CHAPTER IV

NATURE OF POLITY IN SINGAPORE
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The nature of polity in Singapore is characterised by suppression of opposition parties, depoliticisation of the populace, de-emphasizing of politics in preference for economy and the emergence of an "administrative state". Sometimes, it is described as an "authoritarian" and a "police state".

In Singapore the emphasis on economy was so overwhelming that politics seemed to have lost its meaning. A strong and efficient opposition is considered to be the sine qua non of a democracy. But in accordance with the perceptions and policies of the People's Action Party (PAP) government, in Singapore, the opposition just became superfluous in the prevailing situation. Referring to the record of its achievements in the field of economic development as an evidence, the PAP has ever claimed that "its government represents the best interests of the people, that its policies however stringent they may have been in the short term serve the best interests of the nation". Rapid expansion of developmental activities increased the importance of bureaucracy. This resulted overtime, in the diminution of the role of the politician. It is this rise in power of the

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administrator rather than that of a political representative that has led to the emergence of an "administrative state".

Under the guise of economic development, the government led by Lee Kuan Yew employed a policy of "rigorous internal repression, systematic destruction of political opposition and suppression of trade union movement." The government justified it on the grounds of political stability and linked it with the elimination of subversive elements. Barisan Sosialis was the only strong opposition party before 1965. The People's Action Party (PAP) government used Internal Security Act (ISA) to block the growth of Barisan Sosialis. By arresting important leaders on the pretext of subversion, the government "saw to it that it remained in the hands of inefficient people". Although there were other political parties like Singapore Chinese Party, United National Front and People's Front, they could not pose an electoral threat to the PAP government. It was this that led to the establishment of a "dominant one-party system".

Though elections were held periodically, they merely served the purpose of endorsing the mandate for the ruling party. Voting was obligatory. The numbering system of ballot papers could disclose the identity of the voters. This had an

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4 George, n.2, p.112.
5 Ibid, p.204.
"intimidating effect on the voters supporting the opposition reducing the purpose of election to a mere acclamation of the existing power." 7 Since independence, from 1965 to 1980, all the seats in the Parliament were occupied by the PAP. The PAP kept a close watch on the members of the opposition political parties. The people who held opinions contrary to that of the government were either persecuted or sued by the PAP government for defamation. 8 For an individual being in opposition could be a dangerous activity. Fear of being persecuted led to the demise of opposition parties and dominance of the PAP. The government was highly intolerant towards its critics. The opposition parties had to pay heavy price for their anti-PAP allegations and conduct. The government used Internal Security Act (ISA) to suppress the opposition on the pretext of fighting subversive activities. The election became a farce without opposition. Opposition parties were not banned, but arrests and detentions without trial of those who opposed the government policies rendered them ineffective. The Prime Minister talked about democratic rights only when he sat with the opposition. He never considered elimination of opposition as an exercise of


autocracy. In one of his speeches, Lee Kuan Yew said that "checks and balances of democracy are relevant only when the government is run by personally motivated men and when a country is fighting colonialism. PAP government is people's government, selfless and wise, so checks and balances are unnecessary." A perspective analyst observed: "PAP is a disciplined, self-indoctrinated elitist party hierarchically patterned with real authority distributed among the small number of men at the top." According to Tim Huxley, the opposition remained scanty and posed no threat to PAP and remained "vulnerable to many forms of harassment by the government." Undoubtedly, small size of the island facilitated the monopolization of control and organization by a single center.

The PAP government used oppressive methods for political consolidation. Universities, trade unions and news papers were to be puppets of the government. The PAP controlled the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC). The government began "using executive authority to decide" who should attend the conferences between unions and the government and what kind of

9 George, n.2, p.115.
consultative authority should be enjoyed by whom." Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, at a seminar of National Trade Union Congress said, "Singapore is fortunate in having a trade union leadership that shares the same priorities as its political leadership. It may not be too late for the trade union leaders in developed and developing countries to learn that greater co-operation tends to greater prosperity and helps to maintain peace and orderly progress throughout the world." 

