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## The People's Action Party and the Singapore Presidency in 2017

*Understanding the Contradictions between State Discourse  
and State Practice*

### ABSTRACT

While the Singapore government has sought to construct the elected presidency as an institution critical to Singapore's political system, the result in fact forces the institution to contradict itself. This paradox has important implications for politics in a post-Lee Hsien Loong Singapore.

**KEYWORDS:** People's Action Party, Singapore presidential election 2017, state praxes, state discourse, post-Lee Singapore

### INTRODUCTION

In September 2017, Singapore elected Halimah Yacob as the country's first-ever female president. She is also the first Malay-Muslim president in nearly 50 years. While the government, hitherto dominated by the People's Action Party (PAP), claimed this as a resounding success of its meritocratic and multiracial governance model, her election was not without controversy. The presidential election of 2017 (PE2017) was preceded by two constitutional amendments that were passed in November 2016. The first institutionalized a "hiatus-triggered mechanism" which reserves the presidency for one of Singapore's four major racial groups—Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others—if no member of that race had been elected president in the

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preceding five elections. The second amendment tightened the eligibility criteria for candidates who come from the private sector.<sup>1</sup> Halimah Yacob won in a walkover because neither of the other two applicants, Salleh Marican and Farid Khan, was deemed to have met these criteria. Many Singaporeans also believed that the race-based election policy was institutionalized to prevent Tan Cheng Bock from running, because he nearly caused an upset in the election of 2011 (PE2011). The array of controversies throughout the lead-up to PE2017 renders it a fascinating subject of inquiry.

This paper's central argument is as follows. The PAP government has attempted to normalize the notion that the office of the presidency is critical to Singapore's political system. However, the way in which the institution has been created has undermined the credibility of the state's discourses on the presidency. Thus, there are contradictions between the discourses on what the state claims the presidency to be, and what the state's formulation of the presidency has led it to be. We therefore analyze how the PAP government has attempted to frame the elected presidency (EP) discursively, and highlight how the way the EP was institutionalized has undermined the credibility and potency of these discourses.

To make this argument, we interrogate three narratives the PAP government has offered to reveal the contradictions embedded in its methods of institution-building. First, while the state has framed the hiatus-triggered model as a way to safeguard multiracialism and meritocracy, it has instead unleashed criticisms of the capacity of the institution to protect these core values, as well as criticisms against the political use of these values. Second, the state has characterized the new financial qualifying requirements as a way to broaden the pool of the most qualified candidates, but this change has been perceived as a way to tighten the business–politics nexus and arbitrarily shrink the pool of eligible candidates. Third, the state has consistently framed the EP as a politically neutral check against the government of the day, but the design of the institution has rendered suspect both its neutrality and its viability as a restraint. Thus, although the state frames the EP as crucial to Singapore's national interests, in fact all three claims are undermined, upon careful observation. Our analysis will thus demonstrate how and why state praxes can undermine the credibility of state discourse. We conclude by

1. "Private-sector candidate" means a CEO of a corporation. They are neither civil servants nor those who hold ministerial positions (i.e. public sector).

suggesting that because the PAP's need to maintain primacy over the totality of Singapore's social, political, and economic spheres<sup>2</sup> exists alongside a growing appetite for democratization among the electorate, a climate of insecurity within the government has emerged. To cope, officials persist in the government's discursive positions even though these lack resonance with the electorate. This is likely to be exacerbated after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong steps down in 2020.

This paper uses both primary and secondary research methods. Interviews were conducted with the two would-be presidential candidates, Farid Khan and Salleh Marican, and with senior civil servants, civil society actors, and voters who spoke to us under the condition of anonymity. These have been supplemented with analysis of newspaper articles, government speeches, and policy seminars related to PE2017. The paper begins by outlining the key shifts in the office of the presidency. It then discusses the three claims above, before concluding with an assessment of Singaporean politics in a post-Lee PAP.

## CREATING THE ELECTED PRESIDENCY

From 1965 till 1991, the office of the president was purely ceremonial in Singapore. Presidents were appointed through a consociational logic, with representatives rotated among Singapore's four major racial groups.<sup>3</sup> In 1984, then-PM Lee Kuan Yew conceived of the EP as a safeguard to preserve Singapore's vast financial reserves from a potentially irresponsible government and parliament.<sup>4</sup> Nearly three decades later, PM Lee Hsien Loong similarly referred to the EP as crucial to the country's national interests.<sup>5</sup> Two white papers, one in 1988 and another in 1990, proposed constitutional amendments to reconceive the presidency. It would be vested with two key

2. Cherian George, "Consolidating Authoritarian Rule: Calibrated Coercion in Singapore," *Pacific Review* 20:2 (2007): 127–45; Diane K. Mauzy and R. S. Milne, *Singapore Politics under the People's Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002); Hussin Mutalib, "Singapore's First Elected Presidency: The Political Motivations," in Kevin Y. L. Tan and Lam Peng Er (eds.), *Managing Political Change: The Elected Presidency of Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1997): 167–87.

3. Kevin Y. L. Tan, *An Introduction to Singapore's Constitution* (Singapore: Talisman, 2014): 101.

4. Linda Low and Toh Mun Heng, "The Elected Presidency as a Safeguard for Official Reserves: What is at Stake?" Occasional Paper No. 1, Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore, 1989: 28.

5. "Transcript of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Press Conference on the Presidential Election," Prime Minister's Office, August 16, 2011, <<https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/transcript-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loongs-press-conference-presidential-election>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

functions: to act as the “second key” to Singapore’s reserves,<sup>6</sup> and to approve the appointment of key public and civil service positions.<sup>7</sup> The presidency thus became a hybrid office, with both ceremonial significance and limited executive powers.<sup>8</sup> The latter made it necessary for the position to be filled through periodic elections.<sup>9</sup>

Numerous constitutional provisions define who can run for president, how candidates are selected, the scope of the president’s duties, and the procedures required to further redefine the office. Per the 1991 amendments, Article 19(2) mandates that a potential candidate (1) must be “a person of integrity, good character and reputation”; (2) must have “such experience and ability in administering and managing financial affairs” as to demonstrate the capacity to carry out the duties of the office; (3) must have held public offices such as minister or chief justice, or positions such as chairman or CEO of certain statutory boards or private-sector companies with a minimum paid-up capital of SG\$ 100 million (US\$ 74 million). Fourthly, having held these offices, or “any similar or comparable position of equivalent size or complexity,” indicates adequate “experience and ability in administering and managing financial affairs.”<sup>10</sup> Article 18(2) stipulates that a Presidential Election Committee (PEC) will be formed to vet potential candidates, and will have three members: the chairman of the Public Service Commission, the chairman of the Public Accountants Board, and a member of the Presidential

6. “National reserves” refers to the country’s net assets. These include both financial and physical assets. The reserves are managed by the Monetary Authority of Singapore. The total value of the reserves is a state secret, but is estimated to be well over SG\$ 500 billion (US\$ 370 billion). To withdraw from its financial reserves, the cabinet (executive branch of the government) must receive approval from the president. The “first key” to the reserves is thus held by the cabinet, and the “second” by the president. For a withdrawal to occur, both parties must give their consent. However, the cabinet must initiate the process. The president cannot propose using the reserves, so the president holds the “second” key. The reserves exist to provide the country financial security, with withdrawals to be made in periods of financial crisis. For more, see Valerie Chew, “National Reserves,” National Library Board Singapore, 2016, <[http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1487\\_2009-03-17.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1487_2009-03-17.html)>, accessed February 27, 2019.

