

to adopt the more authoritative position of adjudicator. Given the paternalistic socio-political culture of Singapore, as the debate raged on without reaching a consensus, both sides began to actively petition the state to intervene and rule in their favour. There were also growing calls from more neutral sections for the state to intercede and deliver a judgement of compromise that would be sufficiently satisfactory for both parties.

The state obliged and on 18th July, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, in a visible divergence from his initial show of complete support, declared that the NLB had been instructed to return two of the three banned titles to the library shelves.¹⁵ In an attempt to find compromise, Dr Ibrahim reiterated the NLB's right to decide which books should be made available to children in public libraries and as such noted that the returned books would be placed in the adult section instead.¹⁶ In a further act of displaying balance, the minister also instructed the NLB to engage in a review of its administrative guidelines and protocols for dealing with public criticism and feedback of books.

Calibrated liberalisation could be employed as the protest did not raise either of the two red flags we have suggested earlier. The protests were also not led by opposition party leaders, religious groups/individuals or civil society activists whom the government considered a threat. We can thus hypothesize that the strategy of calibrated liberalisation is regulated by designating the level of liberalisation in relation to the levels of threat perceived by the state. The NLB protests, as we have discussed, was relatively not perceived as a threat and as such not seen as a highly risky for the deployment of a calibrated liberalisation approach. The protest orbited LGBT issues as well as the resentment from the arts and literary community over the pulping of books. Neither issues were seen as threatening to the legitimacy of the state. The protest was also not directly primed as a

¹⁵ The third book, "Who's in My Family" had already been pulped.

¹⁶ Yaacob Ibrahim, Facebook post. July 17, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/yaacobibrahim/posts/800605309973979>.

critique of the government but rather, the actions of the NLB, which is a not a vital state institution. The employment of calibrated liberalisation in this instance also involves an electoral component as well: by not taking any sides, the ruling party neither alienated the liberal nor conservative factions within society (Abdullah, 2018).

Thaipusam and Drums: The Recourse to Coercion

The NLB saga can be contrasted with the Thaipusam saga. Thaipusam is a festival celebrated by Hindus, in which a foot procession takes place for about 3km near Serangoon Rd in Singapore(Kong, 2005, p. 231). Although religious foot processions are banned in the country, an exception has been made for Thaipusam since the introduction of the law in 1973 (Sinha, 2011, p. 211). What Thaipusam had not been exempted from, however, was a ban on musical instruments. The government justifies the ban in terms of maintain stability, and the potential ruckus that could come out of allowing the instruments. The move had been criticized by many within the Hindu community for a long time (Sinha, 2011, p. 224).

The arrest of three devotees, Ramachandra Chandramohan, Jaya Kumar Krishnasamy and Gunasegaran Rajendran on 3 February 2015, during the Thaipusam festival after a scuffle with members of the police force, is the point of study in this paper. The arrest triggered allegations of police brutality, religious discrimination, and incited a wave of sympathy for the arrestees online. The police alleged that the detainees were behaving in a disorderly manner and reeked of alcohol. Chandramohan disputed the account, claiming that the issue between them and the police was about the ban on musical instruments. He further denied the allegations that he had been drinking, and criticized the police and media for their assertions.¹⁷ He also said that the police had been

¹⁷ “News reports wrong about Thaipusam incident, says devotee”, The Online Citizen, February 7, 2015, <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2015/02/news-reports-wrong-about-thaipusam-incident-says-devotee/>.

unnecessarily violent toward his sister-in-law, who lodged a police report on the matter. This claim by Chandramohan generated sympathy toward his sister-in-law's plight. Subsequently, the incident generated mass debate amongst the Hindu community on the ban of musical instruments, as most people felt it was triggered by the ban. As the conversation snowballed online, it was met by demands and a petition to make Thaipusam a public holiday.¹⁸

In response, the state was uncompromising. First was the use of calibrated and strategic coercion. The most robust levels of coercion were levelled on the three men who had engaged in the fracas with the police. All three were charged with disorderly behaviour and hit with a slew of other charges. Such a muscular approach, with little mercy is aligned with the state's infamously low tolerance for transgressions with law and order. Despite a groundswell of sympathy for the three men, the state chose to clearly articulate a firm, repressive position to anyone who would consider an act of collective physical action as protest.

