## 1 Singapore's Political Development through Cultural and Ideological Lenses

Since achieving independence in 1965, Singapore has today become one of the most economically prosperous countries with one of the most open economies in the world (Segarra, 2017). And yet, affluent Singapore's essentially parliamentary political system, dominated by an authoritarian state concerned fundamentally with existential matters of national survival and economic prosperity, has not evolved straightforwardly into a more competitive and expansively participatory democratic system that privileges human rights and freedoms. Modernization theory – still influential in the field of comparative politics – predicts such a transition (Inglehart and Welzel, 2009; Peerenboom, 2008; Fukuyama, 1992). American academic Christopher Lingle (1996), noting a gradual decline of electoral support for the ruling party, critiqued as unsustainable Singapore's 'authoritarian capitalism', which he described as a combination of selective economic freedoms with tough political control that rewarded loyalty and sycophancy.

Much less confident about Singapore's path to democratization and liberalization was political scientist Hussin Mutalib (2004: 28), who described Singapore as the most illiberal of democracies. He noted the ruling party's 'abhorrence of a parliamentary Opposition' and took a pessimistic view of the prospects of opposition politics. Chua Beng Huat (2017), a sociologist, argued that the Singapore government was antipathetic to western liberal democracy, grounding its hegemony on a reconstructed social democratic ideology that was present at the party's founding. Two decades earlier, Chua (1997a) had already critically examined the ruling party's efforts to produce an ideology of 'Asian communitarianism' as the basis of an anti-liberal 'Asian democracy'. Cherian George (2017), a journalist-turned-academic, wrote about and against the resilience of the Singapore government's authoritarianism, arguing in favour of political liberalization as a means of revitalizing the establishment. All three Singaporean academics – Mutalib, Chua, and George – have concluded that Singapore's political system has been and will likely continue to be resistant to democratization and political liberalization according to western, particularly US, versions.

In this Element, I note that there have been alternating cycles of political liberalization and repression, though the trend overall has been towards increasing levels of political sophistication among the establishment, the growing alternative and oppositional elites, and the electorate. I argue that Singapore's political development is better understood by paying greater attention to the ideological and cultural negotiations that occur in parallel with its

material successes and failures. This is not to say that a deeply rooted political culture or ideological predisposition constrains democratic prospects in Singapore. Rather, it is the continuous work of shaping and contesting culture and ideology that creates its ever-changing and non-linear contours of political possibility. In this Element, I focus in particular on the ideological and cultural negotiations that occur in the interdependent tasks of nation building, nation and city branding, and the exercise of soft power.

It is useful to think of contemporary Singapore, for all its complexity, as having a dual nature: Singapore is simultaneously a small postcolonial multi-cultural nation-state and a cosmopolitan global city of the top rank. This duality has produced a dynamic variety of contradictions and tensions, which have made all the more challenging the task of keeping the authoritarian Singapore system stable, durable, and successful. For one thing, the state has had to exert continuous effort to contain, rather than resolve, these contradictions in a pragmatic (that is to say, adaptive and undogmatic) fashion whilst directing the public narration of a coherent and persuasive story that is acceptably meaningful and even inspiring to Singaporeans and other countries looking for ideas, role models, and partners for development and governance. This balancing act partly involves an internal process of nation building, but it is also achieved through more commercially motivated and outward-facing efforts at nation and city branding. Both sets of processes contribute to Singapore's capacity to influence foreign affairs, if only for national self-preservation. For a small state with resource limitations, this will mainly be through the exercise of soft (persuasive and attractive) power, which – when strategically combined with hard (military and economic) power – gives Singapore what former Harvard Kennedy School dean Joseph Nye (2013) called 'smart power'.

In this Element, I analyse the increasingly multivocal and contested nature of the Singapore narrative – undergirding its national identity, brand, and soft power – by adopting a critical-analytical approach, inspired by Antonio Gramsci, which is centred on the notion of ideological hegemony. In an advanced capitalist state like Singapore, the dominant classes assume moral leadership by forging national consensus among the diverse classes and social forces. They do this by actively and conscientiously working through their intellectuals and organic influence within civil society. Not to be confused with more straightforward notions of domination, Gramscian hegemony is an unending struggle and a dynamic 'process of creating and maintaining con-sensus or of co-ordinating interests' within shifting relations of domination and subordination (Slack, 1996: 144, 117–18). Developing this idea, Ernesto Laclau (1977: 161) argued that a 'class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society,

but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized'. Another way to think of this is to say that hegemony is achieved in a capitalist society when common elements within discourses associated with different potentially antagonistic classes – dominant, subordinate, subaltern, etc. – are aligned.

