The secret lives of urban kampong chiefs : a political ethnography of grassroots leaders in Singapore's neighbourhood governance and regime politics

Wong, George Boon Keng

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**THE SECRET LIVES OF URBAN KAMPONG CHIEFS:
A POLITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF
GRASSROOTS LEADERS IN SINGAPORE'S
NEIGHBOURHOOD GOVERNANCE AND REGIME POLITICS**

**GEORGE WONG BOON KENG
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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GEORGE WONG BOON KENG

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial
fulfilment of requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2021

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Asst Prof Laavanya Kathiravelu

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Abstract

Who are grassroots leaders, how are they organized, and how do their roles and practices as community leaders in grassroots politics shape Singapore's contemporary urban governance and party-politics? With over 52,000 members spread across hundreds of state-sponsored local organizations such as Citizen Consultative Committees and Resident Committees, and a local presence in every neighbourhood in Singapore today, grassroots leaders are a ubiquitous sight in Singapore's neighbourhood politics. Despite its empirical significance, previous studies have analysed grassroots leaders through top-down, macro-based, and formal-rational approaches. These studies regard grassroots leaders as passive subjects with the minimal agency to influence local grassroots politics beyond what has been structured through the political institutions they serve. Recently, an emerging scholarship that focuses on the middling roles and emic experiences of community actors in mediating grassroots politics has gained currency. These studies depict the vital roles community leaders play in shaping the styles of urban governance and authoritarian regime resilience. They also call for renewed inquiries into existing political actors' lived experiences and their relationship with political legitimacy and regime durability.

This study responds to the above call by examining the political formations, roles, and significance of grassroots leaders in Singapore through a political ethnography of Singapore's grassroots sector in four neighbourhoods within a local political ward in Singapore. Here, I focus on grassroots leaders and their governing practices as they mediate state-society relations as state-sponsored volunteers. I trace the different ways grassroots leaders reproduce different forms of political and state relations through their daily encounters with other actors such as residents and street bureaucrats at the neighbourhood level that make up a significant part of everyday neighbourhood political experiences in Singapore.

The study is divided into four sections. In the first section, I introduce readers to the world of Singapore's grassroots sector from the perspective of grassroots leaders (GRLs) as they make sense of their journey as community leaders. I first examine how grassroots leaders are organized through the grassroots hierarchy based on their different motivations and pathways which stratify them into different social positions based on leader, senior, and volunteer-type grassroots leaders. These social positions shape the roles grassroots leaders assume, as well as the experiences and social expectations they encounter in the grassroots sector. Next, I share how grassroots leaders utilize various forms of capital to influence their social

positions, experiences, and recognition in community participation in organizing unequal community leadership experiences and outcomes through the grassroots.

In the second section, I explore how grassroots leaders frame their experiences as political actors through a historical approach. I do so by tracing the historical relations of grassroots leaders to state and party-politics in Singapore's political history in three different epochs, paying attention to how political transformations and negotiations shape their contemporary positions as state-sponsored volunteers with longstanding associations with the PAP. In the first epoch, I examine the political compact between the fledgling People's Action Party (PAP) government and grassroots leaders made up of "local notables" who supported the former in overcoming their loss of left-wing supporters during the late 1950 and early 1960s. In the second epoch, I look at how grassroots leaders participated in Singapore's urban renewal through national public housing projects, which led to the diminishing of their political leverage over local communities and subsequent co-optation as community leaders. In the third epoch, I show how the contemporary political positions of grassroots leaders as agents of the state and the PAP are largely defined by the structural changes motivated towards state and party capture of these community leaders. In doing so, I show the varying political positions grassroots leaders possess, how they respond to transformations in Singapore's political history and how these responses shape their contemporary place in Singapore's politics.

In the third section, I focus on the contemporary roles of grassroots leaders in urban governance by exploring how they reproduce neighbourhood micro-governance by playing the role of "double agents" in serving both state and local communities. I do so by explaining how grassroots leaders fulfil top-down state urban governance objectives while adapting to bottom-up local challenges in ways that unravel the ideological narratives between state and society relations. In fulfilling state's objectives as state agents, I examine how grassroots leaders perform three types of governing repertoires, providing feedback, managing state resource distribution, and adjudicating community affairs. These repertoires reproduce local knowledge, connections, and labour which are deployed by the state to govern Singapore society through the neighbourhood. I also reveal the local challenges and tensions grassroots leaders face as they address issues surrounding outsourced governance, and the politics of consumption and representation in neighbourhood governance.

In the last section, I clarify the relationship between grassroots leaders and party politics in Singapore by investigating how grassroots leaders reproduce PAP's regime resilience. I do so by charting the varying degrees of involvement grassroots leaders are tied to through parapolitics. In the first instance, I show how grassroots leaders channel grassroots resources to support PAP-MPs' home styles through the latter's role as grassroots advisors. Next, I show how grassroots leaders participate as PAP-MPs' core group members by shoring up political resources and strength for the leaders they serve. Next, I show how grassroots leaders are essential to two PAP's political institutions – the town councils and the vote tracking system. Drawing on their emic perspective, I reveal the different ways grassroots leaders interpret and reconcile their role as state-sponsored community leaders and participate in party politics.

This study achieves two objectives. First, it provides a contemporary update to grassroots politics in Singapore through the lenses of grassroots leaders' emic experiences, revisiting existing understandings of grassroots politics by deepening previous insights while challenging others in the debate. Next, this study reiterates the strategic significance of grassroots leaders by showing how they continue to play an active role in Singapore's politics in three ways. Firstly, this study shows how grassroots leaders' experiences are multifaceted and are shaped by the social positions and pathways they undergo in the grassroots sector. It also shows how grassroots leaders actively recognize their social positions in the hierarchy and utilize resources at their disposal to preserve or increase their social mobility in highly unequal ways. Secondly, it highlights how grassroots leaders help the Singapore state make neighbourhood micro-governance possible by being the "roots of the state" and mediating contemporary state-society relations at the most basic levels of society. Thirdly, it clarifies the contemporary relationship between grassroots leaders and party politics by depicting how parapolitics occurs and its importance to PAP's regime resilience.

Keywords:

Grassroots Leaders, Grassroots Politics, Urban Governance, Regime Resilience, Singapore

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List of Abbreviations and Non-English Terms

BBM	<i>Bintang Bakti Masyarakat</i> (Public Service Star)
BS	Barisan Sosialis (Party)
BTO	Built-To-Order (Public Flats)
CCC	Citizens' Consultative Committee
CCMC	Community Club/Center Management Committee
CDC	Community Development Council
CO	Constituency Office
EIP	Ethnic Integration Policy
ELD	Elections Department Singapore
FSC	Family Service Center
GA	Grassroots Adviser
GE(Date)	General Election(s) (Date of Elections)
GRC	Group Representation Constituency
GRL	Grassroots Leaders
GRV	Grassroots Volunteers
GRO	Grassroots Organizations
HDB	The Housing Development Board (Singapore)
IRB	Institutional Review Board
IAEC	Indian Activity Executive Committee
IRCC	Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles
LTA	Land Transport Authority
MAEC	Malay Activity Executive Committee
MCCY	The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (Singapore)
NACLI	National Community Leadership Institute
NC	Neighbourhood Committee
NCMP	Non-constituency Member of Parliament
NDA	National Day Awards
NEA	The National Environment Agency (Singapore)
NIMBY	Not In My Backyard
NMG	Neighbourhood micro-governance (see pg. 155)
OB	Out of Bounds
PA	People's Association
PAHQ	People's Association Headquarters
PAP	People's Action Party
<i>Penghulu</i>	Village Chief
PGP	People-Government-People (See pg. 169)
PBM	<i>Pingat Bakti Masyarakat</i> (Public Service Medal)
RC	Residents' Committee
RN	Residents' Network
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SES	Socio-economic status
SMC	Single Member Constituency
STP	Standard Training Programme
TC	Town Council
URA	Urban Redevelopment Authority
URSC	Urban and Rural Service Committee
VWO	Voluntary Welfare Organizations

Chapter 1: Introduction and Research Settings

1.1 Background

Every Sunday at 7 A.M for the past decade, Mdm Lin would embark on her daily routine of leading a group of elderly folks for *taichi* sessions in a public park. After her husband's passing and at the encouragement of her Member of Parliament (MP), Mdm Lin volunteered at her local neighbourhood committee (NC) and found solace in organizing the active ageing programmes in her constituency. This morning was special. The *taichi* group was having their monthly birthday celebrations for members under a new park shelter fully decked with benches and tables. This was in large part the result of Mdm Lin's months of organizing with the MP and local agencies in her role as a grassroots leader. As celebrations concluded, the group members showered praise upon the MP and Mdm Lin for the new shelter. While sheepishly deflecting credits to the MP, Mdm Lin was secretly satisfied that she was able to pull it off. The shelter served as tangible proof of her efforts to the neighbourhood. It was an effort privy to a few, including the MP from whom Mdm Lin received a commendation during a recent Citizens' Consultative Committee (CCC) meeting.

In the adjacent neighbourhood couple of hours later, the very same MP (Mr. A) was up and about on his usual walkabouts as part of his community outreach. Using his "grassroots adviser" identity, Mr. A visited the neighbourhood centres in a bid to clock "presence", a political virtue his senior grassroots leaders thought he was lacking during an internal huddle. Joining him was an entourage consisting of staff members from the People's Association (PA), local municipal agencies, and grassroots volunteers. As the PA staff busied themselves scribbling down feedback proffered by residents to get a grasp on the latest grouses in the neighbourhood, Mr. Ang, a veteran grassroots leader and a 3rd term chairman of the very estate the walkabout was conducted in, had other plans. Having received a tip-off from his

local coffee shop's beer buddies of a planned visit to gate-crash the walkabout by members of a local opposition party, Mr. Ang decided to wear both his grassroots leader and People's Action Party (PAP) activist hats. As he greeted familiar faces and shared upcoming community events with residents, he maintained a lookout for possible sightings of the opposition's presence. Under his vigilance, nothing must go wrong.

Meanwhile, taking a leaf off other MPs' playbooks, Mr. A assembled a team of young grassroots leaders to brush up his social media game. One such individual was Jansen, an aspiring community leader. Despite his young age and a brief stint as a grassroots leader, he was offered a seat in the CCC and led Mr. A's social media handles. This was thanks to his creative and effective solutions at improving the MP's online image, a skillset Jansen acquired in his job as a marketing consultant. As the visit drew to a close, Jansen artfully arranged the curated photos of Mr. A with residents, and with a caption, the Facebook post was ready to fish likes and well-wishes from fans and residents online. While monitoring the incoming reactions, Mr. A was joined with Mr. Ho, one of the former's most trusted political aides, and the constituency's CCC chairman and party branch vice-chairman. A lunch meeting with potential patrons had been arranged. With Mr. Ho acting as a go-between, the goal of securing funds for a new local social assistance initiative by Mr. A was in sight. It was no small sum, but Mr. Ho's status as an industry association leader and prolific businessman has earned him reputation and wealthy friends. More importantly, the donation offered access to Mr. A, and it never hurt to have another MP on the dial. As Mr. A. wrapped up his visit, I jokingly pressed Mr. Ho if this meant his nomination for the "BBM"¹ was in the bag. He smiled wryly. Not that it mattered to Mr. Ho's career or political aspirations if he had any. Rather, this award would cement his reputation as a successful "hands-on"

¹ BBM stands for "Bintang Bakit Masyarakat", also known as the Public Service Star. It is a title and award conferred to members of the public who have shown outstanding contribution to national development.

philanthropist; and it makes for good bragging rights among his relatives and peers serving in other constituencies.

These vignettes are a glimpse of the different lived experiences among grassroots leaders (GRLs) in Singapore. Despite their seemingly heterogeneous experiences, Mdm Lin, Mr. Ang, Jansen, and Mr. Ho are all part of what is commonly referred to as the “grassroots sector” in Singapore, a social space that represents the most local level of social and political interactions. In this study, I am interested in the lives of grassroots leaders and their roles as community leaders in performing governance and politics at the neighbourhood level. I explore how their experiences and interactions with the state, residents, and party activists in neighbourhood politics manifest as the roots of Singapore’s politics. The analytical focus is therefore grassroots leaders not just as individuals, but through their collective social roles as community leaders as they interact with different political actors in grassroots politics. To better understand the political significance of grassroots leaders, we need to first situate them within the context of Singapore’s urban political history of community powers.

Singapore’s community power is influenced by two distinct periods of urban governance. Firstly, it is a city that grew out of intensive administrative attention from the British colonial powers. Planned cities are however neither new nor outliers among colonial powers, especially with British imperialism vested in and through colonial cities (Home, 2013). One of the British administration’s most significant colonial influences on its urban geography lies in the implementation of racial segregation of colonial urban spaces. In Singapore, it was the Jackson Plan of 1822 (Pearson, 1969) that produced ethnic enclaves through built and social demarcation. While the plan was never fully realised due to insufficient resources to carry out its extensive administrative ambitions (Yeoh, 2003), it has shaped the early geographical developments of the city. This mismatch between ambitions to keep the city in check and ground enforcement, followed by its economic and demographic boom as a port-city, also

fuelled Singapore's eventual elevation to a Crown colony as the Straits Settlements in 1867 under a governorship model. The increased administrative efficacy was not only driven to protect the settlement's political economy. As Yeoh (2003) points out, in tropical cities such as Singapore, the focus was also centred on municipal sanitary surveillance and control over the private and public urban built environment to promote a clean, orderly, and legible colony (Yeoh, 2003). One such example was the first systematic census survey of Singapore conducted in 1871 to map out Singapore's urban population, which replaced the haphazard census exercises conducted prior (Buckley, 1984). Beyond these considerations, the British colonial administration largely left the affairs of local communities to their respective local leaders in what Barr (2018) described as 'Asian Singapore', albeit under strict British terms. This point was re-emphasized when the colonial administration outlawed triads through the Societies Ordinance in 1890 in a bid to curtail Chinese influence over the colony. The urban political regime of pre-war colonial Singapore therefore primarily consisted of the British colonial elites, British-backed local elites, and irrelevant pockets of local rural settlements which eluded colonial gaze. It also depicted an urban political arrangement where state attention and interventions through the colonial administration were far more dominant than other local political actors in community politics, and thus cemented Singapore's urban political system as a (colonial) state first, then the city (Barr, 2019).

The statist legacies of British urban governance also largely influenced Singapore's post-independence urban governance. One such implication was the move towards state-led development, surveillance, and absorption of community politics (Seah, 1973; Chan, 1976). While the People's Action Party (PAP) rise to power in 1959 signalled an electoral shift in the political regime from the British to local political elites, the broad administrative logics over local communities remained largely similar in terms of social control and political restrictions. Legislative instruments that were introduced by the British such as the Societies

Ordinance and Internal Security Act to restrain community politics were adopted after independence. Similarly, the formal inception of the “grassroots sector” began as a political exercise through the formation of the People’s Association (PA), a statutory board now under the Ministry of Community, Culture, and Youth (MCCY), in 1960 to co-opt the British administration’s project of planting state presence through community centres to foster political control and surveillance. These centres were later deployed by the PAP government to perform similar functions (Seah, 1973). As Singapore rapidly urbanized in the half-decade after independence, so did the size of the grassroots sector and its reach into the newly urbanized neighbourhoods. Recognizing the need to manage the scale of community politics as well as open up opportunities for greater civic participation, the state opted to recruit pro-establishment local volunteers by introducing national-level grassroots leaders programmes consolidated through the PA since the 1960s. These state-backed volunteers are residents mainly made up of Singaporeans from all walks of life that committed time, skills, and even money to manage grassroots organizations (GROs) and are a common sight in state-sponsored community events or initiatives in the neighbourhoods. Like the British’s use of local elites in managing local communities, GRLs are also mobilised by the state to organize and lead the interests of local neighbourhoods they represent, albeit under the PAP’s terms. As such, community politics in Singapore remains largely directed by the PAP government.

More than half a century after its formal inception, the presence of GRLs in neighbourhood associational life remains intact. The most recent count of GRLs in 2019 officially numbers at over 52,000 members, with an estimated increase of between 500 - 1000 members annually since 2009 (Data.Gov, 2021). This suggests that the number of GRLs in Singapore remains constant, if not increasing, in tandem with its population growth. Together, they populate 93 Citizen Consultative Committees (CCCs), 110 Community Club Management Committees (CCMCs), 646 Resident Committees (RCs) or Resident Networks (RNs), and 217

Neighbourhood Committees (NCs) across the 93 electoral wards in Singapore². Of these, the RCs, RNs, and NCs, which are grassroots organizations at the neighbourhood level, host about 42% of total GRLs, representing the largest demographic of grassroots presence in Singapore. Beyond numbers, PA's grassroots presence is also supported by urban community planning guidelines which make grassroots organizations a feature of neighbourhood life. For instance, the PA pays to convert the void deck area into RC or RN centres in old estates. Meanwhile, new Build-to-Order (BTO) public estates are always allocated community spaces for possible use as RCs and RNs as part of Housing Development Board (HDB) policy. Any new public or private estate almost always immediately follows a process to form a PA's grassroots organization.

Sometimes, they come from top-down pressures, where the constituency's PAP-MP (or Grassroots Advisers (GAs) in opposition wards) identifies and nominates a select group of potential residents to form a grassroots presence. In most cases, however, residents work through bottom-up means by organizing a group of self-nominated candidates and expressing interest to form an RC/RN/NC by appealing to the local Constituency Office (CO), the administrative office in charge of grassroots affairs at the ward level. Community events or initiatives at the neighbourhood level remain predominantly organized by or usually channelled through GRLs as collaborations with residents or local business or civil associations. The conspicuous presence of GRLs remains a hallmark of Singapore's neighbourhood governance and politics as they organize town halls to resolve municipal concerns, mediate community disputes, and build community ties by fostering social trust and civic consciousness among residents.

² RCs are neighbourhood-level grassroots organizations for public estates. NCs are the private estate counterpart, while RNs are hybrid organizations with estates that consist of both public and private residences. The public vs. private orientation in Singapore is an unusual urban configuration when compared to other cities. In Singapore, more than 80% of residents live in public residences while the remaining 20% in private residence.

1.2 Problem Setting: Relevance of GRLs in Neighbourhood Politics?

Despite their ubiquitous presence in neighbourhood politics, GRLs have recently come under heavy scrutiny for several reasons. Chief of all is a frequent charge that GRLs serve the political interests of the PAP through their grassroots work. Common lines of critique entailed how PAP-MPs (or branch Chairpersons in opposition wards) are appointed as Grassroots Advisers (GAs) or Mayors, and mobilize GRLs to their political whim. Others criticized the PA for being politicized against PAP's political oppositions when elected opposition MPs are constantly excluded from accessing grassroots resources when GRLs are local gatekeepers. More recently, the expenditure of the PA has also come under fire for its annual budget of nearly \$800 million in 2021, with Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) Leong Mun Wai raising concerns in parliament over fiscal prudence. These critical questions echoed earlier sentiments made by Worker's Party MPs over previous budget allocations for the statutory board. Academic research has also flagged the intimate political connections between GRLs and PAP on various fronts ranging from channelling institutional advantages to support PAP's dominance to co-opting of community leaders to stifle dissent (Weiss, 2021; Tan, 2003; Mauzy and Milne, 2002; Barr & Skrbis, 2008; Hill & Lian, 1995). At the heart of these critiques lies the question of whether GRLs are still relevant and can be counted upon to promote greater local political participation in their communities, broaden Singapore's civil society interests by expanding activism to the neighbourhood level and serve Singaporeans interests regardless of party affiliations.

Proponents have however remained steadfast in their support of GRLs and their contributions to Singapore's national development. One line of defence lies in how GRLs have contributed to nation-building efforts in Singapore. Scores of official commemorative books recount a common state-endorsed narrative where GRLs rose to the challenges of early independence Singapore through "*gotong royong*" or community mutual assistance in promoting local

improvement projects and supporting policy implementations on the ground. Examples included local projects such as “Operation Broomstick” to promote community ownership of public cleanliness, as well as organizing send-off parties to garner public support and acceptance for compulsory National Service enlistment (*People’s Association*, 2015). Another frequent justification was in the significance of GRLs in promoting community resilience in times of urban crisis. Proponents shared how GRLs original mission of supporting Singapore’s combat against communist influences in destabilizing its independence (Hong, 2002), to contemporary crises such as supporting relief efforts for the 1997 Asian Financial crisis, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis in 2003, the trans-boundary haze situation in 2014 and more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic (Goy, 2015). GRLs do so by supporting the implementation of public policies into actionable strategies that are transmitted to the household level, ensuring coordination between state and society at the most basic level. Studies have similarly shown how GRLs emerged as a feature of local civic consciousness and shaped the early years of community development at a time where Singapore’s focus on economic development was made at the expense of broad political liberalization and civil society growth (Vasoo, 1994; Chong, 2005).

This study situates itself within the milieu of these two sets of discourses and interrogates two areas of concern. Firstly, this study recognizes an empirical need to review the assumptions made on both sides surrounding the governing and party-political roles and practices GRLs assume in their grassroots work. While a plethora of scholarship exists to support the statist and party-political associations of GRLs’ community work in the grassroots, they commonly rely on two published classical empirical works to support their analysis. They are Chan Heng Chee’s (1976) *The Dynamics of One Party Dominance: PAP at the grassroots* and Seah Chee Meow’s (1973) *Community Centres in Singapore: Their Political involvement*. While both works remain the most authoritative sources of scholarship surrounding the inner

workings of GRLs' involvement in state and party-political affairs, their analyses are limited in examining the contemporary landscape of GRLs in neighbourhood politics for two reasons. Firstly, both of their works focus on a very specific period of Singapore's grassroots history – the late 1950s to early 1970s. The underlying characteristics of roles and political significance GRLs assume during that period reflect predominantly what Chan described as "...how the PAP succeeds in consolidating and maintaining its dominance and in mobilizing support to achieve its social, economic and political goals." (1976: 11). Similarly, Seah's focus on how GRLs' manage community centres to achieve both state and party-political goals is a snapshot of political dynamics of the late 1960s.

While one might argue that these political considerations of maintaining political dominance by the PAP and the bureaucratic absorption of neighbourhood politics remain relevant to contemporary political analysis, the institutional and political dynamics of Singapore's grassroots politics have significantly shifted since. For instance, the institutional landscape of grassroots politics has morphed into a more centralized configuration through the PA as the mother agency of state-sponsored grassroots organizations. Furthermore, new grassroots institutions such as Town Councils, RCs, NCs, RNs, and Community Development Councils (CDCs) as well as several new roles, have risen to replace or share governing and party-political practices GRLs perform, and these empirical considerations have not been factored in a study of a similar scale. Meanwhile, demographic and urban changes to residents' and GRLs' profiles in Singapore in the last half-century have not been adequately analyzed in how they have transformed grassroots politics, and if so, the degree by which classical findings by Chan and Seah remain useful in understanding the inner-workings of GRLs in grassroots politics. This study, therefore, aims to conduct a contemporary empirical study of grassroots politics that takes into consideration these changes.

A second gap this study points out is the paradigmatic influences of what scholars termed as “old institutionalism” (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011; Rutherford, 1995; Samuels, 1990) in Chan’s and Seah’s works. Both works focus extensively on a top-down institutional analysis. For Chan, while her findings reflected deep appreciation for organizational and actor-based factors as well as local political dynamics on grassroots politics, her choice to analyze PAP’s strategies of dominance using organizational, performance, and opposition variables employed by earlier old institutionalism works (Coleman & Roseberg, 1964; Huntington & Moore, 1970) foreclosed the study’s possibilities. While it served the task of addressing her research objectives, it consequently framed her analysis in a top-down fashion. Similarly, Cheah’s analysis focused on the constituent parts of PA community centres’ formal organizational structure and policy implementations to community politics in examining how GRLs served the state and party politics.

While acknowledging the importance of social actors and organizations, both studies’ institutional analyses of grassroots politics privileged macro-based, rational-legal structures such as policies and formal politics such as public political decisions made by those in authority. A major consequence of such analysis is the portrayal of grassroots politics in Singapore as top-down, unitary in its constituent/structural parts, and political actors passively reacting to constraints set by structural or legal environments and formal arrangements. This top-down institutional analysis might also explain why some subsequent studies have adopted a similar approach in analyzing grassroots politics (Haque, 1996; Ooi, 2009). In contrast, emerging works on grassroots politics have increasingly adopted new institutionalism approaches (Hall & Taylor, 1996), which focus on “bottom-up” elements such as organizational interactions, social actors’ perceptions as well as the socio-political spaces in which politics occur (Weiss, 2020; 2017; Ong, 2015). Contributing to the bottom-up perspectives, this study aims to focus on one particular neglected aspect of grassroots

politics that previous studies have not paid sufficient attention to. They are the GRLs and the everyday governing practices and experiences in Singapore's grassroots politics. It hopes to investigate the "how" lacking in the existing political analysis of GRLs in serving state and party politics in grassroots politics by focusing on their emic perspectives such as motivations, practices, and interactions with others at the neighbourhood level.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study investigates how GRLs produce governing practices and the different kinds of experiences they form in doing so to sustain the state's and PAP's contemporary ability to govern Singapore through grassroots politics. This study views the state as separate from the PAP, a political regime. Drawing on Pierson's discussions (1996), I define the state as a set of institutional constructs tasked with organizing and performing the political functions of governing monopoly of violence, territoriality, sovereignty, constitutionality, public powers, authority, legitimacy, and bureaucracy. On the other hand, a political regime is defined as a set of political arrangements in clarifying "who rules" (Stone, 1989), with its outcomes deciding who has access to the state and its powers, and under what conditions. This distinction is important in two ways. Firstly, it clarifies the ideological insistence in blurring the lines between state and regimes by most authoritarian regimes to cement regime resilience as part of a state's socio-political order (Weiss, 2020; Tomba, 2013). Secondly, it delineates the different political tasks GRLs participate in both state and party politics while revealing the moments where these two domains converge where reproducing governance is aligned with reproducing regime resilience. Thus when discussing matters of the state, I refer to terms such as the state, state agents, state actors, etc. In addressing regime politics, I refer to terms such as party-politics, PAP regime, and regime actors/partners, etc.

Central to this objective is a focus on GRLs' emic experiences as political actors, the roles they take up, the practices they perform, and the relationships they form with others in

grassroots politics. I support existing studies' claims that GRLs do produce political legitimacy and control (Tan, 2003; Mauzy & Milne, 2002). But I also argue that to clarify how GRLs maintain political legitimacy and control of state and PAP's party-politics, we need to re-evaluate existing assumptions of GRLs as passive subjects or political dupes under top-down control, or as unitary actors reacting to structural constraints. By regarding GRLs as social beings with active, meaningful, and complex ways of negotiating their social roles, positions, practices, and relationships in grassroots politics, I ask how GRLs perform governing practices, the different forms of practices that emerged, and how these practices are recognized by themselves, as well as among residents and other political actors on the ground to produce political legitimacy and control for the state and PAP regime at the neighbourhood level. To achieve these objectives, I decided to embark on an ethnographic research project.

This study's unit of analysis is GRLs' governing practices in grassroots politics, which I define as norms, actions, and strategies and their underlying desires, logics, and representations that guide governmental action in managing grassroots politics. Consequently, grassroots politics is defined as multiplicities of state-society and party-political interactions that reproduce, unsettle, or disrupt existing political relationships and arrangements among actors at the local level of Singapore's grassroots sector of urban neighbourhoods. As such, I treat neighbourhood politics and grassroots politics as synonymous in this study.

1.4 Research Methodology and Design

Methodological Frame: Political Ethnography

This study is informed by methodological frames of Political ethnography (PE), defined as an ethnographic approach that epistemologically magnifies the political as front and centre in

social interactions that inform actions and attitudes in politics (See Pachirat, 2017; Schatz, 2009). It relies on the researcher's immersion in studying politics close-up by interpreting, translating the ways actors think, feel as well as act based on their perceptions of their political realities in different vantages and positions they hold (Schatz, 2009). Emphasis is also placed on what Benzecry & Baiocchi termed as 'politics with a small p' (2017: 3), where observations are made of how the lived experiences of the political frame the everyday practices and encounters of 'big P politics such as authoritarianism, civil movements, and elections. PE focuses on the durable meanings and thick descriptions of political experiences to convey the 'inner logics' or 'grey areas' of how politics work 'as such' (Joseph et al, 2007). It encourages the use of multi-sited fieldwork, reflexively allowing the politics/policy to shape emerging fields and methods, adopting different strategies to respond to contingencies in data collection and analysis – blurring the distinction between fieldwork and deskwork and putting together different axes of analysis to provide a robust frame to illustrate the dynamics of politics in action on the ground.

Following the methodological frames of PE, I discuss my research design in terms of timeline, involvement and access, field sites, data collection and production, and notes on ethics, politics, and reflexivity.

Research Timeline

This study is an ethnographic research of GRLs and their governing practices in grassroots politics. It originated from a separate pilot project which I embarked on in late 2017 – early 2018 involving interviews with GRLs about their political experiences as community leaders across Singapore. Following that, I decided to expand on my earlier research work by adopting it as a PhD thesis project. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance and completion of Qualifying Examinations in July 2018, I contacted GRLs with whom I have built rapport previously and conducted preliminary multi-sited fieldwork at four

neighbourhoods across four different constituencies based on the initial site's selection criteria which centred on public vs. private, and mature vs. non-mature estates. Each site was allocated between 1 – 3 visits per week, depending on the availability of activities and access I could muster from informants. Each visit lasts anywhere between ½ to 5 hours. Most of these visits were made during weekday evenings or weekends, where a majority of grassroots-related interactions occurred.

By the end of the preliminary phase, I made strategic to the study's sites based on two reasons. Firstly, initial fieldwork interactions opened up new opportunities for access to collect deeper data and insights on the inner workings of the grassroots sector in one of the sites. An access bargain was struck with key gatekeepers to one of the sites. In return for assisting with basic volunteering tasks, I was given higher levels of access to conduct my research in the entire political constituency, subject to participants' consent and my declaration as a researcher during fieldwork. This however meant spending a substantial amount of time at a single site while taking on an "insider" position in the research, with the concerns that it may affect the applicability of my findings to other grassroots contexts. Taking an insider position in this instance meant being allowed into the inner workings of the grassroots sector and being involved in being a GRL as part of the requirements from gatekeepers. This does not mean that research objectivity is compromised as I took steps to mitigate these concerns (See Involvement and Access below for more information). The second reason was the preliminary fieldwork at four different neighbourhoods was starting to show signs of data saturation at the end of six months as well as growing concerns about my presence as a researcher by certain gate-keepers, with access as a researcher using informants being limited. By data saturation, I refer to the lack of any new sets of data emerging from my observations beyond what is already analytically captured. These concerns are further fleshed out in Involvement and Access below.

After discussing with my committee, I made amendments to the field sites, and focused on a multi-sited ethnography of 47th District, a political ward within a Group Representation Constituency, as the primary site. I chose four neighbourhoods that best fit the initial sampling frame of neighbourhood estate types (public vs. private, mature vs. non-mature) while relegating and limiting the initial neighbourhoods to two secondary sites. I embarked on fieldwork between January 2019 and December 2020, a total of two years. I continued the same frequency of visits of 1 – 3 visits or interactions per week for each neighbourhood in the primary site while making at least 1 visit per month per secondary site. These visits consisted mainly of data collection exercises such as fieldwork observations and interviews.

The fieldwork officially ceased by 31 December 2020, albeit with occasional visits for corroboration purposes.

Access

Pachirat (2017) argues that ethnographers sometimes find themselves in a constant struggle between concealment and consortium, especially in ethnographic projects where one's access demanded a certain level of political involvement, and where the luxury of navigating between participation and observation to fulfil the demands of the inquiry while avoiding political involvement is not often in the researcher's court. For instance, Pachirat's (2011) seminal work, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, required him to work as a factory worker in a meat-processing plant to document how violent labour is routinized in modern society through a mix of institutionalisation, sequestration and surveillance of bodies, sight, and violence. His access into the corporate hierarchy and physical grounds of the factory predicated upon his participation in the ritualised slaughtering of cattle daily and managing the politics of his workplace which revealed relations of domination otherwise invisible to a 'guest ethnographer' (Pachirat, 2009). Similarly in *Home Style*, Fenno's study of politicians in their home constituencies had him doubled up as a

“travelling Congress-watcher” (Fenno, 1978: 252), where he spoke at lengths about how spending time in close company and displaying gestures of loyalty with House members helped him gain significant rapport even as it meant being seen as part of the ‘clique’. They provided an honest glimpse into how deep involvement was both inevitably problematic yet crucial in building access in ethnographic accounts of labour and politics.

Similarly in this study, I learnt during my preliminary fieldwork that despite the relative ease of observing GRLs in grassroots politics, access was highly limited to a superficial level such as being a guest ethnographer attending public community events, or when informant access made possible, an occasional visit as an observer in a grassroots meeting. Mediating my access in the study into the heart of the grassroots sector firstly is my positionality as a Singaporean Chinese, middle-class, male with an academic position as a Ph.D. candidate researcher. My combined social statuses played a role in making initial connections with GRLs as well as accessing personal networks in gaining access in two ways. First, I benefitted from the first impressions made while negotiating access with gatekeepers when my social identity as a Singaporean researcher allowed me to leverage common cultural cues to anticipate or address my rationale for doing grassroots research. I often shared with my gatekeepers that my research stemmed from a yearning to learn more about grassroots politics and GRLs so that I can help the public understand better what their roles and significance are. Framing my profile as a Chinese middle-class male in his 30s who is interested in grassroots politics, I resembled the profile of GRLs PA targeted to recruit into their organizations as a GRL. It also enabled me to easily connect with other Chinese middle-class males in the grassroots sector, which accounts for a sizable population of the grassroots sector. One way I do so is by relying on cultural or gendered cues such as National Service experiences to kick-start conversations and build rapport. Yet despite being ascribed with some of the most privileged demographic statuses one can expect to possess in Singapore, I

found that the most significant status was being regarded as an “insider” in the grassroots sector. The most basic and direct way of doing so was to join as a GRL and build rapport from within through collaboration (Boccagni, 2011). And thus I joined the grassroots as a GRL. By collaboration, I refer to my performance as a GRL in organizing events with other GRLs and navigating the grassroots sector just as a new volunteer in my position would. I also capitalized on my own experiences as a “new insider”, balancing both outsider “strangeness” and insider “access” by journaling my encounters and learning journey as a GRL using an ethnographic field journal. The insights were used to inform and make visible the amount of cultural knowledge, practices, and relations in the grassroots which I needed to interrogate. Following Reeve’s (2010) strategies, I also built strategic rapport with gatekeepers such as PA staff, chairpersons of grassroots organizations, and the PAP-MP by proactively extending a helping hand in their tasks and making my presence felt as useful and disarming. I found that by assisting PA staff members as well as leader and senior GRLs (See Chapter 3 on hierarchy) in their grassroots work, I could gain intermittent access to different kinds of grassroots spaces and interactions such as organizers’ meetings, budget discussions, and after-meeting gatherings which illuminated vast amount of insights.

However, as Aarnikoivu (2016) points out, insider-ship is also graduated by different access based on one’s social positions within the field of inquiry. Like Pachirat (2011) and Fenno (1978), I was offered a rare opportunity to not only take up a senior GRL position, which elevated my access into the inner-workings of the grassroots, I eventually ended up being in a core group (See Chapter 5 on “Core Groups”). This status enabled me access not only to observe privileged settings and interactions but also opened doors to several significant informants who I tapped on for interviews. This was however not without being subjected to performing a degree of political involvement in the grassroots, the local PAP branch, and under the MP to which the core group belonged. Drawing on Fenno’s (1978) experiences, I

similarly negotiated my identity and access as a GRL, party activist, core group member, and researcher by being firm but transparent about my research agendas. I limit my political involvement to what was broadly prescribed in the IRB guidelines as well as what I knew I or other gatekeepers would be comfortable to include in the thesis. Meanwhile, I kept my researcher identity constant among political activists, while also occasionally reminding my informants that I am a card-carrying PAP member in instances where I recognize my political identity might jeopardize my informant's position in his/her groups or activities. While not wholly perfect, it allowed me to navigate my roles as a political actor and researcher in balancing as well as being accountable to either side.

