
SINGAPORE IN 1996

Extended Election Fever

Garry Rodan

Since self-government in 1959, none of the successively elected People's Action Party (PAP) governments have run the full term of five years. Yet when it was dissolved in mid-December and an election date of January 2 subsequently announced, Parliament was within weeks of running its full course. Uncharacteristically, the government was on the defensive throughout much of 1996 as political opponents attempted to influence the agenda of public debate. They focused on disquiet over rising costs of living and widening inequalities in income and wealth distribution. As the year progressed, an intense government campaign unfolded to discredit the Singapore Democratic Party's (SDP) secretary-general, Dr Chee Soon Juan, who had become a symbol of a competitive political model so eschewed by the PAP. Much of the tension for the government derives from its own insistence on exclusive political control in an economically developed polity.

The Economy

The customary preference for a snap election to catch the opposition off guard was not helped by an economic slowdown. In absolute terms, the Singapore economy still experienced impressive economic growth in 1996 but early official forecasts of 8% were revised downwards to 7% and then 6% by year's end. A depressed manufacturing sector, still heavily dependent upon electronics exports bound for the United States, was the chief problem. Electronics products account for around 45% of Singapore's manufacturing production and two-thirds of its exports. Reduced global demand for personal computers and semiconductors hit especially hard, but output also fell significantly for telecommunications equipment and consumer electronics. Petrochemicals, ship repair, and printing also experienced difficulties.

Garry Rodan is Senior Research Fellow at the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, Australia.

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The domestic retail sector's problems of recent years continued. Rental costs, the appreciation of the Singapore dollar, changing patterns of tourist spending, and limits on Singaporeans' disposable income and credit all contributed. A number of major companies have pulled out of Singapore, including the Hong Kong-based Lane Crawford, American discounter K Mart, and French retailer Galeries Lafayette. Of those persevering, many are struggling; during the year, the local C. K. Tang department store announced a US\$20 million loss for 1995.

Domestic Politics

Politics of prices. A joint report released in June by the SDP and the Singapore Malay National Organisation (PKMS) claimed that housing, transportation, and education expenses had risen by "disturbing levels" since the last election in 1991. The political resonance of the opposition parties' message with much of the population led the government to refer the matter to the parliamentary Cost Review Committee (CRC), which reported in November. Essentially, the committee rejected the SDP/PKMS claims about the magnitude of price rises, and emphasized the movement of consumers into "cozier-but-costlier" lifestyles.

Once a major factor in the broad support for the PAP, housing has become an especially contentious issue. Escalating prices have not only affected lower income earners, but jeopardized the prospects of the more affluent trying to enter the private property market. The government has committed US\$7–\$10 billion for the next 15 to 20 years to upgrade existing public housing stock, and a further US\$39 million has been devoted to a scheme assisting low-income people to buy flats. However, the political return on this was compromised by revelations in mid-1996 that Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his son, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, received discounts of 5% and 12% each on two exclusive private condominiums priced at more than US\$8 million. Lee Kuan Yew's eldest brother also happened to be a director of the company involved, Hotel Properties Limited (HPL). The Lee purchases were made through "soft launches" before public tender. Lee Kuan Yew dismissed concern about double standards. "It's not a level playing field," he said. "It's an unfair and unequal world."¹ A distinction had to be drawn, he argued, between corruption and unfairness. Many Singaporeans were left wondering how this was to be reconciled with the much-touted government ideology of meritocracy.

Targeting of Chee. Although not an elected member of Parliament, Chee Soon Juan has urged a more policy-oriented SDP, placing him in conflict

1. *The Independent* (London), 9 June 1996, p. 14.

with the SDP's founder, Chiam See Tong, and his supporters. Ructions within the party culminated in a bizarre legal action of defamation in 1996 by Chiam against Chee and the other members of the SDP central executive committee, who had suggested that Chiam run as a PAP candidate in the forthcoming election.

Attempts to steer opposition politics down this more policy-focused path have been hampered by inadequate human and material resources within the party. This problem is compounded by the Societies Act, which enforces a separation of organizations in the broader community from political life and limits the range of expertise and input available to opposition parties. These limitations were in evidence when the SDP submitted an imprecise document critical of government levels of health care expenditure and subsidization. The government seized this opportunity to try to discredit both Chee and his style of opposition politics. The matter was referred to a parliamentary select committee that grilled four SDP members over data and methodology. The primary focus of contention was a claim that the proportion of government spending on health care fell from 40% in 1970 to just 5% in 1990. Chee conceded that the correct 1990 figure was not 5% but 25%, and attributed the mistake to a typographical error. However, a parliamentary Committee of Privileges subsequently found Chee and colleagues guilty of contempt of Parliament, insisting there was no error but a deliberate attempt to deceive. They were fined a total of US\$36,480.

The plausibility of this verdict rested implicitly on the notion that Chee expected to deceive not just the public but the government and the civil service machinery behind it. Yet Chee's past costly personal experiences, which include the loss of his university post and substantial fines, had already acquainted him with the authorities' meticulous attention to detail. Throughout the investigation, the local government-controlled media reinforced the official interpretation of events, with Chee and others subjected to a level of scrutiny never applied to those actually wielding power in Singapore. Certainly the government scored political points in the health costs debate. Chee and his SDP colleagues were shown as deficient in the preparation of their material and not well coordinated in their internal party activities. Criticisms of Chee surfaced in the professional ranks of the middle class, but the important question is what image Chee is left with among lower middle- and working-class Singaporeans who have supplied the vast bulk of recent opposition electoral gains.