The result of continuous struggle, negotiation, and compromise, hegemony is the basis of popular consent and political legitimacy, though it usually co-exists with other residual and emerging hegemonic formations. Hegemony is, therefore, a complex articulation that – even at its most dominant state – remains unstable and even fragile. As a conceptual tool, it is useful for analysing how consensus, achieved by connecting and containing contradictions, can just as easily be disarticulated, if pulled apart by pressures from shifting material circumstances – such as those relating to economic conditions – and their resultant changes in consciousness. Hegemony can weaken as emergent social forces forge new alliances and movements with new value systems in an ideological struggle. Thus, the maintenance of hegemony – an active process of legitimation – requires continuous ideological work, particularly as changing circumstances lead to new experiences of material disadvantage and the emergence of alternative conscious-ness. In Singapore, as Chua (1997a: 4) argued in his important work on the forging of a new consensus around an Asian communitarian ideology in the 1990s, the 'political and ideological work of the governing is, therefore, never done'.

While the Singapore state attempts continually and systematically to construct a widely acceptable ideological basis for political reasons and justifications, at the heart of which is the national narrative, its brand of authoritarianism resorts only extraordinarily – and thus rarely – to the exercise of brute force. Coercion, in the form of more overt acts of political repression, is therefore the state's last resort (Gramsci, 1971: 269), applied when ideological and cultural efforts seem to have failed. The occasional but highly tactical use of detentions without trial, lawsuits for defamation, and censorship – along with pressure applied behind the scenes – all contribute not only to a silencing of oppositional and sometimes even just alternative voices but also to a low-frequency culture of anxiety that nudges many to constrain themselves in a mode of self-censorship (Tan, 2007; Tan, 2016). George (2007) argued that most states deploy repressive tools 'rationally and with finesse' in order to consolidate authority, noting in particular the Singapore government's exercise of 'calibrated coercion' to repress its political challengers 'with minimum political cost'. This leaves the work of maintaining ideological hegemony to proceed, I argue, by drawing on at least three sources of legitimacy: the mandate arising from regular Westminster-style political elec-tions, the successful delivery of material goods, and the leadership's moral authority to rule.

In this Element, I will discuss these three ideological sources and how they relate to one another. I will then analyse how these legitimating sources are strained by the contradictions that arise from Singapore's dual nature of nation-state and global city, focussing on race, language, and religion in the nation-state and on material inequalities, creativity, and new identity politics in the global city. I will then briefly discuss how these contradictions manifest themselves in civil society, the primary location of ideological and cultural conflicts and negotiations, before examining the state's efforts to (re-)engage the citizens in national-level consultation exercises. I will then analyse how the state, driven primarily by commercial reasons and a marketing logic, produces both an inward-looking and outward-facing Singapore image, conceived as a nation/city brand that can also help to make Singapore attractive and disproportionately influential in international affairs.

## 2 Ideological Sources of Singapore's Hegemonic State

To gain and secure popular consent, through a basic social compact, the authoritarian state seeks to renew a strong democratic mandate through regular elections and, while in power, ensures that its extensive policies and programmes deliver results that people desire: security, wealth, social services, and a well-designed city that is liveable, for instance. Such a transactional relationship, though necessary, is not sufficient for securing lasting legimacy. Thus, the state also pays attention to the transformational dimension that gives it moral authority and an emotional appeal.

### 2.1 Democratic Mandate

Although Singapore displays all the formal features of a liberal democracy, having inherited the system from almost a century and a half of British colonial rule (1819–1963), what it lacks is electoral competitiveness. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has continued to win a significant majority of parliamentary seats since Singapore achieved self-government in 1959 (in fact, every seat in general elections fought between 1968 and 1981). This incumbency, combined with formal and informal influence over major state institutions, creative adjustments to the rules of the game (including gerrymandering), and widely recognized governmental success, has bestowed on it significant structural advantages that severely limit the prospects of opposition politics in the foreseeable future. In consequence, general elections seem unfair even though they are universal and free by international standards. The PAP publicly interprets the results of each election as a strong continuous signal of the

people's mandate, countering arguments for levelling the playing field with assertions that it is 'not wise to purposely let the opposition grow bigger' (Seow, 2018). Public intellectual Ho Kwon Ping (2016), acknowledging the durability of this dominant one-party system, predicted that a transition to a two-party system might be possible only after fifteen years and likely only after thirty.

