

The Secrets of Continuous Governance by the People's Action Party in Singapore: A Focus on Parliamentary System Design

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Abstract: Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the People's Action Party (PAP) has consistently maintained its position as the ruling party, securing an overwhelming majority of seats in the parliament. This paper seeks to explore the historical continuity and refinement process of the PAP's parliamentary system within the context of Singapore's parliamentary structure and discuss the impacts of these designs on the party's governance. By analyzing the PAP's contributions to the composition of the parliament and the design of the electoral system, this study reveals that the parliamentary system is a crucial component enabling the PAP's sustained rule. Evidently, within Singapore's parliamentary framework, the PAP has implemented numerous designs. On one hand, it leverages the procedural legitimacy inherent in the system to confer legitimacy upon its governance. On the other hand, it capitalizes on efficient and frequent design modifications to tailor the system to its advantage, ensuring the continuity of its rule.

Keywords: People Action's Party, parliamentary system, election

1. Introduction

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the People's Action Party (PAP) has consistently maintained its position as the ruling party, parallel to the utilization of Singapore's parliamentary system. Alongside PAP's governance, a series of regulations and policies have been established to scrutinize online media and regulate citizens' assembly and demonstrations, leading to the depoliticization of society. Given Singapore's lack of strong ideological or socio-cultural traditions, the institutional framework becomes a potent endorsement of the PAP's rule and methods. The PAP evidently recognizes this and strategically employs the various aspects of parliamentary system design to maximize its advantages.

This paper will delve into the composition of Singapore's parliament and the electoral system, employing a literature-based research approach to trace the origins and evolution of the parliamentary system under PAP's governance. It underscores the need to remain cautious about the potential reality of authoritarian practices under the guise of democratic structures.

2. History of Singapore's Parliamentary System

Since its inception in 1819, Singapore was initially established as a British colonial settlement under British dominion until it evolved into a distinct political entity in 1946. In 1947, the United Kingdom enacted the Legislative Assembly of Singapore Ordinance, paving the way for the first elections to be held the following year. Following the attainment of self-governance in 1959, the People's Action Party secured a resounding victory in the parliamentary elections, gaining a commanding majority in the legislative assembly. This marked the Party's supremacy in governance, granting it an unparalleled authoritative position in comparison to other political factions.

Consequently, upon formal independence in 1965, the People's Action Party retained this framework, upholding a multi-party system and establishing a parliamentary democracy modeled after the Westminster System. Parliamentarians serve five-year terms and subsequent re-elections. The parliament operates under a unicameral structure, with the executive authority vested in the cabinet, collectively held accountable to the parliament [1].

This parliamentary system, on the one hand, seeks to ensure that the People's Action Party continues to achieve resounding victories in successive legislative elections. On the other hand, the retention of this system from Singapore's initial days of independence is conducive to bolstering domestic political stability, preempting the introduction of new dynamics in power transition and selection methods. Furthermore, this continued adherence to the parliamentary framework signifies the sustained legitimacy of the People's Action Party's authority in governance.

3. The Impact of Coordinated Design in Parliamentary Organization

3.1. Systematic Internal Oversight of Institutions

The sustained internal oversight within the system ensures the long-term dominance of the political regime, with legislative, administrative, and judicial government bodies fully controlled by the People's Action Party, effectively operating as its subordinate entities, a phenomenon referred to by scholars as "party supremacy, government subservience"[2]. The adoption of the parliamentary system provides the People's Action Party with a status of party-government separation, constituting a juridical attempt to reconcile authoritarianism and democracy. The legislative assembly engages in a sequence of proposal deliberations for the enactment of policies and regulations. When the People's Action Party introduces propositions in the legislative assembly and inevitably secures unanimous backing from the vast majority of its allied members within the assembly, policies and regulations initially stemming from the Party's intent acquire procedural legitimacy through the presence of the parliamentary system. This occurs under the imprimatur of the legislative assembly rather than solely under the auspices of the People's Action Party.

Simultaneously, the procedural sequence of this parliamentary system encompasses an inherent mechanism of systematic oversight. This entails that the People's Action Party, in the process of accommodating diverse societal demands and interests, must seek legitimate authority from the parliamentary framework. As the dominant single-party entity, the People's Action Party's actions and decisions need to counterbalance the institutional design's democratic underpinnings. This compels the Party to maintain a sense of crisis, obliging it to remain responsive to public dissent and committed to enhancing citizens' quality of life.