This newfound insider status was however limited due to the constraints influenced by local political dynamics, as I later found out in two instances. The first was that it completely excluded me from examining grassroots activities in opposition party organizations. This was particularly so when the study's timeline coincided with Singapore General Elections 2020 (GE2020) and made partisan identities even more salient and difficult to overcome due to frequent allegations of party espionage and sabotage between the PAP and opposition parties. While this was not detrimental to the research's objectives, it did not allow me to collect sufficient data to clarify the grassroots experiences from opposition party organizations. Secondly, I found out that core group membership tended to be a position where one is "marked" by the auspice of the MP one belongs to. In other words, my plans to replicate a similar level of access in another PAP constituency were not only rejected but I was also interrogated for being seen as infiltrating into another core group when I was always recognized by others as a member of a particular MP's core group. These experiences shaped the eventual reconfiguration of my site selections to ensure that I meet my research objectives of uncovering the inner workings of grassroots politics from a GRL perspective.

Access to...	Level 1 (Public access) No/weak informant access	Level 2 (Guest access) low insider access	Level 3 (Insider access) High insider access
Spaces	Events and interactions in publicly accessible spaces (HDB void decks, parks, Community Center public-access areas)	Semi-public spaces where the informant is situated in. Access to space typically accompanied by an informant	Full access to formal grassroots meetings and discussion spaces as an insider/member. Access all parts of GROs. Access to space no longer needed accompaniment.
Activities	Join in on public/resident access community activities (Block parties, grassroots events)	One-off invitations to formal grassroots meetings and discussions.	Unrestricted access to GRLs gatherings, “back-stage” scenarios such as organizer discussions, budget discussion, staff-meetings
People (GRLs, state actors, residents)	Anyone whom I can access as a public member. Through formal channels or requiring endorsement from organizations or informants.	Anyone whom I can access using my low insider status.	Unrestricted access to anyone I have access to using my high insider access

Figure 1: Access levels in field sites

In terms of access, I outlined three different levels as categorized by the types of social spaces, activities and personnel I could access in the grassroots sector based on the level I acquired in the different sites. An indication of the access level of each neighbourhood is listed in Field Sites below.

Field Sites

The study took place in four primary neighbourhood sites in a political ward (47th District) and two secondary neighbourhood sites (Bluebricks and Hill Heights). The names of these sites were protected with pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes as well as at the request of key gatekeepers in the study. The site selection frame is chosen based on local factors of Singapore’s neighbourhoods which previous studies of grassroots politics have highlighted (Chan, 1976; Seah, 1973; Haque, 1994; Ooi, 2009). Neighbourhood maturity is usually applied to Singapore’s Housing and Development Board (HDB) public housing estates and is defined by the age of the neighbourhood. Mature neighbourhoods were those established during Singapore’s public housing boom during the 1960s to early 1990s, while non-mature neighbourhoods were formed after that. The contextual significance here is that mature neighbourhoods tended to have a more established grassroots presence (Vasoo, 2001). Each public estate neighbourhood typically consists of an average of 1,500 households spread

across 3 – 10 blocks (Chong et al, 1985). In this study, I picked only PAP wards due to the limited access to non-PAP wards due to political access reasons.

Owing to the difficulty in classifying the socio-economic class of neighbourhoods by property type in Singapore due to the extensive public housing presence and Singapore's property market characteristics, this study used a proxy as represented by property value instead. This is indicated by per-square-foot (psf) as drawn from SRX, a reputable local real estate portal that consolidates transaction listings of private properties from Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and public properties from HDB. Thus the higher the value, the more “expensive” the general prices of average properties in the neighbourhood are. While this is not wholly representative of residents' socio-economic statuses (SES), this indicator can provide more a nuanced assessment of residents' SES beyond the public-private estate dichotomy. It is however generally an accepted trend that private estate neighbourhoods are more of a higher SES than public estate neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, the different types of local organisations that are of significance to grassroots politics are also indicated. They include voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs) and Family Service Centres (FSCs) that provide social assistance, in partnership with the government, in their local neighbourhoods. Another organization is the Town Council, which manages the local maintenance of public estates' facilities, and is led by the elected Member of Parliament in charge of the political ward.

The site selection frame and descriptive indicators for the five sites are as followed.

Site Selection Frame	Primary Field (N1)	Secondary Field (N2)	Secondary Field (N3)
Location Pseudonym	47 th District	Bluebricks Estate	Hill Heights
Number of neighbourhoods studied:	(4 sites picked)	1	1
Neighbourhood Maturity	Mature	Mature	Non-Mature
Neighbourhood Estate Type	Mixed. (HDB and Private Estates)	HDB estate	Private estate
Political Seat	PAP	PAP	PAP
Brief demographic information of sites observed.	<p>Site 1: (Zone 1) Newly built public housing estate in a mature neighbourhood. Consisted of 3, 4 and 5 room public flats. (psf: \$500 – \$650)</p> <p>Site 2: (Zone 2) Newly built public housing estate combined with older blocks in mature estate. Consisted of 3, 4, 5 room and larger public flat units (psf: \$500 – \$600)</p> <p>Site 3: (Zone 3) Existing HDB blocks in a mature estate which consisted mainly of 3 and 4 rooms. Higher proportion of elderly compared to average public estate neighbourhoods in Singapore. (psf: \$400 – \$500)</p> <p>Site 4: (Zone 4) Private estate neighbourhood with condominiums and landed units. Long history of neighbourhood association. (psf: \$950+)</p>	<p>Site 5: Neighbourhood made up of public rental housing and HDB blocks. Higher proportion of elderly & residents from disadvantaged households. Built between 1960s – 1970s. Situated near to Central Business District area (psf undetermined due to HDB rental status)</p>	<p>Site 6: Neighbourhood consisted solely of condominiums and private estate units. (psf \$800+)</p>
Other local or Grassroots organisations	VWOs, FSCs, Town Council, local municipal agencies, temple and neighbourhood associations	VWOs, FSCs, Self-help groups, Town Council, local municipal agencies	VWOs
Access	Level 3	Level 2	Level 2
Number of groups ³ observed.	8	2	1

Figure 2: Sampling frame information of field sites.

³ See under Fieldwork Observation – third types of participants, for detailed information on groups observed.

Neighbourhood Profile of 47th District

The primary field of the study is located in the “47th District”, a political ward that is part of a Group Representation Constituency (GRC) under the ruling party, the PAP. 47th District consisted of 11 – 15⁴ neighbourhoods, 4 of which were picked as sites for the study and labelled as Zone 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively. The district also is made up of both mature public and private housing estates with an estimated figure of approximately 18,000 households. The estimated demographic profile of the 47th District is at approximately 80% Chinese, 7% Malays, 7% Indians and 6% Others. Residents aged 19 and below constitute about 15%, while those aged between 20 and 39 at 30%, 40 – 64 at 40% and, 65 and above at 15%. Zone 1, 2 and 3 are housing estate neighbourhoods located in 47th District. While this indicates that 47th District’s profile has a higher number of Chinese residents and has slightly older demographics, its neighbourhood profile does not deviate from a typical private estate one might find in Singapore with similar higher Chinese profiles. Meanwhile, owing to the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) in Singapore, the most public estate would reflect the EIP quota of 84%, 22% and 12% for Chinese, Malays, Indian/Others respectively (HDB, 2010).

47th District thus provides a reasonably comparative demographic site to a typical neighbourhood in Singapore. Zone 1 is a new neighbourhood formed out of a recent HDB development. Comprising of approximately 800 households, the demographic profile of the residents included mainly young couples who were first-timer buyers between the ages of 25 – 40, as well as middle-aged couples who were second-time buyers with children. As a new neighbourhood, there was no prior establishment of a local grassroots committee. Zone 2 was also a BTO development but of a smaller scale and was located in an existing mature estate that was built during the 1980s. The BTO estate’s profile is similar to that of Zone 1, but with the addition of the mature housing estates with mainly families and elderly persons, the

⁴ A range is introduced to disguise the identity of the ward.

residents' average age is higher than that of Zone 1, along with the presence of an existing grassroots committee. Zone 3 consisted of several older blocks built during the late 1970s and early 1980s, with a sizeable proportion of older residents as well as a higher-than-average number of disadvantaged households compared to other neighbourhoods in the district. The grassroots committee in the neighbourhood has also existed for over 30 years and is well established and recognised among residents. The local PAP branch of the district is also located in the heart of Zone 3. Meanwhile, Zone 4 is comprised solely of private estates located in one of Singapore's most expensive neighbourhoods. These included condominiums and landed estates built after the 1960s when the surrounding kampongs were moved. Owing to its prime location, the neighbourhood also underwent several property boom cycles which saw numerous private developments between the 1980s till present. To date, more than 3000 households spanned over approximately 2km² of space, making Zone 4 one of Singapore's more popular private estate neighbourhoods. Like Zone 3, Zone 4 also has an established grassroots organisation with decades of history. These four sites were picked to depict as closely as possible the diversity of neighbourhood types one would typically expect in Singapore for observation, although they more closely resemble purposeful "cases" than representative "samples".

Snapshot of Bluebricks and Hill Heights estates

To ensure comparability and some degree of generalizability of findings to Singapore neighbourhoods in the study, two additional secondary neighbourhood sites from different electoral wards were also introduced. These secondary sites allowed for corroboration and clarification of observations made in 47th District's neighbourhoods. The two sites are labelled Bluebricks estate (N2) and Hill Heights (N3).

Bluebricks (BB) estate is a public estate neighbourhood with several blocks of public rental HDB flats. These public rental flats consisted mainly of residents who were facing financial difficulties or fell on hard times or elderly residents. The rest of the neighbourhood consisted of a mix of mature public flats with most residents having lived there most of their lives. Other than the Resident Committee, there were also numerous local VWOs and self-help groups supporting the underprivileged in the neighbourhood. Bluebricks estate has often been regarded as one of Singapore's most underprivileged neighbourhoods, due to its large concentration of families who are under financial assistance or support from various local social service agencies and organisations.

On the other end of the spectrum is Hill Heights (HH), a private estate neighbourhood with condominiums and townhouses lining up both sides of a long stretch of road at the side of a hill. Residents in the neighbourhood comprised both locals and foreigners. The neighbourhood is littered with cafes, pubs, and special interests shops such as bookstores, bike shops, vet clinics and spas. Residents in the neighbourhood ranged from middle-class to affluent. Accessibility in Hill Heights suited those who drove or chauffeured, as the public buses only manned the main roads, while the neighbourhood is famous for numerous winding cul-de-sacs where landed properties were holed in. Despite the upscale built setting, Hill Heights has a longstanding neighbourhood committee organising various community initiatives such as community gardens, park exercises and street parties.

Data Collection: Fieldwork Observation

Drawing on various ethnographic strategies to complement the various settings (Knoblauch, 2005; Duneier, 1999), I devised a toolkit of five FO roles and strategies as listed below.

FOs Toolkit	Visitor-based observation	Over the shoulder observation	Focused Observation	Extended Place Method	Insider observation
Access	Low	Medium	Low/ Medium	Medium	High
Observation focus	What is observable at plain sight to visitors	Observable insights in informant's line of sight. Observing interactions between followed informant and other actors	Purposive visits to a location to focus on a specific observation	Analysis across multiple sites to form linkages between them	What is observable from the vantage point of an insider
Data Collection	Digital jottings, field notes	Digital jottings	Digital jottings, field notes, videos, photos	Field notes, analytical notes, photos	Digital jottings, photos, journal
Duration	Short	Short	Medium	Long	Long
Used when...	Exploratory visits or when access is limited by what is publicly accessible (eg. Attending a community event)	Following informants around the site in order to gain access to the area, or understand the process of particular interactions (eg. What GRLs do during a block visit)	Object of observation is clear, or for confirmatory or clarification purposes	When there is a need for the observation to go beyond a single site to form a clearer understanding	Access is obtained by being recognised as part of a group, team or setting

Figure 3: Types of observation roles and strategies used in the study

These FO strategies were used in response to the different levels of access and the type of observation required in capturing the data. I used visitor-based observations in situations where I do not require deep access or where strict access is provided by gatekeepers to observe what is available. In this role, I made a minimal impact on the activities or settings by being a passive observer and had very few interactions with other actors in the setting. My role as a researcher was however made conspicuous and unambiguous by introducing myself as one when probed by gatekeepers or other participants. Over-the-shoulder observation is another method used in situations where access is limited to proximity of informants, either due to circumstantial factors or where insights could be gleaned from following them. The over-the-shoulder observation allowed me to follow informants as they go about their interactions in a setting and observe the interactions between the informants and other actors. Instances included tagging along with senior grassroots leaders or MPs during their activities such as house visits or while organizing a community event. Focused observations on the other hand refer to purposive observational visits made with a specific goal in mind

(Knoblauch, 2005). This style of FO was widely used during my visits to secondary sites to corroborate or clarify findings I saw in the primary site and vice versa. For instance, to find how GRLs influenced local policymaking, I identified several settings in which these scenarios occurred based on observations in the primary site. Using the information, I return to the secondary site to insert myself into these scenarios by requesting to observe them. Focused ethnography allowed me to purposefully narrow my scope of data collection to generate more insight on a particular matter, saving time and resources. Next, extended place observation allowed me to link up multiple sites and extend my observations across them to observe the social spaces that are linked to each other (Duneier, 1999). For instance, in finding how GRLs relayed state information to their local communities, I had to extend my observations to various sites such as the community centre, their visits to residents' homes and even digital interactions on social media platforms to understand how these sites are linked as different channels of informational transmission. The extended place method allowed me to connect otherwise limited observational findings in specific sites to form more extensive explanations across the field. Lastly, in settings where I was able to deploy my insider status as a GRL to access and observe closed or "back-stage" settings, I utilised a "hanging out" approach (Woodward, 2008), where I observed my participants' interactions in familial social settings while participating. One common example of hanging out included joining in on the celebrations with GRLs after organizing a successful community event. These observations allowed me to find out what aspects of the grassroots politics GRLs do or talk about outside of public settings.

I used a comprehensive method (Wolfinger, 2002) as the overall method of note-taking. This consisted of creating a chronological order of observations based on a list of descriptive pointers such as time, space, actors, repertoires, speech and objects. This method aided in a narrative recreation of the settings and interactions when I referred back to the field notes. In

situations where pen-and-paper note-taking was either not permitted or disrupting the social norms of the settings, I utilised digital note-taking instead, relying on my mobile devices to record jottings and field notes to create a less intrusive presence. Photographs and sound bites were also used as audio-visual cues to augment the note-taking process which aided the recollection of data. To mitigate the effects of insider observations such as taking observable insights for granted or the lack of research focus due to my active participation in these settings, I have also relied on a reflective journal by recording down my experience from the perspective of an insider after the event. I later revisited these entries as auto-ethnographic data to complement other data forms (Ellis, et al, 2011).

In this study, I collected data from three analytical distinct groups of GRLs based on the frequency of interactions and relations I had with them. The first group were GRLs with whom I have interacted during fieldwork but data collected from them was not uniquely identified as they were regarded as part of the observations. For this group, general consent was obtained through my access to the site. The second group were GRLs whom I have extensively interacted with as informants, gatekeepers or interviewees. These informants often possess expert knowledge on the roles they assume or have experience or involvement in particular activities that are relevant to my inquiry. Gatekeepers referred to participants who enabled my access into sites or networks by way of introduction or recommendation. For this group, disclosures were made through verbal or written consent where required. I constantly reminded them of my intent to observe on the premises. In instances where observation was not possible due to privacy or non-consent, I negotiated for a short annotated summary of the activity/setting in place of a field report, leaving out any identifiable information to particulate place, time and actors. These summaries were shared by participants who were involved, and I corroborated the validity of the summaries by checking for common observations and clarifying outliers by cross-checking them with other

participants. Observations made with informants and gatekeepers were categorised with unique pseudonyms for narrative consistency and tracing of fieldwork's progress. For interviews with informants and gatekeepers, informed consent was obtained through a signed form, and a copy of the interview questions with the IRB contact was provided to interviewees. A total of 40 interviews were used for this study (See Interview for more info). The third group of GVs comprised of individuals in groups I have followed closely during observation. For the study's design, I defined a "group" broadly in numerical form as a collective assembly of individuals with four or more people, with repeated interactions and a shared system of belief, norms and inter-group boundary (Fine, 1979). In the main neighbourhood site, I actively hung out with eight distinctly identified groups. The groups' demographics are as follow.

Label	Group Name	Size	Age Range	Sex (M:F)	Ethnicity (C:M:I:O)	GI*	Access
N1G1	"Zone 2 RC Bros"	7	38 – 71	7:0	6:0:1:0	2	High
N1G2	"MPS volunteers"	14	19 – 58	11:3	13:0:1:0	3	High
N1G3	"Core team"	12	32 – 63	10:2	12:0:1:0	2	High
N1G4	"Gentleman's club"	9	36 – 63	9:0	9:0:0:0	2	High
N1G5	"Gardening Folks"	7	38 - 70	3:4	7:0:0:0	1	Med
N1G6	"TC Reps"	6	36 – 61	5:1	5:0:1:0	3	High
N1G7	"Zone Fantastic 5s"	5	36 – 61	4:1	5:0:0:0	3	High
N1G8	"GRC mates"	5	27 – 43	5:0	3:0:1:1	2	Med

Figure 4: Demographics of groups observed in 47th District

** GI refers to the number of gatekeepers and informants I encountered in the group.*

In the paired secondary neighbourhood sites, I hung out with four different groups across four different sites. Their demographics are as followed:

Label	Group Name	Size	Age Range	Sex (M:F)	Ethnicity (C:M:I:O)	GI*	Access
N2G1	“BB Welfare Team”	5	16 - 48	4:1	5:0:0:0	1	Med
N2G2	“BB Youths”	7	16 – 30+	5:2	6:0:1:0	1	Med
N3G1	“HH NC folks”	4	40+ – 60+	1:3	3:0:1:0	1	Med

Figure 5: Demographics of groups observed in secondary fields.

* *GI refers to the number of gatekeepers and informants I encountered in the group.*

With a few exceptions, the grassroots groups I hung out with predominantly consisted of Chinese males. One possible reason might be due to my social status as a Chinese male, which made interacting with informants or gate-keepers of similar social statuses much easier to access. This might however skew the balance of interactions from ethnic minority GRLs in terms of getting sufficient field insights on their experiences. I mitigated these limits by actively reaching out to ethnic minorities GRLs either through focused observations or interviews to corroborate my findings in this study.

Data Collection: Interviews

I also conducted two forms of interviews with various participants during fieldwork. The first was field interviews/spot interviews which were carried out during fieldwork where the recording was either not possible or feasible. The data from these interviews was attached with field notes as annotated memos, with key information recorded verbatim while the overall gist of the field interviews was annotated and summarised. Field interviews’ participants ranged from residents, street-level bureaucrats to MPs and senior community leaders. These lasted anywhere between 10 minutes to as long as an hour and were typically conducted during ad hoc social settings such as meals or in-between travelling. The second form was semi-structured interviews. All semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. There were a total of 40 interviews, 23 of which were face-to-face, 2 via phone and 15 via digital platforms such as Zoom or Skype. The semi-structured interviews each last between half-hour to two hours, with some being conducted across different sessions in a

serial interview format due to time constraints and also returning for further clarifications or insights with interviewees as my data emerged (Read 2018). Some interviews were conducted in a mix of languages due to interviewees' lack of English proficiency. I mitigated the issue by translating as best as possible into English during the transcription process. A list of interviewees' demographic details is as follows:

Race:	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Others	Total:
	25	6	8	1	
Age:	0 – 19	20 – 39	40 – 59	60 & Above	
	0	15	20	5	
Gender	Male	Female			
	28	12			
Educational Level	Secondary & Lower	JC/Poly/ITE	Bachelor's Degree	Master's and Higher	
	1	11	25	3	
Housing Type (HDB Room or Private)	3-room and below	4-room	5-room or Similar	Private	
	7	10	9	14	
GRL Type (See Chapter 3)	Leader GRLs	Senior GRLs	Volunteer GRLs	ex-GRLs	
	3	11	21	5	
					40

Figure 6: Demographic of interviewees in semi-structured interviews

Data Collection: Archival Research

Archival research was also conducted to support the fieldwork. Examples of data points included internal memos from PA to GRLs, photographs, manuscripts, newspaper articles, declassified documents, social media posts, public-accessible social media materials, and peripheral materials such as posters, commemorative books, autobiographies etc. Other than those publicly available or having obtained permission for semi-public works with copyrights, I accessed these archival materials through three sources. The first was through trawling the digital records made available through the National Archives of Singapore. The second was through public databases or records offered by various institutions such as the

National Community Leadership Institute (NACLI), the various constituency offices as well as other associations. The last source was through individuals who had access to archival materials using personal or professional collections.

Notes on Ethics and Politics in Ethnographic Research of Singapore Politics

In the course of this research, I have gained a profound respect for researchers before myself who have embarked on empirical research on Singapore politics. The constraints are not just tied to methodological limitations. More often, they also require a keen level of sensibilities in navigating between the research of politics and the politics of research. Beyond what has been discussed, I shall make two more points. They are the ethical and political concerns surrounding “studying down” and “studying up”.

In studying down, I acknowledge what Dowling (2005) described as the power researchers possess in qualitative research in framing our subjects and how we deal with imbalances in power relations in favour of the researcher over his/her subjects. Drawing on my previous experiences with studying Filipino foreign domestic workers through an ethnographic account, I recognize how researchers need to pay constant attention in balancing one’s professional relationship as researcher and subjects, and the other interpersonal relationships one may have established in the field. I eschew from claiming objectivity and disinterestedness in my work, a position other scholars have similarly cautioned (Fine, 1993; Murphy & Dingwall, 2001; Pachirat, 2017). Instead, I negotiate for a fair and accountable projection of the work of my subjects and their lives in a way that elicited mutual respect. In this study, there are some elements of “studying down”. One example would be when my insider role as a senior GRL may influence how GRLs with lower social positions respond to my research queries. I address such concerns by frequently reminding GRLs of my role as a researcher, and focusing my observations on how they sought to see themselves. I often do so by checking with them if my interpretations of observations or findings did justice to the

complexities of grassroots politics and their roles in them. It would be remiss to assume that this dissolved all concerns. Sometimes my participants and I reached a consensus, in other moments, we agreed to disagree. I strove to present these different accounts in the hope of showing the greyness that is politics and the various positionalities that GRLs take in reconciling what they do and what they say they do. In striving for beneficence with my research participants, I made steps to ensure my fieldwork observations did not disrupt the political relations or works they have to establish by learning to respect boundaries in social situations so that it is not at the expense of my informants. One example included withholding privileged information between informants and other participants so as not to reveal who has spoken to me, or by defending my informants' confidentiality when probed by others. Despite possessing informed consent, I took extra precautions to ensure or mitigate any informational slippages that might have negatively affected my participants' reputations. Lastly, I also proactively checked in with my participants to ensure their wellbeing during my research, and have offered to be a listening ear to their problems as reciprocity.

This study also opened my eyes to the challenges of what Lillie & Ayling (2020) highlighted in "studying up", or navigating elite studies research. They highlighted how some researchers are often faced with issues of power imbalances in favour of research participants in elite research such as pressures of self-censorship, political conformity or limited access and how existing ethical guidelines are inadequate in addressing these concerns. In this study, an ethnographic investigation of grassroots politics inevitably runs up against figures of authority and political elites who do not take kindly to "political research", and researchers sometimes pay a price for their intellectual and professional curiosity. I found that while there are supporters and sympathizers among my informants who recognize the importance of researching on local politics in Singapore, there is also a noticeable culture of fear and silence toward revealing the inner-workings of politics through research, especially when the

findings go against the grain of political sensibilities in Singapore. I have been similarly subjected to formal and informal probes by figures of authority for my motivations and agendas in studying grassroots politics, and while I have convinced some of the significance of my research to better understand Singapore politics to diagnose it, others remain staunchly unmoved, along with any access request. I have also been subtly warned (usually in between jest) about crossing what ex-Minister George Yeo famously termed as “Out-of-Bounds (OB) markers” by people who meant well as well as others playing their enforcer duties. One can research politics until one is told not to.

Despite this shared sentiment among some researchers of Singapore politics, there is surprisingly a dearth of scholarship on how to navigate political research in Singapore. I am fortunate for the wealth of advice by peers and seniors in similar pursuits. Here, I share one strategy I thought was crucial in my experience of studying up. That is by picking and building allies by playing up my researcher identity (Lillie & Ayling, 2020). Part of this study’s hypothesized that the terrain of local politics is fraught with slippages, negotiations, actors with different positionalities, interests and relations. This heterogeneity meant recognizing that just as much as one can attain the good graces of a political sponsor and achieve unfettered access, so can one can lose everything when the rug is abruptly pulled from under. Hence what I did was to rely on what I could control, and that was my identity and reputation as a researcher. While I participated in grassroots politics as a GRL, I always re-emphasized my researcher persona by constantly highlighting those around me that I am first and foremost a researcher, as well as reminding people of the dual purposes of my involvement. I also delineated my research work clearly by negotiating the boundaries of my involvement and research. If there were political tasks I was expected to perform, I ask the extent to which I could study them. I found that constant negotiations with the gatekeepers allowed me to clarify what the boundaries were. It also made political elites aware of what

motivated me. One example was an MP who approached me to assist with some policy research task that was related to his political work. Knowing that I was involved in grassroots politics research from a mutual friend, he offered to open doors to engage with GRLs he was familiar with. I took up his offer, but not before sharing with him the constraints of what a researcher can or cannot do, and the accountability I have for my research as well as my institutional expectations. He agreed, and I am thankful for his understanding and opportunity. Building up a network of allies in supporting or sympathizing with my research or my researcher self helped in three ways. Firstly, it solidified a field identity that others recognized as legitimate through the people who backed my presence, not because I played any loyalty cards, but because I declared and stood by my position as a researcher first and foremost in the field. Secondly, these allies often also guided me on the cultural nuances of navigating local politics, and I was able to capitalize on this newfound knowledge to make more sensible decisions and relationships in the study, such as how to approach elites for information without comprising mine or their expectations. Lastly, I found that while strength in political numbers is not a panacea, it did ward off unwanted attention from political enforcers when they figured out that I was vouched for by my allies by association; an unintended but welcome effect. I am however acutely aware that this strategy can also be the result of privileges and resources I possess. I do not prescribe it to others, but it makes clear how my research could have been possible at all.

In response to possible critiques that despite all reasonable efforts, my position as a card-carrying PAP member might compromise the findings and interpretations in the thesis owing to issues of partiality or self-censorship, I draw on Pachirat's (2017) open question on the insoluble problem of political ethnography when an immersion of power meets the power (and problems) of immersion. On the one hand, no amount of excuses can ever surmount a satisfactory defense against such charges for all. As Pachirat (2017) pointed out, the problems

of political ethnography qua the *methodenstreit* or disputes over (ethnographic) method will find its way to lay claim that immersion inadvertently pollutes the “data” – the body that measures the scene is also infected by being present at the scene.

While Pachirat offers no recourse to such situations, this experience as an immersive researcher offers me one major point for reflection. This project has enabled me to be more acutely aware that there are no true neutral research positions, but merely positions of “political distancing”. By political distance, I refer to concern over how the politics of research affects the research of politics when one is in proximity to those who have the power and/or motivation to influence the research. The researcher is therefore in a crucial position to defend one’s works, not just from criticism of political pressure, but from political pressure itself. The responsibility to maintain the trustworthiness in such defense of research is therefore on the onus of the researcher(s). As described earlier, the steps and protocols I undertook in this project are examples of how I sought to defend the trustworthiness of the project. Underlying these steps is also the central principle that the research work needs to stand up to not just criticism that it is irrevocably partial, but to those who unsuccessfully attempted to influence the research. Thus, I declare that while I do not have a panacea for resolving all claims against political positionality, I am confident that the research work presented in this thesis at least fulfills the principle of having defended itself from criticism and influence. Using Pachirat’s (2017) analogy, I have kept the wolves at bay.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I open up the study by briefing tracing the historical landscape of Singapore’s local governance, and the different empirical debates surrounding the relevance of GRLs within the grassroots sector. Here, I position my research as clarifying the state of the research by providing justifications for a contemporary study of GRLs in grassroots politics. I do so by examining the two classical empirical works by Chan (1976) and Seah (1973), and

show why such a study is timely through new demographic and theoretical challenges. Then I set out my research objectives in analyzing GRLs' governing practices in grassroots politics as they navigate state-led urban governance and PAP's party-political regime expectations. Next, I cover the methodological frames of political ethnography and lay out the research design in terms of research timeline, involvement and access, field site characteristics, data collection methods in field observations, interviews and archival research, as well as reflecting on the issues and strategies taken in dealing with the ethics and politics of political research of and in Singapore.

Chapter 2: Grassroots leaders and Grassroots Politics: A Review

2.1 Introduction:

In this study, I argue that the roles and significance of grassroots leaders in mediating grassroots political experiences between state and society in Singapore can be better understood when framed through an emic perspective. By studying their lived experiences as local political actors, they reveal the everyday reproduction of governance and political dynamics that undergird neighbourhood associational life through their different roles. I look at how GRLs as community leaders frame their positions, motivations and politics at the grassroots as they navigate and reconcile the different intersections of state, party, community and personal interests., I examine how GRLs As state-sponsored volunteers produce local governance on behalf of the state by utilizing local access and knowledge to influence neighbourhood associational life. I unpack how Singapore's grassroots parapolitics by looking at GRLs' involvement as regime partners in producing incumbency advantages for the PAP regime under competitive authoritarianism settings.

In this chapter, I discuss three interrelated segments in the scholarship surrounding how grassroots leaders shape grassroots politics - the politics of grassroots representation, urban governance and regime resilience. These three scholarship segments are chosen as they each deal with a specific area of interest to this study. In grassroots representation, I draw on works relating to civic cultures and community development in depicting what grassroots politics entails, how grassroots representations are formed and how they are applied in Singapore's context. In urban governance, I examine the "weak state" and "strong state" approaches and the scholarship surrounding Singapore's urban governance model through a discussion of its capacities and limitations. Lastly, I unpack the relationship between grassroots and regime politics by examining different conceptions of regime resilience and

political legitimacy within the community powers and political regime scholarship. In doing so, I show how reconciling both sets of literature offers a new perspective in reconstituting the role of grassroots leaders as active participants in reproducing regime resilience.

2.2 Politics of Grassroots Representation

“Grassroots” connotes the most local of political domains where individuals within communities/neighbourhoods live, interact, and co-exist in “...face-to-face relationships, and meetings so small that most people in the room know one another names” (Read, 2009: 1). It also refers to “...the bonds people build with one another that enable them to rely on one another... how society creates, expands and distributes its means of well-being” (Mollenkopf, 1981: 320). Drawing on the above references, this study similarly regards the grassroots as denoting a sense of propinquity, embeddedness, corporeality and familiarity of relations; a thick political community. Likewise, I define grassroots politics as the most local level of politics between state and society where the interests of local political communities are organized to represent, participate and/or influence local politics for members’ or other political institutions’ interests to be met (Gundelach, 1979; Stone, 1989). Grassroots politics also involved what Tomba (2014) calls “...the everyday practices of power in the neighbourhood” (p.3), where local political actors find different ways to mediate state-society relations and engagements to perform their roles or achieve their aims. Grassroots politics involve organizations that run the gamut from the neighborhood or homeowner associations, community groups and resident committees, to local political machines, state-backed collectives and non-government organisations (NGOs) operating in the neighbourhoods. The organized forms of this local polity are represented in different imageries through the grassroots leaders that inhabit them and are characterized through three main approaches.

In the first approach, grassroots leaders represent ground-up movements through local organizations or groups from a bottom-up perspective (Castells, 1983). Grassroots leaders are

seen as promoting civil society by pursuing civil rights, providing community services or supporting neighbourhood regeneration. As early as Tocqueville (1840), this connection between grassroots organisations and civic engagement has long been regarded as the local bedrock of a democratic society. Others have also paid attention to the role of grassroots leaders in fostering different forms of capital to augment civic participation and informed citizenry at the local level, all basic elements of democratic societies (Purdue, 2001; Craig & Mayo, 1995; Coleman, 1988; Almond & Verba, 1963). For instance, Putnam (1993; 200) focuses on the significance of social capital in building resilient communities that are diverse and inclusive, calling on civilians to act towards public good based on mutual trust and wellbeing. Furthermore, others look to how grassroots leaders harnessed local activism to form global movements such as environment movements (Towers, 2000; Epstein, 1995) and pursuits for social justice (Rickford, 2016; Pichardo, 1997). Yet grassroots politics have also been shown to deepen or maintain urban inequalities or benefit specific groups at the expense of others, especially when local interests demarcate existing fault lines in the community. These include channelling of public funds to serve specific class or cultural interests of dominant groups' neighbourhoods while excluding marginalized communities (Niedt, 2006; Tissot, 2011), or privileging particular forms of gentrification outcomes (Kasinitz, 1988; Boyd, 2008). In both instances, the primacy of political mobilization stems from the bottom-up, where residents turned local leaders use groundswell to focus political support and resources to the communities they serve and belong to.

Meanwhile, scholars have also examined the issues of co-optation within the politics of grassroots representation from a top-down perspective (Eliasoph, 2014; 2009, White, 2008). Much of the focus is on the manipulation of local support to pursue the political interests of organizations. One such issue is astroturfing, or the political manipulation of grassroots leaders and their local resources by politicians, the state or corporate actors to lobby for

political and corporate interests (Walker, 2016; Durkee, 2017). For instance, scholars have looked at how grassroots organizations and leaders are embedded into local political machines to establish clientelistic networks for short-term gains at the expense of long-term developments to their communities (Katznelson, 1981; Kraus & Pekkanan, 2010). Grassroots leaders have also been co-opted by the state for surveillance, social control and spreading of official state-endorsed doctrines for ideological purposes (Corrales, 2015; Greskovit, 2017; Mattingly, 2019). Central to all these examples is the problem of how unequal resources and influence shape grassroots representation, where grassroots mobilization shapes and is shaped by state or corporate interests and their influences in local communities.

Critiquing both bottom-up and top-down perspectives for analytically straitjacketing the dynamics of social and cultural factors in grassroots representation, an emergent third approach interrogates the role motivations and group interactions play in shaping grassroots politics. Initial works in this approach focus on the primacy of civic culture models in shaping how grassroots leaders represent their communities (Almond & Verba, 1963; Docherty et al, 2001; Inglehart, 1990). Here, scholars link grassroots representation to civic cultures of grassroots leaders, as well as the relationships and politics of representation they engage in with different actors in their local communities. More recently, other scholars also paid attention to the civic roles of women and minority leaders in shaping new discourses to grassroots representation towards long-neglected interests and issues in local communities (Kaufman & Grace, 2011; Lindholm, 2001; Kaplan, 1997; Austin & Shills, 1991). These studies share a common assumption in the significance of grassroots leaders' lived experiences in surfacing local activism and empowerment that intersect issues in class, gender and ethnicity in their communities (Heaney, 2019; Prindeville, 2002).