7. Republic of Singapore, “White Paper on the Elected Presidency,” 1988; Republic of Singapore, “White paper on the Elected Presidency,” 1990.

8. Kevin Y. L. Tan, “The Presidency in Singapore: Constitutional Developments,” in *Managing Political Change*: 52.

9. Valentine Winslow, “The Election of a President in a Parliamentary System,” in *Managing Political Change*: 88.

10. Article 19(2), Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, 1991, <<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Acts-Supp/5-1991/Published/19910125?DocDate=19910125>>, accessed September 20, 2018.

Council for Minority Rights.<sup>11</sup> In 1994, Article 151A was introduced, removing the president's veto power on issues pertaining to "defence and security."<sup>12</sup> Amendments were also made to Articles 22, 22A, and 22C, which dealt with "the President's power to veto the appointment of public officers, members of statutory boards and directors of government companies."<sup>13</sup> Article 22H was amended such that presidential consent would no longer be necessary if the government sought to introduce new legislative measures concerning the presidency.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Article 5(2A) stipulates that Parliament can only amend the EP if two-thirds of Singaporeans give their approval in a national referendum,<sup>15</sup> though this provision remains dormant<sup>16</sup> because the government believes it would be imprudent to subject proposals concerning a nascent institution to a mass vote.<sup>17</sup>

#### SINGAPORE'S ELECTED PRESIDENTS: FROM 1993 TO 2011

Singapore's first presidential election was held in 1993 between former Accountant-General Chua Kim Yeow and former PAP Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Ong Teng Cheong. Despite making it clear that he was a reluctant candidate, Chua received 41.3% of valid votes.<sup>18</sup> Chua's performance was surprising because he was running against a high-profile, and indeed popular, DPM.<sup>19</sup> Ong's presidential tenure revealed the structural tensions in the office. The novelty of the EP rendered the role less understood than other

11. Article 18(2), Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, 1991, <<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Acts-Supp/5-1991/Published/19910125?DocDate=19910125>>, accessed September 20, 2018.

12. Tan, *Singapore's Constitution*: 97–98.

13. *Ibid.*: 98.

14. Tsun Hang Tey, "Singapore's Electoral System: Government by the People?" *Legal Studies* 28:4 (December 2008): 625.

15. *Ibid.*: 624.

16. Thio Li-Ann, "Singapore: (S)electing the President—Diluting Democracy?" *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 5:3 (July 2007): 526–43.

17. "Oral Answer by the Minister for Law, K Shanmugam, to Parliamentary Question on Elected Presidency," Ministry of Law, July 9, 2014, <<https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/minlaw/en/news/parliamentary-speeches-and-responses/oral-answer-by-minister-on-elected-presidency.html>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

18. Chia Shi Teck, "Notes from the Margin: Reflections on the First Presidential Election, by a Former Nominated Member of Parliament," in *Managing Political Change*: 188–99.

19. Chong Zi Liang and Seow Bei Yi, "Chua Kim Yeow, Singapore's First Local Accountant-General, Dies at Age of 90," *Straits Times*, August 21, 2016, <<http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapores-first-local-accountant-general-dies-at-age-of-90>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

government apparatuses. Ong and the government interpreted the scope of the office differently.<sup>20</sup> Ong was resolute in attempting to limit the government's ability to make withdrawals from the reserves without his consent.<sup>21</sup> In 1999, he publicly aired the difficulties he faced working with the government because of the lack of clarity over the specific parameters of presidential duties, as well as administrative hindrances to the effective execution of those duties. Notably, Ong complained that he could not carry out his custodial duties with competence and integrity if the government was not transparent in providing him a comprehensive breakdown of the financial and physical assets which constitute the reserves.<sup>22</sup> Ong was told that it would require "52 man-years" for a list of the physical assets to be produced for him.<sup>23</sup> Ong was also proactive in voicing his disagreements with the government publicly because he was the first president with the electoral mandate to do so.<sup>24</sup> He argued that his differences of opinions were aimed at clarifying the president's duties, not enlarging executive power.<sup>25</sup> This was nonetheless enough to galvanize the PAP to issue a firm public rebuttal of Ong's positions, which then led to the 1999 white paper to clarify both the relationship between the president and the government, and the procedures to safeguard Singapore's national reserves.<sup>26</sup>

After two uncontested elections in 1999 and 2005, PE2011 saw the PAP's favored candidate nearly losing. Tan Cheng Bock, a Chinese former PAP backbencher, nearly beat Tony Tan, who garnered a mere 35.2% of the vote.<sup>27</sup>

20. Mauzy and Milne, *People's Action Party*: 153–55.

21. Chua Mui Hoong, "Will There Be a New Man at the Istana This Year?" *Straits Times*, January 16, 1999; "Ong Teng Cheong is the First Elected President of Singapore," *National Library Board Singapore*, n.d., <<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/a99d1364-fdfd-4a05-9f04-be0746d762d5>>, accessed August 18, 2018; "PMO Disputes Ong's Remarks," *Straits Times*, March 10, 2000.

22. "I Had a Job to Do' Whether the Government Liked It or Not, Says Ex-President Ong," *Asia Week* 26:9 (March 10, 2000).

23. Richard Hu Tsu Tau, "Issue Raised by President Ong Teng Cheong at His Press Conference on 16th July 1999," Ministry of Finance, August 17, 1999, <<https://www.mof.gov.sg/Portals/0/Policies/II%20-%20What%20is%20the%20PresidentG%C3%87%C3%96s%20role%20in%20safeguarding%20the%20reserves/Issues%20raised%20by%20President%20Ong%20Teng%20Cheong.pdf>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

24. Cherian George, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation. Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control 1990–2000* (Singapore: Landmark, 2000): 58–59.

25. "I Had a Job to Do'."

26. Tau, "Issue Raised by President Ong."

27. Netina Tan, "The 2011 General and Presidential Elections in Singapore," *Electoral Studies* 35 (2014): 374–78.

That Tony Tan was a former DPM, had a stellar career in government, received strong support from the government machinery, and *nonetheless* barely scraped through, was astonishing.<sup>28</sup> PE2011 was also a boisterous affair, “with online campaigns, public rallies and feisty television debates,” as well as promises from all candidates to dutifully execute the president’s custodial powers.<sup>29</sup> Two other candidates, Tan Jee Say<sup>30</sup> and Tan Kin Lian,<sup>31</sup> also promised to pressure the government to reform policies they believed were unpopular with Singaporeans, even though doing so would fall outside the purview of the office. Indeed, the PAP government envisioned presidential elections to contain “a modicum of political competition among establishment figures” to give the presidency the legitimacy to “limit the powers of any non-PAP government.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, Ong’s tenure as president arguably catalyzed the impetus to curtail the scope of presidential powers, while the fallout from PE2011 appeared to hasten the need to reform the EP system itself.

