Singapore’s Constitutional Development: Autochthony amid Change and Continuity

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79th General Conference and Assembly:
Pre-Conference of Library
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15 August 2013
Libraries – Mere Repositories?

• The legislative quest for “better laws”

• Unique role of library and research services, especially parliamentary libraries

• Societies face similar challenges and issues even if solutions have to be contextualised

• Value of comparative studies
Politics & Post-Colonial Nation-Building

- Independence from Malaysia on 9 August 1965: granted self-government by British (1959-63), merger with Malaya in 1963 to form Malaysia
One-party *dominant* system: People’s Action Party (PAP) the only government Singaporeans have known since 1959

Between 1966 and 1981, PAP was the only party in Parliament
Post-Colonial Constitutional Engineering

- To design a political system that can reduce “political accidents” through pre-emptive, pragmatic institutional design to keep Singapore thriving

- Westminster-inspired but autochthonous development to forge a politico-legal system to suit Singapore’s context
Context & Text

- Laws (as text) operate in a context

- Simple plurality system → One-party dominant state


- Growing desire for more open and vibrant political system
## PAP’s Electoral Performance, 1968-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of General Election</th>
<th>Total no. of parliamentary seats</th>
<th>Total no. of parliamentary seats contested by PAP only</th>
<th>PAP’s % share of total valid votes cast</th>
<th>PAP’s share of parliamentary seats (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 Apr 1968</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51 (87.9%)</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>58 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Sep 1972</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>8 (12.3)</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>65 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Dec 1976</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>16 (23.2)</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>69 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Dec 1980</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>37 (49.3)</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>75 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Dec 1984</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>30 (39.8)</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>77 (97.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Sep 1988</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>11 (13.6)</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>80 (98.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 Aug 1991</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>41 (50.6)</td>
<td>61.0</td>
<td>77 (95.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Jan 1997</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>47 (56.6)</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>81 (97.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Nov 2001</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>55 (64.7)</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>82 (97.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 May 2006</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>37 (44.05)</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>82 (97.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 May 2011</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>5 (5.75)</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>81 (93.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Themes in Constitutional Engineering

• Retain Parliament as the focal point of political system => elections as primary mode of political contestation

• Elite belief that constitutional design must produce a government with a clear mandate to govern i.e., strong parliamentary majority

• Representation not the dominant outcome of electoral process
  – proportional representation portrayed as damaging and divisive
  – Parliament as a platform for alternative and diverse voices (notion of harmonious difference)
“Preemptive” Constitutional Design (1984-91)

- 1984: Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP)
- 1988: Group Representation Constituency (GRC)
- 1990: Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP)
- 1991: Elected President
Map of Electoral Divisions

- Sembawang GRC
- Nee Soon GRC
- Ang Mo Kio GRC
- Sengkang West SMC
- Punggol East SMC
- East Coast GRC
- Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC
- Tampines GRC
- Hougang SMC
- Aljunied GRC
- Joo Chiat SMC
- Marine Parade GRC
- Mountbatten SMC
- Potong Pasir SMC
- Whampoa SMC
- Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC
- Moulmein-Kallang GRC
- Tanjong Pagar GRC
- Radin Mas SMC
- Chua Chu Kang GRC
- Holland-Bukit Timah GRC
- Bukit Panjang SMC
- Hong Kah North SMC
- Yuhua SMC
- Pioneer SMC
- Jurong GRC
- West Coast GRC
Constitutional Changes – 2010 (Highlights)

- NMP scheme institutionalised
- NCMP scheme – up to 9 (from 6)
- GRCs - smaller (target average size of 5 MPs)
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12th GE: Share of valid votes

- PAP: -60.14%
- WP: -12.83%
- NSP: -12.04%
- SDP: -4.83%
- RP: -4.28%
- SPP: -3.11%
- SDA: -2.78%
Entrenching Multiracialism in Statutes

- Fault-lines of race, language, and religion

- Limitations of laws in developing societal resilience and harmony but laws still necessary

- Multiracialism not sustainable without a coherent set of shared national values. Shared values needed to discipline shared purpose of a multiracial nation-state
Masjid-al-Burhani
Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple
Sri Krishnan Temple
Maghain Aboth Synagogue
Cathedral of the Good Shepherd
Orchard Road Presbyterian Church
St Andrew’s Cathedral
Armenian Apostolic Church of St. Gregory
Politics in the ‘New Normal’

- Performance legitimacy (“3rd World to 1st World in one generation”), clean government, and shared economic growth as basis of PAP’s political longevity

- Political landscape has evolved to become relatively more diverse, competitive

- ‘Selective amnesia’ of post-independence voters (P80, P90)

- Abnormality of one-party dominance? Internalisation of good governance (=> need for multi-party democracy?)
Adaptive Changes Needed?

(1) More competitive political landscape in Singapore

(2) Gradual withering of one-party dominance

(3) Need to manage political change within a framework where party, government and state are conflated

(4) Governance in a changing political landscape
In Lieu of a Conclusion

- Singapore in political transition; at political, economic and social crossroads

- Politically-sheltered electorate in politically uncharted waters

- Reconciling constitutional niceties, political aspirations and expectations, political realities, and PAP government’s preference for incremental political change
Thank You!