The government's strategy in dealing with the proliferating protest online was more robust and involved the mobilization of a greater range of strategies across the spectrum of control. The state first pursued a series of tacit threats focused on enshrining the sensitivity of issues involving religion and the potential for resultant social tensions as well as the possibility of a stern state response to prevent such a scenario. Minister of Law, K. Shanmugam responded to the growing umbrage online by noting that instead of feeling victimised by a ban on musical instruments during Thaipusam, Hindus should realise that only they had permission to hold religious processions in Singapore and that no other religious community was "given this privilege".¹⁹ Minister S. Iswaran,

¹⁸ Sangeetha Thanapa's Facebook post on "Thaipusam & the right to cultural and religious expression in Singapore," accessed on May 30, 2015. See also, "Make Thaipusam a religious holiday in Singapore," Change.org, accessed June 1, 2015, <https://www.change.org/p/mdm-halimah-yacob-make-thaipusam-a-religious-holiday-in-singapore>.

¹⁹ "Shanmugam clears the air on Thaipusam," The Straits Times, February 7, 2015.

also further elucidated the government's position when he indicated that the ban on playing musical instruments during such processions, in place since 1973, was enforced due to a history of skirmishes and violence between rival groups and was deemed necessary to prevent disorder and disturbances to devotees and the religious procession²⁰ (Sykes, 2015, pp. 394–404).

The overall effect of all the repeated warnings from the state was a chilling one. An experienced activist who had intended to have a protest rally at Hong Lim Park (the designated Speakers' Corner) was interviewed. The planned protest – which was not allowed to proceed by the police – was deemed to be too sensitive as it dealt with religious matters. The activist himself admitted feeling wary and apprehensive that given the sensitivities at play, he would be censured and crucified if there were indeed “some ugly scenes” at the planned protest.²¹ The palpable anxieties of this activist and others interviewed suggests that public conversations and debates, let alone protests, about issues involving race and religion remain deeply taboo with a looming fear of disciplinary actions from the state deeply entrenched within Singapore society. Despite the government's strong initial reaction and the forced cancellation of the planned protests at Hong Lim Park, there were no accompanied attempts to stifle conversations and debates online, both on social media as well as on various blogs. Interviewees suggested that chilling effect generated by the government's earlier actions meant that discussions had simmered down and was limited to a much more modest online community of netizens. This meant that the state did not have to take such an actively draconian approach any further.

The following year, the music ban was relaxed for the Thaipusam procession after a series of

²⁰ “Street procession rules, including music ban, help keep events safe and peaceful: S. Iswaran,” *The Straits Times*, February 6, 2015.

²¹ Interview with protest organiser, 27 October 2015

closed-door discussion with activists, devotees and community leaders.²² The state in the years proceeding, has continued to relax the restrictions methodically.²³ To be clear, the government did not apologize for its harsh measures in 2015, as it had always argued tough decisions were needed in dealing with race and religion. The state made the concession on its own terms, proving that while coercion was the tool of choice in the short term in 2015, it was willing to adjust its policies and accommodate community interests on its own terms (Ong, 2016). The state's strategy of using coercion in the short term, slowly co-opting stakeholders on its terms and eventually adjudicating that accommodation was possible reflects the calibrated manner by which control is enforced.

CPF Protests: Of Defamation Suits and Simultaneous Compromise

On 8 May 2014 the Central Provident Fund (CPF) board and the Ministry of Manpower that the CPF minimum sum would be raised from S\$148,000 to S\$155,000 from July that year.²⁴ The CPF is a compulsory savings scheme for Singaporeans, and the rise in the minimum sum meant that it became more difficult for Singaporeans to access the funds upon retirement. This caused frustration among middle- and lower-income Singaporeans.²⁵

It was against this backdrop that blogger-activist Roy Ngerng posted an article on his blog, *The Heart Truths*, regarding the CPF and its perceived inadequacies, titled "Where Your CPF Money Is Going: Learning From The City Harvest Trial." In the article, Ngerng drew comparisons

²² The relaxation of the ban allowed for live music to be played at three fixed parts of the procession. For more information, refer to: "Live music at Thaipusam after 42 years," *The Straits Times*, January 19, 2016.