Therefore, it can be contended that the system also imparts a degree of dynamism to the People's Action Party, aligning with a pragmatic governance ethos. For instance, a substantial portion of the party's parliamentary caucus members ascend to leadership positions not solely on the basis of party allegiance, but rather due to their preeminence in respective fields and professions. They have initially

accomplished individuals within their domains, subsequently vetted and interviewed by the People's Action Party, invited to join the party, and assume leadership roles [3].

3.2. Opposition Party Seat Catfish Effect

Since the onset of parliamentary elections in 1959, opposition party candidates in Singapore have failed to secure any seats in the elections of 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980. In the 1991 elections, they managed to gain a maximum of only four seats. Presently, the most prominent opposition parties are the Workers' Party (WP) and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP). The former identifies itself as an "alternative choice," aligning with the fundamental principles of the People's Action Party government. The latter exhibits a more confrontational stance towards the People's Action Party [4].

Although opposition party seats in Singapore's parliament constitute a minute minority, and they face challenges in exerting a pivotal influence on decision-making and the enactment of legislation, objectively speaking, the presence of opposition party seats does indeed introduce diverse political perspectives into the parliamentary arena. This dynamic enlivens parliamentary discussions, prompting the People's Action Party to take cognizance of genuine societal issues and potentially leading to recalibrations in their policy trajectories. This timely refinement in governance efficacy, over the long term, is conducive to the establishment and preservation of the People's Action Party's political image. Such a pragmatic governance style, at the institutional level, is akin to voters reaping benefits from making informed choices, making it less likely for voters to take the risk of entrusting power to an inexperienced political party.

4. The Impact of Biased Design in Electoral Systems

4.1. The Expansion and Suppression of Electoral Values

As the most pivotal aspect of parliamentary systems, the electoral system has undergone a series of modifications and enhancements in its design by the People's Action Party to align with its governing framework and simultaneously maximize safeguards for its governing capabilities.

Singapore's parliamentary elections have adopted the "Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system" and the "Single Member Constituency (SMC) system" since 1988. The Singaporean government asserts that the adoption of the GRC system aims to increase the number of minority Members of Parliament and balance the political power of different ethnic groups, in line with the ideals of diverse racial politics. However, the benefits for the minority ethnic groups are essentially channeled through the understanding of the GRC system, projecting onto minority ethnic candidates within the People's Action Party. Concurrently, the People's Action Party engages in the redrawing of electoral boundaries before each parliamentary election, where the criteria for such redrawing are neither fixed nor explicit. The numbers of SMCs and GRCs are also variable and subject to Cabinet decisions, followed by the President's announcement [5].

A Group Representation Constituency (GRC) refers to an electoral division that elects 4 to 6 Members of Parliament. However, they must be from the same party or political coalition, and at least one member must be from a minority ethnic group, such as Malays, Indians, or other non-Chinese. Party (coalition) candidates compete in a "team" format against another team, and voters cast their ballots for one of the competing teams.

Whether in a single-member or multi-member constituency, the "First Past the Post" or "Winner Takes All" electoral system is adopted [5]. This mode of contesting elections in teams from the same party essentially engenders collective benefit. Voters are often compelled to vote for an entire team due to the presence of a specific candidate. The People's Action Party strategically disperses such high-caliber candidates across various GRCs, ensuring an increased likelihood that voters, prompted by a particular People's Action Party candidate, will select the entire People's Action Party team.

Through this approach, the People's Action Party maximizes the value of each vote, thereby optimizing its parliamentary representation and diminishing the prospects of opposition parties entering the parliament.

On the contrary, opposition parties, especially those in the opposition, often struggle with significantly fewer political resources compared to the ruling party, rendering the establishment of sufficient grassroots organizational teams for GRC candidates challenging. Consequently, in certain GRCs, the People's Action Party's candidate teams can secure victory without engaging in competitive contests. Even if opposition parties successfully form teams and achieve commendable overall vote shares, the distribution of votes can become fragmented due to constituency delineations, resulting in parliamentary seat allocations far below their vote shares.

