

Is singapore's present political system compatible



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When Singapore separated from the Federation of Malaya and gained its independence on August 9th 1965, the People's Action Party (PAP) government then, under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, faced an overwhelming task of ensuring economic survival. This was under the conditions of no natural resources, lack of manpower and the loss of access to Malaya's large domestic market. Many people doubted Singapore's ability to survive under these extreme conditions and believed that it would eventually return back to the Federation.

However, this was not the case, " not if Lee Kuan Yew] could help it (Lee, p. 663). Thus Singapore was left to fend for its own. The government had to quickly solve the pressing issues of housing and employment. With that, the economy had to improve and it did. Singapore eventually achieved considerable economic success, largely due to strategic tactics employed by the government such as free trade agreements, joining the World Trade Organization - manifestations of globalisation-that opened the local market. Being open to an international economy, the PAP government had to deal with the challenges posed by globalisation.

The ease of travelling and the lure of 'greener pastures' and gradual socio-economic stratification, coupled with the increase in the number of educated people and the rising popularity of the Internet has seriously undermined the hegemony of the ruling party in various ways that I will discuss later.

Therefore, in my humble opinion, globalisation will pose as an obstacle to the current political system ruled by the PAP, although the paper will also argue that it may not serve as a fatal blow to the functioning of this ruling party.

According to Foreign Policy, Singapore was ranked top for the world's " most global country" for 2001 (cited in Chan, 2001) and the Gross Domestic Product growth rate is a healthy 2. 2 per cent for 2002. With such a positive outlook for the future, it would seem that the citizens would be able to maintain their comfortable lifestyle and it may even improve as the country's economy recovers. Ironically, the citizens have instead become increasingly critical of the performance of the government.

There has been a steadily rising number of people who have voiced their opinions over the dissatisfaction of policies, such as the uproar over the hike in bus fares last year (2002). Many wondered if it was an appropriate time to raise the fares when the country was barely recovering from the financial crisis and were wary of the government's stance on this issue. The gradual income divide may be the underlying factor to the formation of this " consumption-based identity". Ten years ago, the upper fifth earned 11. 4 times more than the bottom fifth.

This ratio grew dramatically to 17. times in 1999, then reaching a high of 21 times in 2000. (Tan, 2002) Furthermore, the Global Policy Forum found that the top 10 per cent here earned 34 per cent of the total income in the mid-1990's, ahead of other countries such as the United States (25) and China (25). (cited in Tan, 2002) One would suspect that egalitarianism has been traded for growth in the process of embracing globalisation. Having to compete with other countries in the global economy, the literacy rate amongst Singaporeans has to be of a comparable standard to developed countries so as to attract foreign investors.

According to the Ministry of Education, the graduate output from local universities saw a jump from 3409 people in 1984, to 9244 in 2000. This trend is also noted in local polytechnics, where there is a significant rise of 3066 in 1984 to 14059 in 2000. (Ministry of Education, 2002) However, the greater access to education and awareness has resulted in a rise in political participation, which in turn leads to calls for greater democratisation, representation and accountability of the somewhat authoritarian and paternalistic styled government of PAP. (Bilveer Singh, p. 4)

The government now has to take into consideration that the public is more interested and active in politics than before and thus must take public opinion in higher regard when making its policies. Due to increasing affluence, more people can travel or study overseas. Furthermore, the time required to travel to the destination by air, land or sea has reduced significantly, coupled with the constant upgrading of the different modes of transport to provide better quality services. In 2001, Singapore residents made a total of 4.4 million trips overseas by air and sea, which is a dramatic increase from the 1.1 million trips in 1991.

In addition, those households with an income of more than S\$6000 made an average of 4.2 trips, whereas those households with an income of less than S\$6000 made an average of 3 trips, having Malaysia as the favourite destination. (Tan Yeow Lip, 2002) A survey conducted by ACNielsen in 2002 saw a big jump in the percentage of Singaporeans who express a desire to migrate overseas, from 14 per cent in October 2001 to 21 per cent in July 2002. (ACNielsen, 2002) Every year, about 2000 people emigrate and more than half are females who married foreigners and who joining their spouses.

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In addition, the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) receives about 6000 applications annually for reservist training deferment on grounds of overseas employment in which the stay lasts beyond six months. (cited in Goh, 1999)

The main problem brought about by globalisation for the government is perhaps best laid out by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in which he said: " Whether we like it or not, more Singaporeans will take wing, given the pace of globalisation and their own personal mobility. As Singaporeans become even more cosmopolitan, the issue of concern to us is whether they will become less rooted to Singapore.

We now have to even compete for the hearts of Singaporeans against attractions elsewhere. " (Goh, 1999) Furthermore, the individual is in a position whereby the information and influence he receives cannot be first filtered by the government. This unrestricted access can shape the individual's political views, which may contrast with that of the government's. This parallels the environment that the Internet provides, although its effects are comparatively limited, which will be discussed in the later paragraphs.

PAP recognizes the gravity of the situation and this is perhaps why Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong gave such a rousing National Day Rally Address to the public regarding the 'quitters' and the 'stayers'. In his speech, he says: " Fair-weather Singaporeans will run away whenever the country runs into stormy weather. " Stayers" include Singaporeans who are overseas, but feel for Singapore. They will come back when needed, because their hearts are here. " (Goh, 2002) This speech highlights the concerned attitude of the

government over the ever-evolving preferences and perhaps flamboyant nature of its electorate.