Unlike the US presidential system of governance designed to check and balance excessive power in any one organ of state, the original UK parliamentary system that Singapore inherited was designed to concentrate power in the hands of the executive, eventually in the context of a competitive two-party electoral system. Left in the postcolonial hands of Singapore, where uncompetitive elections have produced one-party parliamentary dominance since its independence, what results from regular and compulsory elections has been an enduring dominant party system with a powerful cabinet led by an even more powerful prime minister.

Since the 1980s, several constitutional changes, though often justified in seemingly 'liberal' terms, have actually made it harder for opposition parties to succeed. In 1988, for instance, the government introduced the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system, which replaced most of the single-member constituencies. GRCs are multi-ward constituencies for which teams of parliamentary candidates, between three and six, compete during general elections. Designed principally to ensure there is minority representation in parliament, GRCs must include at least one member of parliament (MP) from a designated minority community (Malay, Indian, Eurasian, etc.). Another advantage of the GRCs – as larger administrative units – was the economies of scale they brought to the management of municipal matters. But such a change has presented opposition parties – already competing in a game with unfavourable rules – with an even more challenging task of finding good eligible candidates. In a first-past-the-post system, larger GRCs tend to reduce the electoral potency of opposition voters. GRCs also allow the PAP to field inexperienced and weaker candidates in teams anchored by more experienced ministerial incumbents, thus enabling the former to be more easily shepherded into parliament.

A second example of such constitutional changes is the introduction of an elected presidency. Since 1991, presidents – previously a merely ceremonial head of state – have been directly elected for six-year terms, during which time they cannot be members of a political party. They have the power to block the incumbent government from drawing down past reserves, approve key civil service appointments, and exercise oversight in matters relating to the Corrupt

Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) and the Internal Security Act.[1] While
the elected presidency could seem like a liberal-inspired reform for strengthen-
ing institutional checks and balances, it can also make parliamentary opposi-
tion seem less vital from the voter's point of view. Meanwhile, the PAP
government's influence over the rules of eligibility has effectively limited the
electoral competition to its favoured candidates, as will be discussed later.

In the 2001 parliamentary elections, barely two months after the September
11 attacks that led to a global climate of uncertainty and an economic recession,
the PAP won a historic high of 75.3 per cent of the total votes. What followed,
even with the PAP's entrenched structural advantages, was a downward trend
of 66.6 per cent in 2006, and then 60.1 per cent in 2011, the PAP's worst
performance since independence (da Cunha, 2012; Tan, 2011). Two PAP
ministers also lost their seats in 2011. In this 'new normal', many political
observers expected that the PAP would lose even more votes and seats in 2015
while the opposition would raise its political profile and narrow the 'credibility
gap' (Ong and Tim, 2014). It felt like modernization theory was finally exerting
its inevitable pull. Instead, in the 2015 general elections, the PAP regained
electoral ground, winning 69.9 per cent of the votes. It was also the first time
that 100 per cent of the seats were contested. However, 2015 was also when
Singaporeans grandly celebrated their fiftieth year of independence and when
their first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew died. Very likely, these events had
a significant pro-PAP impact on the electorate's voting behaviour.

The results, though, were still surprising given what seemed like a rising
anti-establishment mood, expressed especially on social media. Many
ordinary Singaporeans seemed to resent what they perceived to be the
insensitivity, arrogance, self-importance, and entitled mentality of an elite
and patronizing government that lacked empathy and often resorted to
a defensive bullying style whenever it was confronted by even sound and
constructive arguments against its reasons and decisions. Nevertheless,
surveys regularly indicate that the PAP government enjoys high levels of
popular trust. For instance, the 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer found that
74 per cent of Singapore's general population trusted their government,
a rise of 4 per cent from 2015 (there had been a continuous decline from
2013 to 2015) (Kwa, 2016). Having only been governed by one party for all
of their adult lives, most Singaporeans today can only base their decisions
on a single track record, the PAP's. Since this track record basks in the
glow of a state-directed national narrative featuring a heroic government

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[1]  A statute that grants the home affairs minister executive power to enforce preventive detention
    without trial in the interest of public order or national security.

that has transformed Singapore 'from Third World to First' in such a short period of time, the incentive for voters to risk their votes on the opposition would not seem great enough. However, the Edelman survey also noted a gap of 17 percentage points between the informed public (for whom trust levels were higher) and the mass population (for whom they were lower), which is a bigger gap than the average 12-point difference globally. Thus, if Singapore's income inequality increases further, which is not unlikely if the government continues merely to tweak their redistributive policies, there could be significant consequences for trust in the government.