²³ "Authorities relax rules for this year's Thaipusam after feedback from Hindu community," *Today Newspaper*, January 13, 2019

²⁴ "CPF minimum sum to be raised to S\$155,000 from July," *TODAY Newspaper*, May 8, 2014. For a simple understanding of the Minimum Sum, kindly refer to "What is CPF Minimum Sum? 7 Things to know," *The Straits Times*, Jan 21, 2015.

²⁵ For a clear articulation on the CPF system and the various criticisms it attracted, refer to Lim Pei Ying and Tan Shin Bin, "Saving the CPF: restoring public trust in Singapore's retirement savings system," *Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy* (2015).

between how the state managed CPF funds and the City Harvest Church trial in which church leaders were alleged to have misappropriated funds. (Tay, 2015, pp. 25–26).

On 18 May 2014, the Prime Minister’s lawyers sent Ngerng a letter of demand, calling him to remove the post. PM Lee’s lawyer Davinder Singh suggested that the post was making a false allegation against his client, and was libellous.²⁶ Ngerng was asked to remove the post or face a defamation suit, which PM Lee’s legal team eventually launched on 28 May 2014, after a back and forth with Ngerng.

The defamation lawsuit earned Ngerng sympathy from the ground.²⁷ While many had issues with the wording of Ngerng’s post, it was evident that he had tapped into significant public resentment towards the way the CPF has been handled. The debate in the public sphere on the CPF thus intensified. For a while, Ngerng earned ‘martyr status’ amongst many agitated Singaporeans who admired his courage for speaking up. Ngerng appealed to the public to assist him in paying for his legal funds which was supposed to be around S\$70 000; by 4 June, he had amassed S\$81 000, demonstrating the public support he had (Tay, 2015, pp. 25–26).

It is worth noting that Roy was not the only one criticizing the government about the CPF. No doubt, his was the most forceful and controversial voice, since he made tremendous allegations against the Prime Minister, but other members of the public were angry about the CPF too. Coercion by a defamation suit was thus seen by many as an attempt to stifle debate over the CPF issue, and not just to ensure Ngerng did not speak on the issue anymore.

²⁶ “PM Lee demands apology and compensation from blogger,” *The Straits Times*, May 22, 2014.

²⁷ Banyan, “Opinion in Singapore: A butterfly on a wheel”, *The Economist*, June 13, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2014/06/opinion-singapore>.

On 7 June 2015, thousands of Singaporeans attended the “Return Our CPF” protest, which essentially called for greater transparency and flexibility on the CPF and its usage.²⁸ Organiser Han Hui Hui claimed that 6,000 people attended the protest, while *The Straits Times* estimated the crowd “was about 2,000” strong.²⁹ While Ngerng had initially been one of the organisers, on the advice of his lawyers, he withdrew from this position, but chose to remain as a speaker. Other speakers were Han herself, former Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) member Vincent Wijesingha, 2011 presidential candidate Tan Kin Lian, Reform Party chief Kenneth Jeyaretnam, and statistician Leong Sze Hian. SDP leader Chee Soon Juan, who was overseas, had his speech read by blogger Ariffin Sha.

The government’s response to the protest at Hong Lim Park and the furore online differed from its responses to both the NLB and Thaipusam sagas. Unlike the Thaipusam case, the state did not react aggressively to the rally. The protest rally was allowed to happen. Sources close to the organisers said that they faced virtually no obstacles from the state.³⁰ Online discussions were also not subjected to much coercion. Most major alternative news sites online and many socio-political blogs published opinion pieces on the issue. Meanwhile, Facebook groups like “Return our CPF,” “In Solidarity with Roy Ngerng, The Heart Truths” and “CPF broken promises” all ensured Singaporeans had outlets to air their grievances.

Indeed, there seemed to be an acknowledgment that the CPF issue did need to be debated. After the protest rally, there was greater public engagement from the state. Then Manpower Minister Tan Chuan Jin took to platforms like Facebook and the Ministry of Manpower’s (MOM) blog to

²⁸ “Speakers at CPF protest call for flexibility, better returns, greater transparency for CPF scheme” *The Straits Times*, June 7, 2014.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Other online sources such as *Yahoo News Singapore* estimated the turnout at closer to 3000.