It should be noted that one out of every three voters in the 2001 General Elections was under the age of 35 and this percentage would certainly increase in the upcoming election. (Straits Times, 2001) The PAP must be able to convince this new batch of voters that it will serve as the right tool in facing the fierce competition in the global market, especially now with the rise of China. The Singapore government realizes the importance of the Internet as a way of promoting the country as a regional hub of information technology.

In the Nielsen/Netratings Fourth quarter 2001 Global Internet Trends report, 60% of Singaporean households had Internet access via Home PC and its connection rate was 89%. Interestingly enough, Singapore had one of the highest percentages in both categories. (Nielsen/Netratings, 2002) It can thus be safe to conclude that a substantial number of Singaporeans are internet-savvy and may be constantly influenced by the different ideologies that exist in various websites. With the constant encouragement to learn how to use the Internet, the government has unwittingly placed itself in a very precarious position.

On one hand, the Internet is vital in moulding the city as the hub of high-tech industry, yet; on the other hand, it has opened a doorway that the government had successfully kept closed for years. This may to the corruption of Singapore's moral values and spark unnecessary unrest over sensitive issues concerning race, religion and politics. It is arguably already

very difficult for the government to filter out websites that may be deemed objectionable and even harder to monitor closely the activities of such websites.

In an effort to counter such websites, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) introduced the Class License Scheme in 1996 and implemented it on 15th July 1996. With the introduction of these rules and regulations, it would seem like the government had drastically reduced potential serious discussions amongst the Internet users. It strengthened its stronghold by announcing the banning of some websites, further restricting the online community. This led to an uproar on the arguably authoritarian approach to limiting Internet freedom.

Many people, foreign and at home, were unhappy with the implementation of the Class License Scheme as they felt that it would hinder the free flow of information and create a suffocating environment for Singaporeans. As the government already had a strong hold over broadcast and print media, the question in everyone's mind was whether it was necessary to have a control over the Internet as well. The Executive Director of Human Rights Watch/Asia, Ms. Sidney Jones, wrote a letter to Mr. George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts, protesting against the move by the government to enforce rules on Internet use.

In it, she argued that: " It is only through unrestricted discussions of such serious topics (religious and political ideas) by all members of society, no matter how unpopular their views, that these subjects become less explosive. Forbidding discussion - in effect, treating its citizens like children -

will, on the other hand, ensure that dangerous topics remain just that. "

(Jones, 1996) Dr Chee Soon Juan, then secretary general of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party, was also quoted: " It's just another way that the government is trying to control the free flow of information in this country. "

(EFF Archive, 1999)

It can be considered, however, that the 'authoritarian' aspect of the implementation of the Class License Scheme is miniscule when compared with China's banning of the search engine Google. com. Nowadays, the control over Internet surfing does not seem to have weakened. There was an arrest of the head, Mr. Zulfikar Mohamed Shariff, of a Muslim Group called Fateha, over allegations that he had used the website to put down the government. He was subsequently released and has since left for Australia. (Aziz, 2002) It can thus be seen that the Internet has become a double-edged sword for the government.

On one hand, it has proven to be a valuable tool in shaping Singapore as an information hub, but on the other, the free flow of information challenges the idea of restriction, which the government implements so often. No other party in Singapore has been able to replicate the success that the PAP has achieved. The party has been able to employ tactics to win the support of its electorate as seen in the giving out of the S\$2. 7 billion 'New Singapore Shares' to the people a few weeks before the elections, and voting results serve as a strong testament that the PAP would not lose its hold as the ruling party as yet.

Furthermore, the government is not about to rest on its laurels. The Feedback Unit was set up in 1984 to give the public a channel to express opinions on policies through forums and feedback sessions chaired by Members of Parliament. This consultative approach has evidently been more welcomed by the citizens, as compared to the previously paternalistic style. Furthermore, in view of the inevitable challenges of globalisation, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong unveiled the Singapore 21 vision in 1999. The five subject committees are made up of 66 people in total.

These people come from all walks of life and their job scope is to obtain the views of other Singaporeans and debate over vital issues concerning the future problems that Singapore might face. (Teo Chee Hean, Rear Admiral, 1999) It seeks to build a cohesiveness amongst all races, all individuals and promotes the national identity. Another committee has also been set up to review strategies for the 21st century Singapore - 'Remaking Singapore'. (MCDS, 2002) This, on the other hand, serves as an advisory body to the government on economic issues.

All these moves indicate that the government trying to get its citizens to contribute more to the running of Singapore. Globalisation is inevitable if Singapore, having no natural resources and low manpower, is to survive in the global market and prosper. The PAP government acknowledges this and has carefully planned out its strategies in combating the current and possible economic problems. It has also managed to garner sufficient public approval in the previous 2002 election. It should be noted that the election was held during the economic downturn.

Thus, it seems that the public had voted for PAP because they believed that the party would be the best bet in bringing the country out of the turmoil, just like they had on so many occasions, most notably by moving Singapore from Third World to First World standards in just one generation. I conclude that globalisation is compatible with Singapore's political system and the advent of a knowledge-based economy as it has not undermined the credibility of the PAP but instead, will continue to benefit the country in many ways other than economically.