The 1968 Employment and Industrial Relations Act removed many workers' rights giving the management full discretionary powers over most aspects of labour relations including dismissals, promotions and transfers. The National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) acquiesced to these laws and thus ensured the PAP's control of trade union movement. Its objectives were effectively integrated with those of the PAP. The Foreign Minister, Rajaratnam justified these legislative enactments saying that "PAP is not anti-labour. Workers constitute a class with vested interests. The PAP had

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13 George, n.2, p.126.
15 Walden Bello and Rosenfeld, Dragons in Distress: Asia's Miracle Economy in Crisis (San Francisco, 1990), p.301.
to work for the whole country rather than a class."

The housing policy also strengthened the government's control over the working class. The working class had to depend on PAP government for housing and wage labour. From 1966 to 1970, housing estates rapidly expanded, housing policy facilitated the forced depoliticisation of the working class by "physical isolation and creating dependence on wage labour." This guaranteed availability of an obedient labour power.

Rapid economic expansion accentuated disparities of wealth. By 1973, Singapore's per capita income was second only to Japan in Asia. But between the 1950s and 1970s, the wages of the workers earning less than 500 dollars a month increased only about 5 per cent whereas executive grade salaries doubled or trebled. In 1970, Lee Kuan Yew himself said "we are developing painfully, unequally, often unjustly."

Resettlement in public housing did not decrease poverty. A 1958 study noted twenty five per cent of the population below poverty line. In 1978 a similar study found that the percentage of population below the poverty line increased to

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thirty five percent. Very poor were adversely affected by resettlement. 20 The standard of housing in the Housing Development Board (HDB) flats depended on their ability to pay. Poor families which were often larger, lived in one room flats. 21 They found the HDB flats more expensive, transportation more difficult and child rearing more problematic than better off families. 22 In 1970s, the larger families had to wait longer for flats because of the government's policy for encouraging smaller families. 23

Press was also the victim of PAP's oppressive measures. The local newspapers that criticised the government failed to get their licenses renewed and foreign newspapers restricted their circulation. 24 The government felt that "western concept of freedom of press cannot be transplanted in toto to the developing countries where the conditions are totally different. They should put their assets to positive use by being instrumental in reinforcing attitude of discipline and hard work without which economic and social progress cannot


22 Austin, n.20, p.924.


Radio and television programmes had been under the control of the government. National news programmes consisted of lengthy quotations from the authorities and propaganda on productivity and achievements of the government. Books, popular magazines, films, video tapes and other forms of entertainment were scrutinised for their moral and political content and many were banned. The Printing Press Act of 1967 allowed the Minister of Communications and Information to ban any publication contrary to the public interests. Four newspapers Utusan Melayu, a Malay daily, Nanyang Siang Pau, a Chinese daily and Eastern Sun and Singapore Herald, English dailies were closed in late 60s and 70s.

The government exercised its control on all aspects of the people's lives. PAP members were introduced in to university administration also because the government felt that a pure academician was "unable to meet the requirements in the Singaporean context." University students were warned about the values of the government. Their first duty


28 George, n.2, p.140.
was to get a good degree after which they would help the government. The suitability certificates without which a person could not go for higher education completely depoliticised the students. The confessions by the political detainees were arranged to "show the politically apathetic youth the dangers of Communism to the country." Lee Kuan Yew warned them of the problems of involving in things which were not directly related to them. Lee Kuan Yew also threatened to close down the departments of political science, philosophy and history unless the syllabuses became what he described as "most relevant to the Singapore's national interest".

Lee Kuan Yew was an aggressive leader, strict disciplinerian, shrewd analyst, bold, dynamic, firm and relentless. During the period of his administration, he took autocratic decisions. Salaries of the civil servants and academicians were cut. Employers were threatened with imprisonment if they tried to frustrate the government's policy of industrial peace.

The PAP exploited the feeling of insecurity of the people arising from the country's expulsion from Malaysia and later

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because of British military withdrawal, in order to get the people's support to its "ideology of survival". The PAP called for fostering multi-racialism, building a "rugged society" and building up a Singaporean identity. The leadership emphasised values and attitudes that would bolster economic development and modernization. The PAP's "ideology of survival" was based on the premise that "all considerations are subservient to economic and political survival". The people were urged by the government to work hard, to save, to achieve, to be socially disciplined, to adapt to constant change, to be pragmatic, to avoid complacency...".