Furthermore, since the implementation of the GRC system in 1988, single-member constituencies where the opposition garnered over 40% of the votes have either disappeared or been amalgamated into GRCs, effectively diluting their influence. Similarly, GRCs, where the opposition achieved over 40% of the votes, have either been dissolved or redrawn. Conversely, several constituencies where the ruling party achieved overwhelming support have also undergone redistricting to efficiently allocate strong support for the People's Action Party in other areas.

4.2. Ethnic Diversity after Housing Integration

Another policy that has had an impact on the GRC system is the Ethnic Housing Integration Policy (EIP) in Singapore. The official articulation of the Ethnic Housing Integration Policy aims to counteract the ethnic clustering within housing estates, serving the objectives of social stability and ethnic harmony [6]. However, the policy design emphasizes predetermined ethnic ratios within various public housing precincts, mandating that no single minority ethnic group exceeds 20% representation. Given that over eighty percent of Singapore's population resides in publicly owned housing, dispersing minority ethnic proportions within housing precincts effectively precludes the likelihood of other ethnicity-based political parties relying on ethnic support to secure electoral victories.

Since 1997, no Malay candidates, whether from opposition or ruling parties, have been elected in single-member constituencies. In the past, Malay candidates fielded by the predominantly Chinese People's Action Party in constituencies with a significant Malay electorate faced arduous contests. However, following the implementation of the racial integration policy within public housing, the consolidation of minority ethnic groups has been diffused across various constituencies. Simultaneously, the introduction of the GRC team system as a candidacy requirement has intensified the challenge for non-People's Action Party minority ethnic groups to participate politically. Meanwhile, this signifies that only the well-resourced People's Action Party possesses the true capacity within the electoral system to represent the interests of minority ethnic groups, consequently establishing a de facto privilege within the ruling party for minority ethnicities.

On one hand, this seemingly enhances the People's Action Party's political image as a guardian of minority ethnic interests. On the other hand, this privilege serves as a criterion for attracting elites from minority ethnic groups, leading to the inadvertent creation of a "virtuous cycle" within the People's Action Party in terms of political resources. This, in turn, inadvertently curtails the political participation capacity of opposition or other parties in the opposition camp.

4.3. Excessive Representative Disparities in Multi-Variate Constituencies

Manipulating the average size of constituencies proves to be the most effective means of securing seats. Since the adoption of the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system in 1988, there have been two significant trends in successive elections. One is the expansion of GRC size,

progressing from initially having three seats per GRC to the emergence of GRCs with five to six seats by 1997. As the opposition parties gained an increasing share of constituencies and votes, the People's Action Party has had to progressively augment the seat count within advantageous GRCs during the process of redrawing electoral boundaries, ensuring the party's parliamentary representation.

Another trend is the continuous increase in the proportion of both Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and the total population they encompass. This implies that with a greater number of GRCs and consequently more seats, the ruling party can maintain a substantial majority of seats even with a lower share of the total votes. This low-vote, high-seat dynamic results in an increasingly disproportionate relationship between vote share and seat allocation, signifying that the People's Action Party's representation in the legislature is already disproportionately elevated. In essence, the People's Action Party's seats no longer serve the earlier purported purpose of representing minority ethnic interests, as their disproportionately high representation implies an inability to reasonably embody minority interests within the legislative framework. Simultaneously, it is prudent to reevaluate whether using ethnicity as the sole criterion for delineating minority preferences remains sufficiently robust in the present context.

5. Conclusion

This paper primarily examines the assistance provided by Singapore's parliamentary system to the People's Action Party in maintaining continuous governance. It posits that due to the absence of strong ideological or historically rooted socio-cultural factors in Singaporean politics, the institutional framework becomes a pivotal tool for consolidating the ruling party's position. Within Singapore's parliamentary system, the PAP has implemented various designs. The manipulation of the system may outwardly appear neutral, as the PAP employs the system's design as a step within its internal power dynamics. As such, the significant value of the system's design itself might not be overtly highlighted, making it difficult for observers to discern unfair logical foundations within the system and challenging opposing forces to utilize potential flaws in the system as a counterpoint. Therefore, the subsequent research can primarily focus on the potential for self-empowerment within opposing forces.

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