³⁰ Interview with source close to CPF protest organisers, 1 November 2015. Other close sources indicated similar opinions.

defend the CPF system and to explain what he alleged were misconceptions with regards to it.³¹ In his post, the Minister argued that “the CPF system is a good and fair one that is a more sustainable system than most other retirement schemes... (and) CPF funds are absolutely safe.” PAP MPs also “called for a holistic review of the CPF system in Parliament,” an indication that they were acknowledging the saliency of the issue.³² MOM subsequently announced “the setting up of a 13 member CPF Advisory Panel consisting of academics, financial industry experts and representatives from unions and the grassroots and social sectors” in response to the MPs’ requests.³³ The CPF Advisory Panel said it would conduct discussions with Singaporeans for feedback.³⁴

The state announced several feedback forums with party elites, facilitated by grassroots organisations. PAP MP Hri Kumar held a dialogue session with his constituents that allowed for a honest and candid exchange on the CPF. *The Straits Times* noted that “the volley of questions and concerns rarely faltered, and most centred on the Minimum Sum, and the monthly pay-outs during retirement.”³⁵

The general feeling was that these forums proof that the state was heeding public opinion. This sentiment was bolstered when the Prime Minister spent a significant portion of his annual National Day Rally discussing the CPF. At the rally, the Prime Minister “acknowledged Singaporeans concerns and pledged to change parts of the CPF system” while predictably defending the overall

³¹ Tan Chuan Jin, “The Truth About Our CPF and the Minimum Sum”, The Manpower Blog, May 25, 2014, <http://momsingapore.blogspot.sg/2014/05/the-truth-about-our-cpf-and-minimum-sum.html>.

³² Tay, Policy and Political Developments, 9.

³³ Ibid.,

³⁴ “CPF proposals: Advisory panel offers more ideas to make retirement fund more flexible,” *The Straits Times*, Feb 4, 2015.

³⁵ “Questions and more questions on CPF at dialogue session,” *The Straits Times*, June 15, 2014.

system.³⁶ The Prime Minister's acknowledgement showed that the state had recognized the legitimacy of the concerns of the protestors. CPF protestors interviewed concurred. One interviewee said that "PM addressing it during the National day rally showed that it's being looked into seriously" and that "it also showed how the government had managed to control the narrative and react to the protests very well."³⁷ Another seasoned activist articulated:

"The government responded well. They had a lot of focus groups talking about it. Some MPs also spoke to their residents about it in discussion sessions. I think the government has looked at changes. It's still ongoing but its promising...The government took action and used it (the protest) as a listening platform and started their own conversation with focus groups and their grassroots. They took over the conversation!"³⁸

The state adopted a nuanced and calibrated strategy toward the CPF protests, using a multitude of options on the spectrum of control. After it realized that its initial coercive approach resulted in somewhat a backlash, the state allowed a vibrant discussion to take place in the public sphere. It further did not attempt to stifle the protest movement in Hong Lim Park. The state's pursuit of calibrated liberalisation in this instance is especially noteworthy. It pursued co-optation as a strategy, using its extensive grassroots organisations. Offering access to political elites meant that it was able to co-opt the conversation, and hence, decided the terms and boundaries of the conversation. Thus, it was willing to tolerate discussion and listen to ideas, but under its watchful eye.

³⁶ Chun Han Wong, "Singapore to Revise Parts of Pension Plan Amid Retirement Concerns," *The Wall Street Journal* accessed on July 11, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/singapore-to-revise-parts-of-pension-plan-amid-retirement-concerns-1408300084>.

³⁷ Interview with source close to CPF protest organisers, 3 November 2015

³⁸ Interview with source close to CPF protest organisers, 27 October 2015.