Psychology professor David Chan (2017: 73–4) cautioned against 'harmful cynicism' towards political leaders that could arise when they ignore citizens' doubts and suppress their questions. These doubts and questions may legitimately come from a constructive and healthy scepticism that, he thought, should be encouraged. Instead, Chan urged leaders to turn doubt into 'conditional trust' in their competence, integrity, and benevolence, through reasonable argumentation supported by reliable evidence. While the electoral basis of the PAP government's legitimacy seems to be relatively stable, given the structural and emotional advantages that it currently enjoys, public trust in the government should not be taken for granted by an ivory-towered elite increasingly detached from the concerns and questions of the masses, as globalization brings with it greater social divisions and challenges of living a fulfilling life. The PAP government needs, as Chan would argue, to pay attention to its competence (the basis of its performance legitimacy), as well as integrity and benevolence (the basis of moral authority), both actual and perceived.

## 2.2 Performance Legitimacy

The PAP government formally draws its legitimacy from periodic democratic elections, but it also needs to demonstrate its ability to deliver results through efficient, effective, innovative, and far-sighted policymaking. Sometimes the two sources of legitimacy sit in tension with each other, particularly in the context of a paternalistic view that the people cannot be trusted to vote according to their long-term or 'real' interests and an undemocratic view that political opposition is merely an obstruction to the good work of the government.

Having been confronted by limited parliamentary opposition, the PAP in government has not felt so pressed to explain its every decision. Parliamentary deliberations are today televised only in the form of heavily edited clips tied to news programmes. As early as the 1970s, then political scientist Chan Heng

Chee (1975) already described Singapore as an 'administrative state', with a technocratic government and a depoliticized citizenry. While in government, the PAP has been able more confidently than most political parties in democratic governments to plan, formulate, and implement long-term policies well beyond the short-term political constraints of electoral cycles (Peh and Goh, 2007). Tan Gee Paw, a senior public servant who had been instrumental in driving Singapore's successful water-related policies, observed that 'in the civil service, you need to plan so far ahead that you may not even see the results in your career' (Peh and Goh, 2007). Looking for lessons from Singapore's development experience, one might argue anti-democratically that, without competitive multi-party elections, governments can lengthen their planning horizons and avoid the temptation to implement irresponsible policies aimed at making quick electoral wins at the expense of the general and long-term interest, which is usually how 'populism' is understood in Singapore. Another anti-democratic argument has been the notion that a small state like Singapore has to be nimble and act fast in order to avert a calamity or to take advantage of opportunities in a fast-changing world. Minister Teo Chee Hean (1994) once said:

> We are not playing chess where the pieces remain static while we debate and deliberate at length. We are playing football. Stop moving and the rest of the world will run rings around us . . . [L]et us not paralyse ourselves in perpetual conflict and debate.

Thus, more important than the democratic mandate has been the PAP government's performance legitimacy, particularly its capacity and proven ability to protect the people of Singapore, grow the economy, and share the nation's wealth, indirectly but palpably, with as many citizens as possible.

*External security:* When it comes to keeping Singaporeans safe, the PAP government's performance has been illuminated by the discourse of a small and young nation-state, vulnerable to external and internal threats (Leifer, 2000). The government officially describes its foreign policy as guided by both a set of clearly articulated principles as well as a heavy sense of realism. The government accepts that there is little it can do to change the world to suit Singapore's needs, but it can strongly support laws, rules, and norms that govern the international arena in ways that protect the sovereignty of small states like Singapore. The government maintains diplomatic relations with every country and tries to be useful and inoffensive to all, staying consistent and principled whenever it needs to advance its interest (Jayakumar, 2011). Public diplomacy and soft power are, thus, an essential