#### THE 2016 CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS AND THE ASCENT OF HALIMAH YACOB

After PE2011, PAP MPs voiced concerns regarding the apparent “laxity in application of pre-qualification criteria” which permitted Tan Jee Say and Tan Kin Lian to run under the deliberative track (which allows a candidate who does not meet all the requirements to appeal to the PEC).<sup>33</sup> In January 2016, the government appointed a Constitutional Commission to examine the currency of the qualifying criteria.<sup>34</sup> Chaired by Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, the commission proposed: (1) to tighten the eligibility criteria for

28. Stephan Ortmann, “Singapore: Authoritarian but Newly Competitive,” *Journal of Democracy* 22:4 (October 2011): 153–64.

29. Tan, “2011 General and Presidential Elections”: 377.

30. Ng E-Jay, “My Response to Tan Jee Say’s Presidential Bid,” *SG Politics*, July 18, 2011, <<http://www.sgpolitics.net/?p=6990>>, accessed August 18, 2018; Tan Jee Say, “Why I Want to be President,” *SG Politics*, July 15, 2011, <<http://www.sgpolitics.net/?p=6987>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

31. Liyana Low, “Veto Can Be Used for the People: Tan Kin Lian,” *Yahoo! News*, August 21, 2011, <<https://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/veto-last-resort-tan-kin-lian-080931670.html>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

32. Garry Rodan, “Singapore’s Elected President: A Failed Institution,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 72:1 (2018): 4.

33. Thio Li-Ann, *Singapore Chronicles: Presidency* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2015): 68–70.

34. “Constitutional Commission Completes Review of Elected Presidency,” *Channel News Asia*, August 17, 2016, <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/constitutional-commission-completes-review-of-elected-presidency-7857690>>, accessed August 18, 2018.



private-sector candidates, permitting only chief executives of companies with a minimum shareholder equity of SG\$ 500 million (US\$ 365 million); (2) to make it mandatory for the president to consult an enlarged Council of Presidential Advisors when he needs to exercise his custodial powers; and (3) that if nobody from a particular racial group has been elected president in the preceding five terms, the post be reserved for that community.<sup>35</sup> In November 2016, constitutional amendments were passed to reflect these proposals.<sup>36</sup> And thus PE2017 was reserved for Malay-Muslims, because that group had not been represented for five terms in the presidency since Yusof Ishak stepped down in 1970. With the election slated for September 2017, in August Halimah Jacob declared her intention to run, before resigning as speaker of parliament and MP. Since candidates must be independent of party politics, she also resigned as a member of the PAP. She submitted her nomination papers along with two would-be candidates from the private sector, Salleh Marican and Farid Khan, both of whom applied under the deliberative track. The PEC declared Salleh and Farid ineligible, and Halimah became the eighth president in a walkover. With this background, the paper will analyze how the PAP government has attempted to frame the EP discursively, and highlight how the manner in which the EP was institutionalized has further undermined the credibility and potency of these discourses.

#### MULTIRACIALISM AND MERITOCRACY: SAFEGUARDING OR UNDERMINING THE PRESIDENCY?

Multiracialism is ideologically foundational to nation-building in Singapore. Since independence, the PAP government has argued that races are primordial, prone to tribalism, and thus perpetually at risk of conflict.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it treats the population's racial identities—compartmentalized into four broad categories, Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other—as central markers of their being. It maintains that governing Singapore through a racialized model is

35. "Report of the Constitutional Commission 2016," Government of Singapore, 2016, <<https://www.gov.sg/media/elected%20presidency/files/report%20of%20the%20constitutional%20commission%202016.pdf>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

36. "Elected Presidency: Amendments to Constitution Passed in Parliament," *Channel News Asia*, November 9, 2016, <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/elected-presidency-amendments-to-constitution-passed-in-parliament-7719282>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

37. Chua Beng Huat, "Multiculturalism in Singapore: An Instrument of Social Control," *Race & Class* 44:3 (2003): 58–77.

relevant, necessary, and legitimate,<sup>38</sup> and multiracialism continues to be an operative principle in policymaking.<sup>39</sup> Embedded in this system is the notion that this approach to governance upholds meritocracy, another ideology foundational to the PAP government's nation-building project. Since independence, the state has maintained that all Singaporeans receive equal opportunities. As long as individuals demonstrate deservingness—measured through quantifiable indices like educational attainment and job performance—they have upward mobility, irrespective of race.<sup>40</sup> The ideologies of meritocracy and multiracialism thus exist in parallel.

After the 2016 constitutional amendments were proposed and passed, the PAP government embarked on a nationwide tour to justify its decision to introduce a racially reserved EP. Minister of Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam stated that while people can disagree over the extent to which race is a factor in a person's political predispositions, the quantitative evidence in other multiracial countries demonstrates that people overwhelmingly vote along racial lines, tend to have negative attitudes toward different races, and feel greater affinity for those of their own race.<sup>41</sup> The state also argued that race factors significantly in how Singaporeans vote.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, any racial homogenization of the presidency would be detrimental to the long-term sustainability of interracial solidarity. Lee Hsien Loong has argued that it was necessary to intervene and institutionalize the system because otherwise

38. Faris Mokhtar, "Singapore 'Far from Ready' to Do Away with Race Categorization: Ong Ye Kung," *Channel News Asia*, September 11, 2016, <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-far-from-ready-to-do-away-with-race-categorisation-ong-7810834>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

39. Chua Beng Huat, "Political Culturalism, Representation and the People's Action Party of Singapore," *Democratization* 14:5 (2007): 911–27; Eugene K. B. Tan, "Multiracialism Engineered: The Limits of Electoral and Spatial Integration in Singapore," *Ethnopolitics* 4:4 (2005): 413–28; Maisy Wong, "Estimating Ethnic Preferences Using Ethnic Housing Quotas in Singapore," *Review of Economic Studies* 80:3 (2013): 1178–1214.

40. Rosnani Hashim and Charlene Tan, "A Hyphenated Identity: Fostering National Unity through Education in Malaysia and Singapore," *Citizenship Teaching and Learning* 5:1 (2009): 46–59.

41. "Reforms to the Elected Presidency System, Session 2: The Workings of the Elected Presidency," K. Shanmugam, October 30, 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2rz1oMvBcg>>, accessed August 18, 2018; "IPS Forum on the Reserved Presidential Election: Edited Recording of Session 1," Ministerial Dialogue 1 with K. Shanmugam, Minister for Law and Home Affairs, September 20, 2017, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDvrjA3G\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDvrjA3G_s)>, accessed August 18, 2018.