In the Singapore context, scholars have similarly framed the politics of grassroots representation mainly through the above approaches. Owing to Singapore's unique political

geography as a city-state, the boundaries of grassroots politics overlap with national politics. Unlike in many other countries where grassroots politics are nested or subsumed under national politics, (Smith, 2010; Delaney & Leitner, 1997), in Singapore, they exist on the same political scale. The scalar homogeneity of grassroots and national politics in Singapore is commonly regarded as a primary reason why political observers and scholars focus extensively on the grassroots political space as an important site of Singapore's politics (Mauzy & Milne, 2002; Weiss, 2017; 2020). However, the ideological boundaries of grassroots politics in Singapore are also demarcated by what Poon (2013) described as the "heartlands". This frame has been evoked by politicians and locals to denote cultural imagery of Singapore's residential spaces as national space, where Singapore's grassroots sector represents the collective community interests emerging from local neighbourhoods in the production of "authentic" social and cultural capital as national values (Chong, 2010). The "heartlands" therefore constitute the cultural territory where grassroots dwells both as a physical and affective space and separated from the cosmopolitan spaces that undergird the creative and liberal veneers of the global city (Yeoh, 2004). In other words, the grassroots in Singapore evokes both a sense of Singaporean localness as a scale as well as belonging.

Grassroots representations of the "heartlands" have been scrutinized by scholars for their top-down characteristics (Seah, 1987; Chan, 1976). Tan (2003) for instance outlined how Singapore's grassroots sector is made up of a dense network of state and party-sponsored organizations aimed at limiting the autonomy of grassroots engagement by harnessing a compliant civic society, rather than fostering an independent civil society. The focus has been on the institutionalization of the grassroots sector through the People's Association, in what is described as a bureaucratic absorption of politics (Wong, 2019; Seah, 1971). Scholars look at how the state utilizes the grassroots to channel its nation-building strategies by getting grassroots leaders to promote pro-establishment narratives and programs on its behalf (Barr

& Skrbis, 2008; Hill & Lian, 2013). Lee & Haque (2008) traced the social origins of top-down controls over Singapore's grassroots politics to state-led developments during Singapore's early independence years, resulting in what they saw as a statist-corporatist regime. Grassroots organizations receive state resources in return for delivering community needs without engaging in activism, while grassroots leaders operate as members without advocacy (Chua, 2000). Haque (1996) also contested that recent decentralization of local governance through the grassroots has been seen as the transferring of administration without authority. Similarly, other scholars discussed the implications of these grassroots influences by political parties, ranging from defanging of grassroots leaders' autonomy over what and how they represent in the grassroots sector (Tan, 2020), to carefully deployed astroturfing strategies by the PAP to give an impression of grassroots support for public policies (Weiss, 2017). Notwithstanding, other scholars have also examined how oppositional parties in Singapore have capitalized on dissent on the ground, especially in digital spaces, to build grassroots oppositional bases for political mobilization (James et al, 2013; Fuller, 2007). In this study, I draw on these works in approaching the roles of GRLs in the grassroots sector by recognizing the prevalent top-down influences in framing their political engagements in grassroots politics.

While Singapore's grassroots politics dominantly constituted pro-establishment organizations and leaders through the grassroots sector, other scholars have also looked at pockets of ground-up movements in Singapore's grassroots politics, and a significant part of the literature focuses on groundswell arising from "Not-In-My-Backyard" (NIMBY) politics (Bell, 1997; Aldrich, 2008). For instance, Yeo & Neo (2010) traced how residents converged to pursue the culling of macaques which have disrupted their lives, creating oppositions to animal protection policies. Similarly, Baey (2010) highlighted the exclusion of migrant bodies in local neighbourhoods stemming from anti-foreign workers sentiments by local

community leaders and residents. Beyond NIMBY politics, others have also looked at how marginal groups in Singapore such as Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Transsexual (LGBT) groups eke out a grassroots presence by working through peer-to-peer digital networks to develop grounded advocacy outside of the conservative pro-establishment grassroots sector (Chua, 2014). These cases highlight how other kinds of local interests are represented when grassroots leaders and organizations mediate new spaces of flow to allow alternative forms of activism to emerge outside of the prescribed grassroots sector.

Meanwhile, the literature on community development in Singapore shows how top-down and bottom-up perspectives to grassroots politics can be reconciled (Vasoo, 2001; 1984; Riches 1971). Recognizing the importance top-down influences of state and political actors play in shaping the direction of grassroots representations, and the potential of demographic traits and bottom-up activism in steering political discourses and decisions among policymakers and politicians, these scholars looked at how and why community developments in Singapore have been configured through a model where the state plays a dominant role in mediating community relations in partnership with private and people sector players. One common assumption within this approach lies in the acknowledgement that local communities can be designed through different forms of state and local interventions to build specific kinds of communities that fit political and/or local gains (Taub et al, 1977). For instance, Vasoo (1990) examined how community leaders' motivations shape the emphasis resident and neighbourhood associations play in mobilizing particular forms of municipal developments. Challenging prevailing models in both top-down and bottom-up approaches such as rational choice theory (Goulder, 1959), structural functionalism (Loy, 1979) and critical politics (Gummer, 1978), Vasoo posited looking at community leaders' motivations through residents' orientations as well as their capacity to deliver community expectations. This offered a more grounded perspective to how and why particular forms of grassroots initiative

succeeded while others have failed, and how it shapes community participation in Singapore. Similarly in looking at state management of religious communities in Singapore, Tan (2008) proffered how the state and local religious leaders broker to form common platforms for inter-religious co-existence in response to shifting local demands and expectations surrounding religion and religiosity in Singapore. In doing so, they maintained an imperfect but working balance of religious harmony among local communities where religious communities maintain their influence over their congregations, while the state ensures religious groups toe the line to maintain religious harmony. Furthermore, Cho & Kriznik (2016) have applied the community development approach to examining how neo-developmental cities, leveraging on both top-down and bottom-up principles in shaping the urban neighbourhood initiatives as nation-building projects. These studies show that the development of a more robust picture of how grassroots leaders negotiate, reproduce or resist different forms of community engagements is possible by paying attention to their social positions and subjective orientations. In this perspective, both the top-down and bottom-up approaches are drawn into analysis to show how grassroots leaders reproduce grassroots politics through everyday practices of power.

This study follows the community developments approach in elucidating the emic perspectives of grassroots leaders as a way to understand how Singapore's grassroots sector works through their lived experiences. It follows Seah's (1973) call for a deep study of the grassroots sector in Singapore by looking at the historical, organizational and interactional orders of Singapore's politics. This is to counter what has been otherwise an imprecise view of the grassroots sector as fully succumbing to state-backed interests or lacking heterogeneity in terms of how political actors negotiate and make sense of their grassroots participation and representation. This is however not to eschew the obvious presence of state and political dynamics that are tied to urban governance and regime resilience. Instead, I argue that to

fully comprehend the role of grassroots leaders and the grassroots sector in Singapore, the presence of state and PAP's controls over GRLs and the grassroots sector need to be interrogated as well.

2.3 Urban Governance through the Grassroots

In this study, I follow Pierre's approach of urban governance, defined as "...the interplay between state and society and the extent to which collective projects can be achieved through a joint public and private mobilization of resources" (2011: 5). A wide scholarship exists in examining the role and significance of grassroots leaders in mediating and producing urban governance under different state presence and capacities. In "weak states" situations where the state takes a more laissez-faire approach in governing the city, scholars have looked at how grassroots leaders and organizations mitigate state absence by addressing issues of severe inequality or exclusion at the neighbourhood level (Nicholls et al, 2016; Castells, 1983; Aidukaite et al, 2015). Roy (2009) for instance examines how grassroots organizations in Beirut and Mumbai produce regimes of civic governmentality by addressing the politics of inclusion to mobilize against neoliberal transformations through neighbourhood activism. Others such as Pixova (2019) and Leitner et al (2017) also traced how grassroots activism in East Europe resisted neoliberal urban regimes by establishing alternative forms of local governance over their local communities and spaces. These studies highlight how grassroots organizations and leaders contested with other regimes of governance that threatened their local communities and ways of life by taking governance into their own hands. These studies draw on the growth of neoliberal influences in the absence of state interventions in the Atlantic and European urban contexts (Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

On the other hand in certain East Asian contexts where a "strong state" environment prevails, the state presents itself as the most dominant player in urban politics. Scholars have paid attention to how grassroots leaders responded to these differences by examining the different

ways they negotiate co-governance of urban spaces with state actors (Read & Pekkanen, 2009; Tomba, 2014). Drawing on Taiwan and China, Read (2014) highlighted how the intensive administrative access and interventions over neighbourhood associational life through state-sponsored grassroots leaders, allows the state to directly regulate neighbourhood politics. These engagements correspond with the rise of homeowner associations (HOAs) and *Shequ* in Chinese urban settings that replaced the *danwei* system in local governance as the Chinese government looked to community organizations to meet urban demands of community life while maintaining the intricate links between the state and community (Tomba, 2014; He, 2012). Beyond co-governance, scholars also looked at how grassroots leaders embrace or resist co-optations of authoritarian urban developments by the state, and how their participation shape local communities responses to state presence in neighbourhood politics (Frohlich, 2019; Asedotter, 2017).

Singapore possesses a strong-state environment with an emphasis on developmental state fashion to discipline urban spaces through planning and policy (Ooi & Hee, 2002). The state immense capacity to regulate micro-elements of social life such as the family and civic associations is also a major feature of its urban governance (Slater, 2012; Mele, 2017; Ho, 2009). The relationship between the grassroots sector and the state in urban governance closely resembled what Read (2014) termed as the “...roots of the state”, where grassroots leaders play the role of state-sponsored agents in transforming the neighbourhood into the bedrock of Singapore’s local statism (Lee, 2002; Chua, 2000). Scholars however differ in their assessment of state-regulated neighbourhood governance towards producing effective and accountable urban governance. Proponents regard the intimate connections between the state and local grassroots leaders as an effective solution in calibrating community support, municipal developments and social assistance based on local feedback, making the state responsive to community needs (Ma, 2000; Xinsong, 2015; Hashim, 1986). Examining the

incorporation of Resident Committee (RCs) into public housing estates in response to the increasing urbanization in the 1970s, Ooi (2009) highlighted how the Singapore state leveraged on these state-owned community organizations to develop a local state presence in channelling and anticipating local grievances to shape local policies in addressing them. Similarly, other scholars have attributed the state's neighbourhood governance through the grassroots for maintaining the bulwark of Singapore's national narratives towards nation-building (Hill & Lian, 2013; Latif, 2011). Choo (1969) and Seah (1973) both illustrated how community centres played a significant role in transmitting government ideologies in Singapore's urban and rural neighbourhoods, moving the needle on key policies such as Singapore's referendum on merger with Malaysia, and National Service conscription.

Conversely, other scholars demonstrated the limit of Singapore's developmental state approach toward urban governance in building stronger and resilient communities (Rahim & Barr, 2019). Tan (2001) saw how increased participation for the "people's sector" such as the grassroots to play an involved role has been constrained to what he saw as "feminine responsibilities", such as community care, dialogue engagement and consensus-seeking relations. By delegating caring responsibilities to the grassroots, the state sought to emasculate contemporary politics by promoting accommodation and administration over resistance and activism. Furthermore, Sin (2002) argued that despite investments to foster integration through state-led grassroots organizations, ethnic integration remains confined to superficial engagements due to top-down driven processes led by experts which ignored local communities' participation in shaping urban co-governance. Meanwhile, Lim (2007) described how the grassroots emerged as a space where state ideologies of poverty in Singapore are reproduced through pastoral welfarism when grassroots leaders perform community assistance through state-sponsored schemes such as Community Development Welfare Funds. These studies show how the adoption of state administrative tasks did not

produce greater autonomy among local communities to promote local governance. Instead, they reproduce what Haque (1996) described as a delegation of state responsibilities without devolution of authority. Furthermore in his works on decentralization of municipal authority in Singapore through the grassroots, Haque also found that the state has opted to do so in varying degrees, devolving roles with minor political implications such as organizing of community activities to the grassroots, while delegating or holding back local governing roles with a greater political significance. These practices highlight how the state views grassroots leaders with a reservation over intentions for urban co-governance.

While studies of Singapore's grassroots urban governance recognize the effects of strong state influences on neighbourhood governance, little has been done to examine how grassroots leaders respond or negotiate with state actors in everyday governing practice. The existing literature's focus on institutionalism in Singapore's grassroots politics has resulted in what Fine (2012) termed as an overemphasis on institutional and organizational effects over social interactions. Except for early works by Chan (1976), Seah (1973), Vasoo (1987) and Chen (1975) that make a sustained analysis of how different political actors in the grassroots influenced changes in urban governance, more recent analysis on the grassroots has focused on institutionalism as the key driver in explaining grassroots developments (Wi, 2019). This focus neglects how everyday practices of governance are reproduced through the interactional order sustained by grassroots leaders who mediate state-society relations as middling agents.

2.4 Regime Resilience and Political Legitimacy through the Grassroots

Grassroots and party politics are factors in building and maintaining political legitimacy through urban political regimes. Central to urban politics is the conceptualization of power. Studies in regime politics typically focus on how local political actors acquire, navigate or lose power. Broadly speaking, power shapes the processes of who gets what, when and how.

This in turn reproduces the urban conditions that structure-specific political arrangements and institutions (Salisbury, 1964; Orr & Johnson, 2008; Harding, 2009; Schragger, 2016).

The debate over who has power and how power is produced in the city has been sustained within the “community powers” literature, pitting elite-based explanations such as Floyd’s *Community Power Structure* (1953) and Domhoff’s *Who Rules America?* (1967), with the pluralists led by Dahl’s *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961). For elite approaches, grassroots leaders were seen as having marginal political influence owing to their inability to accumulate resources and access into policymaking settings, both of which were monopolized by political regimes made up of business and political elites (Hunter, 1953; Domhoff, 1967). Their roles were confined to being institutional bellwethers of public opinion by elite actors and were only included in policy platforms when mass public support was deemed necessary to push unpopular policies. Conversely, the pluralist approach argued that no single group could monopolize sufficient influence and authority to pursue all range of political actions. Grassroots leaders were especially influential in political action concerning their local communities or required community ties to mobilize for local elections. The breakthrough for urban politics however cumulated with the urban regime approach popularized by Clarence Stone’s urban regime politics (1989) and Elkin’s (2016) works on urban regimes in the United States. Synthesizing both elite and pluralist approaches to community powers, along with the structural constraints of the urban political economy (Molotch & Logan, 1987), regime politics opens up a new discourse in analyzing community powers by interrogating political interactions as an outcome, rather than as an underlying assumption of urban politics. De-emphasizing the static nature of power, Stone clarifies the political primacy of grassroots leaders and organizations by tapping into what he described as “negotiated settlements” (p. 25). Politics for Stone occur in a state of flux, and political coalitions, or regimes, are negotiated settlements that order politics into specific sets of

predictable and stable political actions among those who form the regime. Regime resilience is therefore tied to how regime actors build further predictability and stability between and around each other to sustain their political strength. For grassroots leaders, this meant working with regime partners to bring local neighbourhood support in return for political arrangements that benefit these communities. Urban regime politics allowed for the subsequent scholarship to view the political potency of the grassroots beyond simply through activism-oriented resistance and social movements (Castells, 1983). Instead, it offered new perspectives in seeing grassroots leaders and organizations as consolidative, stabilizing sources of power in urban politics.

Analyses of regime politics outside of the United States have however flourished in developmental and comparative politics instead of in urban politics, where the focus was in identifying the conditions which fostered transitions from non-democratic to democratic regimes and vice versa (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Diamond et al, 1989; Huntington, 1965). In this approach, regimes are regarded as political systems comprising of institutions, ideologies and processes used to maintain political dominance, and are typified into democratic, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes (Gasiorowski, 1990). One process of maintaining political dominance is through establishing political legitimacy. Defined as the premises and processes by which popular consent to power is achieved to govern (Huntington, 1968; Gilley, 2009; Buchanan, 2002), political legitimacy has become a dominant criterion by which scholars examined transition and resilience of regimes, especially between authoritarian to democratic ones and vice versa. For instance, Linz (1990) saw successful transitions to democracy as linked to the development of political legitimacy through electoral victories and the establishment of democratic political systems. Applying political legitimacy to East and Southeast Asian political contexts, however, other scholars such as Alagappa (1995), Levitsky & Way (2010), and White (2005) have illustrated how political

legitimacy can instead further sustain or transform authoritarian regime durability when expectations of economic development and bureaucratic reform can be met without employing democratic means or processes (Chua, 2017).

Likewise in Singapore, the intersection of political regimes and political legitimacy through the grassroots has similarly received wide attention. The focus has been particularly on how the PAP regime sustains particular aspects of political authoritarianism despite regular elections and a modern political system (Mauzy & Milne, 2002; Sim, 2006; Khong, 1995). Scholars also differed in their analysis of legitimacy for Singapore's style of authoritarianism. For instance, critiques such as Barr & Skrbis (2008) and Case (2005) remarked that the constant use of electoral and political innovations by the PAP government to produce incumbency advantages is itself a sign that political legitimacy is shallow veneer. Others such as Chua (2002, 2017), Lee (2017) and Lee & Yu (2012) however caution against viewing PAP legitimacy as tied to conventional measures such as elections, and instead focus on institutional gains made such as Singapore's successful public housing system, urban developments with widespread distributive effects to the populace and a plethora of local institutions that reproduce consensus, contain dissent and depict popular support for the PAP. Meanwhile, scholars such as Tan (2016) as well as George & Low (2020) take on a more measured approach by pointing out that while PAP's political legitimacy has been successfully supported by a wide swath of social engineering, ideological narratives and political innovations, these measures have come under scrutiny amidst growing challenges and change in Singapore society.

Central to this study's focus on the regime and political legitimacy is how grassroots leaders and grassroots institutions reproduce political legitimacy for the PAP regime. Early works by Chan (1976) and Seah (1973) has established the institutional linkages between grassroots organizations under the People's Association with the PAP regime by showing how the

grassroots sector operates in a parapolitical fashion. Seah (1987) defined parapolitical institutions as mass-based political institutions that are presented as ostensibly devoid of partisan interests but have been shown to produce political outcomes favourable to directly maintaining PAP's regime. Singh (2017) and Tan (2003) similarly argue that the grassroots sector channels demand for greater local political participation by an increasingly politically conscious populace into grassroots organizations to secure an impression of mass political support. Weiss (2017; 2020) however provided the most incisive analysis of the relationship between the grassroots sector and PAP's regime resilience in Singapore by clarifying how grassroots organizations are institutionally tied as part of the PAP's political machine to cultivate support and maintain ideological dominance. Unlike previous studies which prompted institutions over actors in reproducing political legitimacy (Mauzy & Milne, 2002), Weiss's major contribution lies in her analysis of how political agents such as MPs', grassroots leaders' and residents' everyday political experiences reproduce regime resilience. Her works are also echoed by a growing scholarship in explaining Singapore's regime resilience through examining the social interactions that occur in political institutions in Singapore. These include Abdullah's (2016) analysis of PAP's internal party structures and electoral interactions, Ong's (2015) study of PAP's Meet-the-People's sessions in maintaining PAP's regime through functional and symbolic functions, and Tan's (2020) examination of how participation in grassroots volunteerism enables citizens to perform civic desirability in the public sphere. These works connect the macro-level institutional and structural characteristics of PAP's regime durability to the micro-level practices and interactions that produce them.

Following Weiss's (2020) call for a deeper understanding of regime durability beyond elections, this study situates itself within this emerging scholarship in focusing on political agents in the grassroots as they make sense of the institutional linkages between regime

resilience, political legitimacy and parapolitics in their everyday encounters. Here, I argue that grassroots leaders project political experiences that can help us better understand the inner workings of how regime resilience is reproduced outside of elections and change of governments. I propose that viewing grassroots leaders as “part” of the urban regime rather than subjected by it, it opens up new avenues to re-consider what the active political roles played by them are in producing regime durability. This analytical lens is due to Singapore’s city-state status, where urban politics is local politics (Haque, 1996).

On the one hand, Stone’s (1989) regime analysis offers us a way to think about political interactions within coalitions that produce or disrupt regime resilience. This works together with Weiss’s (2020) analytical frame that understands regimes are outside of electoral contexts. It spans not just oppositional weaknesses or electoral performances but includes “...policy approaches, governance and politician-voter linkages” (Weiss, 2020: 29). These considerations are less rigid in Stone’s regime analysis, which simply asks how and why each regime responds to particular historical, organizational and interactional configurations that undergird coalition partners’ relationships, expectations and motivations to maintain the regime. Stone’s urban analysis, therefore, provides an active orientation by which we can attempt to understand how and why grassroots leaders in Singapore choose to engage in legitimizing the PAP regime through grassroots participation. It provides scholars with new ways of understanding how political legitimacy is characterized from political actors’ perspectives, and how different configurations and meanings to political legitimacy within lived experiences clarify the complexity and durability of political regimes outside of conventional but analytically poor markers such as electoral victories or policy changes (Weiss, 2020; Slater, 2013). This study, therefore, provides a more comprehensive approach to urban political regimes by merging two interrelated scholarships of regime analysis in

understanding the role and significance of grassroots leaders as part of urban political coalitions in reproducing PAP's regime resilience.

2.5 The Secret Life of Kampong Chiefs: a Study of Grassroots Leaders in Singapore's Grassroots Politics

In examining how grassroots leaders experience politics through representations, urban governance and regime resilience, this study adopts the analytical framework used in Luigi Tomba's *The Government Next Door* (2013). The reasons are threefold. Firstly, Tomba's (2013) analytical construction of neighbourhoods fit this study as both share a similar treatment of how neighbourhoods should be understood in non-Western urban contexts. Like Tomba's treatment of Chinese neighbourhoods as "...places of intense social interaction and government activity" (p. 6), this study also recognizes that Singapore's neighbourhoods reflect more closely Tomba's characterization as constantly involving state presence and interventions. At the same time, this study also acknowledges Tomba's attention to the roles urban characters such as local community leaders and residents play in mediating various dimensions of grassroots politics, and how their inter-subjective political experiences produce the discourses of grassroots politics that make their neighbourhood associational lives meaningful. The second reason is due to the similar unit of analysis. Like Tomba's focus on the governing practice and rationales among Chinese residents in their urban neighbourhoods, this study hopes to further elucidate what grassroots leaders in Singapore do and what they think they are doing as governing practices in Singapore's grassroots sector. Tomba's focus on "neighbourhood consensus", "micro-governance" and "contained contention" provides useful analytical starting points for me to embark on a similar neighbourhood study of Singapore's grassroots politics in interrogating grassroots representations, urban governance and regime resilience. Lastly, Tomba's approach also provides an approach where grassroots representations, urban governance, and regime resilience intersect and are examined in the

context of how neighbourhood politics reproduce political legitimacy for the Chinese regime. While acknowledging that Singapore's and China's political systems are not wholly analogous, his approach presents a crucial analytical blueprint of how a systematic study of community leaders in neighbourhood politics may be achieved.

Applying Tomba's approach to a study of grassroots leaders in Singapore's grassroots politics, I address three main research questions. Firstly, I ask, who are grassroots leaders in Singapore's grassroots sector and how are they organized? This question is aimed at uncovering the characteristics of grassroots leaders in the way they see themselves within the life-worlds of the grassroots sector they inhabit. By examining the organizational attributes of the grassroots sector, we can further understand how they situate themselves within the structures of the field, and how these social structures affect their participation in neighbourhood associational life. In the second question, I ask, what are the roles and governing practices grassroots leaders in Singapore engage in at the neighbourhood level? This question is further delineated into two parts, namely, how do these governing practices reproduce urban governance, and how do these governing practices reproduce regime resilience for the PAP? Addressing the second question opens up the world of grassroots leaders and their political activities within the sphere of urban governance and regime resilience for scrutiny. Finally, in the third question, I ask, what are the different ways grassroots leaders perceive their roles and governing practices in urban governance and regime resilience, and how do these perceptions shape how they enact their governing practices? This question takes the emic perspectives into account for the responses one obtains in the earlier two questions, helping us make sense of the way grassroots leaders make sense of their political decisions and action in neighbourhood associational life and local politics.

I address the first question by examining who join the grassroots, the reasons they do so, and the kinds of social statuses and resources that shape individuals' social positions and volunteering experiences as grassroots leaders in Chapter 3. In doing so, I address the social formation of the local grassroots sector through an organizational approach by interrogating how grassroots leaders collectively perceive the local grassroots social structure, and how their social positions inform us about the organizational inequalities that influence grassroots development and representations. Next in Chapter 4, I further address the question of grassroots leaders' social formation in the first question by examining how grassroots leaders' roles have changed through Singapore's political history. I demonstrate how historical transformations of the grassroots sector played a significant role in shaping what grassroots leaders think they do within the context of urban governance and PAP regime resilience by tracing three epochs of political events frequently raised by grassroots leaders in discussing these transformations. Chapter 5 and 6 cover the second question respectively through the lenses of the third question, where I look at what are the roles grassroots leaders play in Singapore's urban governance and regime resilience, and how they make sense of their political participation as state and regime agents. In Chapter 5, I look specifically into how grassroots leaders serve both state and local communities' expectations as double agents in Singapore's style of neighbourhood micro-governance. In Chapter 6, I interrogate the varying degrees of involvement grassroots leaders choose to play in parapolitics, and how their practices produce regime resilience through MP home styles, political core groups, and vote tracking systems. The Conclusion Chapter 7 reiterates the main contributions of this thesis.

Chapter 3: Meet the Urban Kampong Chiefs: Grassroots Hierarchy, Organizational Inequalities and Elite Capture in Grassroots Politics.

3.1 Introduction

Who joins the grassroots, for what reasons, and how do their social statuses shape their grassroots positions, volunteerism experiences and elite capture of the grassroots? While existing studies have depicted grassroots participation through political, altruistic or practical motivations (Vasoo, 2001; Tan, 2003), they seldom account for how they shape or anticipate GRLs' different styles of community participation. Despite their ubiquitous presence as the most numerous local community leaders in Singapore at more than 52,000 members (DataGov.SG), the social worlds of GRLs elude comprehension, and for good reasons. Part of this is due to the plethora of grassroots experiences among GRLs. Ask any GRL what their experiences in the grassroots is like for them, and one is likely to get a wide range of answers. Yet these variations are neither arbitrary nor random. Instead, I observed that collectively, these experiences expose social patterns that link to GRLs' relative social positions in the grassroots hierarchy. Like any institutional field, the grassroots sector is structured by a hierarchy that stratifies GRLs into different social positions. These strata shape GRLs' community participation experiences in terms of their access, interactions and outcomes within the grassroots sector. Some GRLs I spoke to shared that they started volunteering from what they called "the bottom", serving at the neighbourhood estate level for decades as a rank-and-file volunteer, before "retiring" without fanfare. Meanwhile, I observed how others were invited into office-bearing positions in local apex grassroots committees at the constituency level such as the Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs) or Community Centre Management Committees (CCMCs), were awarded national honours for their contributions, and stayed on for decades as esteemed community leaders. One's social position in the grassroots hierarchy becomes a reflection of one's social position in Singapore society and vice versa.

Following these observations, the first puzzle I hope to decipher is - why are certain GRLs accorded social positions at the top of the grassroots hierarchy, and receive awards, titles, positions and recognition for their contributions, while others are excluded from so despite sometimes having volunteered far longer or more than the former? In essence, what accounts for organizational inequalities among GRLs in terms of differences in social positions, recognition for community contributions and participation? I define organizational inequalities as unequal access, interactions and outcomes accorded to GRLs within the same organization as a result of their social positions within the grassroots hierarchy as sites of inequality (Amis et al, 2018). These inequalities are maintained when actors reproduced the categories and processes of social stratification through their interactions within the organization (Bernadi & Tridico, 2020; Rockwell, 2016). The scale I am analyzing here is the grassroots sector (Tan, 2003) and its grassroots organizations at the local level. My analysis, therefore, excludes the Community Development Council (CDCs) and People's Association's national-level committees, organizations and politics.

A second observation is that that many GRLs at the top of the grassroots social structure typically consisted of affluent men, and were but not exclusively, of Chinese descent. In 47th District, the percentage of Chinese men with middle-class⁵ or above status in the CCC and CCMC was around 70%. A similar trend was reported in both Bluebricks' and Hill Heights' CCCs and CCMCs as well. These men were usually senior executives, professionals or business owners from the private sector and also held leadership positions in other community-based or civic organizations. What compels this group of economic and social elites to join the grassroots or occupy these top positions? And does their presence matter in

⁵ As outlined by scholars (Yao, 1996; Tamura, 2003; Tan, 2004), I recognize that defining middle-class in Singapore is often elusive, incomplete and multifaceted task spanning across social-economic statuses (SES), social lifestyles and aspirations as well as political cultures that requires a deep analysis beyond this study's scope. Instead, I define middle-class mainly through one specific measure outlined by Yao, which is "quality housing". This refers to home ownership of at least a 3-room HDB unit and bigger, or a private/condo apartment. This measure is used as it is the most consistent trait expressed among GRLs I interacted with that characterized what "middle-class" meant to them.

community politics? Existing studies examining local elite participation in community organizations tell us they do, and one such way this is so is in the issue of elite capture (Dutta, 2009; Warren & Visser, 2016; Darmawan & Klasen, 2013). Elite capture is defined as a process by which elites, members with disproportionate access to social, economic or political power, dominate community organizations for their self-interests (Dasgupta & Beard, 2007; Atlatas et al, 2019). One way local elites do so is by occupying executive positions within the community based organisation to influence decision-making processes involving resources allocation, community mobilization and access to top positions within the organization. Initial observations warrant a deeper investigation into whether elite capture exists, and if so, how it impacts community participation at the grassroots.

In this chapter, I address the above puzzles through three central questions. Firstly, what are GRLs' collective perceptions of the grassroots social structure? Secondly, how do GRLs' motivations, capital and group interactions shape their social positions in the grassroots social structure? Thirdly what do the above findings inform us about how organizational inequalities and elite capture are maintained at the grassroots? I address the above questions first by outlining the local grassroots hierarchy as understood from GRLs' perspectives. Next, I offer a typology of how GRLs framed their motivations, capital and group-based experiences to grassroots volunteerism and analyze their effects on GRLs' social positions in the grassroots, and in reproducing or reinforcing organizational inequalities. Finally, I conclude by discussing future research for organizational inequality and elite capture in community participation through Singapore's grassroots sector.

3.2 Mapping the Grassroots Hierarchy

To trace how organizational inequality occurs, I first show what the three types of GRLs are in terms of social positions in the grassroots hierarchy at the local level. This was done using an exercise I do with GRLs to map and make sense of their social positions. Here, they

deciphered the grassroots hierarchy based on what they thought were the main social positions which existed, where they thought the various grassroots roles belonged to in these social positions, along with what they thought were common characteristics these roles had within similar social positions in the hierarchy at the local level. By “local level”, I refer to the hierarchy situated within the political ward level, and the total number of such local grassroots hierarchies corresponds to the number of political wards in Singapore. As of present (2021), there are 93 political wards. The grassroots hierarchy depicted in the diagram below (Figure 7) is a summary of their aggregated responses.

Figure 7: Grassroots hierarchy of a typical grassroots at the local level.

The most distinguishable types of GRLs in the grassroots hierarchy are “leader”, “senior” and “volunteer” GRLs. These three terms correspond to a set of emic hierarchical terminologies

GRLs frequently use or recognize in identifying general strata of social positions in the grassroots hierarchy. Although other terms also exist based on the local cultural context, such as how “leader” GRLs may be referred to as “grassroots bosses”, or when “senior” GRLs are synonymous with “*kampong* chiefs” or “community leaders”, most GRLs I spoke to generally accepted that the “leader”, “senior” and “volunteer” terms adequately captured the three strata that outline the grassroots hierarchy.

Furthermore, other than occasional instances where certain GRLs defied their typological characteristics due to local dynamics, there is a strong agreement among GRLs I spoke to surrounding three sets of identified characteristics that defined these social positions. First was the amount of power in terms of authority and influence GRLs think each type has in the local grassroots sector, which translated into the capacity for the GRL in the category to make others in the grassroots do things in their way. Next was what they thought each type does in their grassroots volunteerism and the common characteristics within their volunteerism experience. Last was the chance of obtaining community honours within each type, defined as awards such as the National Day Awards or other formal community-related recognition. Due to the various awards available, I used the *Pingat Bakti Masyarakat* (PBM), of the Public Service Medal, as the benchmark as it has been regarded by GRLs as the most commonly recognized community honours. When asked to categorize their relative social positions through the different types highlighted, most GRLs I interacted with chose to use grassroots organizational positions as the markers in organizing the grassroots hierarchy.

At the top of the grassroots hierarchy are the “Leader” GRLs. Leader GRLs are characterized as individuals who possessed high levels of power in terms of authority and influence in the grassroots. The source of their power comes from two sources. The first is through the grassroots role they take on. The most common roles GRLs associated with Leader GRLs were the CCC and CCMC chairpersons and their vice-chairs, as well as the leads of what I

termed as “function-based” groups. Unlike the CCC and CCMC which are formal GROs prescribed by PA, function-based groups are local-level taskforce or committees that are formed to serve specific municipal issues or objectives at the local level. These groups also vary by constituency and are usually temporary, lasting for as long as they are needed for the task they are organised for. Members are appointed positions by the GA or GRLs equivalent to the ranks of leaders and seniors based on the amount of authority they need to perform their roles. Examples of function-based groups include community centre renovation committees, neighbourhood renewal programme committees, and other committees for grassroots-related initiatives which are set up in response to municipal or community issues such as traffic issues or social assistance programs.

In describing what leader GRLs do, one leader GRL respondent, Mr Joo, shared:

“...my role as [CCC] chairman is overseeing the grassroots for the Adviser [GA]. I lead the team [CCC] to ensure that things get done in the right way and with the resources. I make sure the CCC got the right people to lead projects, and find the money to carry them out to serve our residents...I’m like the captain and the grassroots is the ship, if the ship [got] no petrol, I need to go find some. If the ship has a leak, then I need to find the expertise to stop the leak.”

Similar to Mr Joo’s experiences, leader GRLs saw their roles in the grassroots as overseeing the strategic direction and objectives of the local grassroots sector. However, I observed that leader GRLs very seldom lead community projects directly. Instead, they spend a substantial amount of time recruiting new members with the skills and resources the former requires into the grassroots. Their recruitment objectives include seeking two groups of people. They are “patrons”, individuals who have the financial capital to donate to the grassroots cause, and “grassroots managers”, people with the ability and capacity to lead or manage grassroots

initiatives on behalf of the leader GRLs. In other words, leader GRLs' main roles are seeking out candidates to fulfil "senior" GRLs through the networks and resources they can muster. Leader GRLs are also the most likely to clinch community awards at a shorter time than other types, with leader GRLs in this study's sites typically receiving their PBMs within four years of their community service. Of the 8 leader GRLs found in 47th District, 7 are Chinese males in their 40s – 70s, and the last is a Chinese female in her 40s. Half of them are business owners, while the other half holds at least senior managerial or higher positions in their companies. All of them also occupy leadership roles in community or trade associations outside of PA. All but one are invited into their grassroots positions as leader GRLs by the GA, the remaining one having served for over a decade before his ascension into a position within the leader GRL strata. The leader GRLs in the other sites also bear similar characteristics. These findings suggest three trends. Firstly, the appointment of GRLs is a very top-down non-democratic process where GRLs are installed into positions based on how the existing local grassroots leadership decide. Secondly, these decisions lead to the selection of GRLs that tend to reflect similar social statuses or world views based on what the grassroots leadership deems as aligned to organizational interests or personal preferences. In doing so, the grassroots leadership at the top of the hierarchy reproduces the discourses that are closely associated with or aligned with their social statuses and worldviews. Thirdly, the selection process also highlights a dearth of organic leadership succession among GRLs in favour of a tightly managed leadership transition. They reflect a cultural affinity to political leadership transitions typically seen in PAP's style of governance, where an organic transition is seen as a period of instability that needs to be managed to maintain political order (George & Low, 2020; Bellows, 2009).