component of its foreign policy arsenal. Even so, the ability to defend Singapore militarily, even for just a few weeks until help arrives, is a psychologically and politically necessary aspect of nation building. Singapore's defence budget was more than US$10 billion in 2018. In a 2016 survey, Singapore's military expenditure (between 3 and 5 per cent of its GDP each year) was the seventh-highest among countries in Asia and Oceania (Parameswaran, 2018). Singapore seems well-equipped to defend itself against military threat. And there is a well-established system of compulsory military service, which also serves as a platform for mass socialization (Huxley, 2000). Today, speaking openly about Singapore as a target of terrorism, the government has intensified its counter-terrorism capabilities and launched a comprehensive community response movement, SGSecure, to promote vigilance, cohesion, and resilience. Other external threats, the discourse around which circulates liberally in the public sphere, include cycles of economic and financial crises, spread of disease, and other non-traditional security issues, including cybercrime. Continually highlighting the severity of Singapore's external insecurity can augment the public's appreciation of its government's record of keeping Singapore safe.

*Internal security:*  Out of a total population of 5.6 million today, Singapore has a resident population of 3.4 million Singapore citizens and 0.5 million permanent residents. The government describes Singapore society – with its resident population made up of Chinese (74.3 per cent), Malays (13.4 per cent), Indians (9.1 per cent), and 'others' (3.1 per cent) – in the rather rigid terms of a 'CMIO' model of multiracialism. There is a dualistic view in the public imagination: multiracial harmony gives cause for celebration, but racial difference also provokes anxiety. Social anthropologist Lai Ah Eng (2004) described this as a contrast between 'rituals and riots', urging Singaporeans to go beyond it. More recently, Lai (2017: 174) observed that the CMIO approach 'has been blamed for racism's prevalence and divisiveness. Deeply entrenched into government systems, it has permeated every major field and level, affecting mindsets, policy-planning, resource allocation, political representation, population profiling, public housing, educational performance and the like'.

Within the discourse of internal threats, Singapore continues to harbour collective memories of racial and religious unrest, and communist subversion, especially from the more socially and politically turbulent years of the 1950s to 1970s (Conceicao, 2007; Ramakrishna, 2015). Singapore's worst race riots in 1964, causing about 35 deaths and 560 injuries, resulted from heightened tension between the Chinese and Malays. The event is commemorated in

Singapore schools every year on 21 July when 'racial harmony day' is cele-
brated, and it features vividly in history textbooks that tell and re-tell
The Singapore Story. Singapore's history of communist subversion is also
often told in terms of the infiltration of Chinese schools and political exploita-
tion of communal (meaning racial) issues (Singh, 2015). Part of the story also
involves Singapore's sometimes troubled relationships with Malaysia and
Indonesia, both imagined as giant Malay-Muslim neighbours surrounding
a 'little red dot' with a Chinese majority and significant Malay-Muslim min-
ority. Vigilance against racial and religious extremism, for instance, has made
race and religion taboo subjects in the public sphere, reinforcing a siege
mentality and paranoid culture that have pervaded its economic, social, and
cultural life. Its narrative function is to warn Singaporeans not to take racial
harmony for granted. Its ideological function is to justify the need for tough
state repressive instruments such as the Internal Security Act and the
Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (designed to prevent the politicization
of religion).

The CMIO model presents the government with a means of securing
political legitimation by divide-and-rule; that is to say, maintaining
a divided social structure that gives rise to anxiety, fear, and paranoia – the
key ingredients to nourish an ideology of survival which sustains a belief that
only a strong state in the form of the PAP government can protect
Singaporeans from their divided selves (Kathiravelu, 2017). This culture of
anxiety, nourished by a constant flow of public communications surrounding
internal and external threats, amplifies the Singaporean sense of vulnerability
in ways that augment the achievements of its government, justifying its
extensive powers in terms of the nation's basic survival, security, and
stability.

*Economic growth:*  The government holds up economic growth as a primary,
non-negotiable, and 'over-riding' goal (Chua, 1997a: 68) aimed at ensuring
Singapore's survival as a vulnerable nation-state, enabling the government to
finance high-quality and affordable public housing for more than 80 per cent of
the population, education and health care for everyone, and infrastructure for
a productive and liveable city. In the 1980s, the so-called East Asian 'tiger
economies', whose successful industrial policies were yielding high economic
growth rates and incomes, included Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, and
Taiwan. In Singapore, an anxious managerial 'middle class' emerged, whose
members were mostly employed by the public sector, possessed bourgeois
values and aspirations, but were not motivated to press for democratization,
which was what modernization theory anticipated (Jones and Brown, 1994).