42. "IPS Forum on the Reserved Presidential Election: Edited Recording of Session 3," Ministerial Dialogue 2 with Chan Chun Sing and Janil Puthuchery, September 20, 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoReucEnjls>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

the primordiality of racial preference would impose a glass ceiling on racial minority members who aspire to the presidency.<sup>43</sup>

If race influences voting this much, it is assumed that Singaporean Chinese—who constitute over 70% of the population—would render the presidency the prerogative of Chinese candidates in perpetuity. A prominent civil society activist from the Malay-Muslim community called the reserved elections system an example of “calibrated meritocracy,” wherein the state gives opportunities to wholly capable minorities who, through no fault of their own, would struggle to win an election.<sup>44</sup> A system of quasi-affirmative action is therefore not perceived to be contradictory to meritocracy. Halimah Yacob made a similar declaration in her inauguration speech, when she stated that it was precisely because of Singapore’s commitment to meritocracy that she, a female minority member, could become president.<sup>45</sup>

Senior civil servants interviewed for this study similarly stated that while not ideal, a racially reserved presidency guarantees minority representation, and thus symbolically projects the ethos of equal opportunity in a multiracial society.<sup>46</sup> Thus, given that the state believes voting patterns to be undergirded by racial considerations, it has offered the hiatus-triggered EP as a mechanism to limit the potency of racial divisions in politics. In other words, it framed the 2016 constitutional amendments as a way to safeguard both multiracialism and meritocracy. The EP is also now meant to project these ideologies. However, in reality the hiatus-triggered model has problematized, rather than secured, both these ideals.

Debates in popular discourse revealed a critique of the very foundations of how race is understood in Singapore. After Halimah, Salleh, and Farid declared their intentions to run in PE2017, questions concerning the extent of their Malayness emerged.<sup>47</sup> Following reports that Halimah’s father was

43. “Next Presidential Election to Be Reserved for Malay Candidates: PM Lee,” *Channel News Asia*, November 8, 2016, <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/next-presidential-election-to-be-reserved-for-malay-candidates-p-7719928>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

44. Interview with Malay-Muslim civil society activist, Singapore, August 25, 2017.

45. Halimah Yacob, “In Full: President Halimah Yacob’s Inauguration Speech,” *Today*, September 14, 2017, <<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/full-president-halimah-yacobs-welcome-speech-swearing-ceremony>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

46. Interview with senior civil servant, Singapore, February 4, 2018a; interview with senior civil servant, Singapore, February 5, 2018b.

47. Zakir Hussain, “Doubts about Presidential Hopefuls Not Being Malay Enough Are Off Track,” *Straits Times*, July 20, 2017, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/doubts-about-presidential-hopefuls-not-being-malay-enough-are-off-track>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

Indian, some Singaporeans questioned how Halimah could claim to be Malay when other political leaders from mixed backgrounds defined their racial membership in patrilineal terms.<sup>48</sup> Salleh was criticized because not only is he ethnically Indian, his command of the Malay language is considered poor.<sup>49</sup> Farid's ancestry is rooted in Pakistan, and his identity card gives his racial group as Pakistani.<sup>50</sup> Thus, some questioned how he could claim to represent Malays too. Others also argued that if being Muslim is central to defining Malays, then surely Chinese Muslims too could qualify.<sup>51</sup>

While these criticisms predominated within the Chinese and Indian communities, some Malays also shared these sentiments.<sup>52</sup> The proportion among Malays was smaller because they generally recognize that it is not uncommon for people of diverse ethnic backgrounds—Arab, Javanese, Bugis, Minangkabau, Balinese, Indian—to be identified under the rubric of “Malay.” What is more, those Malays who questioned the Malayness of the candidates tended to focus on Halimah's racial background more than Salleh's or Farid's, because she was perceived to have been endorsed by the PAP government. They believed the hiatus-triggered model was introduced to prevent Tan Cheng Bock from running, so their criticisms were primarily fueled by their sympathy for the opposition. Though many Chinese and Indians shared the belief that Tan was a victim of the government's ability to rewrite the constitution and introduce new qualifying clauses, some struggled to appreciate the heterogeneity of the Malay race. Article 19b(6) of the constitution states that even if someone is not of the Malay race, he can be considered Malay so long as he identifies with and is accepted by the community as such.<sup>53</sup> No such provisions are included in the legal definition of Chinese or

48. “PM Lee Mistaken Halimah Yacob as a Malay,” *SG-Truth*, September 2017, <<http://sg-truth.blogspot.com/2017/09/pm-lee-mistaken-halimah-yacob-as-malay.html>>, accessed August 18, 2018. The picture in this article comparing Halimah's racial heritage with other PAP politicians went viral on platforms such as WhatsApp.

49. Hussain, “Doubts about Presidential Hopefuls.”

50. *Ibid.*

51. “If Indian Muslim Halimah Yacob Can Run for This ‘Reserved’ Presidential Election, a Chinese Muslim Can Also Too,” *Independent SG*, June 2, 2017, <<http://theindependent.sg/if-indian-muslim-halimah-yacob-can-run-for-this-reserved-presidential-election-a-chinese-muslim-can-also-too/>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

52. These statements are based on interviews in 2017 with numerous Singaporean voters across races.

53. Article 19B(6b), Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, <<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963/Historical/20170401?DocDate=19990701&ProvIds=pr19B->>>.

Indian, even though both racial categories in Singapore were also invented through the assimilation of otherwise diverse ethno-linguistic groups in East and South Asia.<sup>54</sup> Since independence, the state's practice of race-making has similarly favored negating intra-racial differences.<sup>55</sup> The fact that most Singaporean Chinese and Indians can trace their respective ancestries back to specific countries, China and India, also diminishes the salience of an intra-racial consciousness relative to the Malays, who are rooted across the Malay archipelago.<sup>56</sup> Many non-Malays have a relatively monolithic perception of race, so their superimposition of a homogenized vision of race onto Malays was inevitable. Consequently, many Singaporeans questioned the very notion that any of the would-be candidates could claim to be Malay in the first place.

A second group criticized the continued application of racialized governance in the presidency. Unlike the former group—which grappled with how race should be understood—they took aim at the conceptual relevance of race in contemporary Singapore. Prominent critics such as Thum Ping Tjin and Harish Pillay argued that race is an archaic and arbitrary system of organizing people.<sup>57</sup> This is not an unfair assessment. Indeed, sociologists and historians widely acknowledge racialized systems of governance to be rooted in the prejudices of colonial regimes and imposed for administrative convenience—not because they reflect authentic forms of cultural life.<sup>58</sup> Singaporeans who share their views were frustrated with the perpetuation of a divisive model of social engineering. Another critic, Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh, also argued that the PAP government's claim to be protecting multiracialism through the EP was disingenuous because the president's power is marginal compared to the cabinet's.<sup>59</sup>

54. Nirmala Purushotam, *Negotiating Multiculturalism: Disciplining Difference in Singapore* (New York: Mouten de Gruyter, 2000).

55. Zarine L. Rocha, "'Stretching out the Categories': Chinese/European Narratives of Mixedness, Belonging and Home in Singapore," *Ethnicities* 14:2 (2014): 279–302.