In the middle of the social hierarchy are the senior GRLs. These are GRLs who occupied positions in the two apex grassroots organizations, the CCC and CCMC, at the constituency

level or are chairpersons of the local GROs. They have varied levels of power deriving from the authority of their positions as chairpersons or apex GRO members, as well as the influence they have based on capital they possess as well as group membership in cliques within the grassroots. A common characteristic among senior GRLs' grassroots experience involved directly managing the grassroots initiatives under their charge, including recruiting volunteer GRLs as the manpower for their initiatives. Their remaining time is split between meeting with PA staff and other stakeholders as well as planning the operations of the organizational direction of the GROs they lead. A small subset of senior GRLs known as "patrons" are given senior GRL positions based on their donations to the grassroots. Unlike others who achieve their senior positions through clocking years of volunteering experience, these individuals can replace volunteerism with financial contributions, exchanging economic capital for cultural capital. Senior GRLs have a good of obtaining community honours and awards based on their contribution in leading grassroots initiatives, but typically take anywhere between four to eight years of grassroots service to receive their PBMs. The demographic make-up for senior GRLs tends to be more varied. In 47th District, the gender ratio between males and females is 6:4, and while individuals came from a wider variety of socio-economic classes, ethnicities, occupations and ages, the dominant majority of senior GRLs tended to be Chinese middle-class professionals or small business owners. In terms of intra-organizational mobility, about half of GRLs started as volunteers GRLs before assuming positions in the senior strata, while the other half were brought in by leader GRLs. This is especially so for GRLs who were patrons, who were invited in by the leader GRLs into their senior GRL positions. Barring the patrons, a majority of the senior GRLs are also residents in the constituency they are volunteering in.

At the bottom of the grassroots hierarchy are the "volunteer" GRLs. These are individuals that make up the bulk of the grassroots volunteer population. They are typically confined to

minor organising roles or serve as rank-and-file volunteers in their local constituencies. Volunteer GRLs usually held very little power, which is confined to the amount of authority they have in terms of the roles which they are serving in, and the senior GRLs they are associated with. Formally, Volunteer GRLs are distinguished from grassroots volunteers (GRVs) by their official membership into PA's grassroots hierarchy, having served an onboarding or probation period which lasts typically three months. Volunteer GRLs are also eligible for a range of grassroots benefits (See 3.3 on Reciprocity below) that are not accessible to GRVs. Despite this institutional role distinction, Volunteer GRLs are typically difficult to be delineated from GRVs in practice, as they are often seen as the troopers of the grassroots sector, handling the menial tasks dished out by senior and leader GRLs. The "leader" in their GRL title, therefore, seemed more at odds with their actual roles as compared to Leader or Senior GRLs, the latter two often involving more conspicuous leadership roles and responsibilities. GRVs typically view volunteer GRLs as equals in terms of seniority in the field, but with access to grassroots benefits and a commitment to sign up formally as a volunteer. Furthermore, while GRVs can usually distinguish volunteer GRLs from senior and leader GRLs, they are less likely to tell apart the latter two, mostly owing to their lack of institutional knowledge over the grassroots hierarchy.

Much of the volunteer GRL time is spent directly participating in grassroots events or supporting grassroots initiatives as ground staff. Compared to leader or senior GRLs, volunteer GRLs spent a larger amount of their grassroots volunteerism directly engaging with residents. Their contribution to the grassroots was primarily through committing time and effort to manage a specific task within grassroots initiatives. The chances of volunteer GRLs obtaining community awards such as the PBM were highly unlikely, due to their perceived non-leadership participation in the grassroots. Instead, most volunteer GRLs received long service awards which were given to volunteers who have served at intervals of 5, 10, 15 and

20 years respectively. Almost all volunteer GRLs were made up of residents who either served in the estate they lived in or in the interests group they commit to. Like senior GRLs, the social demographics of volunteer GRLs span a wide range, while their class statuses were linked to the estate they came from. Private estate neighbourhood volunteer GRLs tend to be more affluent and lived in landed or condominium premises, while public estate neighbourhoods volunteer GRLs were made up primarily of middle-class backgrounds. A majority of volunteer GRLs were homeowners or lived with their parents or children. The gender ratio between males and females was fairly balanced at 6:4, but only 1 in 5 volunteer GRLs was a racial minority. More than 95% of GRLs in the GROs I have observed were Singaporeans, with new citizens making up 5-10% of this majority. The rest of the volunteers were usually PRs and were either spouses or relatives of existing GRLs.

Intra-organizational upward social mobility between the types of GRLs also varied substantively. Volunteer GRLs were usually able to rise to become senior GRLs over time, typically anywhere between four to ten years of service to do so. Most senior GRLs on the other hand reported that they did not expect to rise to the leader GRL positions for two reasons. Firstly, most of them recognized that the position usually entailed being not just involved at the leadership level of the grassroots, but that it required capital and networks to raise funds and recruit individuals which most people did not possess. Secondly, these positions were usually selected by the GA, and usually entailed what GRLs described as political connections these leader GRLs had with the GA or other leader GRLs. Here political connections were defined by GRLs as knowing the right people to be recognized as being capable of delivering the role expectations of leader GRLs. Instead, certain senior GRLs were often given interim leader GRL positions during their course of grassroots service as both an acknowledgement of their grassroots contributions as well as to give them a chance to see if they could assume a more permanent role. Leader GRLs who were invited into their positions

usually remained in the strata. Even after they retired from their roles, they were usually given local titular positions such as “honorary chairman” or “immediate-past chairman” to keep them in the grassroots. Senior GRLs who relinquished or retired from their roles at the senior strata were usually relegated by the grassroots leadership to being volunteer GRLs, although most usually take up other positions within the senior strata or appeal to their previous status as senior GRLs to maintain their social positions in the grassroots hierarchy.

These findings highlight important characteristics of the grassroots hierarchy. Firstly, it revealed how the grassroots hierarchy primarily operates on a “selectorate” model (Lankina, 2004). GRLs are divided into three types by being selected by the grassroots leadership based on the amount of social and economic capital they bring, rather than starting at the same level and moving on into the different social positions. Next, the selection is made by the preceding GRLs type at the top of the hierarchy. The GA first selects the leader GRLs, and the latter appoint individuals into the various roles in the senior GRL category to each manage a part of the organization. These senior GRLs then recruit the volunteer GRLs whom they think would fit into their organization to carry out its grassroots functions. These cascading levels of selections, therefore, help us explain how GRLs are sorted into these positions in the grassroots hierarchy based on how potential GRLs were identified according to the specific resources or skills they bring to serve each type of the grassroots hierarchy. Intra-organizational mobility however remains highly limited and tied to top-down recognition of one’s capacity to offer particular economic and social capital which the grassroots leadership requires or expects, rather than bottom-up merit. Furthermore, the high number of Chinese male GRLs among the top grassroots leadership also suggests the possibility of race/ethnicity and gender being deployed as capital by GRLs to influence the selectorate process. This analysis is prompted by Ray’s theory of racialised organization (2019), who argued that organizational practices can reproduce ethnic/racial structures by

enhancing particular groups' agency, opportunities and access to resources based on racial or ethnic preferences or attributes. Likewise, the dominant presence of Chinese affluent/middle-class men as "leader" and "senior" based GRLs could be partly explained by GRLs' use of ethnic, gender or even class-based attributes as "credentials" (Ray, 2019) to present themselves as suitable candidates for particular organizational roles in the grassroots hierarchy. These interactions are not out of the question, as I show how the use of ethnicity, class and gender also emerged out of clique interactions to influence opportunities for its members in the same chapter below.

3.3 A Typology of Grassroots Volunteerism Pathways and Motivations

In this part of the chapter, I discuss the different ways GRLs framed their motivations for joining the grassroots, and how these different motivations influence their social positions and pathways as well as frame their self-legitimacy in the grassroots hierarchy. First, I compare how responding to different types of GRLs' invitations to participate in the grassroots, along with volunteerism, have a significant impact on one's initial placement in different social positions of the grassroots. Next, I examined the three main ways GRLs framed their motivations through reciprocity, civic participation and political absorption, and how they predict GRLs' community participation styles and social positions in the grassroots. Bringing these findings together, I discuss the implications these motivations have in self-legitimizing and structuring GRLs' community participation experiences and subsequent interactions in the grassroots.

Invitation vs. Self-application – Framing Sponsored and Open Pathways to GRL

Recruitment

The most prominent way GRLs talked about their motivations for participating in the grassroots was through whether they were invited to join or came forward on their own. Those who were invited spoke about how the GA or existing GRLs broached them into

joining the grassroots after identifying the individual's fit into the roles they were looking for. This was in contrast to those who sought to volunteer by approaching the local grassroots directly on their own.

"I met my MP at a work seminar...he found out I was living in his constituency and asked if I was interested to help out in the grassroots since he wanted someone who had experience in working with elderly people...I thought why not, since I was helping out elsewhere [in other civic organisations], so I see what I can do for my neighbourhood...I was roped into the AAC [Active Aging Council] to lead silver-generation related activities for (place redacted) constituency after he introduced me to the CCC chairman. After couple of talks...about two weeks...he [CCC chairman] asked "are you willing to help the MP to steer the AAC?" So I said yes because it was a request from the MP" (Mr. Han, early 40s, senior healthcare executive)

"I approached the grassroots during a RC event...the staff got back to me about a month later. I had to fill up a form and wait another two weeks. Then I met the RC chairman for an interview...then I was an observer for about 3 months helping events. They [RC] said I needed to volunteer for enough events before I can be officially promoted to a GRL...in total I have been a GRL for two years." (Mr. Tan, late 30s, sales manager)

The above excerpts indicated how grassroots recruitment operates on two different pathways. The first resembles what scholars have described as a "sponsored" network process where individuals are brought into community participation by being offered leadership positions, opportunities and rewards that commensurate to their participation (Tuner, 1960). The second resembles an open process that placed individuals at the bottom of the grassroots hierarchy to

work their way up through their community contributions. The major implications of the sponsored process are that it contravenes opportunities for upward mobility among those who entered through the open process when individuals are placed into senior GRL positions through the recommendations of those at the top of the hierarchy. On top of existing structural constraints such as the two-year service tenure and placement opportunities, they further reduce opportunities for volunteer GRLs to take on bigger community leadership positions at the senior level.

The biggest difference was in the placement of social positions and duration of being inducted into the grassroots as a GRL. For Mr Han, the invitation got him quick access through the MP to be connected to a leader GRL who later had him assume a senior GRL position in less than a month. On the other hand, Mr Tan's application through the RC had him go through a formal recruitment process that lasted four months, and he was eventually placed as a volunteer GRL under the RC he applied for. In both instances, the individuals had similar social backgrounds, with the only difference being how their grassroots admissions were made through the selectorate model by invitation or by self-application. As discussed earlier, the selectorate model relies heavily on how existing GRLs' recommendations for incoming volunteers shape their initial placements into the grassroots hierarchy, therefore creating structurally different experiences from the onset. For Mr Han, his foray into the grassroots as a senior GRL places him at a position where his contribution to the grassroots entailed leading higher-level projects and his position as a GRL was quickly elevated based on the perceived skills he had been identified for the role.

On the other hand, despite serving far longer than Mr Han, Mr Tan remained a volunteer GRL. When asked how long before he sees himself being "promoted" into being a senior GRL, Mr Tan estimated that it would have taken him at least another four years. He attributed a significant part of this estimation to two variables – service tenure and placement

opportunities. In service tenure, Mr Tan explained that as GRL positions are on two-year tenures, rotations only take place when the tenure expires or when a GRL vacates the positions. This meant that while volunteer GRLs do move upwards in the hierarchy, it is dependent on how many of such opportunities are made available to GRLs such as Mr Tan at the local level. These opportunities are however available during major community events where the GA and leader GRLs are invited as guests. Mr Tan estimated that such opportunities numbered anywhere between 2 – 4 events per year. Compared to Mr Tan, Mr Han's position in the senior category offers him far more opportunities for such placement opportunities as the frequency and depth of interactions between leader and senior GRLs are far higher than the former two with volunteer GRLs. These interactional opportunities included monthly committee CCC, CCMC and other constituency level meetings where the GA, leader and senior GRLs meet to discuss municipal and community matters, as well as constituency level community events joined by those at the top of the grassroots hierarchy.

The relationship between capital and the GRLs who are recruited through sponsored process lies in the increased opportunities of those who can meet GAs or leader GRLs in different social settings as networked encounters. While Mr Han's example depicted a chance encounter, his case is atypical. Instead, most GRLs that come through the sponsored process are those who share similar economic, social and cultural affinities with the top grassroots leadership in professional or recreational settings. GRLs that are sponsored often do so through introductions made by mutual friends who vouch for their credibility or talents, or in work settings where the GA or leader GRLs come in contact with these potential candidates. These interactions suggest that the GRLs' sponsored process is mediated by individuals' differentiated access to what Hunter calls "other locations of power" (1953) beyond formal community power structures. Thus those with higher access and frequency of interacting in

these spaces are more likely than those without to be recruited through a sponsorship by the top grassroots leadership.

GRLs responded differently to both sponsored and open processes in legitimizing their motivations through their grassroots experiences. GRLs who entered through the open process frequently criticized the sponsored process as unfair to them. Open process GRLs I spoke to felt that the sponsored system resembled the practice of leaders frequently “parachuted” in public institutions, and saw GRLs who came through the sponsored process as having the skills but not necessarily having gone through what one volunteer GRL described as having started “... from the bottom”, and being “hands-on” in their community service. Similarly, senior GRLs who rose from volunteer GRLs saw their senior positions as legitimately “earned” through their contributions compared to those who were placed into senior positions. Conversely, senior GRLs I spoke to who came through the sponsored process did not see themselves as any different from their open counterpart. Instead, they framed the skills and resources that they contributed to the grassroots as convertible capital to compensate for their lack of ground experiences and time. In doing so, they self-legitimated their positions as senior GRLs. These responses also altered social formations among senior GRLs, with those having served as volunteer GRLs and shared similar experiences banded into discernible cliques within the grassroots. On the other hand, the sponsored senior GRLs socialized more frequently with the GRL(s) who recommended them into their positions or other sponsored senior GRLs.

Framing Motivations through Reciprocity, Civic Participation and Political Absorption

A second approach GRLs framed their motivations was through reciprocity, civic participation and political absorption. The goal is not to probe into the “true” reasons GRLs participate in the grassroots if any. Instead, I study their intents as a means of discovering how they make sense of their social positions and experiences in the grassroots. These three

approaches are neither mutually exclusive nor are they static. GRLs' intents do change as they move up/down in the grassroots hierarchy or experience encounters that reinforced certain intents more than others.

Reciprocity as Pragmatism

Among the three, I observed that reciprocity-based intents be the most salient in terms of how GRLs framed their motivations. I define reciprocity-based intents as motivations involving the anticipated exchange of equivalent gratification (Gouldner, 1960; Malinowski, 2018). GRLs discussed grassroots volunteerism in terms of offering their time and efforts in return for what they anticipate either as outcomes for their community participation or as serial reciprocity (Moody, 2008). In anticipating outcomes, GRLs discussed two dominant benefits which they sought in return for their participation. The first is what GRLs described as “grassroots leaders’ benefits”, or institutional privileges accorded by PA to GRLs who have contributed a stipulated duration or significance to PA’s organizational objectives. The most frequently discussed benefit GRLs sought after is the Ministry of Education (MOE) Primary School Registration Scheme. Commonly referred to as “Phase 2B”, the scheme required GRLs to serve two consecutive years and fulfilling a set of local community service requirements to enrol their children into an earlier primary school balloting exercise in a school of their choice. GRLs who appealed to these motivations were often parents who joined the grassroots to secure a primary school placement for their kids. In return, they typically aligned their grassroots volunteerism with the duration and requirements to be eligible for the benefits. As such, they tend to join as a volunteer or low commitment senior GRLs which corresponded to the grassroots role’s tenure term of two years. Many of the GRLs who do so here are lower-middle-class parents and are typical of Chinese descent attempting to enter popular schools but do not have the capital to access “old boys/girls

networks”. Phase 2B, therefore, offers them a way to mitigate alumni privileges instituted in the school placement system.

Another set of benefits GRLs frequently talk about through their grassroots participation is gaining social capital in terms of being closer to the GA and other community leaders to leverage on their assistance when GRLs required them in personal or work-related requests. Unlike their counterparts who served for PA stipulated grassroots benefits, these GRLs cultivate their relationship with the GA and other senior or leader GRLs by volunteering in grassroots initiatives to build ties that they can call upon when needed. Common examples I observed were local business players such as coffee shop owners or market association leaders who joined the grassroots to obtain fringe benefits such as special permission from their local MPs to use more storefront space or privileged use of community spaces for commercial purposes. Meanwhile, personal benefits included relying on their MP to strengthen their appeals on policy decisions that ran the gamut from housing, education, citizenship and traffic offences related matters. This however required them to stay on in the grassroots for longer periods to cultivate their relationships with others, and they tended to pursue leader GRL roles to get closer to GRLs at the top of the hierarchy and obtain opportunities to prove their usefulness in the grassroots. Once connected, however, these GRLs may reduce the amount of commitment while they remain embedded to the grassroots and renew their presence through occasional participation. I found that a sizable majority of GRLs tend to end up in this pathway towards the twilight of their grassroots participation.

The last type of reciprocity-based GRLs participates in the grassroots to “give back” to the community. While often framed through altruistic narratives, I observed that these GRLs are practising what Moody (2008) termed as serial reciprocity or the practice of paying it forward as a result of having received a benefit. GRLs often discussed their motivations by the help they received from others in the community or the local MP and sought to reciprocate by

volunteering as a way of paying it forward. GRLs espousing these motivations are usually volunteer GRLs. One particular group which stood out was the Indian and Chinese middle-class status new citizens who often framed their motivations through serial reciprocity. Some new citizen GRLs I spoke to reference how they were approached during citizenship ceremonies, and many were inclined to serve as a way of reciprocating the citizenship status they were bestowed with. They explained that this was one way they could display their gratitude and allegiance by giving back to Singapore through grassroots volunteerism. These acts can be interpreted as a form of performative nationalism (Sturm & Bauch, 2010). Here, new citizens as GRLs interpret their grassroots volunteerism as a means of expressing their new national identities as Singaporeans. In espousing the narrative of paying their dues for citizenship privileges they achieved, the reciprocity language allows GRLs to legitimize their micro project of nation-building through grassroots volunteerism. The serial reciprocity of such performative nationalism emerges when new citizen aspirants learn from existing new citizens GRLs on what kinds of performance is expected upon during their iterations. Beyond new citizens, other GRLs also shared that they volunteered out of displaying gratitude for local MPs or influential GRLs in assisting them with their citizenship applications, and their reason to serve was in response to the latter's call for participation. GRLs appealing to serial reciprocity tended to populate the volunteer category as they were not primarily concerned with social positions to meet their intents. They also eschewed being involved in pursuing community positions for fear of being seen as volunteering with ulterior motivations. Their volunteerism duration and intensity also varied widely and usually depended on the social anchor their serial reciprocity is tied to. Correspondingly when these social anchors are lifted, such as the departure of their favourite MP or GRL, these GRLs also ceased their volunteerism.

Analyzing the above responses, I argue that reciprocity featured prominently in most GRLs' motivations for grassroots participation because it allowed them to practically gain access to important community benefits through an institution with low barriers of entry for participation. These benefits were also featured prominently as a strategy by PA to attract community volunteers by enticing them to commit to receiving grassroots privileges which otherwise needed a huge amount of capital to obtain alternatively. For instance, the ability to apply for school places at Phase 2B stage accorded GRLs with the same privileges as balloters who are parent volunteers (PVs) or clan and religious association members connected to the school. Parents volunteering for the Phase 2B privilege explained that with the trend of schools limiting PVs to increasingly higher standards in terms of what they could contribute to the school, as well as barriers in being affiliated association members due to religious or ethnic reasons, the only way they saw themselves having a chance to enter popular schools was through grassroots volunteerism. The reason is, unlike PV or association members, the barriers to becoming a GRL and later obtaining a ballot opportunity through Phase 2B remained low due to the institutional openness of PA's open recruitment process. Meanwhile, local business owners who could not afford access or wield influence in larger merchant associations were still able to be GRLs to get closer to the MP or leader GRLs to cultivate their social networks. These reciprocity-based intents reveal how different local actors leverage the benefits tied to being a GRL to mitigate class-based differences to opportunities and access in their pursuits. In doing so, they did not mind being at the lowest of the grassroots hierarchy as long as they achieved the payoff in return for their community participation. At the same time, these reciprocity-based responses also reveal a prevalent discourse of pragmatism when GRLs tie their motivations to particular forms of tangible exchange through grassroots participation. These findings echo the larger governing logics of pragmatism and utilitarianism in Singapore's governance where political participation is

shaped by compensatory considerations (Quah, 2010). Just as the PAP government peg salaries of public leaders to the private sector as a pragmatic approach towards adequately compensating Singapore's "best and brightest" in the public sector (Quah, 2003), the grassroots sector operates on a similar governing logic that community participation must entail some form of incentive to motivate GRLs to serve in the grassroots instead of elsewhere or none at all. In doing so, these GRLs associate their participation in a highly utilitarian fashion which require constant quid-pro-quo interactions to maintain their grassroots involvement.

Civic Leadership

The next most common set of intents is civic participation. GRLs who appealed to civic leadership motivations shared how they became GRLs to serve in local-level community organizations to shape the local politics and developments of their local constituencies. Here, GRLs expressed their community volunteerism as part of their foray into local community politics, where they hoped to pick up experience and understand how best to serve their communities better. These GRLs resembled what Almond and Verba (1963) characterized as individuals with "participant orientations" in local civic cultures, where they expressed higher levels of interests, capacity and expectations in terms of participating in local politics. Within this, there are two main types of civic participation. The first type involved appealing to political aspirations. These GRLs tend to pursue longer commitment durations in the grassroots and were often the ones who actively worked their way up the ranks in the grassroots hierarchy. Most assume senior GRL positions, while those who had sufficient capital to influence the GA or other leader GRLs were able to secure positions in the leader strata. By taking up GRL roles, these individuals used their time and experience in serving the community to shore up experience, a credible track record and networks that would later serve their political aspirations such as entering politics or leading other community

organizations elsewhere. These aspirants explained that while they have ventured into other areas of political participation such as joining political parties as well as leading civic initiatives elsewhere, participating in the grassroots allowed them to be embedded into local politics much more easily. They pointed that this is made possible through the institutional dominance of PA's organizations over community politics in Singapore which offered GRLs a viable space to make a real impact on the lives of residents, while as one respondent described, "...cutting one's teeth in local politics". While these GRLs came from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, class and ethnicity, they were predominantly males. This partly explains why leader and senior GRLs types tended to be disproportionately male in most constituencies, as these GRLs actively targeted grassroots leadership positions as stepping stones to further their political aspirations. While they often overlap with those who pursue reciprocal relations, the primary goal of this group of GRLs is to climb up Singapore's political ladder through the grassroots.

Meanwhile, the second group of GRLs who espoused civic participation motivations often did so advocating their interest as active citizens in shaping the distribution of municipal resources channelled through the PA. Unlike their politically aspirant counterparts, this group of GRLs saw themselves as citizens representing their local estates in articulating their expectations to state actors such as HDB, NEA and NParks in improvements or new developments they hope to see in the community. Examples ranged from shaping municipal developments such as influencing improvements in the estate as well as mediating the distribution of resources to residents through organizing community events that they thought would appeal to those they represented. These GRLs typically occupied positions within the volunteer or senior categories of the grassroots hierarchy, the former allowing them to spend more time engaging with residents while the latter gives them a local authority in deciding these matters. Some of these GRLs were existing community leaders in other civic

organizations and saw their grassroots participation as an extension of their active citizenry. Others also reported that they were inspired by what they could do to enact change in their communities, especially when their inputs are recognized and appreciated by residents.

These sentiments towards civic participation reflected what Ho (2000) outlined as limited but viable avenues for the local citizenry in Singapore to participate in ways that augmented the local state's powers in governing an increasingly diverse populace. Local civic organizations such as PA GROs are designed not only to serve national development but as institutional dragnets which funnel politically active individuals in Singapore into serving state-endorsed community organizations instead of participating in civil society groups. Both of these GRLs appeal to civic participation precisely because they share a common intent to participate in political opportunities incorporated through the grassroots, albeit for different reasons. Likewise, the low barriers of entry in PA's open recruitment processes enable GRLs to participate in local civic initiatives without needing to shore up pre-existing political legitimacy or influence. Instead, GRLs could ride on PA's institutional presence in community politics to make a difference despite their low levels of political authority or influence outside of the grassroots. This feature offers residents to become easily roped into politics while serving state governance objectives through their community participation.

Political Absorption

Beyond reciprocity and civic participation, GRLs also frequently cited political absorption for their entry. I define political absorption as the process of absorbing local stakeholders into the organization to produce aligned interests and expand its influence over the community. These GRLs explained that their motivations for joining in the grassroots are tied to their positions as community leaders in local religious, ethnic or civic groups, and are absorbed into the grassroots to represent these groups' interests within the grassroots. Unlike reciprocal relations, these community leaders recognize that by being absorbed into the grassroots

hierarchy, they would have to serve the organizational interests of the GA and leader GRLs through aligning their organizations with the former. In return, these GRLs are typically given senior-level GRL positions within the domain of their group's interests or functions. For instance, I commonly observed prominent local Malay and Indian groups or organizational leaders being given leadership positions within the ethnic GROs such as the Malay or Activity Executive Committees (MAECs) or Indian Activity Executive Committees (IAECs). In the case where multiple prominent groups existed in the constituency, these representatives took turns helming the GROs as a form of power-sharing.

Other examples included absorbing local religious associations and having their representatives assume positions in the local Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs). In deciphering how absorption affects the duration of grassroots participation, I found that it depended on the institutional linkages the grassroots wishes to extend to these organizations. In most cases, these absorption processes take between one to two role tenure durations (2 – 4 years) before absorbed individuals stabilise in the grassroots. Thus, I observed that if these GRLs were able to stabilize within the first two tenures, they are likely to stay on for extended durations of time. The longest known member I found on site was a GRL who served for up to 14 years co-serving his temple associations along with his role as the local IRCC representative in the grassroots.

Meanwhile, absorbed GRLs justified PA's style of political absorption in two main ways. The first is through recognizing the authority of PA as the state-backed arbitrator of local community relations. By absorbing representatives from different civic organizations into its organizational structure, the GA and leader GRLs can able to directly control how these organizations respond to contestation surrounding the use of community spaces and local co-existence. The next was through the acknowledgement of PA's power as a local institution. Despite the subordinated elements of absorption, I observed that local community

organizations sometimes willingly chose to be absorbed by the grassroots just to be legitimized as state-backed community leaders. Others shared instances where they found it difficult to reject invitations at the behest of the GAs who often were also the local PAP MPs of the constituency. They cited that they chose to join the grassroots just so that they do not risk offending the local political establishment. In both of these justifications, the central premise rests upon the acknowledgement by GRLs in the grassroots' hold over community relations, and the use of political absorption as a means to recruit community leaders to do so. Another important consequence of this absorption is that it allowed the PA to claim ethnic and religious diversity in the grassroots by assimilating community leaders into the fold to be used as racial or religious representatives whenever the grassroots needed such representations to be deployed for national purposes such as in interracial and inter-religious dialogues or initiatives.

Summarizing the three intents listed above, I make four central observations. Firstly, understanding GRLs' motivations help map out the different ways they accessed the grassroots hierarchy and the various forms of recruitment in-routes to GRLs. These discussions further delineate the varieties of sponsored and open based processes to grassroots recruitment in Singapore, and its implications of economic and social capital to GRLs' social positions in the grassroots hierarchy as well as how they see themselves contributing to the communities. Here, I briefly explored how different motivations revealed particular social patterns surrounding gendered participation among political aspirants and levelling class differences through grassroots benefits from reciprocal participation. These findings privilege the different ways GRLs actively framed their participation as community agents through pathways into the grassroots. Secondly, I show that in studying how GRLs express their motivations, these discussions help explain they are likely objectives in seeking out certain social positions in the grassroots hierarchy or in predicting their duration of

service to a certain extent. This helps to explain why certain GRLs choose to “climb” the grassroots hierarchy, while others are satisfied with their social positions. Furthermore, analyzing the duration of service helps to explain how community participation may be sustained, especially when high turnover in big numbers may be seen as signs of dissatisfaction among GRLs due to a mismatch between motivations and what the grassroots can offer (Vasoo, 1990). Thirdly, I illustrate how motivations also served GRLs in justifying the inequalities they encountered in the grassroots hierarchy, further entrenching the stratified system and recruitment processes found in PA organizations in Singapore’s grassroots sector. Last but not least, while the above motivations are delineated for analytical purposes, in reality, GRLs espouse multiple overlapping motivations in shaping their experiences in the grassroots sector. Furthermore, GRLs’ motivations do change as their social statuses, positions or capital they possess change through their life course. For instance, it is not uncommon for GRLs to join with aspirations for civic participation, but later stay on as a result of grassroots benefits or the networking opportunities being a GRL offers. One major consideration for why most GRLs do stay on in the grassroots is also linked to the social and cultural opportunities it offers in providing GRLs with access to locations of power to rub shoulders with MPs or other leader GRLs in a similar location of power.

3.4 Capital and Clique Influences on Organizational Inequalities

Here, I examine how capital and group interactions emerged as the most salient factors in influencing how GRLs framed their unequal experiences.

Capital Interconvertibility and Accumulation through Grassroots Participation

How do GRLs reproduce inequality in the grassroots through their accumulation and use of capital through grassroots participation? This study examines through three main ways.

Firstly is through the use of capital to fulfil the expectations of grassroots participation within corresponding GRL types. This resulted in highly unequal levels of capital injection among GRLs. Those who contributed more in terms of both the quantity and type of capital favoured by the grassroots hierarchy are likely to be rewarded with higher social status. Earlier in the chapter, I outlined how each type of GRL in the grassroots hierarchy recognized specific sets of capital forms that are valued more than other forms within their strata owing to the common objectives of their participation. Here, I delineate these expectations into two different forms – operational and cultural expectations.

Operational expectations are defined as the required capital expected out of GRLs to full the operational aspects of their grassroots roles. Each of the three types requires different forms and degrees of capital to fulfil the operational requirements specific to the type. Leader GRLs corresponded to high degrees of economic, cultural and social capital to fulfil their participation expectations of bringing in funding and expertise to run grassroots programs in local constituencies. On the other hand, senior GRLs require high levels of cultural and social capital to manage their grassroots programs well, while volunteer GRLs are not typically expected to contribute capital any more than what is required for the groundwork they do such as meeting residents or helping out at events. In essence, volunteer GRLs are valued for their direct labour input, which has a limit on how much they can accumulate and contribute as GRLs based on the event's requirements as well as their physical limits. Meanwhile, both senior and leader GRLs do not have such limits their grassroots roles require them to accumulate resources that are not tied to physical labour, they are also capital stored as accumulated labour (Bourdieu, 1986) in anticipation for future grassroots initiatives. In other words, the accumulative potentials for interconvertibility among particular forms of capital such as economic capital or cultural capital allow for GRLs in the senior and leader categories to contribute more compared to volunteer GRLs when they have to continuously

raise money, seek out manpower, or lead grassroots programs as part of their grassroots labour. Moreover, due to the scarcity of resources such as economic and cultural capital which are tied to their high interconvertibility in appropriating potential labour for future grassroots initiatives, they are often valued by the grassroots leadership more highly than physical labour offered by volunteer GRLs. Thus, the operational expectations of each GRL by their types may constrain what GRLs reproduce as role expectations and how their contributions are valued by the grassroots leadership within these roles. By commoditizing economic and cultural capital as grassroots contributions and seen as more significant compared to manual labour such as distributing flyers, carrying goods and setting up of events, leader and senior GRLs are therefore perceived to contribute more than volunteer GRLs solely based on their role expectations.

Beyond operational expectations, leaders and senior GRLs perform cultural expectations by displaying recognition for those under them as a form of affective labour in the grassroots hierarchy. These displays serve to acknowledge the labour volunteer or senior GRLs put in as well as reproduce the hierarchical relations for those above them, similar to what Bourdieu (2007) described as performances of duty masters perform over servants to maintain the cultural bonds of obligations the latter have in serving the interests of the former. GRLs discussed these cultural expectations through the idea of “做人” (*zuo ren*), a Mandarin term that translates into “being human”, but culturally refers to the conduct one needs to fulfil in one’s social position. Leader GRLs are seen by others in the grassroots hierarchy as individuals who are deeply respected in the grassroots hierarchy but are also highly expected to fulfil the cultural expectations of taking care of those under their charge during their role tenure. Examples include more organizational forms of care such as backing up one’s subordinate during a clash of interests or expectations between different groups in the

grassroots hierarchy or making sure that the organizational interests and its members are protected, to more personalized forms such as assisting members with personal favours.

Similarly, senior GRLs are also expected to take care of volunteers under the programs they led, albeit at a smaller scale. GRLs typically discussed these cultural expectations through being “caring” or “knowing how to treat members fairly” or “leadership qualities”, but I observed that these responses point to an important set of practices that emerged among GRLs, which is performing appreciation. Leader and senior GRLs are expected to perform appreciation in ways that are commensurate with their status. For instance, leader GRLs such as the CCC and/or CCMC chairmen are typically expected to host at least one appreciation gathering with senior GRLs to thank them for their service. Similarly, senior GRLs would do so for their committee members. These gatherings would occur during festive occasions such as Lunar New Year, National Day, or after the completion of a major grassroots event/initiative. Other instances I observed included handing out local community awards or even posting on social media to recognize the contributions of senior and volunteer GRLs.

The crux of performing appreciation is not just in whether leader or senior GRLs do so, but also in how much capital these GRLs put into displaying the appreciation that is culturally expected of them. Thus these become demonstrations of closeness which showcased the social statuses of leaders and senior GRLs based on the capital they invest in performing their duties. One common way leader GRLs performed the expected level of appreciation through hosting gatherings is by doing so at elaborate venues such as hotel banquets or in one’s residence. In the former, GRLs rely on economic capital as a means of showing appreciation by using the symbolic value of the hosting’s cost. Correspondingly, the more expensive and elaborate the gathering, the more appreciation one is symbolically displaying as well. When GRLs’ opened up their residence for gatherings, they rely on social and cultural capital to express one’s appreciation by symbolically displaying the admission of GRLs into their

homes as a sign of trust and closeness. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic period where large gatherings were restricted, leader and senior GRLs continue to main this affective labour through sending hampers or frequently inviting select members to their homes for meals. In all these cases, these performances do not exclusively rely on a single form of capital. Just as GRLs needed to tap into their cultural capital of knowing what is the appropriate menu to serve in a hotel to convey their appreciation, so would GRLs with much bigger houses accommodate more GRLs in performing their appreciation. In both cases, however, fulfilling these cultural expectations is also precisely how leader and senior GRLs maintain their social statuses in the grassroots hierarchy, and they can only do by relying on the capital they possessed to meet these expectations. Alongside operational expectations, these two sets of expectations partly explain how inequality is produced through the unequal capital injection of GRLs to fulfil their grassroots performance.

The second way GRLs produced inequality through capital is by selecting GRLs who do not threaten their social positions in the grassroots hierarchy. For leader and senior GRLs, being able to fulfil the expectations of the role presupposes the relatively higher capital they possessed over volunteer GRLs in general. Their social positions in the upper echelons of the grassroots hierarchy also enabled them to directly influence recruitment processes within grassroots programs and committees they lead. As part of their role to recruit volunteers, leader and senior GRLs looked to their networks or within the hierarchy to select potential GRLs who would be able to fulfil both organizational objectives and not threaten their social positions in the grassroots hierarchy. These GRLs shared that part of their consideration in recruiting GRLs was picking those they felt they could trust to do grassroots works without being “difficult”, referring to being able to control the GRL within the grassroots hierarchy. As such, leader GRLs often chose members of the senior GRL category that would bolster their chances of preserving their social positions in the grassroots hierarchy. This is often

done by appointing them to grassroots positions that either extended leader GRLs' influence or authority over different parts of the grassroots hierarchy, or by grooming senior GRLs to take on incoming leader GRL positions so that ex-leader GRLs can maintain their influence in the grassroots hierarchy even after they are gone.