The ideology demanded self-sacrifice for the national interest. Through this ideology, PAP sought to determine the people's interests on the belief that the "PAP's own survival was paramount to Singapore's survival." This facilitated the government's attempts to suppress claims for the redressal of grievances or attempts at anti-PAP political mobilization. According to an analyst the ideology of pragmatism and survival was formalised to "legitimise the entire political programme of exploitation and repression". Based on its

32 Garry Rodan, n.16, p.88.
34 Chan Heng Chee, n.29, p.147.
35 Garry Rodan, n.16, p.88.
36 Tremewan, n.18, p.108.
justification for pragmatism and necessity, the PAP government could undermine the local working class and control education and media. When the Law Society of Singapore criticised the Printing Press Act, the government criticised it as a pressure group and charged it of exceeding its boundaries. Its president had been suspended in 1973 for one year from practice.\textsuperscript{37}

The PAP leaders were convinced that a small country like Singapore, without natural resources could not afford the luxury of partisan politics and attempted to depoliticise the power structure in favour of economic growth and political stability. They were convinced that these could be maintained only in the narrow limits determined by the party and administered by the bureaucrats and not politicians. The People's Action Party and its leader Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew worked out a system closer to meritocracy that stressed hard work and conformity to work dedicatedly for economic growth. Its ministers functioned like members of a board of directors rather than cabinet ministers. An aspiring politician must be good at his profession before being considered for the office.\textsuperscript{38}

The philosophy of the administrative state was based on the premise that the time spent by the groups and counter groups to lobby, influence and change the policies was a waste

\textsuperscript{37} Straits Times (Singapore) 28 October 1986.

\textsuperscript{38} Indian Express (New Delhi) 23 December 1976.
of time that slowed down the implementation process. Therefore
the government had taken "stern measures against those who
harp on gut issues such as language, culture and religion." For
instance when two opposition candidates accused the
government of discriminatory measures against those Chinese
language educated during 1976 election campaign, the
government accused them of stirring up communal emotions. The
single party parliament led to the blurred difference "between
the government and the state". Any political activity
outside the ruling party became increasingly dangerous and was
replaced by meritocracy. Even the PAP had no coherent party
network. It was only "a group of people who share the same
occupational status, but all of them operate as individuals
rather than factions". Each of them was a specialist in a
particular field such as public issues, technical details etc.
and each trying to catch the eye of the party leaders by his
performance such as questions in parliament, public speeches
and constituency work: Party discipline was strictly observed.
Politics was viewed as "authoritative allocation of values,
power and resources". The allocation was done by the
cabinet with the help of top administrators.

Parliamentarians were elected because they could fit into

39 Shee Poon Kim, n.30, p.196.
40 Hans U. Luther, n.7, 127.
41 Chan Heng Chee, n.1, p.60.
42 Ibid.
any one of the administrative roles, technocrats, mobilisers, Malay vote getters and Chinese intellectuals.  A technocrat rendered his technical expertise in initiating, modifying and facilitating physical, economic and social planning. A mobiliser created mass support for the party and was inevitable for his feedback functions and also for his role in explaining the popular policies to the electorate. Malay vote getters and Chinese intellectuals represented the racial communities and they acted as a link between these two communities and the PAP. Malay vote getter counterbalanced ethnic representation of Chinese intellectuals who in turn counter weighed the dominance of westernised and western trained technocrats. A data on recruitment into the Parliament in 1974 showed that mobiliser, Malay vote getter and Chinese intellectual together outweighed the administrator technocrats. The technocrats elevated to the ministerial positions were more in number. In 1975 most of the legislators were stated to be from technocratic backgrounds reflecting prevailing faith in the desirability of the government and control of the society by experts. In 1972 out of 65 members in parliament, 19 were technocrats, 17 were trade union members and very few were to have been through real political

43 Chan Heng Chee "Legislative and Legislators" In Jon S.T. Quah and others, eds., Government and Politics of Singapore (Singapore, 1985), p.85.
44 Ibid., p.86.
battles.\textsuperscript{45} "This reduced" according to Chua Beng Huat, "space for popular participation in politics because the electorate do not possess the requisite knowledge to be trusted with making informed decisions".\textsuperscript{46} The PAP depended on meritocracy, a key elite group whose ideas and directions would be the "main moving spirit that shapes the prosperity and destiny of the nation".\textsuperscript{47}

The success of the PAP was attributed to efficient bureaucracy and its implementation of policies. The civil servants were entrusted with the task of experimenting with ideas, enterprises and organizations to pull Singapore out of economic difficulties.