The success of the state's calibrated strategy quickly became apparent. Subsequent protests saw huge dips in the number of attendees.³⁹ One interviewee who attended the 7 June rally, but did not attend subsequent protests, explained:

“There seemed no reason to go Hong Lim and scold the government when it was obvious they were interested in listening and changing things. If they don't listen, we scold, they listen also we scold, the protests will end up losing effect. We must be willing to say that they are doing a good job when they admit things need to change and they are trying to change.”⁴⁰

The strategy toward the CPF protests best represents the range of calibration available to the government on the spectrum of control. At the start, the PAP regime used a coercive strategy against Ngerng, as the integrity of the PM was impugned. At the same time, recognizing that ground sentiment on the CPF issue itself was real, the state responded with a careful liberalisation of the public space, and by co-opting the issue itself.

Broader Lessons for Comparative Politics

This paper has outlined the strategies of control for the Singapore state. It introduces the concept of *calibrated liberalisation*, which must be viewed within the *spectrum of control*. The PAP's approach is not always draconian, and in fact usually highly measured and sophisticated (Ortmann, 2012).

This paper does not make the claim that Singapore is unique, or that the PAP's strategy is exceptional. Indeed, such strategies are commonplace for competitive authoritarian regimes, simply because there is a need to be more adroit (Gerschewski, 2013; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007).

³⁹ “Hundreds attend protest against CPF and Medishield Life policies, *The Straits Times*, July 12, 2014.

⁴⁰ Interview with protest participant, 23 October 2015.

The ruling party in such regimes cannot just rely on the knuckleduster approach, as it could easily be punished by the electorate in elections. As such, it must complement authoritarian features with strategies of liberalisation. Such an analysis is not unique to competitive authoritarian regimes: even ‘pure’ authoritarian countries cannot use repression all the time, as it can be costly (Slater & Fenner, 2011, pp. 20–21). As mentioned earlier, Dickson (2016) highlights the tools of control at the regime’s disposal in China, arguing that the Chinese Communist Party cleverly utilizes the strategies of repression, co-optation and legitimisation. The Saudi royal family has managed to stay in power for the longest time, because it has been able to co-opt the Islamic religious elites, while giving some concessions to them in shaping the religious outlook of ordinary citizens (Al-Rasheed, 2015). Other scholars have developed sophisticated theories on the strategies of co-optation which authoritarian countries have embarked on (Bertocchi and Spagat, 2001; Gerschewski, 2013). The point here is that regimes will never be able to stay in power through pure and outright repression. Indeed coercion and violence is often politically costly and often spark wider resistance when employed in an expansive and haphazard fashion (Slater, 2010). This is even more true, almost by definition, for competitive authoritarian regimes, as there are more avenues for contestation by opposition parties, civil society, and ordinary citizens (Froissart, 2014; Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007; Lewis, 2013).

The concept of calibrated liberalisation thus becomes useful for the purposes of analysing how authoritarian regimes maintain power. Where and how exactly a regime ‘opens up’ becomes instructive. Equally key is understanding the areas in which the state has not liberalised, which tell us a lot about the core pillars an authoritarian regime stakes its legitimacy on. Indeed, this is what we have attempted to do through the concept of calibrated liberalisation. Calibrated liberalisation posits that (competitive) authoritarian regimes would be willing to liberalise in spheres which do

not threaten its legitimacy. These spheres of course differ from country to country: the point is not to say that all authoritarian regimes would be more amenable to allow for LGBT activism, as authoritarian regimes which rely on conservative religious legitimacy would obviously not, but rather, to demonstrate that each regime has what it considers to be its core principles, and it is in those areas that liberalisation is less likely to take place. Furthermore, just because an authoritarian entity has started to liberalize in some areas, it does not mean that the liberalisation is cosmetic and performative, as it could very well be that the regime has indeed liberalized. However, the liberalisation process would likely be a selective and limited one, as the concept of calibrated liberalisation shows. Liberalising in one arena, which is not key to the regime's legitimacy, but where citizens would be happy or grateful with said liberalisation as it concerns an issue that is close to their hearts, would be a most viable strategy for a regime in its pursuit of remaining in power. It is not merely a matter of whether or when to coerce; authoritarian regimes often have to decide whether and when to liberalise.

It is hoped that future research, whether on Singapore or other hybrid regimes, will utilize the concept of calibrated liberalisation, especially towards understanding the conditions under which a regime chooses to liberalize, and what the red lines for a particular regime are, as it provides a useful analytical tool to evaluate how states maintain power and control beyond outright repression.

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