Social capital plays a significant role in allowing individuals access to prestigious or powerful social positions in an organization by sharing social networks where several said organizational elites are also within (Schafft & Brown, 2003). Inversely, I argue that these organizational elites are also motivated to pick individuals with similar social networks, using social capital as a means of forming hierarchal relations to preserve their social positions in the organization. One major reason is that social capital helps to transform the bonds of hierarchy, allowing organizational expectations to be framed through kinship or communal expectations to compel individuals to act/comply. Within the grassroots leadership, leader and senior GRLs selected potential candidates from their networks which reflected their strategies in maintaining their social positions, such as recruiting employees or subordinates from their firms, or family members and close friends into the grassroots. I also observed how other leader or senior GRLs sometimes recommended their business associates into senior GRL positions by intending to have the latter owe them a favour by allowing them to easily access grassroots benefits⁶. From within the grassroots hierarchy, leader and senior GRLs also appointed lower counterparts who have displayed loyalty or rapport with them into higher positions to further consolidate the former's hold over the latter. Meanwhile, these GRLs also blocked or rejected dissenting rising counterparts which posed a threat to their positions by utilising their capital to influence how other leader or senior GRLs selected candidates to their favour.

⁶ See above in reciprocity for more details on the benefits mentioned

Last but not least, the reproduction of inequalities through capital is partly explained by contestations among GRLs to convert the capital they possess to obtain grassroots awards, perks and recognition as a form of institutionalised capital. A significant reason for these contestations lies in the immense value of grassroots awards as a symbolic capital that raises the social statuses of award bearers by exemplifying their contributions to the country. These awards also offered bearers to be ennobled with titles that set them apart from other citizens. For instance, award bearers would bear state conferred titles such as “PBM” or “BBM” beside their names. One senior GRL who was awarded the PBM shared that he included the title into his firm’s business card as it heightened his social status as a local community leader among his peers. Beyond its national symbolism, these titles are also often used by GRLs to differentiate among themselves those who have “made it” from the rest in the grassroots sector. It confers GRLs an elite status that is used to command recognition and authority from other GRLs for mobilization purposes as well. Compared to other symbolic gestures such as being invited to prestigious events including the Istana Open House or National Day Rally, the titles are a more enduring status of one’s achieved social prestige and honour in the grassroots.

	2018	2019	2020	Total
PBM (Total)	178	175	203	556
- GRLs	138	137	146	421 (75.7%)
- Non-GRLs	40	38	57	135 (24.3%)
BBM (Total)	58	62	41	161
- GRLs	31	32	22	85 (52.8%)
- Non-GRLs	27	30	19	76 (47.2%)
BBM(L) (Total)	15	13	14	42
- GRLs	9	9	9	27 (64.3%)
- Non-GRLs	6	4	5	15 (35.7%)

Figure 8: Grassroots awards⁷ conferred to recipients on the basis of their contributions as GRLs.

⁷ Ranking of award’s prestige in ascending order - the *Pingat Bakti Masyarakat* (PBM), the *Bintang Bakti Masyarakat* (BBM) and *Bakti Masyarakat (Lintang)* (BBM (L)). (Source: Prime Minister’s Office, Singapore).

As part of the National Day Awards (NDAs) system, the grassroots is one out of many fields which offered citizens an opportunity to be conferred state-wide recognition for their merit to the community in the field of “...the arts and letters, sports, the sciences, business, the professions and the labour movement” (PMO, 2021). Yet public records (See Table 4.3) show that in the three main award categories GRLs were eligible between 2018 - 2020, 75.7%, 52.8% and 64.3% of PBMs, BBMs and BBM(L)s were awarded to GRLs respectively. This suggests that PA-based grassroots organisations presented higher opportunities for public citizens to obtain these state honours compared to other fields, which partly explain why individuals sought to join the grassroots. Local nominations are typically made by the GA in discussions with some leader GRLs, and GRLs familiar with the process shared that each local constituency typically nominates between 2 – 4 candidates who have made the most significant contributions to the grassroots. As the GA and leader GRLs are the key decision-makers in these nominations, they often interpreted contributions based on how much resources GRLs accumulated for grassroots objectives through the various capital forms. As mentioned earlier, volunteer GRLs are constrained by both their role expectations and the capital they possess beyond physical labour. They were therefore usually considered as least contributing members. Meanwhile with grassroots awards nomination on the line, competing senior and leader GRLs used their capital in possession to increase their grassroots contributions to increase their chances of being nominated. This resources competition thus privileges GRLs who have high levels of capital to mobilise to channel them into obtaining these grassroots awards.

Beyond NDAs, another noticeable element of inequality lies in leader and senior GRLs having an “easier” access to other grassroots benefits compared to volunteer GRLs. While grassroots benefits are all accessible to any type of GRLs, I found that leader and senior

GRLs were able to use their positions, social and other forms of capital to elicit further access to benefits not available to volunteer GRLs.

“A major perk of being a GRL is obtaining tickets to the National Day Parade [NDP] live rehearsals, or occasionally on the event, if they were available from [PA] HQ. The formal procedure is through ballot. GRLs who would like to ballot would cast their interests and the ballot will take place. It is interesting however that the top grassroots leadership do possess some level of control over the “distribution” process. While I have not found instances where these tickets were used or sold for personal benefits, I have however witnessed situations where discretions were made by the grassroots leadership to “award” tickets to GRLs whom they thought contributed significantly to grassroots efforts. As for how “significant contribution” is defined is often left to the discretion of the top grassroots leadership. I also found that that obtained tickets from such discretionary practices were usually the higher-level GRLs such as patrons or chairpersons of GROs instead of the rank and file volunteer. I have also witnessed cases where these high-level GRLs made inquiries to the CCC or CCMC chairpersons on how one might secure NDP tickets in exchange for sponsoring or organizing a major grassroots initiative.”

“...I told my [CCC] chairman and my GA, for all the work I put in, I don’t mind not being invited for any other events or whatever, but I just want to go for the “chap goh meh” (Istana Lunar New Year) dinner...it’s not because I want to go there and take photos with politicians...I know some people like that...I got there for the insights...as you know me, I am a political buff...I want to know what’s going on in (Singapore) politics that will be in the speech before others do”

The above excerpts are some examples of how GRLs use their capital to mediate access to grassroots benefits. Other examples of grassroots benefits included invitations to attend Istana Visits and Open Houses, National Day Rally (NDR) and other major state ceremonies. These events sometimes bestow immense recognition and prestige, as it is commonly understood in the grassroots sector and Singapore society that only a select group of elites in the political, economic and community sectors are invited. Beyond recognition, invited GRLs also rubbed shoulders with the incumbent political leadership, and gained cultural capital such as insider or privileged information from conversing with other attendees from different sectors in the businesses, arts, academia and politics.

The selection process to these invitations usually rested in the hands of the GA, at the advisement of a small group of decision-makers including the CCC and/or CCMC chairpersons and the Constituency Director(s). While I found that there were clear attempts to select a diverse and representative mix of people in terms of ethnicity, gender and age, as seen by the heterogeneity of invited attendees, there were also a couple of “regulars” names on the list. These were usually leader and senior GRLs who secured their invitations by negotiating their access. In doing so, these GRLs can acquire greater access to these grassroots benefits beyond formal channels. However, leader GRLs I spoke to shared that these practices do not mean the ballot systems in place to distribute grassroots benefits are ineffective. Instead, they justified their discretionary practices as part of “balancing” grassroots recognition to favour those who can contribute more than those who cannot. The ideological use of merit to rationalise discretionary distribution benefited GRLs with a greater amount of capital to navigate around the institutional channels to derive access through informal means while reminding those who cannot afford additional access of the inherent inequalities in grassroots benefits.

Gentlemen Clubs and “Towkay” Circles: Impact of Gendered and Class-based Cliques on Grassroots Participation

Beyond capital, group experiences also partly explain organizational inequalities among GRLs. Grassroots groups are structured either along formally organized forms such as the different types of GROs (See Figure 7) or as cliques. I define cliques as members who recognize and closely identify each other as a subset of an organization or main group and form reciprocal relations among themselves (Tichy, 1973). They are closed networks or groups which Focusing on the latter, I examine two common types of cliques as closed networks I found in the sites I observed, and how GRL use these cliques to gain social and cultural capital to bolster their chances of moving up the grassroots hierarchy. They are known to GRLs as gentlemen clubs and *towkay* circles.

Gentlemen clubs are male-exclusive/dominant cliques in the grassroots hierarchy which are organized around gendered participation of common interests or activities. Despite the term’s longstanding association with sexuality and implied promiscuity (Frank, 1998), GRLs I spoke to typically referred to gentlemen clubs to associate these closed groups with a heightened sense of gendered camaraderie instead. Akin to “old boys club”, (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2019), these cliques typically consisted of male GRLs coming together to form associational relationships based on friendship and camaraderie in the grassroots hierarchy. One member quoted that he felt “...safe to talk “cock” with buddies” through gentlemen clubs, referring to the informal setting which allowed members to unwind and talk without restraint. Despite its gendered formations, I found that group members tend to cut across class and ethnicity. Access into gentlemen clubs varied across the constituencies, but commonly required members to sponsor new entrants. New GRLs often joined through the recommendation of members with whom they have worked within the grassroots such as organizing a community event and developing a great rapport. This enabled volunteer GRLs to access these groups

under the recommendation of senior or leader GRLs. Conversely, I found that longstanding volunteer GRLs in these clubs were also involved in inviting others in, sometimes even senior and leader GRLs. Membership numbers can go anywhere from 4 to over 20 people, included GRLs from across different types, and several gentlemen clubs often existed in a single grassroots hierarchy. Common activities ranged from meal or drinking sessions, sporting activities such as golf, pool, football to mundane interactions such as going on smoke breaks together. GRLs explained that gentlemen clubs were formed for two reasons. First was a common goal among these GRLs to find a way to hang out outside of their work and familial groups. These groups were made up of members that hung out after their grassroots work and offered members a space to bond. These GRLs justified the gendered make-up of their cliques by explaining the stigma of fraternizing with members of the opposite sex in the grassroots. This resulted in males preferring to hang out together to avoid being perceived as engaging in anything intimate, as these perceptions negatively affected their public image as GRLs. In some gentlemen clubs, members also shared that joining them was a rite of passage where they were recognized by the senior males who were usually leader GRLs in the grassroots hierarchy. Being part of the clique was therefore a sign of being part of an inner group where members were recognized for their associations with those in the upper echelons of the grassroots hierarchy despite their status. For instance, I observed that volunteer GRLs who are members of these gentlemen clubs often flaunted their comradeship with leader or senior GRLs to gain recognition from other volunteer GRLs in their interactions.

Another set of cliques in the grassroots hierarchy is what GRLs characterized as *towkay*⁸ circles. These are groups that typically comprised of senior and leader GRL who come together owing to their status as business or corporate leaders, or sharing similar corporate or

⁸ The term Towkay (頭家) is a dialect term that translates into “bosses”. A Commonly used among Hokkien and Teochew communities in Singapore, it is used to connote business leaders or heads of companies.

business networks. *Towkay* circles are usually formed as a result of business interests and networking opportunities among these individuals. Members are either introduced by the GA and become acquainted by association or are invited into the group due to their economic status. Unlike gentlemen clubs, *towkay* circles' memberships are very seldom restricted by gender, although the circles I found consisted mainly of ethnic Chinese male members with affiliations to Chinese clan associations. More than three-quarters of these members are business owners of local SMEs in industries ranging from F&B and construction to legal or consulting services. One GRL in the *towkay* circle saw it as a "natural" process as he surmised that female business leaders are demographically less than male counterparts, and the grassroots sector tends to attract male business leaders as they were usually part of old boys networks in other organizations and were recruited into the grassroots by the GA or existing male GRLs.

This also revealed the extended connections GRLs in these circles had outside of the grassroots. I further found that local *towkay* circles were often parts of larger business cliques across different constituencies, forming chains of connections where members knew and frequently interacted with each other by mutually supporting their community events. *Towkay* circle members often meet over meal gatherings or networking events, either in a formal setting such as being invited as guests in community events or during festive occasions hosted by the de facto leader among them. While grassroots social positions do influence internal hierarchies of *towkay* circles, I observed that the de factor leaders are typically the member with the highest economic status and most capital, alongside other leadership positions they held in clan-based, business and community associations elsewhere. These lead positions are however more of a symbolic position than bearing any functional purposes but were coveted by some members for their symbolic prestige of being first among equals. Members' conversations involved industry sentiments, market performance, new public or

private projects, as well as an update on who's who within the communities they are acquainted with. In defining their relationship with other circle members, GRLs in these circles used phrases such as "common goals", "helping the less privileged together" and "respected member giving back to the community", demonstrating their clique relations in philanthropic relations despite their business interests.

Using the above cases of gentlemen clubs and *towkay* circles, I examine three ways in which clique interactions maintained organizational inequalities, albeit differently. First, I found that cliques formed social cleavages across types in the grassroots hierarchy (Flap, 1997). For gentlemen clubs, they form through the clique's gendered membership that produced cross-cutting cleavages (Htun, 2004) and create additional inequalities along with gendered experiences. Meanwhile, the use of name-dropping and performing knowledge of highly privileged information by clique associates to show off one's status among volunteer and senior GRLs also illustrate how they reproduced social division among their types by using the cultural and social capital. While these practices may not be inherently gendered, the gendered distribution of social and cultural capital through gentlemen clubs produced these inequalities along gender lines. These examples show that gendered cross-cutting cleavages contributed to inequalities within the grassroots hierarchy. On the other hand with *towkay* circles, these cleavages along class-based characteristics coincided with the grassroots hierarchy when the social positions of senior and leader GRLs within the clique also largely corresponded with their grassroots status. These cliques, therefore, maintain inequalities when they reinforce the existing stratifications GRLs are subjected to within the grassroots hierarchy.

Next, while gentlemen clubs and *towkay* circles are cliques, they both possessed very different group structures that mediate GRLs' pathways and experiences of inequalities. Gentlemen clubs resembled what Tichy (1973) termed as "normative cliques", or cliques

which are formed primarily for members to seek affiliation and friendship, have high inter-ranking members, moderate inter-clique hierarchy and a high degree of openness to entry. Likewise, the above findings show that these attributes enabled male GRLs to further integrate into the grassroots by not only finding their place in the grassroots hierarchy but doing so within groups that support or maintain their work there. On the other hand, I have not found any female-dominated groups which played a similar function to gentlemen clubs. One plausible reason could be that female-dominated groups might occur in spaces such as home space or familial-based activities (such as Mommy's groups) which I did not have access to. Another plausible reason could be due to the lower female participation rate in the grassroots, although current statistical evidence shows that male and female grassroots participation is at 54.5% and 45.5% respectively (MSF, 2021). This distribution may however be more representative of volunteer GRLs, as previously highlighted, than of the upper echelons of grassroots leadership such as those in the senior and, especially in the leader GRLs category. Another reason could be attributed to how female GRLs did not perceive gender to be a salient factor for group formation or participation, as compared to their male counterparts. Female GRLs I interacted with shared that while they had close female friends within their grassroots networks, many of them did not form or participate in such closed groups settings along the lines of gender. This may partly explain how male GRLs can sustain their grassroots volunteerism for longer periods due to the social bonds and affiliations they have made in creating reasons for staying on, compared to female counterparts. With service duration being a variable in influencing upward mobility as it increases the duration for GRLs to accumulate their grassroots contributions, male GRLs, therefore, possess more opportunities to rise the ranks.

Meanwhile, *towkay* circles fit into what Tichy described as “no-mobility utilitarian cliques”, where clique members congregate through a similar identification for their high economic

capital or statuses and are marked by their large clique size, low inter-rank membership, minimal inter-clique hierarchy and a low degree of openness to entry. These cliques enable GRLs with the most economic resources to form an association to aid internal elite cohesion, defined as establishing consensus among elite members for collective mobilization, within the grassroots hierarchy. It also provided additional social networks for leader and senior GRLs with opportunities to associate themselves in other locations of power and rub shoulders with the rich and powerful in Singapore society. This partly explains why highly resourced GRLs remain vested in staying on despite having already obtained their grassroots honours, in that they have to continuously participate in grassroots volunteerism to access these cliques for their other interests. In doing so, top-level GRLs remain vested in keeping these social positions to themselves for as long as they need to in keeping access to these networks available.

Lastly, these groups offered durable ties to be converted into opportunities for upward mobility both within and outside of the grassroots hierarchy. Even though gentlemen clubs members were primarily an outlet for male GRLs to coalesce, I observed numerous instances where it did not stop members from seeking out privileges and opportunities through clique interactions. These ranged from sharing privileged knowledge and information about grassroots matters to influencing senior and leader GRLs to bolster members' chances of rising up the grassroots hierarchy. In *towkay* circles, the practice of sharing business information offered clique members new opportunities for capital accumulation, while the symbolic status of de facto leaders within these circles offers GRLs a chance to use them as symbolic capital to accumulate other forms of capital. For instance, a member of a *towkay* circle I studied was seen using his status as one of the de facto leaders to maintain his trade association committee membership position, keeping him in a position to influence public policies when engaging with public agencies. Furthermore, he shared that these positions

came in handy for his firm's bids in public and private tenders, where it was a sign of a firm's trustworthiness and reliability. This illustrates how accumulated capital through *towkay* circles could be converted into other forms of capital and used to further economic capital accumulation by these economic elites. It also reinforces the significance of capital in these interactions, and show how clique and capital go hand-in-hand in reproducing organizational inequalities within and through the grassroots hierarchy. At the same time, these inequalities can even extend outside of the grassroots hierarchy when individuals can gain access to influence policies or obtain favourable business opportunities beyond their grassroots roles.

3.5 Conclusion: Organizational Inequalities and Elite Capture through the Grassroots Hierarchy

In tracing how the grassroots hierarchy, motivations for joining grassroots, capital and clique-based interactions reproduce organizational inequalities, I conclude by addressing this chapter's three main research questions. Firstly, I mapped out how GRLs collectively perceived the grassroots social structure through the grassroots hierarchy (Figure 7), along with the different pathways GRLs typically embodied (Figure 9). In doing so, I show that despite the different experiences GRLs share as part of their grassroots participation, these findings can be analytically organized to form a conceptual model for how a local grassroots sector is socially structured through an emic approach. The model contributes to the existing scholarship in two ways. Firstly, it offers scholars a way to clarify the specific processes to further examine structural conditions, organizational inequalities and community participation in Singapore's grassroots field, moving us from descriptive to explanatory propositions of grassroots participation. This is made possible through the analytical links established among the different experiences of grassroots participation seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Connecting grassroots hierarchy, motivations, capital and cliques in affecting organizational inequalities

Secondly, it offers a general model for analytically comparative work with other community fields elsewhere, positioning Singapore's grassroots field as an empirical case study for further research in other urban contexts in East and Southeast Asia as outlined by other scholars (Read and Pekkanen, 2009; Weiss, 2020). With the growing interest in Singapore's model of urban political development (Craig et al, 2008; Cho & Kriznik, 2016), this model complements existing accounts of community organizations and participation in Singapore (Vasoo, 2019; 2001; Chua, 2004) by showing how organizational politics factor into the contemporary analysis of elite participation and cohesion in local community organizations.

In addressing the second question on how motivations, capital and group interactions shape social positions, opportunities and recognition in grassroots participation, the underlying social interactions point to capital. Here I recount Bourdieu's declaration that:

"...the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world....the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chance of success for practices." (1986: 241)

Likewise, I found that the grassroots sector reproduces the social world when GRLs accumulate and convert the capital they possess through grassroots participation. Like other fields, the grassroots sector exists as a social field that produces specific sets of cultural and symbolic capital such as grassroots knowledge and community awards. They are directly and indirectly convertible to economic capital. I show how the legitimacy and prestige of the grassroots sector are ensured when economic capital intersects with access, experiences and outcomes of GRLs. The dominant class, specifically economic and cultural elites of utility to the existing grassroots leadership, obtain grassroots positions and/or community honours, and

value the symbolic significance of them in reproducing or preserving their social positions in society.

Existing studies of elite capture in community development conventionally emphasized how elite actors occupy positions of power in community organizations to channel resources to benefit their agendas (Warren & Visser, 2016; Lucas, 2016). The findings in this study add to the conversation by showing how elite capture is not solely centred on the monopolisation of economic resources and does so through two instances of elite capture. Firstly, economic elites access positions of power in the grassroots first by exchanging economic capital in the form of funding to grassroots initiatives, and later social capital by recruiting other economic elites into the local grassroots hierarchy. Within these positions, they select subordinate GRLs that do not threaten the social positions using their authority by picking either people from their networks or subordinates that they can control. Next, elite cohesion is formed when economic elites chalk up grassroots contributions through their grassroots roles and are duly rewarded based on their contributions. Furthermore, National Day Awards selections structurally favour leader and senior type GRLs over volunteer GRLs owing to how grassroots contributions evaluations favour economic and cultural capital over voluntary labour. In the course of their service, leader and senior GRLs also receive recognition or deference from lower-ranking GRLs who do so for a variety of reasons in the hopes of gaining benefits from those in the higher echelons. By influencing both positions and NDAs nominations, the economic elites reproduced their social positions within and through the grassroots hierarchy. In doing so, they stifle upward mobility of volunteer GRL as well as gender, class and ethnically marginalised individuals in the grassroots hierarchy.

Yet beyond elite capture of positions of power, national honours such as National Day Awards, as well as networking and business opportunities, I did not find elite capture in terms of resources diversion or opposition to public resources distribution in community

development. These findings concur with the emerging literature that suggests that elite presence or limited elite capture may not necessarily stifle community development and service delivery (Alatas, et al, 2019; Arnall et al, 2013). Instead, when provided with incentives that do not compromise public resource delivery such as giving out National Day Awards or appointing individuals in highly prestigious community leader positions, elite members can be sufficiently motivated to align their agendas for joining the grassroots with serving local mass interests, and provide crucial professional skills, resources and networks in driving community developments (Dasgupta & Beard, 2007). By tapping into local elites' capital, the Singapore state effectively channels resources from private individuals into public investments through the grassroots. Such processes also call to attention the possibility of a "captured elites" phenomenon, where local elites are co-opted or absorbed into the grassroots sector as a means of social control. These governance strategies are aligned with Tan's (2003) characterization of the state in using the grassroots to secure mass support while absorbing traditional leaders such as individuals with local influence or capital to attain them. What I have shown here is how this is done through the convertibility of capital into grassroots contributions and vice versa. Singapore's example, therefore, offers us a case study in understanding how elite participation is incentivised, secured and reproduced to meet mutually benefitting goals for local elites and the state through community participation.

Chapter 4: Historicizing the Grassroots Leader: A Grassroots Account of GRLs in Singapore's Political History.

4.1 Introduction

A favourite past-time among GRLs was sharing stories of old about the grassroots. These were historical accounts of GRLs' experiences or oral history passed down from predecessors about Singapore's political past, tracing back to the times where memorable episodes of local politics were happening right before their eyes. From reminiscing hard-fought victories in elections to retelling closed-door incidents at the local level that never made the news, these oral accounts were often shared over informal settings. Senior volunteers would share their versions of the stories, often interrupting each other to qualify the context or even giving contradictory accounts, all to paint an even more complicated social memory of grassroots politics. These were either anecdotal accounts or passed on from their predecessors as oral accounts. One such individual I frequently talked to was Mr Toh, an ex-grassroots leader in his 70s. Like his parents and older peers before him, Mr Toh served in the grassroots since he was a youth, amassing a great amount of oral history about the grassroots. Mr Toh was one of my go-to informants for all things grassroots history. One vivid encounter was in Mr Toh's retelling of an event we chanced upon while going over one of the People's Association (PA) glossy commemorative books. As I verbally translated the "official" account into Mandarin as best I could, Mr Toh frequently interrupted me by clarifying what he thought transpired. At the end of the session, I asked him what his thoughts were on PA's account of the grassroots, having left out details that could have reshaped the grassroots history. He chuckled, and in his usual fashion, shrugged. "I think our stories were not considered important because what the PA writes is [official] history", he later confessed in Mandarin, "but they are still our stories because it's what we [GRLs] as

Singaporeans have done for Singapore; so it's proof of our past that others cannot take away from us".

This chapter is dedicated to filling their stories into the history of the grassroots. It is an attempt to re-visit the history of the grassroots as part of Singapore's political history through GRLs' accounts as political actors. One frequent topic GRLs shared during my conversations with them was stories about their political experiences concerning Singapore's political history. Their experiences have been conventionally framed through two narratives. The first is through the state-endorsed narrative, which viewed GRLs' contributions as intertwined with the political history of the People's Association (PA) and the People's Action Party (PAP) government (Yap, 2010; Fong, 1979). Within this, GRLs are seen as community leaders responding to the government's call to action to quell political instabilities during Singapore's independence years, and working with the government to foster communal harmony in nation-building (Lim, 2019; Kwek, 2019). Contrastingly, GRLs have also been portrayed as serving both state and PAP's interests through co-optation or coercion (Chan, 1976; Mauzy & Milne, 2002), tying their political participation as parapolitical agents to maintaining PAP's political hegemony at the grassroots (Hill & Lian, 2013). Despite their different takes on GRLs' experiences, both accounts share a similar premise in framing GRLs as passively being caught up by the political changes around them.

My time spent in the field however revealed that these narratives merely scratched the surface in the ways GRLs have understood and accounted for their positions in Singapore as political actors. Sometimes these accounts disrupt what is the "official" narrative of the grassroots as recorded in the annals of commemorative books and government by revealing the political significance of GRLs or defying the critical literature which portrayed them as feeble political subjects. Other times, they provided important fillers to help fill lacunas in political history. As anecdotes, these stories revealed important clues to local interpretations of how

they saw Singapore politics unfold from their perspectives and participation as GRLs. These oral accounts also provided new ways of interrogating the history of the grassroots against the bifurcation between state-backed and critical narratives (Loh, 1998). They are vitally crucial in corroborating, interrogating or contesting the rarefaction of history as discourse (Foucault, 1969), prying into the order by which the narratives or subjects are organized. Indeed in most cases, GRLs I spoke to scoffed at the way these narratives scripted their experiences. Instead, they shared that these seemingly contradictory historical accounts can be better understood by recognizing the active political positions and roles GRLs played at particular historical junctures in Singapore's politics, and how their participation as a political class changed Singapore's political history.

The research question I attempt to answer in this chapter is – how do GRLs frame their emergence and roles as political actors in Singapore's political history? I examine the three most common periods GRLs focused on in Singapore's politics. In the first period, I focus on the period between the late 1950s and early 1960s where three distinct groups of local notables allied themselves with the fledgling PAP in exchange for securing economic benefits, local recognition and municipal improvements. In doing so, these community leaders were the progenitors of senior and leader type GRLs who helped bridge the gap between the colonial-backed political elites and working class in the new PAP regime. In the second period, I examine the decline of GRLs' initial political influence through their participation in public resettlement projects. In doing so, I demonstrate that their participation, while on the one hand accelerating Singapore's pace of urban renewal, also arrested the rise of organic neighbourhood-based organizations. In creating urban neighbourhoods without the political ties which brought neighbourhood communities together, the urban transitions from kampongs to HDBs had major implications to Singapore's urban politics as well as the subsequent political leverage GRLs had in these

HDB estates. In the last period, I trace how GRLs are politically defanged through party capture by the PAP and the professionalization of the grassroots sector through institutional reforms in the PA. This resulted in the political defanging of GRLs as they are constrained in their scope and capacity for political action, which characterises their political positions in the contemporary context.

4.2 Framing GRL Historical Positions as Political Actors: Three Periods in Singapore's Political History

Pre-1945: Colonial Seeds of the Grassroots

While GRLs only started playing a deeper role in Singapore politics during the 1950s, the conditions which birthed local governance between the state and local communities dated back to the British colonial administration. This is particularly through the colony's municipal authority, Singapore's Municipal Commission, and control of colonial spaces in Singapore (Yeoh, 1996). The Municipal Commission was introduced in 1887 as part of an expansion of municipal governance to increase the colonial administration's control over the city's urban area as well as solve major issues surrounding sanitation, urban sprawl and diseases. With the introduction of the municipal electoral wards⁹ in the same year, this was the first time Singapore experienced local elections which allowed for non-Europeans British subjects to represent their communities, albeit often referring to Chinese men of leisure representing their own business or clan interests or territories (Yeo, 1996). Although the elections were abolished shortly after in 1913 and replaced by a Board comprising solely of members nominated by the Governor, the relations of power institutionalized by the British have provided the seeds for local political elites, especially notables in the business and local ethnic communities. They played a crucial role in local politics by influencing how resources were allocated to improve the living conditions in the colony. This institutional practice was

⁹ The wards were Tanjong Pagar, Central, Tanglin, Rochor and Kallang.

carried on through the increased number of non-European notables represented in the Board, signalling the opportunity for non-European local political elites to participate in shaping the city's social and built environment (Turnbull, 1989).

Furthermore, the British were constantly reminded of the power local leaders held among their communities in controlling the colony, as depicted through the daily struggles over public spaces and utilities between ground enforcers and the local populace (Yeoh, 1996). Local leaders played an authoritative role in securing the support of their communities and acted as spokespersons to represent local interests to colonial management of the city till WWII (Choo, 1969). Local leaders' powers were also recognized by the colonial administration through the former's role as organizers and patrons of self-help groups. This was particularly so for Chinese leaders who sought to exert their political influence through their leadership positions in *kongsi* or dialect/clan associations (Yeoh, 1996). These community groups enabled the colonial administration to take on a laissez-faire approach to the social welfare and development of the colonies' workforce, freeing up resources and administrative manpower. In return, many of these leaders were recognized as local agents in maintaining safety and order in the colony and were allowed some level of political discretion over the affairs of their respective communities (Yong, 1992). This practice continued as part of the tapestry of local governance until the Japanese Occupation in 1942, which temporarily dismantled the British's hold over Singapore. These practices formed a political understanding among local elites that the state could be negotiated to share governance if interests are aligned.

1945 – 1964: From “Local Notables” to Community Leaders: the Emergence of GRLs through Aligned Interests.

After WWII, the emergence of GRLs can be traced to the consolidation of three distinct but interrelated groups of local notables who subsequently allied with the PAP in the early 1960s

to provide the mass local support it needed to defeat the Barisan Sosialis (Barisan). Here, I use the term “local notables” to denote individuals who wielded influence or authority in the communities they were associated with and were able to mobilize mass political support. The three groups were community centre entrepreneurs, local Chinese “political moderates”, and local headsmen in urban and rural kampongs. While each group had its own set of interests in siding with the PAP at a time where the fledgling government had lost the support of its left-wing base, the common factor is in the belief that their decisions to align and support the fledgling PAP government had viable political and economic payoffs relative to their positions with other local notables in their communities. Many of these groups overlapped, with individuals being members in more than one of these groups.

Community centre entrepreneurs are individuals who relied on community centres (CCs) to ply economic benefits. GRLs shared that they are made up of Chinese men who operated as middlemen/agents in facilitating local economic activities such as managing religious and clan associations’ activities or running local services such as repair workshops or trade shops. Their support for the PAP and subsequent ascension into GRLs are derived primarily from their economic interests in maintaining a good relationship with the CC staff and the local PAP regime to use CC spaces for their commercial activities. Initially established by the British in the early 1950s with a vision to foster community ties and disburse welfare services as part of stabilizing the colonies, the CCs built by the Department of Social Welfare were in reality often left to the local committees from the community to manage its day-to-day affairs (Seah, 1973). Many of these centres eventually came under the hold of local political aspirants and entrepreneurs who used these spaces for various interests. GRLs I spoke to shared that these entrepreneurs ran businesses such as coordinating pirate taxis operations, construction services for kampong houses in the vicinity or organizing local festivals on behalf of religious associations. Some were even purported by the government to be involved

in illegal businesses such as gambling dens or pubs (Seah, 1973). Furthermore, these entrepreneurs also supported local political aspirants who used the CCs as their bases of operations. In return, these entrepreneurs were often hired as logistical and event support.

When the PAP assumed power in 1959, the new government wrestled control of the CCs from existing local committees and consolidated them under the People's Association. Despite the management changes, CC entrepreneurs continued liaising with the new CC administration under the PAP government by providing logistical services in return for continued, albeit discreet use of the CCs for their other economic activities. One common way this was done was through hiring entrepreneurs as "instructors" through PA's vendor system (Seah, 1973). When the left-wing faction of PAP led by Lim Chin Siong and Fong Swee Suan broke off and formed the Barisan Sosialis (BS), taking along 177 of 250 PA's employees into a strike (Seah, 1973), CC entrepreneurs who sided with the PAP government due to their commercial interests provided manpower and logistical support to replace the shortfall to keep the CCs operational. Respondents I spoke to who knew people who operated as CC entrepreneurs shared that while many entrepreneurs are primarily motivated by the prospects of siding with the faction they thought would best secure their economic ties with the CC then, they recognised that their decisions were a political gamble.

As there are entrepreneurs who sided with the Barisan, so are those who did with the PAP government. The latter group did so out of the fact that the PAP still held on to the institutional reins of the CCs through PA, and the economic opportunities seemed more certain by siding with the establishment. Their gamble paid off, and the entrepreneurs who sided with the PAP government gained in two ways. Firstly, with the decreased competition due to the exodus of their counterparts who support the Barisan, PAP-aligned entrepreneurs were able to secure privileged use of the CCs. A number of them were also subsequently appointed as GRLs through their positions in People's Management Committees (PMCs),

which assisted staff members with the running of CCs, a position that complemented their commercial interests. Some entrepreneurs who initially sided with the BS were also eventually co-opted as GRLs when they proved their disassociations with the opposition, while others sought their luck with clan and religious associations which allowed them to ply fringe economic benefits in return for their organizational services such as hosting festival gatherings or fundraising.

Similar to the economic interests of CC entrepreneurs, the second group of local notables comprised of community leaders who represented what GRLs described as local Chinese “moderates”. In reality, this group covered a broad set of local Chinese groups ranging from English educated Chinese professionals to businessmen or board members of the Chinese clan, religious and trade associations. The common social characteristic these members shared is their position as established members of the Chinese community who have sided with the British colonial administration and Chinese business communities to secure business or political privilege. Many of these members are also related to local leaders who worked closely with the British to govern pre-war Singapore. These members have conventionally advocated for political change through gradual reform and supported moderate-left parties such as the defunct Singapore Progressive Party (PP) and the Democratic Party (DP) before the rise of PAP in the 1950s. Their preference for gradual reforms is tied to both economic and political interests in maintaining their positions as local elites. These groups of Chinese moderates were initially ambivalent in supporting PAP due to the party’s inclusion of left-wing supporters which threatened their interests in a gradual reform of Singapore’s decolonization. Many of such moderates shared vested interests in having the British cede power over to local elites, whom these moderates are a part or supportive of. Another key concern was in sustaining the local political economy with the British, where many of them

had business ties. However, GRLs shared that members' stance changed owing to two developments.

The first was in the establishment of government-backed Chinese middle schools after the dissolution of the Singapore Chinese Middle School Students' Union and the suspension of associated Chinese Middle schools under allegations of Communist influences (Wong, 2004). Responding to appeals by representatives of Chinese "moderates" who wanted to resume their education amidst the tensions between Chinese Middle Schools and the government, the nine-member All-Party Committee of the Legislative Assembly under the Labour Front government made notable recommendations which won the support of Chinese moderates. The most significant of these recommendations was the opening of three Government Chinese Middle schools that received government grants and offered bilingual education which opened up the prospects of entering into universities and the civil service. This move was particularly significant for the moderates at that juncture as it signalled that the colonial-backed government was able to offer a middle way for them to preserve Chinese' interests while doing so without resorting to support increasingly disruptive left-wing politics. One GRL shared that this was a "turning point" for those who initially supported anti-government protests but found that a more viable alternative of co-existence with a pro-colonial government is possible through their introduction of Government Chinese Middle Schools. These schools offered children of these Chinese moderates to access bilingual education which offered both a chance to maintain their economic relationship with the British through English and their cultural pride through Mandarin. The most significant outcome of the above policy is in motivating leaders of the Chinese moderates in PP and DP to side with the incumbent Labour Front under the Singapore's People Alliance (SPA) under the 1959 general elections.