56. Purushotam, *Negotiating Multiculturalism*.

57. Thing Ping Tjin, "The Show with PJ Thum - Ep 1 - The Elected Presidency and the Political Economy of Race in Singapore," *New Naratif*, September 9, 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdlOkojXApA>>, accessed August 18, 2018; Harish Pillay, "No, Halimah, You Are Mistaken," *life one degree north, one-o-three degrees east*, August 12, 2017, <<https://harishpillay.wordpress.com/2017/08/12/no-halimah-you-are-mistaken/>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

58. Farish A. Noor, *The Discursive Construction of Southeast Asia in 19th Century Colonial-Capitalist Discourse* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

59. Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh, "On Singapore's Presidential Election," *Sudhir TV*, September 10, 2017, <<https://sudhirtv.com/2017/09/10/on-singapores-presidential-election/>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

Literary critic Alfian Sa'at suggested that if the government were truly serious about using periodic reservations to enable minority representation, then this logic should be extended to senior civil service and ministerial positions, and the prime minister, too.<sup>60</sup>

A third group, comprising Singaporean academics, argued that while the constitutional amendments may have been well intentioned, they ran counter to the state's multiracial ethos. Eugene Tan stated that the hiatus-triggered model signaled that multiracialism had failed to temper distrust between racial groups.<sup>61</sup> He also suggested that it may unintentionally entrench a racialized pattern of voting<sup>62</sup> in a society that has predominantly voted along party rather than racial lines.<sup>63</sup> Cherian George argued that it was simplistic to assume that Singaporeans vote racially. He contended that surveys instituted to gauge how Singaporeans vote tend to encourage racially tinted answers. Yet, surveys have also shown that if given the opportunity, nearly 70% of Singaporeans—regardless of race—would vote for the popular Indian DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam to be the next PM, with Chinese leaders falling far behind in the poll.<sup>64</sup> Kevin Tan interrogated the legal logic behind the definitions of each racial group. He argued that if a Community Committee of elites from each racial community needs to be formed to vet the racial membership of each candidate, as required by Article 19b(4a) of the constitution, then the state risks a tautological trap: if the candidate's race is presumed to be unknown, then the composition of a racial community cannot be known either. It would then be unclear on what basis the members of the Community Committee could even be chosen.<sup>65</sup>

60. Alfian Sa'at's Facebook page, accessed 11 September, 2018, <<https://www.facebook.com/alfiansaat/posts/10154657859697371>>.

61. Eugene K. B. Tan, "Singapore's First Reserved Presidential Election: More Haste, Less Speed, and a Missed Opportunity," *Presidential Power*, October 23, 2017, <<https://presidential-power.com/?p=7097>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

62. Eugene K. B. Tan, "Reserved Election: Boost for Multiracialism?" *Today*, September 9, 2016, <<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/reserved-election-boost-multiracialism>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

63. Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, "The Malay Community: Voting Trends and Issues," *Round Table* 105:2 (2016): 205–15.

64. Cherian George, "The Singapore Presidential (S)Election: A Monumental Miscalculation," *Mothership*, September 15, 2017, <<https://mothership.sg/2017/09/a-monumental-miscalculation/>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

65. Chan Cheow Pong, "Law Expert Kevin Tan Says the S'pore Constitution's Definition of 'Malay' Is Anomalous," *Mothership*, September 9, 2017, <<https://mothership.sg/2017/09/>>

Many Singaporeans also found the notion that a hiatus-triggered model can safeguard meritocracy logically faulty. For one, reserving the election for a specific racial group signals the application of affirmative action rather than merit. Most Singaporeans closely associate affirmative action with Malaysia's *bumiputra* policies. This is not an accident. For decades, the PAP government has deliberately contrasted its model of racial equality and meritocracy with Malaysia's privileging of Malays in education, employment, and business opportunities, precisely to frame Singapore as superior to Malaysia.<sup>66</sup> To now introduce a system mirroring affirmative action inevitably reads as contrary to meritocracy. Indeed, some used the Malaysian experience to criticize the reserved EP.<sup>67</sup> The partisan attitudes of Singaporeans who oppose the PAP also factored into their criticisms. If the reserved EP was a mechanism to block the increasingly popular Tan Cheng Bock's candidature, then it was preventing a qualified individual from running. Tan was seen as a victim of affirmative action, making it hard to see the reserved EP as founded on meritocracy.

Finally, the substantially tighter qualifying requirements for private-sector candidates made the EP appear to be the exclusive domain of the country's super-elites, or individuals who are likely within Singapore's richest 1%. Few found the changes necessary, and many deemed the state to be preoccupied with excluding otherwise eligible Singaporeans from running, rather than protecting the ideal of meritocracy. It is also worth noting that in the last decade, Singapore has become increasingly fractured along class lines.<sup>68</sup> The state, too, acknowledges the sharpening class divisions as a problem for the country's social compact.<sup>69</sup> That it would then implement a system skewed

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law-expert-kevin-tan-says-the-spore-constitutions-definition-of-malay-is-anomalous/>, accessed August 18, 2018.

66. Dayang Istiaisyah bte Hussin, "Textual Construction of a Nation: the Use of Merger and Separation," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 29:3 (2001): 401–30.

67. Reuben Chew, "Thoughts on the Reserved Elected Presidency (and the Walkover)," *Describee*, September 11, 2017, <<https://www.describee.com/thoughts-on-the-reserved-elected-presidency-and-the-walkover/>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

68. Charissa Yong, "New Study Finds Clear Divide among Social Classes in Singapore," *Straits Times*, December 28, 2017, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/new-study-finds-class-divide-in-singapore>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

69. Tham Yeun-C, "Fighting Inequality a National Priority, Says Ong Ye Kung," *Straits Times*, May 16, 2018, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/fighting-inequality-a-national-priority-says-ong-ye-kung>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

toward the super-elites made the state seem less interested in meritocracy than in the consolidation of Singapore's model of elitist governance.<sup>70</sup>

Collectively, these debates elucidate a rejection of the state's discourse on the EP. Rather than acknowledging the validity of the state's narratives, many Singaporeans criticized them as fallacious. Significantly, critics used the very logics of multiracialism and meritocracy, promulgated by the state to co-opt the citizenry's consent, against the state. While the PAP government ultimately dismissed their disagreements as either misplaced or unpragmatic, key members of the cabinet—PM Lee included—acknowledged that the constitutional amendments might cost the party votes in the next general election.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, the government also acknowledged the weakness in its ability to frame the EP as a mechanism to both represent and safeguard the foundational values of nation-building. Ultimately, most Singaporeans acquiesced to the introduction of a reserved EP. Instead, they hoped the PEC would grant eligibility certificates to all candidates. When it became apparent that Halimah would win in a walkover, the catchphrase #NotMyPresident, reminiscent of the outburst at Donald Trump's US election victory, went viral online, and between a few hundred and 2,000 people participated in a protest shortly after her inauguration.<sup>72</sup> The rarity of overt dissent in Singapore underscores these reactions as being the culmination of widespread frustration with the PAP government's actions on the EP, starting with the unpopular constitutional amendments and ending with the perceived bulldozing of Halimah into the presidency. The PAP government's attempts to mobilize multiracialism and meritocracy as justifications failed to gain traction. In fact, as the state has attempted to recreate the reserved EP as an institution crucial to consolidating these values, its insistence on using them has undermined the office.