One must understand the government's policies that "increased the power and scope of bureaucrats and reduced the role of politician.\textsuperscript{48} These were: increasing participation of the government in business and groups of governmental activities in statutory institutions and private companies. The bureaucrats were placed in charge of statutory boards and as members of the board of directors of companies.\textsuperscript{49} A bureaucrat was not accountable to anybody except ministers who were answerable to former's actions. It was only in 1974 that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{45} Chan Heng Chee, n.29, p.149.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Chua Beng Huat, n.8, p.658.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Chan Heng Chee, n.29, p.149.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid., n.1, p.63.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., n.6, p.21
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\end{footnotesize}
a Public Accounts Committee was established to examine the accounts laid before the Parliament.\textsuperscript{50} To legitimise its policies the government had to rely on bureaucracy. A political study center was established where the bureaucrats interacted with the cabinet ministers. The bureaucrats were exposed to party ideology and were expected to adopt the values and policies of the government. This co-operation between the bureaucrats and the political leadership led to rapid economic development of the country and hence the popular support to the PAP. Many civil servants were invited to enter politics. "The politicization of bureaucrats and their decision making power led to enormous influence they command."\textsuperscript{51}

The political leaders of Singapore gave top priority to economic survival, modernisation and development. Most of the legislators were people with administrative and managerial backgrounds. Since 1972 there had been a noticeable addition of civil servants in the political arena.\textsuperscript{52} The civil service was considered an appropriate training ground for political career.

During the period of this study, rise in the power of bureaucrats was clearly discernable. The country's

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., n.1, p.65.

\textsuperscript{51} Seah Chee Meow, "The Civil Service" In Jon. S.T. Quah and others n.43, p.109.

\textsuperscript{52} Chan Heng Chee, n.1, p.85.

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geographical size also helped to form a concentrated and co-ordinated apparatus. This facilitated easy mobilization, execution of public policies and regulations of behaviour, communication of ideas and redistribution of services.\(^{53}\) This meant a clear shift of political power from the politician to the bureaucrat. The status and role of elected politician was reduced because of non-competitive situation. His contribution to the strength and survival of the party was not crucial. The close relationship between the civil servants and political leadership was so considerable that the gap between the two sectors was almost blurred. They came to be regarded as natural allies offering crucial service to the political leadership. The civil servants ran the country while the political leaders representing the popular will and legislature would be subordinate to the dictates of the administrative convenience.

In this scenario, it was essential for the government to create some channels for politically aware people to express their interests without which anti-establishment ideas and beliefs could develop and challenge the government.\(^{54}\) Therefore, the government started intermediary institutions like Citizens Consultative Committees, Community Centres and Resident Committees to absorb the participatory talents of the

\(^{53}\) Chen Heng Chee, n.6, p.55.

\(^{54}\) Seah Chee Meow, "Para-Political Institutions", In John S.T. Quah and others, n.43, p.174.
people, directing them to different aspects of the government's socio-political and developmental programmes. The government's social and economic policies further ensured popular support. The government depended on bureaucracy and para-political institutions for a wide range of services essential for everyday living. With the emergence of Barisan Sosialis, PAP had already lost "ideologically motivated members who acted as vital links between the PAP and the population". Hence it was necessary for the PAP to build a strong organizational network at the grassroot level.

Community centres and Citizens Consultative Committees (CCC) spread the ideas and aspirations of the government, redressed the grievances of the people and acted as linkages between the government and the people. For the PAP political consolidation had to be done at two levels (i) delivering essential goods and services; (ii) policy of controlled mobilization. The CCCs acted as a bridge between the government and the community leaders in various localities to acquaint themselves with local grievances. The function of the CCC were:

1. To transmit information and make recommendation on the needs of the people to the government and to keep the people informed of government's action and policy matters; and

2. To promote good citizenship among the people of

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56 Hans U. Luther, n.7, p.127.

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Singapore. 57

The Citizen’s Consultative Committees were not free from government’s interference. The members of the committees were nominated by the local members and approved by the Prime Minister’s office. 58

People’s Association was the widest based organization in Singapore. These associations were headed by a cabinet minister. The major responsibilities of People’s Associations were organization and promotion of group participation in social, cultural, educational and athletic activities for the people of Singapore, in order to instil a “sense of identity and a spirit of dedicatedness to a multiracial community.” 59

The People’s Association and Community Centres were instruments to carry out government’s policies of nation building. 60 The Community Centres elicit responsibility and participation among the people and work towards establishing a Singaporean identity. The members of the community centres were also nominated by the members of Parliament. Both People’s Associations and Community Centres fostered the norms of political community envisaged by the PAP leaders.