The second development is due to the political decline of local Chinese moderate leadership in politics with the SPA having only obtained four seats in the 1959 general elections. This was further hastened with their subsequent losses in the 1963 general elections with the exit of prominent coalition leaders such as Lim Yew Hock (Lau, 1998). Part of the decline may be explained by the shift in many of the moderate support to the politically moderate-faction of the PAP led by Lee Kuan Yew, which by 1961 had ejected the left-wing faction from the party. GRLs I spoke to explained that PAP became an ideal choice for a good number of local Chinese moderate leaders as it became the incumbent government in 1959 and had expressed similar political interests in working out a gradual and peaceful political transition with the British as well as resisting communist takeovers. Supportive Chinese moderates threw their lots with the PAP government during the referendum for the merger, which accounted for the latter's electoral success in the urban communities in Central Areas of Singapore. Several moderate leaders also formed or joined the goodwill committees in supporting Lee Kuan Yew's constituency tours in the urban areas to garner support for the referendum. This was to display political presence with the PAP government, using goodwill committees as a vehicle to show the PAP what moderate leaders had access to. It was also to signal to other moderate leaders that the PAP was a viable party that could be trusted to bring about promised gradual reforms. These goodwill committee members were later invited to join as GRLs as members of the Citizen Consultative Committees (CCCs) in 1966, forming the early bulk of leader and senior GRLs in the grassroots.

The last group of local notables consists of village headsmen or *penghulus* in both urban and rural kampong areas. They are primarily males from a variety of ethnic backgrounds based on their kampong's dominant ethnicity and are typically landowners or local business owners in the kampongs they represented. Many of them are also members of associations such as the Singapore Attap Dwellers' Association, Singapore Wooden House Dwellers' Association,

Singapore Country People's Association, Singapore Farmers' Association and the Singapore Rural Residents' Association. In urban kampongs, these headsmen derived their authority from their longstanding roles as community leaders in channelling municipal developments such as water pipes and public repairs from public agencies to local communities, representing and assisting residents with dealing with public agencies, as well as organizing community events. In rural kampongs, other than performing similar functions as their urban counterparts, many of the village headsmen also had urban-rural connections which connected rural residents with work opportunities in both rural and urban areas.

While conventionally regarded as sympathetic to left-wing causes or making up the bulk of Barisan's rural support bases (Seah, 1973; Loh, 2013), some GRLs shared that a number of these local headsmen decided to support the PAP for two main reasons. The first is that some of these headsmen felt that they could not rely on the Barisan to obtain what was essential to their kampongs' and their interests, which was secure municipal developments into their areas. A large part of the loss of confidence was due to Barisan's strategy of using strikes to incite the populace, which disrupted local economic activities and brought unease to the kampongs which were involved due to frequent police raids. On the other hand, the PAP has sought to use municipal improvements as a political carrot to attract these leaders to side with the government. The two most commonly sought-after improvements were constructing community centres and public goods such as roads and street lighting in the kampongs. By allying with the PAP, the local headsmen sought to connect with the government to secure these developments for their communities, thus increasing their local standing. Another reason for supporting PAP is that many of these local headsmen who sided with the PAP are also vying for local recognition and authority over more prominent counterparts in their local communities. Allying with the PAP thus offered these headsmen an opportunity to compete with those who supported the Barisan by gaining state recognition and legitimacy. In showing

their support, the headsmen that supported the PAP joined in on goodwill committees and provided the PAP with access to kampongs during the constituency tours. In return, many of these headsmen are recognized as GRLs and brought into the CCC through their participation in goodwill committees.

Despite their different but interrelated interests, the cumulative support of these three groups had a significant impact in allowing the PAP to quickly build a local support base despite the departure of its left-wing faction which decimated its local party branches. It revealed how the PAP manoeuvred into power, first on the backs of left-wing supporters, and later by leveraging on the support of those who were antagonistic or ambivalent to the left-wing groups. This piece of history filled the analytical gaps in explaining how the PAP's early reliance on left-wing supporters was no longer needed for the party to maintain its seat of power subsequently. The support proved to be crucial to PAP's victory in the merger referendum where it received 71% approval ratings (Seah, 1973). To quickly secure these local notables as the new PAP's mass support base, the PAP used its influence as the incumbent government to transform them from party collaborators into state agents by co-opting them into state-backed grassroots organizations. This was done through the CCCs and PMCs where these three groups of notables went on to become pioneer members. Thus these notables emerged as GRLs, a new class of political actors who supported the PAP as aligned to their interests. In return, these new GRLs had access to the state's largess. One such way this was carried was through the Urban and Rural Service Committee (URSC). CCC members who were local notables were able to request essential services or municipal improvements required by their communities to the URSC. This requisition model of municipal improvements was particularly effective in garnering more headsmen into becoming GRLs, as the communities they have traditional authority over benefitted from new municipal improvements such as service roads, anti-flooding works, public standpipes and

street lighting into their *kampongs* or neighbourhoods. In return, local PAP MPs were promoted as benefactors to the local communities by village leaders. This allowed both the MP and local notables to achieve political and traditional legitimacy over the communities they represented. As pointed out in a later chapter, these political arrangements to municipal developments continued till today as a core feature of Singapore's urban politics. The process of cop-opting community leaders described in the previous chapter can also be traced to this period.

Another way was through introducing community centres as recreational improvements in the rural kampongs where the PAP had poorer support. Many of these centres were provided with public resources and co-managed with the PMCs. The PMCs served to legitimize the state's authority by enabling the PAP government to spread its political presence and authority into local kampongs which were often antagonistic to state interventions due to the legacy of Barisan's influences. In return, they were given access and control over the use of CC spaces, as well as recreational and communication platforms such as community televisions and telephone lines, as well as resources to organize social functions for the community. The community television in particular opened a new and significant means by which government-sanctioned information was transmitted directly into the local communities, expediting the rate at which public announcements and information by the government could be received by the local populace.

The most significant benefit applicable to local notables turned GRLs was the access to the national honour decoration system through the *Bintang Bakti Masyarakat*, more commonly known by its abbreviation, the BBM. These awards become part of the National Day Awards offered to GRLs as national honours, as discussed in Chapter 3. Following the British national honours roll system for local collaborators in the colonial administration, the BBM offered state recognition for local notables' support to community development and was the

only one out of six existing national honours in the system accessible to community leaders in the early 1960s. To local notables, the BBM offered a way for them to be recognized by the state which accorded significant privilege, enabling them to join the ranks of the modern state nobility (Bourdieu, 1996) In one interviewee's words, it was akin to "...showing that you have made a significant contribution to the grassroots" (Interview, Ms JF, 2019). These honours have been awarded at a state reception held at the Istana during National Day since 1966, and those who were invited to attend the reception were seen as part of an inner circle of community leaders who had been recognized by the state for their merit and status as leaders of their respective communities.

Through the support from these local notables who are later converted into GRLs, the PAP has found itself several groups of regime partners who were inimical to Barisan's influences and thus resolved its dilemma of having to build a local base from scratch during an uncertain political period. One GRL I spoke to shared that these early GRL pioneers were "natural allies" of the PAP as they shared a common interest with the new government in pursuing reforms without "rocking the boat". Similarly, Seah (1973) reasoned that the bourgeoisie elements of these local notables made their cooperation with the PAP mutually beneficial. Just as these notables were recognized as community leaders by the state, the PAP also secured a group of mass base of support which was not aligned with any communist agendas (Seah 1973). These developments were anything but natural or normal, as these were political gambles made by local notables during a political upheaval that could have easily been in BS's favour, which still maintained sizable political support in the early 1960s. In doing so, however, these local notables became the early pioneers of GRLs that allowed the PAP to bridge the gap between its colonial-backed political elites and local mass support on the ground. Yet this narrative of "political gamble" was also backed by pragmatism and material considerations of the politics of the day which made these local notables side with the PAP.

These considerations echoed similar considerations Non-European local elites had in working closely with the British colonial administration before 1945. The shared motivations among these local notables were not only based on a moderate political ideology but also a pragmatic one, where access to political powers and resources in Singapore was always up for negotiation with whoever controlled the state at that critical juncture. In post-war Singapore, while the fledgling PAP leaders lost their left-wing populists, their control over state resources and legitimacy as the incumbent government allowed them to reconfigure their regime without losing their seat of power. This was however only possible when these local notables recognized and negotiated to maintain the PAP regime, and in doing so, preserve their interests accordingly.

The Late 1960s – 1980s: The Decline of GRLs’ Political Leverage and Consolidation of the Grassroots.

In the next period, I examine how GRLs saw their decline of political influence through participation in public resettlement projects and the changing narrative of their political roles as political allies into facilitators of Singapore’s modernization. I analyze three main trends in making the case. First is through their decline in political currency owing to the displacement of their communities as an unintended result of resettling kampongs into public housing estates. Second is through the emergence of volunteer GRLs through a new grassroots institution, the Resident Committees (RCs), which replaced CCC and PMC members as the contact points with residents. Finally, this period also saw the consolidation of the various grassroots organizations under a single grassroots system under coordination committees. These coordination committees reorganized neighbourhood politics from GRLs to the local PAP-MP and effectively crowded out the rise of organic neighbourhood-based organizations.

With the Barisan’s resignation of parliament in 1965, boycotting of the General Elections in 1968 leading to subsequent decline, the PAP enjoyed unfettered political hegemony both in

parliament and on the ground (Mauzy & Milne, 2002). While this also meant that the political leverage offered by GRLs who held positions in the CCCs and PMCs (later known as CCMC) as a bastion to Barisan's influences in the community space diminished, they remained politically relevant owing to their ties in the local communities or associations they belonged to. The ties these GRLs had with their local communities were however decimated as the former participated in public resettlement projects which unintentionally displaced the local influence they had. Institutionalized in 1960, the Housing Development Board (HDB) had already begun major relocating and housing projects in earnest, reaching over 1.1 million or approximately 51% of Singapore's residents by 1976 (Chen & Tai, 1977). On the ground, resettlement projects remained a thorny issue as local settlements struggled with state agencies over the interpretation of resettlements and negotiations over fair compensation (Loh, 2007). The CCCs, now a ubiquitous institution in all electoral divisions in Singapore, closely followed resettlement projects and supported the local MPs.

“[Field note: GRLs & Resettlement] Among the stories shared about how HDB resettlement projects worked out in the past, one stood out. It was about how one particular GRL, Mr Soo, a teacher, convinced local villagers to resettle by the stipulated deadline by making an unusual deal with them, delivering livestock for Lunar New Year. Apart from farmers who were resettled under an agricultural housing scheme, most residents applied under a common scheme with compensation rates tied to the built area of their houses. This meant that while most villagers engaged in subsistence farming such as rearing poultry and vegetables, they were not compensated, and the livestock was culled if they were not disposed or accommodated in time. When news of resettlement reached Mr Soo's village, many residents were agitated. A major complaint centered on how villagers' livestock were culled just months to Lunar New Year, an important

celebration among villagers. Others feared that purchasing meat during the festive season meant higher costs. Learning from other villages' experiences, the villagers contemplated stonewalling the demolitions in a show of public displeasure. Taking villagers' concerns to the MP, Mr Soo convinced the CCC to devise a program where villagers surrendered their livestock in return for the same amount in the next Lunar New Year. Villagers were initially skeptical but eventually supported as Mr Soo and other GRLs in the village gave their word. When Lunar New Year season arrived, Mr Soo oversaw the purchases with money donated from patrons, and personally delivered livestock to the newly resettled residents. While seemingly a minor gesture, residents still remembered Mr Soo's act of ingenuity till today, which allowed resettlement to proceed without a hitch"

GRLs roles consisted of mediating and representing the interests of the local communities to secure compensation and resettlement transition (Kwek, 2019). The role of GRLs as mediators was particularly significant for local MPs as it mitigated situations where communities that lacked the means to resist or negotiate with local agencies in resettlement projects demonstrated their grievances through the electoral box. By acting as policy translators to navigate resettlement projects with state agencies, the CCCs were valued as an essential stakeholder in mediating local contestations with state developments. Meanwhile, with their known connections to political and state actors, the CCCs were able to convince disgruntled residents that they were getting a fair share of the deal. CCCs were also able to find alternative solutions to the local populace's demands in meeting local agencies such as the HDB in assisting with resettlement timelines. GRLs shared that these were possible owing to the continued influence these GRLs had on their communities, given that many of them held on to their positions as local notables which complemented their roles in arbitrating

or mediating over resettlement matters with HDB and residents. In doing so, GRLs helped residents transition through these resettlement projects without much fanfare.

The most direct impact over the success of these resettlement projects to GRLs however was their subsequent loss of control over their local support bases which were now displaced in different public estates across Singapore. This dwindling support base was not lost on some GRLs who anticipated that the resettlement project would render them politically irrelevant. These concerns were often raised in the CCC under the pretext that GRLs could not guarantee the dissemination of information or bring matters to the local MPs if they did not have a presence in these new neighbourhoods. Some GRLs did so to obtain favourable deals such as having more choices or increased compensation on their resettlement offers in exchange for continued support in the grassroots. Others did so out of feedback raised from their local communities over the social implications of the displacement. Other GRLs felt that the resettlement projects not only did not benefit them, it also disrupted those whose economic livelihood depended on the kampong communities which were gone. Similarly, residents were plunged into unfamiliar territories as a result of resettlement, losing the community ties they have nurtured in their previous villages for social support and protection. Coupled with the high-stress and conflict environment of coping with high-rise living, the local populace living in these new HDB estates often expressed discontent and lower community satisfaction than their rural counterparts. For instance, in a survey study of public neighbourhood vs. kampong estates in 1975, Chen & Tai (1977) found that while respondents cited that new public estates provided better amenities and facilities, they also cited higher levels of social pathologies linked to their decreased social support and reliance compared to their kampong counterparts.

To address these concerns, the PAP government implemented two new measures. The first was by introducing the Resident Committees (RCs) in 1978 to replicate the functions of the

CCCs and CCMCs at the ultra-local scale (Huey, et al, 1992). This scale operated through HDB's "precinct" administrative spaces in the form of constituency zones, introduced in 1979 as part of residential planning to adapt the recreational and community scale previously found in villages (Chua, 1997). RCs took over the task of community development at the neighbourhood level, organizing events and mobilizing residents for projects which promoted civic responsibility and social cohesion. Meanwhile, the government also introduced the *Pingat Bakti Masyarakat* or PBM in 1973. Like the BBM, the PBM was just one level below the former and allowed for the state to recognise a larger number of community leaders, increasing the chances through which local community leaders could contribute and be awarded accordingly. GRLs shared that the PBM was introduced to reward GRLs who contributed to the resettlement projects, framing their contributions not as a loss of political relevance, but as making Singapore's modernization possible. Such practices continued as depicted in later chapters.

Both of these measures however further hastened the decline of GRLs' political relevance. Firstly, the introduction of the RCs led to an increase of GRLs at the neighbourhood level whose demographic profiles and origins are different from the earlier group of GRLs. Most of the RC GRLs were either wage earners or professionals who joined the RC for various reasons. Some wanted to make a difference in their new communities, while others entered intending to connect themselves to local politics for networking or political aspirations purposes. The essential difference between these new GRLs and their earlier counterparts however was that their local authority was derived primarily from their positions as RC members instead of any prior social relations with the communities they served. These new GRLs, therefore, did not see themselves as natural leaders in their communities and were more easily persuaded, or replaced by other GRLs if they were deemed as too antagonistic to serving state interests by the leading agency that governs RC affairs, the HDB. The new GRL

system under the RC, therefore, replaced the initial batch of GRLs, who were local notables, in the new public estates by taking over their roles as the neighbourhood-level community leaders, rendering the original group of GRLs without their local communities which they can exert influence over. For instance, the resettlement saw the loss of existing common spaces such as provision stores, coffee shops or rural community centres where the initial batch of GRLs relied on to easily centralise and mobilise their communities. Instead, the ex-kampong residents in new HDBs found themselves utilizing urbanised common spaces such as corridors, void decks and RC centres which promoted block-based or estate-based communal interactions.

Secondly, by awarding national honours through the PBM, the PAP government pacified several GRLs in exchange for the loss of their political bases. Most GRLs who were local notables accepted the exchange as the prestige for these awards were highly recognized in Singapore society owing to the state's endorsement and offered them social statuses which were comparable to the recognition they obtained from their local communities. Another reason was that GRLs did not have a choice in preventing the resettlement projects. Instead of resisting, they chose to accept their awards in the hopes of staying in favour of the PAP government. Some GRLs have also shared that a small number of those who resisted by organizing local villagers to stonewall developments to seek higher compensations or prevent resettlements were later asked to retire from their positions and be replaced by new GRLs. They explained that by the 1970s, the PAP had been in political dominance for close to a decade and had no lack of aspirants from the business and professional circles who would join the grassroots as GRLs to be a part of the political establishment. Several older GRLs also saw their positions as local notables no longer tenable due to the displacements and sought to re-align their usefulness in the grassroots by accepting these awards. By the early

1980s, the original batch of GRLs who were local notables had either retired from their grassroots positions or was fully co-opted.

Meanwhile, the narrative of GRLs as political allies and regime partners that was prominent in the early 1960s had also been largely replaced by a new narrative of GRLs as contributors to nation-building. In an act of discursive backpedalling, these extended even to GRLs' efforts in the early 1960s. For instance, recounting the birth of CCCs, the 50th-anniversary commemorative book published by the PA framed these local notables as responding to Lee Kuan Yew's call for community leaders to lead their communities in nation-building tasks¹⁰. GRLs however pointed out that these contemporary accounts had underplayed the political characteristics these local notables turned GRLs had in Singapore's political development, which obscured the reality of how the PAP was able to survive from its lack of a mass support base. GRLs I spoke to on these matters frequently raised the issue of how Singaporeans have "...forgotten their origins¹¹", citing how even new GRLs no longer understood the political compact between the PAP government and community leaders.

These oral accounts are also supported by earlier scholarship by Seah (1973), Chan (1976), and Shaw et al (1977) which recounted the political nature of GRLs as a political class that allied with the PAP. Some GRLs explained that part of the reason for the narrative change stemmed from the fact that the PAP government wanted to present a national development narrative that was congruent with what they hoped to portray and cultivate GRLs into as community leaders with civic rather than political interests. This was done through revising how GRLs are portrayed in official PA publications as apolitical community volunteers who participate in grassroots affairs for the betterment of their communities as a public good, and in official speeches given by PAP leaders in addressing the role of GRLs in nation-building.

¹⁰ For a copy of the book, refer to <https://www.pa.gov.sg/newsroom/publications>

¹¹ The term used here is a translation of 饮水思源, which is a Mandarin idiom that reads "while drinking the water, recall its source". It denotes the need to remember one's origins/roots.

In doing so, it confined GRLs to its new ideological task of serving nation-building and stifled political interests among GRLs by portraying politics as antithetical to nation-building. Other GRLs also saw it as the PAP government downplaying the instability and political manoeuvres in the party's rise to power in the early years while centring the political role of Lee Kuan Yew more prominently. These practices have however continued into contemporary accounts of framing Singapore's history through a predominantly nation-building centred narrative (Hong, 2002)

Another important change is the formal incorporation of a GRL ordinal system to rank the organizational positions of GRLs serving in the CCCs, CCMCs and RCs, and in identifying them as state-sponsored volunteers. Before the changes, GRLs were still commonly referred to by their local titles or honorifics such as "kampong chiefs", "*penghulus*" or "local bosses" among others, along with overlapping local hierarchies which distinguished these GRLs' social statuses. The introduction of the GRL ordinal system incorporated the different GRLs serving in the various grassroots organizations into an integrated grassroots volunteer system, with an organizational hierarchy that placed CCCs and CCMCs above RCs. This resulted in the contemporary grassroots hierarchy depicted in Chapter 3. This integration was also further enhanced by the introduction of "coordination committees" as the new local apex locus of power. Consisting of chairpersons from the CCCs, CCMCs and RCs, these coordination committees were fronted by local MPs as the executive spheres of political influence at the local level. Formally, as the name suggested, these committees were supposed to promote coordination among the various grassroots organisations in the constituency. The committee represented the de facto political body of local politics, where members within this group were seen as the new political elites in association with the established PAP regime.

Despite arising out of different institutional functions and social backgrounds, the members of the CCCs, CCMCs and RCs were drawn together under the auspice of local MPs to serve as primary supporter groups (Fenno, 2003) in managing local politics without risking being politically undermined as they did not wield considerable influence within PAP's cadre system. In the constituency, the MP drew on the community leaders from these different pools to gather the resources needed to widen the scope and bolster their abilities to meet political demands – tapping on businessmen for donations, professionals for their technical knowledge and skills in managing administrative tasks, and community leaders for their social capital, communication channels and ability to mobilize the ground. These will be further elaborated on in a later chapter. In doing so, MPs were able to score political achievements to boost their political reputation, which in turn attracted even more notables and community leaders. This vertical integration and “virtuous cycle” of the PAP's regime eventually led to the emergence of the collective term “grassroots leaders” as a means of identifying these community leaders in Singapore¹², and the unification of their institutional turf, the grassroots sector. On the other hand, the formalization of GRLs and integration of the grassroots sector also stifled or alienated the emergence of organic grassroots organizations in the new public estates. Unlike resident or neighbourhood associations elsewhere in cities or suburbs which emerged to meet the needs of residents and the community through bottom-up activism (Martin, 2004), the RCs became the go-to institution that channelled residents' activism into pro-government initiatives and communication. In return, these resident volunteers were formally recognized as GRLs which legitimizes their role as community leaders in their estates. The RCs therefore directly competed with existing neighbourhood organizations in representing community interests while crowding out new

¹² Although the volunteers in their different grassroots organisations have existed since the latter's institutionalisation, the term “grassroots leaders” and “grassroots level” in referring to the collective body of these actors only came to legislative existence in 1979.

ones as potential neighbourhood organizers were often recruited into the RCs due to the latter's endorsement by the state.

The 1980s – Early 1990s: Defanging GRLs through Party Capture and Curtailing Grassroots Capacity and Scope.

In this final part, I trace how GRLs described the period from the 1980s – 1990s as a crucial era where their roles as political actors faced greater pressures from state controls under the PAP. GRLs linked this to increasing pressures faced by the PAP as a result of electoral losses and growing disgruntlement among GRLs over political transitions in the 1980s, which subjected GRLs to further controls to curtail their influence on local politics. In party capture, GRLs faced pressures to profess their allegiance to the PAP by playing more active roles in the local PAP branches, with failures to do so resulting in marginalization from GRLs who were PAP party activists. Meanwhile, they also experienced further limitations to their roles due to new reforms aimed at reining in the grassroots sector to focus solely on civic volunteerism. These two trends underscored how GRLs faced curtailment which severely limited what they can do as community leaders in contemporary neighbourhood politics. This included restricting GRLs' autonomy in using their local authority and influence to sway political sentiments at the local level, as well as disciplining them into being ostensibly nonpartisan and depoliticized while supporting PAP through incumbent advantages.

GRLs I interviewed pointed to the victories by opposition leaders, J.B. Jeyaretnam in 1981 and Chiam See Tong in 1985, at Anson and Potong Pasir wards respectively as the turning point of PAP's hegemony, and concerns over the political potentials of GRLs. GRLs recalled these concerns to the loss of primary political supporters as a result of political alienation and disgruntlement of GRLs in both wards. Both Anson and Potong Pasir saw their longstanding PAP MPs stepping down, with the replacements brought in by the PAP from outside the local

grassroots scene. In Anson's case, PAP Pang Kim Hin's alienation of local GRLs was scrutinized by the local newspaper:

"Mr Pang Kim Hin was plainly the wrong man for the job...Mr Pang just could not connect...Many people on the ground felt their roles were diminished, as if they no longer mattered. They felt they were needed only as loyal soldiers, not to ask awkward questions but just to carry out decisions made by the professionals who knew better...The PAP candidate also did not endear himself to the local party and grassroots helpers. He brought his own campaign staff to Anson, largely friends who are also professionals and people who did community work with together with him at Bukit Panjang. Veterans in Anson, who should know the constituency better than he and his team, felt they were relegated and were hurt. That must tell on their moral and performance. It did. While no one can deny a candidate the right to pick his own campaign staff, political maturity and experience would dictate that a man new to a constituency pay heed to those who have spent long years working there."

"Why Pang was the wrong man for the job", The Straits Times, 9 November, 1981

Similarly, Mah Bow Tan's maiden defeat in the 1985 General Elections was déjà vu for the PAP. Like Pang, Mah was a candidate parachuted by the PAP after Howe Yoon Chong, a two-term MP, resigned from politics in Potong Pasir. GRLs I spoke to saw these two setbacks by the PAP as signs of a larger scale miscalculation on the part of the party's political renewal starting from the 1980s. Unlike the "Old Guards", or first-generation PAP MPs who made their political careers on the backs of ground support from both local notables and the masses, the second-generation of PAP MPs were picked for their technocratic expertise and qualifications, qualities that were perceived by the PAP as vital for the political leadership in

revolutionizing Singapore's governance. These moves were however read by older GRLs as an elitist change of heart by the PAP. One GRL I spoke with described the move as “ungrateful” for not recognizing the efforts made by the pioneer politicians and the GRLs, and forcing them to retire. Other ex-GRLs described how the MPs they served with were planned for retirement, and the potential PAP candidates brought in with them a fresh slate of volunteers to take over their GRL positions:

“... [MP name redacted] invited us for dinner...most of the old boys... he thanked us for supporting him and doing our part for the constituency. Then he announced that he was retiring [from being an MP] and asked us to stay on and help in any ways we can...we ask if the new MP will bring his own men in...but he told us not to worry, support in any ways we can” (Mr Goh, ex-GRL, late 70s, interview in Mandarin)

While some were given ceremonious titles and national honours to acknowledge their service¹³, others were relegated as the leadership changed. In Pang's case, the disgruntlement of community leaders was aired in public. But for some local constituencies with electoral walk-overs, it ended with quiet lay-offs. As some pioneer GRLs recognized that they would lose their privileges and positions to the new political teams brought in by new PAP MPs, they expressed their displeasure by leaving the grassroots abruptly or turning local communities against the new PAP MPs as soon as the MPs they served left. This resulted in PAP losing its support among certain groups of GRLs in local communities, which signalled a growing political risk community leaders possess in possibly de-stabilising the hold PAP had over the local constituencies.

¹³ The term often used to describe this process was in the Mandarin term “好下台” which was loosely translated as being given a gracious or honorable situation to step down from one's position.

GRLs shared that these concerns over grassroots political risks, as depicted in the 1980s losses, led to the PAP subjecting what was previously a political partnership between GRLs and the PAP MP into further political control by formally co-opting them into the PAP ranks. I define such practices as party capture. Previously, while GRLs were regarded as serving PAP's interests by extension of their grassroots volunteerism through state-sponsored grassroots organizations, they were able to express their political affiliation or support, sometimes even openly as anti-PAP. Part of the rationale was that this allowed the PAP MP to pick up ground disgruntlement through GRLs. Furthermore, these disgruntlement did not pose a political threat to PAP's dominance after the fall of Barisan due to the lack of any viable opposition parties. Veteran GRLs shared that the change started sometime after the loss of Anson in 1981 where GRLs were approached and explicitly encouraged to pledge and demonstrate their allegiance to the local MP by registering as card-carrying PAP activists and playing a more active role in the local PAP political branches. One way in which they did so was through increased presence by serving PAP's Meet-the-Peoples' Sessions and wearing "white-on-white" or PAP's party uniforms in doing local branch work if they had not already done so. New volunteers on the ground were often screened by leader or senior GRLs who were also local PAP activists for their political allegiance and to ascertain motives for joining the grassroots. GRLs that refused to profess their allegiance as PAP members or suspected of harbouring sympathetic attitudes to anti-PAP views were seen by these political activists as "untrustworthy" or "uncommitted", and a gulf between PAP and non-PAP grassroots members emerged:

"You can tell who are the hardcore PAP and those who just sign on because they kenna pressured...those of us (GRLs) who don't want to join or reject...you kena [got] marked until you join." (Mr Bala, ex-GRL)

GRLs shared that in some constituencies, the difference between the “hardcore PAP” GRLs and their non-PAP counterparts resulted in differentiated treatments in terms of access to grassroots funding for local community work, leadership positions and nomination for national honors. GRLs that did not want to risk the pressures of their PAP counterparts usually also had little to lose in subscribing to the party membership. Moreover, one ex-GRL who used to be a senior party activist also shared that GRLs who did eventually sign up as PAP party members were often excused from paying membership fees or sponsoring branch activities. This made the cost of pledging allegiance through being card-carrying activists low enough for GRLs to opt into during that period.

In reducing the political presence of GRLs, the PAP also started investing in more elaborated grounded presence of their MPs in community events and initiatives to show that resources were made possible directly by the MP’s contributions instead of GRLs. Similarly, in Opposition wards, non-MP PAP leaders were nominated as Grassroots Advisers and public monies were channelled through the grassroots organizations to allow them to build political legitimacy and credibility under the pretext of community development (Chua, 1992). The introduction of town councils in 1988 also sought to centralize the MP’s role as a key decision-maker of local municipal developments within public estates as a political institution with a team of local councillors (Haque, 1996). Grassroots leaders vying to be appointed as town councillors often demonstrated their allegiance to the PAP and/or MP. To retain political power over municipal developments in the non-PAP constituencies, the Community Improvement Projects Committee (CIPC) funds, succeeding the URSC program in 1965, continued under the CCC despite the inception of town councils. It allowed the CCC to steer municipal improvements independent of town councils under the hold of PAP MPs or candidates.

Another way grassroots leaders were reined in was through the professionalization of the grassroots sector under the auspice of the One Grassroots Movement starting in 1992 (Yap, 2010). While the professed goal was to modernize the grassroots sector in line with the tenets of New Public Management, which emphasized decentralization and greater accountability through outcomes-based targets and cost-efficiency (Haque, 1996), GRLs shared that it indirectly reduced their local autonomy and scope to lead community initiatives. At the institutional level, the CCCs and RCs were moved from the Prime Minister Office (PMO) and HDB respectively into the People's Association (PA) in 1993. This consolidation expanded the scope by which the People's Association was involved in steering the grassroots sector, and along with this, a delineated working relationship between GRLs and professional staff members in the provision of community support and engagement in the constituency. RC GRLs I spoke to pointed to the change of staff relations on the ground. Previously, full-time staff members were hired through funds designated from RC secretaries who were public servants under the HDB. Under this arrangement, RC GRLs had a major say on how the RCs operated daily and could influence staff hiring and their scope of work. The RC secretaries at HDB simply maintained oversight of both the staff and committee through regular monthly meetings, ensuring that RC GRLs were broadly in line to engage the neighbourhood. After the professionalization, however, the RC secretaries were replaced by a PA staff team who functioned as a bureaucratic check and balance on the RC GRLs. Instead of answering RC GRLs, each RC had a new Constituency Manager (CM) who reported directly to the Constituency Directors, the local heads of each constituency for the PA. They kept tabs on community matters, audited financial processes and steered community engagement by advising GRLs on what neighbourhood events were permissible. Staff members now also had the power to dismiss a GRL based on infringing PA's volunteerism code of conduct. These institutional reforms inverted the relationship between PA staff and

GRLs, giving the former more power over the latter in influencing how grassroots engagement is conducted at the local level. While these moves could be read as bureaucratic absorptions of politics into civil service, they also signalled larger transformations to intensify the overlapping domains between civil service actors, community political actors and the government in politicizing bureaucratic work, as seen in other state-society straddling organisations such as Indonesia's state-led neighbourhood associations, the *rukun tetangga* and *rukun warga* (Kurasawa, 2009) or Thailand's Cooperative Community Groups (CCGs) (Mahakanjana, 2009).

In further disciplining GRLs, the National Community Leadership Training Institute (NACTI) was also formed in 1993 and developed the Standard Training Programme (STP) for GRLs which became the official manuscript for defining grassroots volunteerism under PA. The STP was particularly vital for two reasons. Firstly, it demarcated the roles and boundaries of what grassroots volunteerism constituted. This empowered the state to impose sanctions on GRLs who did not adhere to its policies, effectively constraining what grassroots leaders could do in their role as local community leaders. This included prescribing what GRLs should explicitly do or stand for in their official capacity as civic representatives between state and society. It subjected GRLs to consenting to a strict code of conduct which was constantly monitored and calibrated by ground staff members who represented PA at the local level. For example in the initial years, GRLs shared that they were explicitly instructed that they cannot politicize any neighbourhood related matters or talk about local politics in their role as GRLs. They were also highly discouraged from joining civil society groups or any organizations which were not endorsed by the state. GRLs who did not adopt these practices were deemed as uncooperative or institutional risks and were excluded or stripped of their formal positions as office bearers. The STP also provided the means for the state to codify volunteerism practices in the training of new grassroots leaders in its new role as a

community leadership training institute for grassroots leaders across the different organizations under PA. In doing so, the state redefined the functional and relational roles of grassroots leaders in the neighbourhood as community volunteers instead of political stakeholders.

These reforms were also accompanied by a wider political shift surrounding the emerging demarcation between “civil society activism” and “civic society volunteerism”. The demarcation can be traced back to the declaration of “civic society” by then Minister of the Information and the Arts (MITA) George Yeo in 1990 and later on by other political leaders, to connote the political space between family and society (Lee, 2005). The declaration was part of a conscious interpretation by the state to lay claim on civil society spaces as framed through civic participation out of a sense of national belonging and patriotism (Chua, 2000). This demarcation has wide-ranging implications for civil society participation in political developments in Singapore, with the grassroots sector taking up the ideological space of civic society and local community politics, while civil society remains peripheral to this space and relegated to activism without abode. This demarcation would be known as the out of bounds (OB) markers (Lee, 2005), which indicated the political boundaries by which civil society groups could intervene in Singapore society. In doing so, the grassroots sector was largely insular to social causes such as low-wage migrant issues, gender and sexual equality, and human rights, as the grassroots organizations eschewed activism that was not endorsed by the state. Some GRLs shared that while they were actively passionate about social issues such as human rights and gender inequality, they were told that these agendas should not be brought into the grassroots, as it was a space for civic volunteerism and not civil activism. GRLs who attempted to do so were often faced with rebuke or warnings from their local grassroots leadership for attempting to “politicize” the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, GRLs who were seen as promoting civil activism was often told to regulate their activism or risked not being

appointed for more senior positions in the grassroots hierarchy. What this also meant was that civil society groups in Singapore were excluded from influencing local community politics through the grassroots sector, and did not develop to build local activism bases in ways other cities have done so such as sanctuary cities (Jeffries & Ridgley, 2020; Bauder, 2019) and “LGBT neighbourhoods” (Nash, 2013). This bifurcation of civil society into “civil” and “civic” spaces, therefore, divided local activists and activism into two distinct spheres, each operating under a different set of local policies and regulatory principles from the other.

GRLs’ influence on local politics was also further curtailed with the co-optation of the grassroots and their knowledge of local constituencies to serve PAP’s leadership transition. This was done through the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system. The initial introduction of the GRC system was reasoned by the government to secure greater minority representation at the polls (*Hansard*, 11 January 1988). One of the most significant impacts of this system was that it became an important part of the PAP transition strategy as a training ground for potential PAP MPs. These candidates were introduced into the grassroots as a means of having them familiarized with local GRLs on the ground, building rapport to facilitate the succession and ease into the neighbourhood culture. As many of the new political candidates did not come from the constituencies they served or had prior political experience on the ground were contesting for, the familiarization process enabled these MPs sufficient time to build these relations before they were fielded as MPs. GRLs who were senior political activists were also often let in the know and assisted with the transition by guiding these new candidates into adjusting and learning the local politics.