70. Michael Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore: Networks of Power and Influence* (London: IB Tauris, 2014).

71. Tham Yeun-C, "Reserved Presidential Election Was Right Thing to Do: PM Lee Hsien Loong," *Straits Times*, September 29, 2017, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/reserved-presidential-election-was-right-thing-to-do-said-pm-lee-hsien-loong>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

72. Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh, "Hundreds Take Part in Silent Protest against Reserved Election at Hong Lim Park," *Straits Times*, September 16, 2017, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/hundreds-take-part-in-silent-protest-against-reserved-election-at-hong-lim-park>>, accessed August 18, 2018; Terry Xu, "Close to 2000 Turn up at Hong Lim Park for Protest against Process of Elected Presidency," *Online Citizen*, September 20, 2017, <<https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2017/09/20/close-to-2000-turn-up-at-hong-lim-park-for-protest-against-process-of-elected-presidency/>>, accessed August 18, 2018.



## NEW FINANCIAL LIMITS: ENABLING THE MOST QUALIFIED OR LIMITING THE POOL OF CANDIDATES?

An important change to the EP tightened the qualifying requirements for private-sector candidates. Whereas in the past either the chairman or CEO of a company with paid-up capital of SG\$ 100 million (US\$ 74 million) qualified automatically, now only the CEO of a company with at least SG\$ 500 million (US\$ 370 million) in equity would be automatically eligible. While the candidate need not be a sitting chief executive, they must have served for a minimum of three years in the 20 years preceding the issuance of the writ of election, and the company must have met the minimum shareholder equity requirement for those three years of service.<sup>73</sup>

The PAP government justified these measures by arguing that the critical nature of the EP—given that the position holds the proverbial “second key” to the financial reserves and approves important civil service appointments—made it imperative to ensure that the president understands the complexities of the evolving global political economy.<sup>74</sup> The government argued that various local, regional, and international developments made the criteria defined in the 1991 constitutional amendments outdated. The government then sought to counter criticisms that the 2016 amendments severely limited the pool of eligible private-sector candidates. While less than 160 companies met the requirements in 1991, the update allows just under 700 automatically eligible companies. In both cases, this amounted to slightly more than 0.2% of all companies in the country.<sup>75</sup> Thus, the government believes that the amendments were proportionate and, relative to 1991, opened the door to a larger number of candidates. After taking the public-sector qualifying requirements into account,<sup>76</sup> the government estimates the total pool across races to now be in the vicinity of 2,000 people.<sup>77</sup> To the government, these people have the experience, skills, and aptitude to dutifully execute the role of the presidency.

73. Article 19, Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, <<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963#prt9->>.

74. “Report of the Constitutional Commission 2016.”

75. *Ibid.*

76. “Public sector” refers to those who have held qualifying civil service or executive branch (e.g. ministerial) positions.

77. K. Shanmugam, “Ministerial Dialogue 1.”

Two problems emerged that rendered this discourse incapable of justifying these ideas. First, in the context of PE2017, it is irrefutable that the two criteria—that all candidates be certified Malay and that private-sector candidates be the chief executive of a company with at least SG\$ 500 million in shareholder equity—will have interlocked to reduce the number of automatically eligible people. Not only are Malays a minority, they are also overrepresented in lower socioeconomic indices. The available data on the number of automatically eligible Malay CEOs are nebulous. A list of all 691 companies with shareholder equity of SG\$ 500 million and above shows only seven Malay CEOs in the last 20 years.<sup>78</sup> Interviews with a senior civil servant and a board member of the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry put the figure between 35 and 80.<sup>79</sup> Notably, both Salleh Marican and Farid Khan were highly skeptical of all three numbers. Citing their lengthy experience as leading entrepreneurs from the Malay community, they stated that if the figure were as high as 35 (or more), they would know who those individuals were. Salleh also argued that it was unlikely that any of the seven mentioned in the list would qualify automatically, as they would not have had the minimum three-year tenure as CEOs.<sup>80</sup> Though the media touted two CEOs who might have qualified, Bahren Shaari and Shafie Shamsuddin, neither was likely to have met the three-year requirement.<sup>81</sup> The five other names were never mentioned in the media, indicating that either they did not qualify or the media was unaware of them. Given the resources available to the mainstream media, the likelihood of the latter seems remote.

Public-sector candidates also appear to be few and far between. At the time the writ of election was issued, two were sitting cabinet ministers (Yaacob Ibrahim and Masagos Zulkifli), one was a former minister and former speaker of parliament (Abdullah Tarmugi), and one was the former speaker of parliament and current president, Halimah Yacob. Beyond this, the media highlighted one more potential public-sector candidate, Zainul Abidin

78. List of directors of companies with more than SG\$ 500 million equity, March 6, 2018. The list was procured from Handshakes by DC Frontiers, a Singapore-based company with a license to acquire and resell this information.

79. Interviews with a senior civil servant, Singapore, September 19, 2017, and a Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Trade Director, Singapore, August 16, 2017.

80. Interview with Salleh Marican, Singapore, October 16, 2017.

81. "Bahren Shaari," *Istana* (n.d.), <<https://www.istana.gov.sg/-/media/Istana/Presidents-Office/Council-of-Presidential-Advisors/BS.pdf>>, accessed August 18, 2018; interview with Salleh Marican, Singapore, October 16, 2017; interview with Farid Khan, Singapore, October 15, 2017.

Rasheed—though he would not have met the criteria because he did not serve as a full minister.<sup>82</sup> Zainul Abidin Rasheed is a former senior minister of state. No Malays appear to have been given qualifying civil service appointments in the last 20 years.<sup>83</sup> In all, there appear to be only a handful of automatically eligible Malays from both the public and private sectors. Rather than expanding the pool of candidates, it is clear that the number of eligible Malays was disproportionately unrepresentative of the community's population.

For this reason, the claim that the constitutional amendments expanded the pool of eligible candidates, particularly in the context of PE2017, lacked credibility. Given the PAP government's ability to control dissent, a candidate opposing Halimah was unlikely to emerge from within the establishment without its approval. And since the private-sector qualifying requirements were tightened to ensure that the president had the aptitude to guard Singapore's reserves, it was inevitable that many Singaporeans would contrast Halimah's limited financial management experience with both Salleh's and Farid's. Though neither of them came near the shareholder equity requirements, many still perceived their business experience to be far more relevant to successfully executing the EP's office than Halimah's role as speaker of parliament. Therefore, the re-constitutionalization of the EP became perceived as a mechanism to severely restrict the pool of candidates and prevent any opposition to the PAP government's preferred candidate from emerging from the Malay business community.