58 Linda Quen Ching Lim, n.23, p.184.
60 Sunday Times, (Hong Kong), 30 June, 1985.
Objectives of the resident committees were:

1. To provide a better channel of communication with the authorities

2. To ensure a better sense of security and protection from crime, vandalism, drugs and other anti-social activities.

3. To encourage sense of neighbourliness and racial harmony among residents through sports, social, cultural and other activities.\textsuperscript{61}

Well organised party branches in all the constituencies and para-political institutions helped in PAP's consolidation of power and its continuous contact with the people at grass-root level.\textsuperscript{62} The popular participation and articulation were possible through these organizations. They involved local leaders at the constituency level and small businessmen who had few chances of being elected to the legislative assembly or administrative boards. The relationship between the intermediary institutions and the PAP was very strong. The close identification of these institutions with the PAP assisted the consolidation of the PAP's political base in those constituencies. With the actual involvement of socially accepted local leaders and a highly compact network of these para-political institutions, the PAP had made it difficult for the opposition to expand their support base.

The grass-root organizations participated in mobilising


\textsuperscript{62} Shee Poon Kim, n.30, p.199.
support for a government's cause. Articulation of ideas and application of pressure on government took place through letter columns of the newspapers. But even the letter columns contained issues of demands for more efficient administration, housing, public transport and so on, rather than political issues.\textsuperscript{63} The government preferred the electorate not to make political issues out of these problems. Instead it would rather encourage the electorate to treat such problems as purely administrative matter and continue their criticism to that of improving bureaucratic efficiency in the delivery of goods.\textsuperscript{64} Lack of corruption also strengthened the system.

Political culture of Singapore discouraged "conflict, confrontation and bargaining (and) emphasizes stability, low risk and petition".\textsuperscript{65} The people could show disapproval only through official channels. The state demanded absolute loyalty of the citizens to the nation. Though the citizens had been given certain rights, they were expected to have a sense of loyalty to the State and the government.

The ability of the PAP to attract new talents into the government rendered the opposition ineffective in posing a viable alternative. Moreover, the opposition parties were

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} Chan Heng Chee, n.1, p.56.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Chua Beng Huat, \textit{Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore} (London, 1995), p.126.
\end{itemize}
plagued with factionalism and internal feuds and had only limited grass-root support.

The main function of the members of Parliament was to act as a link between the people in the constituency and the party leaders, thus making the government more accessible to the people. "Meet-people sessions" were held every week where the members of Parliament met the people of their constituencies. These sessions provided the opportunity for the common people to bring their problems to various party branches for assistance and advice. The PAP members of Parliament regularly visited constituencies for this purpose. This "stressed accessibility of government for ordinary citizens" and encouraged a "sense of involvement on the part of the people in the affairs of the state."  

The job of the MP was more of an administrative nature, therefore his individual performance did not make a significant difference. Major emphasis was put on expertise and judgement of the leadership to plan, and implement the policies. The style of governance entailed elimination of politics. The main reasons for the power of PAP were its achievement of economic development, an efficient political and administrative apparatus operating all governmental, administrative, legal, trade union and party affairs. Politics became a part time affair for anybody but those with ministerial and related offices. Every state intervention and

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66 Chan Heng Chee, n.6, p.108.
undemocratic act was carried out following due Parliamentary processes. Rapid improvement in material life combined with political repression kept political expression at the lowest point. People sensed the government’s disregard for their views. They had thus no desire to jeopardise their own economic interests. Middle class individuals were inclined to "cultivate their own interests, leaving the government to institute rules, and policies which do (did) not affect them directly or can (could) be borne without financial difficulties."\(^{67}\)

This led to the depoliticisation of the people. Due to absence of opposition parties in the Parliament, the government could divert its energies completely to economic development. The PAP's "ideology of survival and pragmatism" and its emphasis on economic development over politics made parliamentary democracy a farce and resulted in the emergence of an "administrative state".

\(^{67}\) Chua Beng Huat, n.8, p.664.