At the same time, the senior PAP leadership also utilized the grassroots as a means to test out potential candidates’ performance on the ground. This system allowed the PAP to solve the issue of fielding new politicians who were often not recognized or endorsed by local community leaders on the ground. With the grassroots field as a training ground, potential

MPs candidates were able to experience firsthand what was expected of them should they take up the role of political representatives under the PAP's ticket. Compared to the diversity of the first generation of PAP leaders, a good number of these new political candidates were heralded from privileged backgrounds and living conditions which were alien from urban and community cultures in the public estates, especially in underprivileged neighbourhoods. The goal was to acclimatize them into these political realities and expectations and eliminate candidates who could not adjust to the demands of their potential roles. What was new in this system was that GRLs became a useful means to transfer knowledge and support this process of candidate selection by the PAP. In the long run, the grassroots training ground system enabled the PAP to field candidates, who would have not garnered sufficient political mileage and support on their own, to enter politics through its sponsored system.

The above transformations limited GRLs' political autonomy while allowing the PAP to usher in a new wave of MPs who were selected for their technocratic or professional expertise instead of a strong political base. This was however done so at the expense of GRLs who would have stood a chance at entering politics "from below", or influenced politics by backing their preferred political candidates using their grassroots authority. One informant likened the new urban regime of 2nd generation of PAP leadership to Singapore's military system where the MPs were the "officers" who stood aloof and commanded from above while the grassroots leaders were the "NCOs¹⁴ and sergeants" who tended to the ground, and the gulf between these two classes of political actors as in "different worlds". Nevertheless, by reining in grassroots leaders either through party capture or bureaucratic absorption, the PAP defanged GRLs in both direct and indirect ways which retained the latter's effectiveness as state-sponsored volunteers, while at the same time curtailing their potential for political action. In doing so, it reduced the political risks GRLs posed if they supported the emerging

¹⁴ NCO stands for Non-commissioned Officers, who were senior officers in the Singapore's military institution

opposition, while at the same time ensuring that the grassroots sector remained under the hold of the PAP.

4.3 Conclusion: Locating GRLs in Singapore Political History

Are GRLs stooges of the PAP, as political opponents have described, or are they the highly revered community builders to Singapore's national development as espoused in the state-endorsed narrative such as the Singapore Story? In this chapter, I answer these questions by outlining the various ways GRLs narrate the historical developments of the grassroots sectors and their participation during these times. This study draws on GRLs' narratives as they framed their historical role as political actors, and I show that the two dominant narratives which have underlined GRLs' political experiences in the scholarship are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they both revealed the transitions GRLs experienced as political actors. By injecting GRLs' accounts and combining these two narratives, I provide a way to read their emergence and roles as political actors in Singapore's political history.

In the first period, I demonstrated how the local notables of post-WWII Singapore, who started as unlikely allies of the PAP, ultimately joined as strange bedfellows. This alliance offered the PAP its much needed mass political base which replaced its loss from the defection by its left-wing activists. This helped the PAP to emerge as the party which reconciled the most two seemingly contrasting political camps of the era – those who supported colonial-backed reforms and pursued anti-Communist political transition, and those who supported the de-imperialization and independence without succumbing to postcolonial influences. These local notables who eventually emerged as the pioneer group of GRLs also formed a new political class despite divergent reasons for joining the alliance. They backed the PAP to achieve their shared interests in retaining their social positions in society. At this period, GRLs framed the early roles of GRLs as political actors whose

participation made possible the rise of PAP, and their place as a regime partner in the new political compact of post-war Singapore.

In the second period, I showed how urban resettlement projects and the rise of GRLs at the neighbourhood level through RCs led to the political decline and relevance of the initial group of GRLs at the CCC and CCMC during the 1970s. Moreover, with the detachment of the initial group of local notables GRLs from their local communities as a result of kampong resettlements, they could no longer muster the same political leverage they had over the PAP. These factors led to the eventual shift in the narrative from GRLs as political allies into nation-building contributors. In doing so, it obscured the political roles GRLs played in the first epoch and downplayed the political origins of GRLs formation. The largely successful transition in Singapore's urban resettlement of kampongs, along with the formation of RCs, also stifled any potential for organic neighbourhood associations to form that could pose a challenge to the PAP government. Instead, RCs captured a large number of potential civic-minded individuals, rendering them as a new class of GRLs that emerged through their willingness to contribute to their local neighbourhoods' developments under the auspice of the state. In doing so, Singapore's experience in urban renewal did not produce the kinds of diversity of residents or neighbourhood associations seen in other urban contexts elsewhere. In this period, GRLs witnessed the change in their roles as regime partners into contributors of nation-building, and with it the end of their political leverage as leaders of their local mass bases.

In the last period, I illustrated how the rise of disgruntlement among GRLs surrounding PAP's political transitions in the 1980s contributed to headways made by political opposition. In response, the PAP introduced a series of measures through party capture and professionalization of the grassroots sector which inevitably curtailed the potential for GRLs to influence local politics. In party capture, GRLs faced pressures to openly profess their

allegiance by being PAP card-carrying activists as well as contributing to local branch activities. Through professionalization, the power relations between GRLs and bureaucrats were inverted, with the latter now controlling GRLs' scope and capacity for political action. In this period, GRLs interpreted these changes as an attempt by the PAP to fully subject them to the apparatus of the state and party organs, an outcome that characterises the contemporary position of GRLs in Singapore politics.

These periods in Singapore's community politics are however not atypical of some nation-states emerging from post-colonial experiences. Firstly, longstanding political culture drawn from uneven state-society relations affords the state an amount of legitimacy premium seen in strong state formations in East and Southeast Asia (Gilley, 2016). These qualities shaped the choices local political actors make in supporting the state during political upheavals. In the case of Singapore, it explained how different local notables view PAP's incumbency as a sign of strength despite the latter's alienation by left-wing supporters in the early 1960s. Similarly, in post-WWII Japan, the move to dismantle neighbourhood associations or *chokais* by the occupying Allied forces were met with resistance by local Japanese communities, who saw their associations as vital links in supporting the Japanese state to rebuild Japan (Pekkanen, 2009). In these cases, the political primacy of state institutions weighs heavily among political actors who choose to support state institutions as strategies in rebuilding socio-political order (Robinson & Acemoglu, 2012; Huntington, 2006). Likewise, the bureaucratic absorption of urban politics, seen by the subsuming of community elites such as GRLs under state control, is characteristic of strong state developments in creating community partners amenable to cooperation or co-optation. Unlike cities elsewhere where the state relies on social institutions outside of its ambit to achieve local governance (Migdal, 2018; Dahl, 2005), in Singapore, like many of its counterparts in East and Southeast Asia, the modern

state sought to control its cities by penetrating and regulating urban associational life through state-sponsored organizations (Read & Pekkanen, 2009).

Despite these shared characteristics, Singapore's political history is its own. The timing of transformations in GRLs' political roles and significance was also crucial in forming the peculiarities of Singapore's parapolitics, where their roles as state agents frequently overlapped with expectations to maintain PAP's regime despite claiming to be non-partisan. These developments challenge the trend where increasing political liberalization saw a clear re-emergence of grassroots organizations and community leaders participating in local politics such as in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Read, 2014; Degolyer & Scott, 1996). Instead, GRLs in Singapore remain tethered to both the state and the PAP party, even as the city-state experienced political liberalization since the 1990s. Singapore's political history through the frames of GRLs however allows us to understand more clearly the changing relationship between political actors as political developments shape their roles and significance in local politics.

Chapter 5: The Government Next Door: GRLs in Singapore's Neighbourhood Micro-Governance

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, I concluded that the professionalization of the People's Association (PA) in the 1990s has since resulted in a bureaucratic absorption of grassroots politics that transferred the political dominance from GRLs to the state. Instead of working with autonomous neighbourhood and residential associations as depicted in most other urban settings, Singapore's model of neighbourhood governance is largely characterized by a top-down approach where the state plays a dominant role through its intermediary organizations such as the PA, alongside strategic importance of the grassroots space in governing the masses. This style of urban governance has been termed by scholars as neighbourhood micro-governance (Wang & Clarke, 2021; Yip, 2014; Tomba, 2014; Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008).

I define neighbourhood micro-governance (NMG) as a style of urban political administration focusing on the neighbourhood as both space and objective of "intensive governing" (Tomba, 2014: 12). As spaces, the state demarcates the neighbourhood as a scale of governance and sought to make it both highly legible and controllable through state presence and action (Scott, 2008). In objectives, the state views ultra-local engagements in neighbourhood associational life as vital to its core interests in producing governance and seeks to intervene in different aspects of everyday life in neighbourhoods to achieve those aims. In other words, the state is not only interested in the management of everyday urban neighbourhood life, but chooses to do so through intimate, intrusive and sometimes invisible forms of social control such as neighbourly pressures, community surveillance and promoting local narratives conducive to its political legitimacy or control (Tomba, 2014; Read, 2012; Ooi, 2009). In accessing neighbourhoods, the Singapore state can channel NMG through state agents such

as street bureaucrats and community volunteers to influence the quotidian lives of its citizens (Weiss, 2017; Tan, 2003; Vasoo, 1990).

Despite the decline in their political leverage and eventual submission to state organs as depicted in Chapter 4, GRLs continue to be a ubiquitous sight in Singapore's neighbourhood scene, and now play the role of state-sponsored community leaders in their neighbourhood. Existing studies have conventionally accounted for their continued through their roles in enacting nation-building initiatives (Ooi, 2009; Tan, 2003) or in maintaining PAP's interests at the neighbourhood level (Weiss, 2020; Mauzy & Milne, 2002). These studies however do not explain GRLs' significance in urban governance beyond PA's grassroots organizations (GROs) or PAP's local party organs. I contend that while these accounts are necessary, they are insufficient in explaining why GRLs as social actors matter, or in some cases, are essential to reproduce Singapore's style of NMG from the state's point of view. This point can be gleaned from the continued use of GRLs even after PA's reforms, instead of replacing them entirely with street bureaucrats or paying community agents to manage neighbourhood governance as depicted in cities with NMG elsewhere (Read & Pekkanen, 2009). Here, I argue that GRLs are critical to NMG because of the governing toolkits they possess that are used to address the top-down governing objectives and bottom-up challenges of NMG. I define governing toolkits as accumulated knowledge, practices and experiences GRLs acquire that form "strategies of action" (Swidler, 1986: 276) that inform their roles as GRLs. The cultural tools within these toolkits are therefore tools used for governance.

In this chapter, I address the following question - how do GRLs reproduce NMG through their roles as state-sponsored community leaders? I do so first by explaining how GRLs acquire governing tools using different forms of social and cultural capital they accumulate through their roles as "double agents", while regulating their service to state and local community interests. Next, I show how GRLs reproduce NMG through a top-down approach

by analyzing how they utilize their governing toolkits to perform feedback, distribution and manage local issues to fulfil the state's NMG objectives. Lastly, I illustrate how GRLs discuss disruptions by examining their responses to common sets of local challenges to NMG. In doing so, I argue that GRLs are a crucial group of social actors that produce cultural tools which enable the state to employ NMG as its local governing strategy.

5.2: Acquiring Governing Tools as “Double Agents”: GRLs as Community and State Agents Serving State and Community Interests

The unique social position GRLs assume in neighbourhood governance lies in the overlapping roles they play as community and state agents in serving both state and community interests. I argue that as “double agents”, GRLs acquire and synthesize two different sets of governing tools through accumulating social and cultural capital with the communities and state agencies they work with.

Accumulating capital in the community

As community agents, GRLs pursue the interests of their local communities through the positions they hold in GROs. These GROs define the parameters of GRLs' pursuits and are organized either by social demography or area in the constituency. Social demographic-based GROs cater to specific demographic or interests profiles of residents in the constituency that the PA has identified. For instance, the Youth Network organizations (YNs) promote civic participation for youths by youths, and GRLs in YNs pursue local youths' civic needs by recruiting more youths to join in civic participation initiatives such as forming political interests over the communities they belong, as well as organizing youth-centric events that appeal to youths based on endorsed social causes such as sustainability and intercultural harmony in the community. Meanwhile, area-based GROs are in charge of pursuing the local interests of residents demarcated by a territorial boundary. For instance, RCs and NCs are

residents' associations representing civic associational life in public and private neighbourhoods respectively.

Serving as community agents in GROs, GRLs accumulated social and cultural forms of capital that are specific to the demographic profiles of their communities which allowed them to acquire particular sets of governing tools:

“As a RC member...for many years...residents know who we are...share with us what is happening in the estate...they trust us to help to solve their problems or raise them to authorities...sometimes when we want to find out what happened in their block, we can approach them and they will share what they saw” (Mr. Chu, RC volunteer)

Capital accumulation is defined through Bourdieu's (1986) works on forms of capital, where capital is seen as stock of accrued assets owned by individuals and set for future use to accumulate or achieve certain objectives. In other words, capital possesses a relation of reciprocity, where it is mediated by relations between the one who presents it, and the obligations to recognise and fulfil the expectations of the capital's presence to the one whom capital is presented. In this thesis, capital embodies the form of economic, social and cultural entities, and thus accumulated and deployed by individuals. Drawing on Mr Chu's excerpt and other findings, there are two types of governing tools that GRLs acquire through their work in the form of capital as community agents. They are local connections and knowledge. Local connections refer to the forms and degree of connectedness with their communities GRLs possess. GRLs accumulate social capital by forming cordial relations with members of their communities, organizing community actions and building durable communal relations through their GROs. Beyond simply as accumulated networks and gatekeeping trust, GRLs also deploy social capital in what Putnam (2000) described as “bridging” and “bonding”

social capital, the former referring to weak ties between groups, and the latter, strong ties within groups.

I observed that a significant portion of local connections GRLs establish with their communities is through activities that produce bonding social capital. Bonding activities include organizing community events such as block parties or festive celebrations, setting up digital chat groups and reaching out to their communities through community surveys or newsletters. They are aimed at fostering interactions between GRLs and their communities to deepen the connection between the two groups by associational interests. GRLs I spoke to typically measured the reach of their local connections in the context of bonding social capital by the number of members they can reach out through email or phone, and vice versa. Some also measure by the number of members they can mobilize when they organize events or seek collective action. By mobilization, GRLs refer to the number of people they can confidently muster to move, such as being present for a community event or actively supporting a local initiative. GRLs I interacted with reported that their local connections range between twenty to as many as hundreds of connected members, while they reported a maximum mobilization rate of between 5% - 35% of members they are connected with.

A trend I noticed was that GRLs who accumulated their social capital through digital platforms were also frequently those with a much higher number of local connections compared to their peers, but inversely reported a much lower mobilization rate than their non-digital counterparts. This suggests that while using digital platforms to engage in social capital activities can establish weak ties to connect and communicate with members, this may not effectively translate into mobilizing collective action. Another explanation GRL offered was that while reaching out to their communities have become more convenient with the use of social media platforms, mobilizing through weak ties still required them to nurture relations with particular members which have depicted mobilizing capacity. Some GRLs

refer to these individuals as “people persons”. Sometimes, GRLs acquired the role of “people persons” themselves, embedding mobilization strategies into their local connections. Examples included fostering reciprocal relations by helping others in return for the promise of collective action such as supporting a local petition for neighbourhood improvements or building supporter bases through one’s charisma or resources. Other GRLs seek out “people persons” in the community and invest additional time and resources in cultivating their support to rely on them for mobilization.

GRLs also measured local connections by the degree of connectedness they have with residents through bonding social capital to form strong ties:

“Our residents sometimes go through tough times like retrenchment or passing of a loved one...we will pay a visit to show that we care. Some elderly residents who live alone also need a helping hand ...we befriend them and slowly care for them until they are out of the woods. Even after they recover, we still visit them like close friends or relatives...sometimes they tell us “why so kaypo [busybodies], nothing to do always come visit someone with no family members waiting to die”, then we joke back “...you treat us as your godson or god-daughter, then got family member already mah” [laughs]” (Ms. Tan, RC Volunteer)

Ms Tan’s example is a common occurrence among GRLs who connect with their residents using community caregiving as a form of bonding social capital. They often require an intensive amount of time and effort on the part of GRLs to nurture close-knitted relationships between members and them. The most common bonding social capital initiatives include befriending “vulnerable” individuals in their communities to provide community care. I observed that while most of these efforts initially begin with GRLs extending caregiving as community caretakers, these relationships sometimes form durable and strong ties over time.

Unlike weak ties which manifest as connectivity via mass outreach, strong ties allow GRLs to influence their members' actions such as accepting extended support from partners in the community. For instance, GRLs who are befrienders of vulnerable individuals often work closely with community service agencies such as Family Service Centers to assist individuals to tide over their vulnerable situation. Thus, contrary to Putnam's assertion that strong ties deter the emergence of community relations, what I found instead is that GRLs rely on strategies that appeal to both strong and weak ties to connect to their communities. In doing so, GRLs acquire local connections in the form of numerous associations and strong bonds they established with their communities.

Apart from local connections, GRLs also acquire local knowledge of the communities they serve which form cultural capital that augments their governing toolkits.

"Every community got its history...what residents like or don't like, and what you can or cannot do...New GRLs take time to learn all this local knowledge from the laojiaos [more experienced GRLs] about what these are...you slowly gain the knowledge as you serve. After a while when you organise events long enough...trial and error to know what can or cannot do. Sometimes people forget then they do an event...they realized why the older GRLs say these things. It's a very important skill" (Mr Koh, Senior GRL, ex-RC Chairperson)

GRLs framed local knowledge in two ways. The first is cultural knowledge, which refers to the local cultures of communities that characterize their present expectations, practices and demographics. Another form of local knowledge is community memory or the history of communities that define their identities and collective significance. GRLs acquire local knowledge in two ways. The first is through their membership of the communities they serve in. Most GRLs are part of the communities they belong to, owing to GROs' recruitment

prerequisites that require that no more than 10% of members from being outside the communities they serve in. As such, GRLs usually possess a baseline of local knowledge that guides their community work. The most significant part of acquiring local knowledge however comes from their experiences and time spent as community volunteers. The most direct way they do so is through organizing events. Using events, GRLs ascertain the consumption profile and political interests of their communities as they structure events' activities around what they prefer. Successful events, such as distribution of masks during Covid-19, as measured by members' turnout or meeting certain community objectives such as introducing neighbourhood improvements that received widespread local support or endorsement. Meanwhile, unsuccessful events such as those with low turnout or those which captured negative media attention due to public complaints become cautionary tales that GRLs avoid repeating. By having access to interactions with different members of their communities, GRLs not only come across various local cultures and community memories among their members, but they are also able to consolidate them into aggregated information that guides their community sensing. As a form of cultural capital, GRLs use the aggregated information to formulate collective expectations and identities to negotiate for improvements or benefits to the communities with state agencies or bring members together towards a common goal.

Accumulating capital through state agencies

GRLs also play the role of state agents as state-sponsored volunteers. Unlike community leaders in other civil or civic organizations that derive their roles representing communities, GRLs in Singapore are endorsed as state-linked actors that embody the state legitimacy in carrying out their community volunteerism. They are deemed by other state agencies as allied partners working to serve the objectives of NMG rather than as independent community agents. Scholars such as Read (2012) termed such individuals agents of administrative

grassroots engagement that the state relies on to connect national-level policies to communities. GRLs work closely with a variety of state agencies and local governing bodies—the most commonly cited being Town Councils, HDB, LTA, NEA and NParks. These state agencies also have a strong local presence in local communities owing to the nature of their work to implement national policies locally. Thus in interactions between state agencies, GRLs acquire specific social and cultural capital that is converted into governing tools. Here I discuss three forms – working relationships, bureaucratic “officialese” and local knowledge of bureaucratic cultures.

One such form of social capital GRLs acquire is the working relationships they form with street bureaucrats of state agencies. Street bureaucrats form a large part of the face of the state in interfacing communities, and their objectives ranged from implementing policies, gathering feedback and managing relations with local stakeholders such as MPs, GRLs, other community partners such as merchants associations and residents at the constituency level. To coordinate municipal developments in local neighbourhoods, GRLs work closely with street bureaucrats, and often form cordial relationships that bolster cooperation between the two. GRLs cultivate these working relationships for a variety of reasons. One most common reason is that it enabled them to influence municipal developments by nudging street bureaucrats to accede to their recommendations as community leaders. One instance I found was NC GRLs in landed estates lobbying with LTA for the removal of parking restrictions outside their and other members’ units in exchange for the support over widening of roads along their streets. Other GRLs shared that these working relationships allowed access to privileged information that is not yet released to the public when street bureaucrats share them with GRLs to keep the latter prepared for a negative groundswell. Sometimes, such information carried minor significance, such as proposed improvements to playground or community facilities. Here, GRLs simply enjoyed the privilege of possessing early

information. At other times, the information carried significant materiality, such as news of Selective En Bloc Redevelopment (SERS) or announcement of major upgrading programs, which affect real estate prices. Street bureaucrats also benefited from such working relationships by relying on GRLs to suggest municipal improvements that will boost public approval or obtain feedback to anticipate the impact of unpopular municipal decisions. For instance, GRLs are often consulted by street bureaucrats over local municipal projects such as enhancing a playground or building sheltered link-ways before they are implemented to ensure that possible local considerations are factored in. All these actions point to the potential significance of the influence GRLs accumulate through their working relationships with local actors in state agencies.

In terms of cultural capital, one governing tool GRLs commonly cited acquiring is interpreting and using bureaucratic “officialese”. GRLs pick up what some described as “government language” through repeated interactions and correspondences:

“[State] Agencies don’t dare to say no directly to the Adviser or grassroots [GRLs] because it’s not politically correct...But after awhile [sic] you realize they actually say no in government language...they will say “oh the project will have foreseeable delays due to whatever lah”, or “research shows that not advisable to build”...you learn to read between the lines and know they actually don’t want to do it in the first place...so if you want to tekan [rebuke] them, you also need to use their language so that they know they cannot siam [avoid]...if you outright say them, then also not nice mah, cause supposed to be working together” (Mr Chan, NC Chairperson, CCC Member)

Bureaucratic officialese is the coded language used by state agencies to convey intentions through jargon and linguistic cues recognized among political agents. Some GRLs shared that

this stemmed from the need to maintain decorum in official settings while buffering the impact of rejections and reprehensions street bureaucrats get from the MP or GRLs, to avoid being blamed for being the bearer of bad news. As a function of politics, scholars have noted that the use of bureaucratic officialese confers political power and control over those who employ these discursive practices over those who can neither decipher nor speak it, effectively silencing the latter (Sarangi & Slembrouck; Elliot, 1987). Likewise, state agencies often use bureaucratic officialese on GRLs to dismiss or defer their requests without having to reject them outright. By learning to “read between the lines” through experience, however, GRLs can participate in local policymaking in “government language”, effectively mitigating the political advantage state agencies have over them during policy negotiations. Furthermore, GRLs also learn how to use bureaucratic officialese to convey their intentions to state agencies and political actors such as MPs while being in line with political etiquette. In doing so, GRLs can effectively engage in politicking with state agencies and other governing bodies that recognize bureaucratic officialese while maintaining the stability of local governing relations from outsiders’ points of view.

Lastly, most GRLs that constantly deal with state agencies often realize that state agencies operate very differently across districts and levels of organizations. I termed these as local bureaucratic cultures. Differences between local bureaucratic cultures include the ways state agencies communicate with community stakeholders, the level of inertia or interest agencies display over different types of municipal matters, as well as peculiar styles of working relationships the street bureaucrats embody. Reasons GRLs offered in accounting for this diversity ranged anywhere from idiosyncratic personalities to institutional legacies. What I found however is that despite these differences, GRLs are often able to accumulate local knowledge of bureaucratic cultures through their interactions with these agencies and work with their institutional quirks to meet municipal goals. I also observed that some GRLs also

often played a coordinating role in getting multiple state agencies to work together, and manage the various local bureaucratic cultures to smoothen inter-agency coordination. For example, GRLs are often tasked by the grassroots leadership with communicating with local bureaucrats across agencies in managing a municipal issue or community initiative and creating the glue that enables different agencies to be on the page or direction in terms of community expectations. In doing so, these GRLs are often highly regarded by their agency counterparts as valuable partners. This suggests the critical role GRLs play as mediators in bringing state agencies together and reconciling differences in bureaucratic cultures at the local level.

In serving both state and society as double agents, however, GRLs run the risk of what scholars termed the “multiple principals” problem (Whorsham & Gatrell, 2005’; Da Cruz & Marques, 2010). When agents serving two or more principals are met with resource constraints or have vested interests in serving one more than the other, it results in higher transaction costs and conflicting expectations (Schillemans & Bovens, 2015). Moreover, others have noted that even if agents do balance multiple principal expectations, the cost arising from overlapping monitoring to prevent agents from benefitting themselves may mitigate its effects. On the ground, I found that most GRLs indeed pursue vested interests in serving either community or state objectives at the expense of the other. Community-oriented GRLs justify their interests by appealing to their role as community leaders fighting to achieve benefits for their communities, even if it meant going against state objectives at the risk of their positions. For instance, I witnessed how GRLs, along with residents, appealed for a public explanation from the local MP when certain zoning areas were abruptly changed, resulting in a large part of residents’ views being blocked by a new housing development. In this case, while GRLs were expected to play the middle ground, they protested with residents as there were similarly affected and saw their roles as community representatives to express

their displeasure. On the other hand, state-oriented GRLs rationalize their allegiance by citing their role legitimacy as deriving from state authority, and therefore perceiving their obligations as tied to the state. Meanwhile, I also found GRLs who chose to free-ride by enjoying the privileges of being GRLs while not contributing to either.

Despite the ubiquity of these predispositions, I found that most GRLs did not undermine community or/and state interests in ways that destabilised their roles as double agents. GRLs explain that this is because their conduct are constrained by “boundaries” that moderated their community volunteerism.

Figure 10: Boundary for GRLs' conduct

This boundary is a feature of Singapore's NMG model. It ensures that while individual GRLs pursue whichever interests they choose to, they do so within what is institutionally tolerated by the state through PA, regulating GRLs' actions within what the state regards as permissible. GRL shared that these boundaries were constituted out of a combination of the political expectations by the GA and the grassroots leadership, the Constituency Office's (CO) directive as the local face of PA's bureaucracy, as well as residents' collective expectations as interpreted by GRLs themselves. These boundaries specifically constrain GRLs' governing practices and exist in both formal forms such as GRLs' code of conduct and regulations to grassroots activities, as well as informal forms such as social expectations to meet the combined expectations of the GA, PA and residents without offending either. While the formal forms of these boundaries were often clear and continuously enforced by

the CO staff, the informal expectations were less so. Thus, GRLs acquaint themselves of these informal expectations by socializing with other GRLs, PA staff or the GA in the grassroots to gain a relative general but adequate sense of what these boundaries are. As such, GRLs also rarely overstepped the more invisible aspects of these boundaries, but the few that do serve as cautionary tales for where such limits are and the consequences of doing so. Common reasons include receiving complaints by PA staff and/or community members over issues such as acts of self-benefits or failing to comply with PA's code of conduct for volunteers. The consequences ranged from formal disciplinary actions such as institutional censure by PA or stripping off their GRL positions to informal punishments such as ostracization by other GRLs and community members. Such boundaries are likened to what scholars termed as "OB" markers in Singapore (George, 2016; Lee 2002). Here, I argue that despite being state-sponsored volunteers, the strategies of regulating GRLs' political actions by the state do not greatly differ from how it operates in other spheres of society. Agents self-regulate their political action as a form of accountability, albeit by passing on and internalizing the cost of monitoring.

5.3: Top-Down Approach to NMG: GRLs in Surveillance and Distribution Practices

Under the "P-G-P" Model

To understand how GRLs fulfil state objectives in NMG, a short discussion of how NMG is organized in Singapore is warranted. The most prominent way this is through PA's People-Government-People (P-G-P) engagement model (*NACLI*, 2017).

Figure 11: PGP model

Typically introduced during GRLs’ orientation seminars, training programs, as well as in leadership dialogues by PA’s training arm, the National Community Leadership Institute (NACLI), the P-G-P model summarizes the state’s key objectives and style of NMG, as well as underscores the double agent roles GRLs play in mediating state and society. While the inverse triangle is formally depicted as signifying the importance of the “people” in state-society relations, one GRL joked that its topography is an allusion to the constant state’s presence “beneath” every grassroots interaction. Such allusions are however not absurd. As Scott (1998) argues, the breakthrough of modern states lies in their capacity to intervene in society to make it legible, controllable and cultivatable for its interests. A significant part of Singapore’s style of NMG is therefore not simply governance for governance’s sake, but also a project aimed at imposing its schemes through ultra-local interactions and contexts to mould society at its foundations and present it as national development to support its political legitimacy (Loh, 1998; Teo & Khong, 1997).

Here, I examine the schemes of the P-G-P as represented by three types of governing repertoires GRLs perform as top-down governing approaches in reproducing NMG. They are channeling local feedback, managing state resource distribution, and adjudicating local issues. Governing repertoires are defined stocks of governing practices that allow social actors to readily act or adapt to perceivable situations. It limits the range of perceivable

governing practices at the moment of recognizing the political task at hand, while at the same prompting likely sets of possible actions the individual can draw on based on one's accumulation of social and cultural capital (Swidler, 1986; Foucault, 1978). These are top-down approaches as they underscore the institutional objectives the state expects GRLs to perform to serve its interests. I link governing repertoires and GRLs' governing toolkits by examining how they utilize governing tools in their arsenal to produce local feedback, distribute state resources and manage local issues as part of NMG.

Providing “Feedback”: Relaying, Contextualizing and Micro-processing Local Information

Ask any residents who they might approach if they wanted to raise a concern on neighbourhood issues, and chances are, and their answer would be GRLs. The neighbourhood feedback system works embedded into the community grapevine in different ways, sometimes through casual conversations between residents along with the corridors or at community events, during home visits by the local Member of Parliament (MP), or even in neighbourhood or community group chats in WhatsApps or Telegram. At the heart of these interactions is residents' feedback. Residents provide feedback to GRLs in a variety of ways and for a plethora of reasons. Most do so directly such as raising their concerns by calling GRLs they know and trust over faulty common facilities or community safety problems. Others sought more discreet means, one even resorting to dropping an unmarked letter at the doorstep of the RC chairperson in the wee hours of the night to report a suspected illegal brothel operating out of a neighbour's unit.

The informational economy of residents' feedback is a vital vein of resource to state actors and local political bodies for different reasons. State agencies such as HDB, NParks, LTA and NEA tune in to the local chatter to collate and resolve local grievances surrounding policy decisions on the ground. Town councils rely on residents' feedback in order to keep up

with maintaining common facilities and improving neighbourhood amenities. MPs drive local community initiatives on the back of what they gather from residents in the hopes of displaying their efforts. In essence, feedback fuels public policy and political developments on the ground. Despite the increase in emphasis and investments to enhance the capacity and frequency of community communication by state agencies and governing bodies, I found that a significant amount of residents' feedback continues to be mediated by GRLs. The reason is threefold.

Firstly, GRLs have often developed or had access to an elaborate system of communication networks as part of their community outreach, and these channels often accessed a wide number of residents in ways that state agencies have little access to or are costly to develop. These channels facilitated feedback collection in two ways. Firstly, GRLs can purposively tap on these channels to obtain local responses. Examples range from one-to-one interactions such as seeking out specific neighbours on the pretext of fulfilling grassroots duties, to mass-based interactions such as conducting community surveys. State agencies leveraged these networks sending their information requests to GRLs to float them through various channels to obtain residents' feedback. For instance, the HDB relies extensively on GRLs to obtain feedback on Housing Improvement Programmes (HIPs) and Neighbourhood Renewal Programmes (NRPs) before commencement to calibrate the choices of improvement to increase public approval. Conversely, these networks also functioned as listening posts where GRLs intercepted local information shared through local chatter to alert state agencies on possible issues in the neighbourhood for their action. In doing so, these networks managed by GRLs offered state agencies the means of connecting to residents while lowering transaction costs of communication

Secondly, GRLs provide solutions to informational quality problems faced by state agencies. One example is what I termed as patronizing information or information that obscures or

downplays the severity of the problem by the informant. Street bureaucrats reported that they frequently faced patronizing information with residents which disrupted their public work or resulted in costly delays. One common occurrence is during dengue site visits where residents would rebuff inspectors by being reticent and offered insufficient information. Other examples included neglected faulty common facilities or displaying bystander effect to domestic violence faced by neighbours. Reasons residents offered range from fear of getting into trouble with authorities or being seen as busybodies, to general reticence towards street bureaucrat or display of NIMBY attitudes (Wexler, 1996). GRLs often overcome this problem by utilizing their local connections and knowledge to convince or compel residents to provide additional information or context to these issues. Typical examples included acting as local guarantors for residents to obtain immunity from municipal misdemeanours in exchange for cooperation, socially pressuring NIMBY residents to mobilize towards issues such as littering, or rallying residents to collectively support interventions to community problems such as enforcing new traffic regulations in the neighbourhood which may incur inconvenience by improving safety. GRLs also improve informational quality by offering contextual information through their local knowledge to enable state agencies to corroborate or supplement other information they possess.

Beyond moderating access and quality of feedback, GRLs also translate local grievances into legible information for state agencies.

“Residents complained that there wasn’t enough parking lots in the MSCP, but HDB’s monitoring survey said that there were adequate lots and closed the case. This made the residents very unhappy. Later on we gather feedback and realize that HDB got it all wrong...these residents bought season parking but had to fight with public for car park lots. We explained to HDB about the “fairness problem” and make them realize why it’s actually a “parking problem” from residents’

point of view even though the survey is correct. We explain residents really wanted red lots at different parts of the MSCP so that it makes sense for season parking holders. HDB said ok, so everyone was happy.” (Mr Wong, RC GRL)

The above example showed how GRLs mitigated the season parking issue between residents and HDB by recognizing and translating the miscommunications between residents and HDB in how they defined the lack of parking lots differently. The task of translation mirrors what Latour and Woolgar termed as “microprocessing facts” (2013: 151), or converting unintelligible abstractions into perceivable information within a frame of recognition. Synthesizing their local knowledge and connections with knowledge of bureaucratic cultures and “officialese”, GRLs help state agencies reduce misinterpretation by processing residents’ feedback through the same cultural frames street bureaucrats use to diagnose and negotiate local issues. In doing so, GRLs operate as more than just “eyes” of the state. Instead, they operate as crucial translators that draw on the cultural capital of local communities and bureaucracy and connect the two social worlds. These translations are however not always perfect, as they are dependent on the sum of local knowledge and GRLs’ ability to interpret officialese.

Managing State Resource Distribution

The state also utilizes GRLs to manage the transmission and style of local service delivery of policy information, public and private resources to communities and neighbourhoods. This is part of the state’s reliance on community agents in planning and executing the dissemination of public information and resources right to residents’ doorsteps (Read, 2012; Ooi, 2009). These local distribution channels are also embedded into the same grassroots networks that GRLs maintain for feedback operations, and allow the state to achieve two crucial goals. Firstly, they functioned as distribution valves which the state can calibrate what and how policy information and resources reach local communities. It augments state capacity to

quickly track who receives what and how, complementing policy implementation which requires mass public buy-in such as distributing TraceTogether tokens and apps to conduct contact tracing (Stevens & Bhadra, 2020; Woo, 2020). Secondly, it reduces the transaction cost of building and maintaining duplicate distribution networks by other state agencies as the logistical and operational burdens of existing networks are maintained by GRLs which can be tapped on. Examples include leveraging on neighbourhood Whatsapp group to disseminate new policy announcements that require quick and/or public uptake such as new control measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, or information on how the latest Singapore Budget affects locals.