The PAP government's discourse also had limited potency for elections beyond 2017. By the government's own admission, slightly over 0.2% of companies meet the SG\$ 500 million equity threshold. While the previous qualification requirements ensured that the institution would only be accessible to the elites, now it is open to even fewer. It is important to note that Singapore's political economy has generally been dominated by a nexus of business and political leaders. Singapore ranked fourth in the *Economist's* 2016 Crony Capitalism Index.<sup>84</sup> Many current and past PAP leaders have, at

82. Afifah Ariffin, "Singapore's Next President: A Look at Potential Contenders," *Channel News Asia*, November 20, 2016, <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-s-next-president-a-look-at-potential-contenders-7726654>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

83. Article 19(3), Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, <<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963#prt9->>>.

84. "Comparing Crony Capitalism around the World," *The Economist*, May 5, 2016, <<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2016/05/05/comparing-crony-capitalism-around-the-world>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

different junctures of their career, also sat on the boards of various government-linked companies which meet the SG\$ 500 million equity requirements.<sup>85</sup> To be clear, though, Singapore also ranks among the highest in indices of clean governance, anti-corruption measures, ease of doing business, and economic competitiveness.<sup>86</sup> Thus, the level of cronyism has little to do with malpractice among political and business elites. Rather, it suggests that the interests, aspirations, and networks of the two groups overlap significantly.

It would therefore not be controversial to suggest that relations between business and political elites in Singapore are generally warm. More clearly, the implication of this is that private-sector candidates who do qualify automatically would, more often than not, have political predispositions which are congruent with the PAP government's. As a result, the EP became seen as an institution which favored a tightly limited group of pro-establishment elites. Even the idea that the pool had expanded relative to 1991 could not change this perception. Though the state could correctly argue that the global political economy had shifted substantially since 1991, the logical point of reference available to most of the electorate was 2011. They compared PE2017 with PE2011, not the 1993 election or the 1991 amendments, simply because it was the most recent presidential contest. Treating 1991 as the yardstick was inevitably going to fail. Given that the 2011 contest was so boisterous, the 2016 constitutional amendments appeared arbitrary and politically motivated, rather than meticulously crafted to safeguard Singapore's interests. Consequently, the recreation of the EP became perceived as a means to predispose future elections toward candidates perceived as potentially intimate with the PAP government.

#### ABOVE PARTY POLITICS, OR UNDERMINING THE PRESIDENCY'S NEUTRALITY?

Successive generations of PAP leaders have described the EP as a politically neutral office designed to protect Singapore's hard-earned reserves and to ensure that key civil service appointments proposed by the government are made without prejudice. Lee Kuan Yew himself deemed it necessary for the

85. List of directors of companies with more than SG\$ 500 million equity, March 6, 2018.

86. Stephan Ortmann, "The 'Beijing Consensus' and the 'Singapore Model': Unmasking the Myth of an Alternative Authoritarian State-Capitalist Model," *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies* 10:4 (2012): 337–59.

EP to operate as a fail-safe against a “rogue government,” should one get elected.<sup>87</sup> During Halimah Yacob’s inauguration, Lee Hsien Loong described the office as “non-partisan” and stated his belief that she would adapt well to remaining “above the political fray.”<sup>88</sup> In the lead-up to nomination day, Halimah also addressed accusations that her 16-year association with the PAP would color her judgment and decision-making, should she become president. She argued that throughout her tenure as a trade unionist and an MP, she had voiced her disagreements with the government in various parliamentary and committee meetings.<sup>89</sup> Thus, the EP has been articulated as both politically independent and a check against the government.

However, the institutional design of the EP makes it seem contrary to these proclamations. First, the position lacks regulative mechanisms to guarantee the neutrality of candidates. Currently, rules allow eligible members of any political party to resign and submit their application papers to the PEC immediately. There is no legislative measure that would make it possible to deem an applicant sufficiently disassociated from the partisan beliefs or networks of their former political party. This is important because the political culture people are socialized into, particularly with lengthy party affiliations, tends to consciously and unconsciously mediate how they make political decisions.<sup>90</sup> To be clear, this does not render a candidate incapable of exercising judgments free of partisanship and political prejudice. However, Halimah’s political history inevitably tainted her candidacy, as it was difficult to fathom how she could maintain neutrality when working with the very government she had been a member of. That she maintained her accession to the presidency to be a result of the PAP government’s commitment to multiracialism and meritocracy—a view numerous Singaporeans have

87. Charissa Yong, “Why was the elected presidency changed?” *Straits Times*, April 10, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/why-was-the-elected-presidency-changed>, accessed August 18, 2018.

88. Lee Hsien Loong, “PM Lee Hsien Loong’s full speech at President Halimah Yacob’s inauguration ceremony,” *Straits Times*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/pm-lee-hsien-loongs-full-speech-at-president-halimah-yacobs-inauguration-ceremony>, accessed August 18, 2018.

89. Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh, “Halimah Yacob unveils presidential election campaign slogan and team,” *Straits Times*, August 29, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/halimah-yacob-unveils-presidential-election-campaign-slogan-and-team>, accessed August 18, 2018.

90. Alan S. Gerber, Gregory A. Huber, and Ebonya Washington, “Party Affiliation, Partisanship, and Political Beliefs: A Field Experiment,” *American Political Science Review* 104:4 (2010): 720–44.

rejected—underscored the perception that even after resigning from her party, she was very much still guided by its political philosophies.

Importantly, this also has implications for presidential candidates from opposition parties. Tan Jee Say ran in PE2011 shortly after losing in the 2011 parliamentary election as a member of the Singapore Democratic Party. He used the PE2011 campaign to voice political positions that were distinctly oppositional to the PAP. He was rightly criticized for proposing ideas that contravened the constitutional purpose of the EP. Thus, the absence of regulative measures to ensure institutional neutrality has potentially made the EP either pliable or combative in its relationship to the government. That said, the PAP's dominance in virtually all sectors of political life will inevitably predispose segments of the electorate to perceive the EP as succumbing to the former tendency rather than the latter. To prevent the institution from devolving into an extension of party politics, it would be useful to institute a grace period for aspiring candidates. Farid Khan stated that corporate directors are only recognized as independent three years after they resign the position.<sup>91</sup> Independence in the EP's qualifying requirements could be codified by adopting a similar measure.

Finally, the capacity of the EP to be a viable check against the government is somewhat limited. The revised EP system was designed to include an expanded Council of Presidential Advisors (CPA)—an unelected body of eight technocrats appointed by the president, prime minister, chief justice, and the chairman of the Public Service Commission. The CPA's members have vast experience in various branches of the Singapore government, and they undoubtedly help the president make informed decisions. The constitution also obliges the president to consult the CPA on issues concerning the EP's custodial powers. If the president contravenes the CPA's recommendations and attempts to veto the government's decision on drawing from the reserves or making key appointments, the parliament can overrule this “by passing a resolution of not less than a two-thirds majority.”<sup>92</sup> This has effectively rendered the CPA less a consultative body and more a potential check against the president.<sup>93</sup> Some quarters have criticized this as curtailing the ability of the EP to operate as an effective check against the government, even though PAP

91. Interview with Farid Khan, Singapore, November 3, 2017.

92. Tan, *Singapore's Constitution*, 97–98.

93. Yvonne C. L. Lee, “Under Lock and Key: The Evolving Role of the Elected President as a Fiscal Guardian,” *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2007): 294.

leaders have framed it as such, while also arguing that the CPA's counter-checking potential is problematic because it has significant influence over the EP in spite of its unelected nature.<sup>94</sup> This has dampened the capacity of the EP to project itself as an institution capable of operating as a neutral check against the government, even within the narrow scope of its custodial powers.