Redrawing electoral boundaries. The government's share of total votes has been a major unofficial index in Singapore's first-past-the-post electoral system. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong observed in May that if his party obtained less than 60% of the popular vote in the next general election (GE), "I

would think that's going to be a terrible letdown for me." Yet by November Goh was asserting: "We shall move away from comparing the percentage of votes with the last GE's," and he emphasized the primacy of seats as a measure of government support.² In the same month, major changes were announced to the electoral system and boundaries, which should limit the potential of a general swing against the government to translate into seat losses.

The number of single constituencies was reduced from 21 to 9, and 15 group representation constituencies (GRCs), with between four to six members each, will account for the rest of Singapore's parliamentary representation. The shift toward more GRCs was presented as consistent with recent reforms enlarging local government districts and as a means of addressing wide variances in the size of existing electorates. Single constituencies in which opposition parties came within striking distance of defeating PAP candidates in the last election have disappeared, generally subsumed under GRCs comprising sitting PAP candidates. Opposition parties will find it difficult to put together many tickets of up to six high-profile candidates. This necessarily places a premium on the five single constituency electorates not already held by opposition parties, creating the possibility of vote dissipation through competition. Minimizing the adverse impact of electoral changes on opposition prospects thus requires a high degree of cooperation among the parties.

International Relations

Two important international meetings occurred in 1996 with special significance for Singapore. The first was the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in Bangkok in March. Prime Minister Goh proposed this leaders' summit in 1994 because he sees Asia-Europe ties as a weak link in the U.S.-Europe-Asia triangle. ASEM produced a host of specific, if limited commitments to promote stronger contact, including the establishment of an Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) to advance political and cultural ties. A number of diplomatic visits between Europe and Singapore during the year complemented ASEM's work.

The second meeting was the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference, which saw more than 5,000 delegates and journalists descend on the city-state in December. The choice of Singapore as host of the conference was an acknowledgment of Singapore's trading credentials and status, and it also presented an opportunity for the government, through its chairing of proceedings, to play a role in brokering outcomes. At the plenary session,

2. Quoted in "Singapore PM Says Popular Vote Not a Gauge of Support," *Agence France Presse*, 19 November 1996, and *Straits Times*, 19 November 1996, p. 1.

Communications Minister Mah Boh Tan announced an accelerated opening up to competition of Singapore's public monopoly basic telecommunications services.

In regional relations, Lee Kuan Yew spoke with journalists in early June and suggested the possibility of merger between Singapore and Malaysia. He declared that "it will be difficult to achieve for a very long time, but I hope it will happen."³ The response on both sides of the causeway was surprise and a respectful dismissal of the idea as a contemporary issue. Arousing a great deal more controversy was the Singapore government's close political and commercial ties with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the military dictatorship ruling Burma, which have been a concern to human rights advocates and opponents of the illicit drug trade in the international community.⁴ At a press conference called by the SDP and PKMS in November, the government was called on to address specific claims made in an Australian television program⁵ that drew attention to investment by the Singapore Government Investment Corporation (GIC) in the Myanmar Fund. The Fund was linked to Burmese nationals Stephen Law and his father, Lo Hsin Han. The former is denied access into the United States because of suspected drug dealing, and the latter was described by Australian Federal Police as "one of the major drug producers and traffickers" in Burma.⁶

Refusing to answer the opposition's questions, the government offered instead a parliamentary inquiry, but not surprisingly in the light of recent experiences of PAP-dominated parliamentary committees, the invitation was not taken up. The government attacked Chee, maintaining his reference to the program amounted to anti-national and opportunistic behavior. The local media pursued this line, with the *Straits Times* even mounting something of a defense of Lo Hsin Han's reputation in its November 5 editorial: "As best as can be ascertained, he has never been charged with or convicted for drug offences." It then asserted that "a large section of the Australian media does not even believe what it puts out." However, the Singapore government's international credibility as a moral crusader against drugs may have been tarnished.

On a more positive note for the Singapore government, the American-based Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom honored Lee Kuan Yew with the "1996 Architect of the New Century Award," presented to "course-changing leaders" who act "in the Nixonian spirit of enlightened pragmatism in foreign

3. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 June 1996, p. 17.

4. See Francois Casanier, "Khun Sa's 'Surrender': The Bigger Picture," *Burma Debate*, 3:2 (March–April 1996), pp. 4–7.

5. "Dateline," Special Broadcasting Service, 12 October 1996.

6. One of the questions posed by the SDP and PKMS was whether Stephen Law is able to move freely in and out of Singapore.

policy.” This led to some criticism within America, notably from *New York Times* columnist William Safire, Richard Nixon’s former speech writer and a vociferous critic of Lee and the Singapore government. Chalmers Johnson also resigned as a member of the Center’s advisory committee in protest. However, the ceremony attracted an enthusiastic crowd of senior American establishment figures and others from around the world who endorsed the award.

Conclusion

The year’s events gave clear evidence that the Singapore government remains heavily committed to the forging of broader international trade and investment links on the one hand, and the retention of a highly controlled domestic political environment on the other. It is the pursuit of this formula that makes Singapore an interesting model for scrutiny and produces so much anxiety in political life, both for the government and its opponents.