#### WHAT'S NEXT FOR A POST-LEE SINGAPORE?

This paper has argued that while the PAP government has sought to construct the EP as an institution critical to Singapore's political system and national interests, the way it has designed the EP has undermined the credibility and potency of these discourses. The state's narratives have sought to frame the EP as a way to safeguard multiracialism and meritocracy, an institution to be led by highly qualified individuals, and a politically neutral check against the government. However, as has been discussed, the state's creation and recreation of the EP has paradoxically eroded its capacity to embody these narratives. Indeed, the EP has been soundly criticized as having undermined multiracialism and meritocracy, having excluded potentially capable candidates, and having become less neutral and an inadequate check against the government.

Why has the PAP government persisted in propagating these narratives when they have so little traction? Officials recognize that many Singaporeans are becoming politically conscious. They know that many wish to see great political diversity in the country's institutions. Thus, the government needs to project a willingness to gradually democratize the body politic. After the 2011 general election, PAP leaders began adopting the rhetoric of democracy. Now it is not uncommon for them to state that if Singaporeans are dissatisfied with the PAP, they will express this at the ballot box.<sup>95</sup> However, the gradual shift in the country's political environment toward openness exists alongside the PAP's impetus to dominate all "socio-political spheres of Singaporean society."<sup>96</sup>

94. "The Workers' Party's Position Paper on Proposed Changes to the Elected Presidency," *Today*, November 8, 2016, <<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/workers-partys-position-paper-proposed-changes-elected-presidency>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

95. "2013 Oct U@live Featuring Minister Vivian Balakrishnan," *NUScast*, November 14, 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjZtVjbYJAU>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

96. Mutalib, "Singapore's First Elected Presidency," 178.

The state's rhetoric of democratization must fit within its soft authoritarian praxes of governance.<sup>97</sup> These tendencies are inherently dialectical, and the tension embedded in this relationship can only manifest as political insecurities. Thus, the state will insist it is committed to developing a more open political system, perhaps hoping to assuage an electorate that is becoming more politically active, even as it pursues measures that run counter to this goal. Various examples of this exist. The creation of "group representative constituencies" in electoral politics has long been called out as a measure designed to enable the PAP to consolidate power under the guise of enabling minority representation.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, the state justified the creation of "nominated" and "non-constituency" member of parliament positions as a way to enlarge the space for non-partisan and opposition voices,<sup>99</sup> even as it has institutionalized various structural hurdles for opposition parties in the electoral process.<sup>100</sup>

These examples show the mismatch between the PAP government's discourse on the EP and its praxes of institution-making. Scholars have seen actions such as these as products of the PAP's elite-driven, paternalistic approach to governance, whereby the leadership institutionalizes a "government knows best" system to manage the country.<sup>101</sup> To be sure, the PAP has become increasingly consultative since Lee Kuan Yew stepped down in 1990.<sup>102</sup> Yet, it would be uncontroversial to argue that the PAP still prefers that dissent be expressed in a structured environment, or more accurately, an environment which it can control. The harsh treatment of Thum Ping Tjin at the 2018 hearing of the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods reflects a government still willing to lash out at dissenters who violate this arrangement.

Quite simply, then, it is clear that the PAP remains concerned with maximizing the scope of its power and authority, even though it claims

97. Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir and Bryan S. Turner, "Governing as Gardening: Reflections on Soft Authoritarianism in Singapore," *Citizenship Studies* 17:3-4 (2013): 339-52.

98. Tan, "Multiracialism Engineered." Scholars argue that before the GRC system, minorities were already able to win a representative number of seats in parliament.

99. James Chin, "The 2015 Singapore Swing: Depoliticised Polity and the Kiasi/Kiasu Voter," *Round Table* 105:2 (2016): 141-48.

100. Meredith L. Weiss, Hoe-Yeong Loke, and Luenne Angela Choa, "The 2015 General Election and Singapore's Political Forecast: White Clouds, Blue Skies," *Asian Survey* 56:5 (2016): 859-78.

101. Kenneth Paul Tan, "Meritocracy and Elitism in a Global City: Ideological Shifts in Singapore," *International Political Science Review* 29:1 (2008): 7-27.

102. Emily Y. Soh and Belinda Yuen, "Government-Aided Participation in Planning Singapore," *Cities* 23:1 (2006): 30-43.



otherwise. These insecurities are likely to heighten after Lee Hsien Loong steps down as PM in the next general election. The next generation of leaders (the fourth, or 4G) will need to take steps to consolidate power and legitimize themselves in the country's evolving political climate. Already, signals of their insecurities appear to have emerged. Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong issued an unprecedented statement which subtly criticized the 4G leaders for taking too long to decide who among them would succeed Lee Hsien Loong.<sup>103</sup> Other leaders, such as Heng Swee Keat (through his press secretary), Maliki Osman, Desmond Lee, and Janil Puthuchery, have issued written responses to critiques from public figures,<sup>104</sup> statements which in turn were criticized as reactionary rather than showing willingness to embrace a more open consultative system of governance.<sup>105</sup> The historic 2018 Malaysian election which toppled the Barisan Nasional from federal power for the first time ever has also focused the spotlight on the PAP, which is now the oldest and only remaining elected one-party government in the world. In this context, one can expect political insecurities to be exacerbated within the 4G leadership, spurring the leaders to institutionalize policies which reflect discourse-praxis contradictions rather than coherence, once they take over the reins of governance.

103. Goh Chok Tong's Facebook page, <<https://www.facebook.com/MParader/photos/a.584664768242860/1954246467951343/?type=3>>, accessed September 12, 2018.

104. Lim Yun Chien, "Plain Speech Also about Telling the Hard Truth," *Straits Times*, June 5, 2018, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/forum/letters-in-print/plain-speech-also-about-telling-the-hard-truth>>, accessed August 18, 2018; Maliki Osman, "This Is What Helping Families Looks Like," *Straits Times*, June 27, 2018, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/this-is-what-helping-families-looks-like>>, accessed August 18, 2018; Desmond Lee and Janil Puthuchery, "History Is Not the Preserve of Historians," *Straits Times*, April 10, 2018, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/history-is-not-the-preserve-of-historians>>, accessed August 18, 2018.

105. Jonathan Lim, "The Curious Political Nature of a Press Secretary's Reply to Han Fook Kwang's ST Commentary," *Mothership*, June 10, 2018, <<https://mothership.sg/2018/06/han-fook-kwang-press-secretary-response-heng-swee-keat/>>, accessed August 18, 2018.