Figure 12: Types of Distribution Practices enacted by GRLs

Summarizing GRLs' experiences, I found four different types of distribution practices (See Figure 12). They are "broadcasting", "delivery", "co-creating", and "organizing" distributions, and are differentiated by the varying levels of social and cultural capital required. While these practices are delineated for analytical purposes, I found that most distribution exercises incorporate all four types of practices to varying degrees. For instance,

organizing a community event would require GRLs to broadcast the event details to the community, do door-to-door rounds to sell tickets, and work with partnering state agencies to incorporate community engagements through the events.

At the lowest rung of the spectrum is broadcasting or distribution practices that do not require GRLs to intensively draw on their local connections and knowledge to support outreach or translation in local communities. GRLs control several broadcasting outlets including platforms such as community noticeboards and banner stands in the community or in residents' or community Facebook groups. Other outlets include human actors such as people persons who operate as town criers. Despite its rudimentary setup, broadcasting practices remain integral to the state's distribution strategy because they occupy high visibility locations in the local neighbourhoods. GRLs manage broadcasting practices in two ways. Firstly, they maintain broadcasting platforms by populating them in strategic locations such as common entrances to estates, near bus stops, or around commercial spaces such as coffee shops and provision shops, periodically evaluating its effectiveness by checking in with their communities. GRLs also perform the role of gatekeepers in screening and authorizing broadcasted materials in their local communities that they deem as "suitable" based on residents' expectations. For instance, community boards are secured under lock and key to deter use and GRLs actively remove unauthorized posters or report dubious information shared by other residents, citing vandalism and fake news. Authorized posters are reviewed for information clarity and accessibility such as language use and appropriate visuals that conform to state-endorsed racial and religious depiction. In doing so, they police the flow of broadcasted information in the neighbourhood by ensuring that state-endorsed materials are privileged over other sources.

Delivery-based distribution refers to the targeted distribution of information or goods to selected recipients. They are what GRLs refer to as "last-mile connections", and emphasise

one-to-one transmissions instead of mass-based outreach. GRLs make delivery possible by tapping on their local connections to access residents that fit into delivery profiles. Using their information on and relationships with residents GRLs work with state agencies to encourage residents with specific demographic profiles they are targeting to enrol into public programs. For instance, GRLs were deployed as “ambassadors” to convince their communities to opt into COVID-19 vaccination programs through visits to selected residents who have not signed up. I found that GRLs utilized their local connections to augment delivery strategies. In most cases, they leverage the social trust residents have for state authority by declaring their GRL identities as state-sponsored volunteers. When residents exhibit mistrust for public bodies, such as when residents rebuff social welfare workers, GRLs play up their neighbourly ties as a foot-in-the-door technique to open up. GRLs also leveraged their friendly relations with neighbours to reach out to their family members. The examples suggest that GRLs recognize how social capital can be utilized to achieve last-mile connections to reach their target audiences. In doing so, they enable other state actors to access the domestic spheres of communities, depicting how the state shapes the family through micro-interactions at the local levels (Teo, 2010) through the role of GRLs as the point of access.

Figure 13: State agencies (left) and GRLs (right) co-creating distribution.

Unlike delivery-based practices that highly capitalize on social capital, co-creating distributions require GRLs to incorporate local knowledge of communities with their knowledge of public agencies' goals to customize local policy communication with state agencies. GRLs play the role of curators by converting state agencies' objectives into local contexts. In doing so, state agencies use GRLs local knowledge to guide their policy communication and public outreach in local communities. One such example is the budget talk hosted by the Central Provident Board (CPF) in Figure 13, where they collaborated with GRLs to co-organize a breakfast session based on GRLs' recommendations that Sunday late mornings were the best time to conduct such talks with residents living in the estate due to the latter's demographic habits. By using the information GRLs provide, state agencies save on transaction costs in having to experiment with different ways of creating outreach in local communities.

Organizing practices offer GRLs the most autonomy compared to the above three distribution practices in terms of deciding how and what public resources should be distributed. The administrative liberty however produces intricate ways in which the state's objectives are achieved through GRLs' seemingly self-directed pursuits. Firstly, GRLs do so using funds allocated by its parent organization, the PA.

Grassroots Organisation Type	Estimated annual State Allocation of Funding through People's Association (excl. grants, or unscheduled transfers)
Residents' Committee (RC)	\$15,000
Neighbourhood Committee (NC)	\$7,000
Residents' Network (RN)	\$15,000
Citizen Consultative Committee (CCC) Community Centre Management Committees (CCMC)	\$2,500 - \$5,000 (Exclude unscheduled transfers and grants such as CIPC)

Figure 14: Estimated annual state funding through People's Association (field findings).

Resident Committees and Networks receive the most allocated state funding for organizing for two reasons. Firstly, part of the organizing cost includes maintaining a local RC/RN

centre and staff, a legacy of the RC system which continued into the present. These centres serve as communal facilities which GRLs use to organize events. Secondly, RCs and RNs serve public estate neighbourhoods which are seen as relatively less affluent than their private neighbourhood counterparts. To allow RC GRLs to provide more subsidies to public estate residents, higher funding amounts are allocated to RCs and RNs.

Popular Event Type	Annual Frequency (district, est.)	Average participants per event (est.)	Subsidy amount (\$ per pax)	Total Subsidy per event (est.)
Durian events	7	200	\$25	\$5,000
Sit-down dinners	4	300	\$50	\$15,000
Local Excursions	60	75	\$20	\$1,500
Sports/Health events	25	30	\$10	\$300
Interest-based events	120	16	\$20	\$320
“Reserved” events	4	NDCs (400 – 800) LNYC (200 – 500) Hari Raya Puasa (100 – 200) Deepavali (80 – 150)	\$20 - \$50	NDCs (\$21,000) LNYC (\$12,250) Hari Raya Puasa (\$5,250) Deepavali (\$4,025)

Figure 15: Rough subsidy averages of 47th District’s and other districts community events on an annual basis (figures are ranged averaged using available financial data from events)

Despite the public funding, the number of subsidies to residents shown in Figure 15 often meant that GRLs needed to raise extra funds to cover events’ costs. A significant part of organizing, therefore, involved fundraising. Leader and Senior GRLs are tasked with raising funds by seeking donations from their networks to support the constituency’s grassroots coffers. GRLs conducted fundraisers for their constituencies and competed with other constituencies as well as other fundraising initiatives in the non-profit sector. The fundraising activities were incorporated into events such as during festive celebrations like Lunar New Year and National Day, or as charity projects such as sporting competitions and auction drives. Senior GRLs also contributed to the cause as “patrons”, a titular position in the CCC, where they solicited donations from personal connections and channelled them to the

constituency they were serving in. The donations raised per event ranged anywhere from \$10,000 to as much as in the millions of dollars. For instance, in a charity golf and auction dinner event organized by GRLs in the 47th District, they raised over \$350,000 in a single day, with a single patron donating as much as \$50,000. At the local level, volunteer GRLs resorted to selling tickets or sought community engagement grants from state agencies to offset event costs. The differences in funds raised have an impact on GRLs' legitimacy, with the leader and senior GRLs being respected by volunteer GRLs and residents for being able to organize fundraising through their social networks. The state however ultimately benefits by leveraging on GRLs' social and cultural capital to accumulate economic capital in the form of private resources to be channelled into public goods for local communities.

Besides fundraising, GRLs also organize “reserved” events as local encounters of nation-building initiatives. Reserved events refer to compulsory community celebrations designated by PA which I argue reproduce the spectacle of the state's multiculturalism (Goh, 2013).

Figure 16: NDC live-telecast organized by GRLs to celebrate National Day in the heartlands.

The most significant reserved event is the National Day Celebrations (NDC), which is organized to reproduce what Kong & Yeoh (1997) describe as national identity through local reproductions of national rituals as theatricality. This includes reproducing imperative rituals such as reciting the National Pledge, singing the National Anthem and receiving a national day speech from the Grassroots Adviser (GA), to showcase how local communities interpret ideological tenets of the nation through multicultural performances. Most NDCs even run concurrently with the actual National Day Parade (NDP) by live-telecasting the celebrations as a community event, simultaneously mimicking NDP rituals with the audience at the NDC. In doing so, the NDC repackages the spectacle of the NDP through the grassroots, producing a locally-scaled experience of consuming the nation (Leong, 2001) through consuming the heartlands and vice versa.

Other than the NDC, there are three main festivals designated to the Chinese (Lunar New Year), Malay, (Hari Raya Puasa), and Indian (Deepavali) races in Singapore. Despite its intent to promote racial and religious harmony through grassroots activities, in the sites I have observed, the funds and emphasis placed on each festival varied considerably. For instance, GRLs in charge of organizing Hari Raya Puasa or Deepavali are typically members of the Malay Activities (MAEC) and Indian Activities (IAEC) Executive Committees respectively. They have shared that despite the reserved status of these celebrations, their organizing capacity is limited to the funds and outreach members in either committee can muster. Except for constituencies with a significant Malay or Indian community presence, minority reserved events are organized as small-scale events with a turnout of between 100 – 200 people. In contrast, Lunar New Year Celebrations (LNYCs) in the grassroots were touted as elaborate affairs that rivalled NDCs in scale. Organized majorly by leader and senior GRLs, LNYCs featured different kinds of local celebrations such as calligraphy distribution, lion dance competitions and a community sit-down dinner with an average turnout of

between 200 - 500 or more people. The state also celebrates the “Chap Goh Mei”, or the 15th day of the Lunar New Year, as an official function, with the Prime Minister giving a Lunar New Year Address to invited grassroots leaders. These examples illustrate how the state promotes its brand of multiculturalism by recognizing the symbolic significance of racial harmony in Singapore according to reserved events for each major racial group represented by GRLs at their local levels. (Chua, 2007) At the same time, the differences in investments and turnout to reserved events reminded minority communities of the realities of structural inequalities they faced in Singapore when GRLs are given rein over their racial communities’ celebrations. These “hard truths” serve as an ideological reminder to local minority communities of their demographic minority status in Singapore, which in turn reproduce legitimacy for the state as a custodian over maintaining the symbolic significance of racial representation in the heartlands in what Vasu (2012) described as governing through racial and religious differences.

Outside of reserved events, GRLs have broader liberty to organize events, with the sole criteria of responding to their communities’ demands. However, I found that GRLs often supported event requests of members whom they identified with considerable economic, social or cultural capital in their communities. Examples include notables in clan or religious associations, leaders of local merchant associations, heads of local interests groups or simply residents with the influence to mobilize other residents. Firstly, organizing a successful event elevates GRLs’ legitimacy within their communities as they are seen as advancing the organizational interests of the group. GRLs, therefore, have vested interests in organizing events that are not only well-received by residents, they are also likely to succeed. By successfully organizing events that are also aligned with influential members, GRLs raised their own political influence in their communities with the approval or support of these members. Secondly, these influential members also possess the capability to contest the

influence GRLs have in these communities should they not respond to their expectations. This jeopardizes their positions as GRLs should influential members choose to compete with them. GRLs, therefore, strike a balance among influential members by spreading out their organizing across the different interests, where influential members' expectations are adequately met through a balanced line-up of events that included everyone as much as possible. Both of these reasons explain why GRLs choose to organize a recurring line-up of events in local communities. Correspondingly, changes to these events' lineup signal shifts in the local political influence among influential members. By managing influential members through organizing, GRLs assist the state in identifying who they are while maintaining political order in local communities by governing on the state's behalf. This is often done through formal channels such as constituency leadership meetings where GRLs updates the list of notable influential members to the GA and CO staff. This information augments the state capacity to anticipate power shifts among notable communities such as clan or business associations, religious organizations or community movements at the national level by observing developments at the grassroots.

Adjudicating Local Problems

A GRL once remarked, "I may not have the right answers, but I know what the problems are". This quote sums up the next significant role GRLs perform; adjudicating local problems in their communities. Neighbourhood associational life is filled with issues like neighbourly disputes, deficient municipal facilities, and contestations between state agencies and residents over local regulations. GRLs shared that imageries of friendly neighbours and harmonious communal relations depicted by state agencies, project desires, rather than realities.

GRLs' journey of adjudication first begins by promoting themselves as reliable figures of community adjudication. A major reason is that they are by no means the only or the most influential group of local actors that collect data on local issues. Residents' choices run the

gamut from government digital platforms such as the OneService App, local helplines that quickly connect residents to street bureaucrats, to Meet-the-People sessions with MPs promising to do their best for constituents to show their political worth. Despite these alternatives, I found that most residents often preferred to rely on GRLs to solve their problems. One reason is that to keep up their relevance as adjudicators, GRLs utilize their governing toolkits to build and maintain adjudicator identities that appeal to residents. Some GRLs appeal to residents with their reputations for being trustworthy and empathetic. Residents seek them out when they needed discrete interventions for issues such as family issues, neighbourly disputes or employment problems. Other GRLs offer efficiency with their connections with street bureaucrats, which residents rely on to quickly address municipal issues such as faulty lighting, or litter and pest related issues. Meanwhile GRLs with in-depth policy knowledge benefit residents by negotiating with state agencies in issues such as municipal violations (eg. Waiving fines, appealing traffic summons) and policy related queries on their behalf. All these examples suggest that GRLs selectively use their social and cultural capital to offer residents different ways to resolve their local issues. In doing so, they cultivate adjudicator identities that appeal to what residents think would best address the local concerns they have.

Despite cultivating access to these problems, GRLs perform adjudication selectively by choosing to recognize some residents' problems as community issues and resolving them, while framing others as personal matters, not within their scope of grassroots duties. GRLs shared two reasons why. Firstly, they frame community issues by deliberating if residents' problems fit into the purview of local state agencies' jurisdictions they are familiar with or work with. Applying their knowledge of what local agencies can do through interactions with street bureaucrats, GRLs identify possible justifications for their interventions. For instance, if a resident's complaint about illegal parking outside his property is interpreted as within the

purview of LTA, and if LTA has strong working relationships with the local grassroots, GRLs are more likely to resolve the issue. Conversely, when GRLs are unable to frame the issue within state agencies' purview or have poor/weak working relationships with state agencies, they are less likely to resolve or get involved in the matter as they do not see a means to justify their interventions. One social worker in BlueBricks estate estimated that the GRLs who have working relationships with the local social service office were thrice more likely to resolve or refer social assistance related appeals by residents than other GRLs. GRLs explained that their justification to frame and resolve community issues is tied to how much support or approval they think they can get from state agencies based on prior experiences.

Secondly, GRLs based their adjudication selections on how they define "community interests" by taking cues from three groups of actors – the GA, leader/senior GRLs and residents. Each of these groups exhibits a set of community preferences that is transmitted when interacting with GRLs. All else equal, the GA possesses the most influence on GRLs as he/she is regarded as the "face" and de facto leader of the constituency's grassroots movement. For instance, GRLs in the 47th District prioritized resolving municipal concerns as the GA made it a major grassroots commitment through a series of local campaigning. In another instance, while GRLs in the BlueBricks estate initially focused on the elderly's well-being as it was part of the outgoing GA's political identity to appeal to elderly folks, this focus was shifted to alleviating the pain points of local business communities with the arrival of a new GA. Similarly, leader and senior GRLs who have significant local influences also reflected their preferences to lower-ranking GRLs. By aligning their adjudication practices with the interests of civic passions of higher-ranking GRLs, lower-ranking GRLs can build rapport with them for associational purposes. Collective local influences among residents also shape GRLs choices too. For instance, two neighbourhoods adjacent to each other in the 47th District depict vastly different policies addressing stray cats. In the first, they were considered

pests owing to complaints by residents and local merchants, and GRLs often worked with the Town Council to relocate the cats. Across the street, they were considered community cats and GRLs actively collaborated with animal rights groups to maintain their well-being. This was in part due to pressures from groups of residents who were also animal activists and a younger population of households who were open to the idea of community cats. GRLs explained that they refer to these groups of local actors because they influence the value of community interests. GRLs, therefore, adjudicate issues only when they feel these issues are valued to actors that they serve, rendering their time and effort worthwhile.

These findings illustrate how the state uses GRLs as local mediators that filter residents' concerns by resolving local ones while escalating more serious cases to state agencies on behalf of the state. Doing so also enables the state to continuously keep a pulse on the ground to understand local issues which inform policymaking. At the same time, it allows the state to actively shape the distinction between community and personal issues when GRLs respond to the GA's and state agencies' preferences. When residents appeal to the state through GRLs as an arbiter of community problems, it further justifies the state's role as a regulator of social harmony in Singapore (Koh & Soon, 2012). These adjudication practices however also produce problematic moments when systematic or public issues are trivialized or interpreted as personal problems. This is particularly so in issues such as racist or xenophobic incidents where GRLs with the lack of knowledge to recognize the social elements of these issues fail to raise them as concerns to state agencies. This might also suggest why residents turn to other avenues such as social media to pour out their grievances or address such issues, as they do not have to rely on GRLs to adjudicate the gravity of their concerns when they expect that their issues might be trivialized or personalized.

5.4 NMG Disrupted: GRLs' Responses to Bottom-up Challenges as Community

Leaders

The cases I have illustrated thus far suggest a coherent picture of how GRLs serve the state by implementing its objectives through their roles as state-sponsored community leaders. The experiences GRLs recounted are however anything but amicable. Reproducing NMG requires GRLs to adapt state objectives with local contexts, but meeting both is often fraught with local challenges that disrupt the state's interventions into neighbourhood associational life. Here, I discuss three bottom-up instances that reveal the local challenges GRLs face in their work of adapting NMG to their communities. They are outsourced governance, the politics of consumption, and the politics of representation. I share how GRLs respond differently to each instance and how these differences reveal internal organizational contradictions GRLs face that highlights the limits of Singapore's NMG.

Outsourced Grassroots

In *Governing Global-City Singapore*, Tan (2017) outlines Singapore's mode of governance as a marriage between ideological pragmatism, authoritarian controls and technocratic solutions in achieving capital and compliance. This allows the state to carve out a narrative of political strength which in turn legitimizes its dominance over society under the PAP government (Tan, 2012). These manoeuvres also manifest as narratives in the grassroots movement that reinforce state legitimacy in neighbourhood associational life. One such narrative is the ideological depiction of GRLs as natural community leaders in bonding communities. They do so by leading local initiatives, sacrificing their time and resources to produce community life. As Chapter 4 highlighted, the genesis of this narrative stemmed from the historical justification produced by the state to portray GRLs as progenitors of early nation-building efforts to downplay their original political significance in local politics. In doing so, the state transforms GRLs' political participation by framing them fulfilling a form

of civic *noblesse oblige*, with a moral economy driven by the very principles of pragmatism extended to individuals who become community leaders because they want to uplift their local communities through self-help (Osman, 2015).

This narrative is however limited by the practical realities GRLs face in performing such *noblesse oblige*. GRLs that possess the motivations, time, money and willingness to work with the state are limited to a small minority of local elites. Most GRLs who join the grassroots are working professionals, most with other commitments and see their participation as civic volunteerism. Moreover, those with the resources are also not compelled to contribute through the grassroots to obtain political benefits such as connections with political elites or state recognition which they can obtain elsewhere such as serving in other public organizations and committees. Thus the grounded realities are a far cry from the myth purported by the state of self-made community leaders who regard grassroots volunteerism as a vocation. To portray a mass grassroots movement as a show of legitimacy, the state had to drive the recruitment of volunteers to meet these numbers while finding resources to finance the shortfall of resources that non-elite GRLs lacked. To reconcile its ideological objectives, the state relies on what I term as “outsourced governance”, or the use of vendors to perform the task of community work in place of GRLs.

The choice of outsourcing community work is neither new nor strange to Singapore’s model of governance in sourcing for cost-effective solutions or relying on private sector solutions to meet public goals (Chan, 2016; Vasoo et al, 2019). The significance of outsourcing in the grassroots can be seen from its ubiquitous presence and size. For instance, I found that 9 out of 10 grassroots initiatives involve at least one vendor, and the proportion of event costs paid

to vendors ranges from 60% - 99¹⁵%, making it a multi-million dollar industry. Vendors are selected through the Government Procurement system, with the use of quotations and tenders only for contracts above \$6,000 and \$90,000 respectively. Vendors run the gamut from training providers to event management companies that handle residents' interactions or engage in enforcement work such as community surveillance. GRLs' power lies in their executive decision to influence and approve contracts based on their office bearer positions, with leader GRLs and senior GRLs typically handling tender-type and quotation-type contracts respectively. The low barriers-to-entry, lucrative opportunities and extensive reliance on vendors to outsource risk and valence led to some GRLs and vendors describing the situation as a "grassroots shadow industry".

Furthermore, some GRLs and vendors explained that vendors are hired not simply because they provide cost-effective solutions, but that they absorb the risk of governing failure when community initiatives go wrong. Examples of risk include accidents, not meeting the state's and residents' expectations, or when someone needs to be held liable for blame. In tender specifications, vendors are often made to sign liability clauses that make them largely responsible for any mishaps or lapses in organizing. On the ground, vendors are typically expected to be flexible on their contractual agreements to meet changing objectives in grassroots initiatives or risk failure. Failing to do so, vendors face debarment which restricts them from bidding in public sector contracts. While these conditions are considered industry norms in the private sector, the pervasive use of vendors in grassroots initiatives depict the characteristics of outsourced governance when governing liability is privatized and the political risk of organizing is externalized to vendors. When events are successfully

¹⁵ I found that in some constituencies, there is an institutional practice by GROs to denote \$1 to non-vendor costs (usually placed as logistics or venue cost), as a symbolic gesture that the event is not 100% paid to external hires.

organised, however, the GRLs and PA claim the credit as part of their organizational competencies.

Apart from residents and state agencies, interfacing vendors featured a significant part of their grassroots experience, ranging from taking part in contract committees, to managing vendors at event venues:

“We work with vendors to run events...we plan what to do, then instruct them to carry out the whole event...they will handle the issues so that we don’t have to worry...sometimes it’s very difficult to get volunteers to do everything because it’s just volunteerism, so they help whenever they got time only...we use vendors to do the heavy lifting so that it makes our life easier also... because if the commitment is a lot and we have to take a lot of responsibility if the event don’t do well, then otherwise nobody dare to volunteer” (Ms Liu, RC GRL)

Many GRLs also shared similar sentiments as Ms Liu’s and concurred that vendors enabled GRLs to cope with their community work by handling the bulk of organizing as well as absorbing risks so that volunteers do not have to deal with governing failures. Other GRLs have however felt that the extensive use of vendors diminishes the GRLs’ roles as community organizers:

“Nowadays we plan an event, it’s SOP [standard operating procedure] to hire vendor...but then like that become GRL for what? If we only hire vendor...might as well don’t be volunteer and just give it to the PA staff to manage everything...we [GRLs] not adding value to grassroots like that” (Mr Lye, NC GRL)

Like Mr Lye, GRLs also expressed concerns that their community impact is reduced when they outsource their organizing to external parties. This suggests that GRLs derive significance from their organizing work, and relying on vendors interrupts the relationship between their roles and contributions to community value. Despite these concerns, GRLs acknowledged that outsourced governance is essential in addressing the constraints of risk, logistical and administrative burdens, and volunteering commitments they faced in the course of their community work. Doing so allows GRLs to fulfil their roles while the state maintains its ideological work of reconciling grassroots *noblesse oblige* with mass GRLs recruitment. This show of strength is however dependent on a grassroots industrial complex where vendors benefit from public contracts. Grassroots mobilization in the form of event organization in Singapore's neighbourhood governance is therefore derived through outsourcing grassroots tasks as neoliberal urban governance where state and private sector trade risk and responsibilities of governance as commodities.

Neighbourhood Class Patterning and Inequalities through Politics of Consumption

Next, I argue that GRLs impose class-based perceptions in reproducing class patterning and inequalities in the neighbourhood through a politics of consumption. By politics of consumption, I refer to governing practices aimed at regulating the consumption of public goods distributed. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the grassroots system functions as a channel where state resources are allocated through GRLs through distributive practices. In Singapore, class-based orientations emerge through "private", "public" and "public-rental" estates as tied to property ownership (Chua et al, 2017), and GROs are linked to estate types via neighbourhood and residents' committees for private and public estates respectively. When GRLs organize in the neighbourhoods they belong to, they reproduce the class-based consumption preferences and practices reflected by their residents' class preferences and profiles. For instance in Hill Heights, the study's designated private estate site, community

activities consisted of eco-recycling initiatives, community service with local voluntary welfare organizations, street parties, and pet-related events. In contrast, BlueBricks estate's rental blocks typically saw GRLs organizing tuition services, free meals programmes for disadvantaged households, youth camps for latchkey kids during the holidays and block parties to commemorate local festivals. In both instances, these activities reveal how GRLs perceive residents construe grassroots activities based on the feedback they received from residents. For Hill Heights, grassroots volunteerism is framed as giving back to society or taking part in cause-based or interest-based activities linked to the common economic, social and cultural capital the neighbourhood possesses. As for BlueBricks estate, these activities reflect what GRLs do to help residents gain access to opportunities that GRLs think are lacking in the community such as educational support.

Neighbourhood class-based perceptions also shape governing relationships between GRLs and residents. GRLs in Hill Height estate see their relationship with residents in a more egalitarian fashion and use more tacit and fluid forms of governing practices with residents. For instance, GRLs would blend feedback practices with their informal conversations with residents in order not to be seen as too intrusive, or promote "democratic" elements of community participation such as surveys and town halls to encourage residents to speak up about local issues and concerns. GRLs explain that as residents were mainly professionals and highly educated, an egalitarian relationship works in GRLs' favour in convincing residents to support the local grassroots. On the other hand, GRLs in BlueBricks estate see their relationship with residents more hierarchically as use their authority as state agents to pursue their community work in intrusive and authoritative ways. For instance, GRLs would conduct estate patrols, make surprise home visits to check in on residents' well-being, and tend to make executive decisions in community matters on behalf of residents. GRLs explain that their practices are informed by their experience that a top-down approach works more

effectively because residents “are used to it”. These examples suggest that NMG is adapted into neighbourhoods when GRLs align their class-based perceptions with residents’ grassroots preferences and profiles, producing durable social patterns that reveal class-based influences within GRLs’ governing practices.

The above pattern of class-based expectations reflects common grassroots scenarios where GRLs share the same socio-economic class as the local neighbourhoods they serve in. While this is typically true for volunteer GRLs who are recruited from their local communities, leader and senior GRLs tended to come from higher socio-economic backgrounds and impose their class-based perceptions in communities they do not share similar socio-economic classes with. One implication is the profiling of poorer neighbourhoods in the constituency by these leader and senior GRLs as “problematic estates”:

“The most problematic place is this estate with rental blocks...with Singapore’s poorest people...some just come out of jail, others nowhere to go and too poor to find a proper place...you see the worst-off of Singapore here... We focus a lot here because the people need a lot of help from us...many of them are under ComCare and SSOs...but we make sure they don’t rely on welfare...Some lived for more than 10 years and still stuck here...it can be a dangerous place because some of the people here are ex-convicts and desperate...we try and help residents here to get out...more importantly not come back in...luckily it’s just this few blocks so it’s manageable” (Mr Chu, Leader GRL)

Mr Chu’s comments are commonly observed in leader and senior GRLs who focused on certain neighbourhoods in their constituency bearing “problematic” traits as tied to the neighbourhood’s socio-economic class. Unlike private estates where GRLs promote democratic forms of interactions, these “problematic estates” are seen as requiring intensive

state interventions to “manage” them. Similarly, residents are depicted as dangerous, passive or helpless. Such perception fosters leader and senior GRLs to see their roles as containing the neighbourhood in what Loh (2007) described as sites of “social pollution”. For GRLs like Mr Chu who have the power to decide how distribution practices are engaged in these neighbourhoods, their perception of these spaces as problematic estates influences the way they perceive what “help” residents need most – which is to “get out” and “not rely on welfare”. These perceptions can however reproduce the structural inequalities residents face in these estates face when the help they need is incongruent with what these GRLs think otherwise. For instance, residents who are focused on stabilizing themselves in these rental units will not benefit from grassroots initiatives that encourage them to uplift themselves by getting out. These GRLs’ positions of power also enable them to decide who deserves help, reproducing what Teo (2018) termed as “differentiated deservedness”, or the delivery of public goods based on how GRLs as state agents interpret if problematic estates’ residents are worthy of aid. GRLs wield enormous local influences by regulating recommendations they make to social service agencies or the amount of short and medium-term financial assistance they receive from the Community Development Welfare Fund (CDWF). These examples show how the perceptions of those in power over those who are most subjected to influences of power can shape outcomes at the neighbourhood level, producing social inequalities through NMG.

Intersectionalities and the Limits of Politics of Representation among Racial Minority

GRLs

One common challenge some GRLs face is the straitjacketing of their grassroots leadership roles in expecting to represent their local communities as a result of their ascribed social statuses. These instances are most commonly experienced among racial minority GRLs who face overt pressures to organize and represent their ethnic communities in the grassroots

movement and struggle being constantly pigeon-holed to speak on behalf of their race. I termed such challenges the limits of politics of representation. Some racial minority GRLs shared that they often faced such pressures as part of their everyday experiences:

“I don’t get it why Malay GRLs must always represent Malays...like all Malay problems here become my problem....I join because I want to do something for my community...but it doesn’t mean I am always helping Malays first” (Ms. Yati, Senior GRL)

Like Ms. Yati, racial minority GRLs are often expected to play the role of de-facto representatives acting in the interests of racial communities, privileging their racial identities over all else. GRLs shared instances ranging from being strongly encouraged to join the MAEC or IAEC, being included in grassroots communication materials as a token racial minority model, is expected to speak up on what their racial communities think or on issues relating to racial minorities despite professing little to no experience to the topic, and being recognized for their work with their ethnic communities over other grassroots contributions. These issues point to two reasons. Firstly, they are derived from the state’s assumption that racial representation is an essential attribute and significant motivator for community volunteerism among racial minority GRLs. This assumption is tied to the state’s ideology that racial community leaders are naturally predisposed to self-help, and the interests of their communities would align with their beliefs and principles (Chua, 2007). Secondly, racial minority GRLs are under-represented in the grassroots movement. While the lack of nationwide data makes it difficult to confirm, site estimates show that the ratio of racial minority GRLs to the total GRL population in the constituency is about 1:13. The state’s anxiety to build a local grassroots representation of the small number of racial minority GRLs becomes a priority to present a racially representative grassroots movement.

Racial minority GRLs shared different responses to these pressures. Some emphasized fronting their racial identities to climb the grassroots hierarchy by capitalizing on their willingness to represent their ethnic communities in return for senior GRL positions. By checking the state's boxes of a racial minority, these GRLs obtain privileges such as being invited to represent their constituency in national-level GRL events, being featured as model minority individuals in the community and being nominated as leader or senior GRL. These GRLs explain that as they recognized that their racial identities are a salient part of their selves, they do not see it as a problem to represent their ethnic communities as part of their grassroots identities. In doing so, they appeal to the state-endorsed narrative of racial representation by reproducing its ideological work of confining grassroots participation and community self-help.

Other racial minority GRLs have however resisted such pressures by appealing to other social statuses which they deem are more significant to their selves such as class, gender and age. One youth¹⁶ racial minority GRLs, in particular, highlighted his age as a salient point of his grassroots participation even though he acknowledged his racial identity.

"I don't see myself as Indian volunteer only...I see myself as an Indian youth volunteer...I think it's a bit different...I think I can relate much better to my age group of friends from different races because we share similar experiences...but I can also share my experiences as an Indian to them. So I will think that it's not totally correct to say that I will just one standard to decide who I am as a volunteer because it's these mixed together you know?" (Raj, Volunteer GRL)

Like Raj, most GRLs resisted the pressures to highlight their racial identity as the most salient feature because they see their social statuses as interwoven. This suggests that GRLs

¹⁶ The PA definition of youth is between 12 and 35.

recognize the intersectionalities of their identities in ways that challenge a solely race-based interpretation of their grassroots contributions and representation (Crenshaw, 2017). Similarly, as in Ms Yati's case, these GRLs also saw their racial markers as constraining the potential contributions they can offer to the grassroots as they witnessed the system viewing them solely through the lenses of their race. One GRL shared that his grassroots recruitment was sponsored and he was groomed to be a senior GRL because "...*the CCC needed a Malay representative otherwise it's all Chinese inside*", denying him of his other attributes or social status. Other minority GRLs also felt that GROs such as the IAEC and MAEC continue to perpetuate race-based perceptions as they provide an institutional justification for Malays' and Indians' community affairs to be handled as race-related issues, rather than just community issues. These experiences highlight the problems of arrested multiculturalism (Goh, 2019), where Singapore's state-led approach in using racial minority GRLs figures to promote community participation among minority communities has led to the reverse. Instead of allowing minority leaders to emerge out of the local contexts, they come from, the state arrests these developments by sponsoring minority GRLs into racial representation through a top-down approach. This is however met with contestations from racial minority GRLs, as they become the very people who unravel the limits of such race-based representations by appealing to their intersectionalities.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the contemporary experiences of GRLs as state-sponsored community volunteers in NMG in three ways. First, I explore how their roles as "double agents" in serving state and communities interests allow them to acquire social and cultural capital that enable them access to governing tools that no other political actors in the community possess. At the same time, I explore how their governing conduct is regulated by the state through boundaries. Next, I explore how GRLs meet the state's objectives of NMG

by using their governing toolkits to produce feedback, distribution and adjudication practices. Within each practice, I explore how GRLs use their social and cultural capital differently to produce different experiences of micro-governance that meet the different needs and challenges on the ground. Lastly, I explore how GRLs discuss the limits of NMG through outsourced governance and the politics of consumption and representation in reproducing state ideologies and social inequalities. These discussions underscore the tensions of neighbourhood governance that GRLs face in their roles. By cumulating the different analytical dimensions of GRLs' experiences, I illustrated the inner-workings of NMG and GRLs' roles in reproducing the government next door within Singapore's neighbourhood associational life.

Relating to the scholarship on state-sponsored community organisations, this study concurs with findings made by Read and Pekkanen (2009) in acknowledging the presence and intensity of state interventions in governing the city through governing local associational politics at the neighbourhood level in East and Southeast Asia. It does so by eschewing the distinction between state and community agents, showing that the two coexist in state-sponsored grassroots organisations. This study also delineates Singapore's style of urban governance as a hyper-local experience, where the face of the state is embodied in local figures that collapse the scale of administrative distance. In other words, the state is not some far abstract overarching behemoth that hovers around its subjects (Scott, 2008). Instead, the state's presence is felt through the daily encounters of governing practices that reproduce its ideological works. In responding to Tomba's (2014) conceptual insight that the neighbourhood consensus is at the heart of any urban-political order, this chapter shows that this consensus is built through governing practices that connect the people and state as mediated by the networks, discourses and labour produced reproduced and accumulated by GRLs at their local neighbourhoods. In doing so, it captures the essence of what it means by

neighbourhood micro-governance where state legitimacy is maintained through the reproduction of local orderings by GRLs.

Chapter 6: GRLs and Parapolitics in PAP's Local Regime Resilience

"The PA does not check on the political allegiance of the participants of our activities, nor do I or anyone know their voting preferences. It is not relevant to our work... We certainly do not mobilise anyone for any political party... I will be the last person to ever allow the PA to be politicised."

Chan Chun Sing,
PAP-MP & Deputy Chairman
People's Association
Today, 14 April 2016¹⁷

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined how GRLs performed neighbourhood micro-governance in serving both state and local communities as double agents in Singapore's urban governance. These governing practices enabled the administrative state to intervene in neighbourhood life as a territory and objective of neighbourhood micro-governance. The significance of GRLs as a political class however extends beyond its role as a state or community agent. Next, I locate the significance of GRLs in parapolitics - their involvement in preserving PAP's regime resilience in Singapore. Adapting Seah's (1987) definition of parapolitical institutions, I interpret parapolitics as the practice of presenting political actions as ostensibly devoid of partisan interests but can be shown to elicit consistent and overt political outcomes favourable to a particular party. The shift from an institutional characteristic to practice is crucial in analyzing political action not as divorced from the actors who are involved in the process of reproducing them. In other words, parapolitics is a set of political practices that needs to be examined along with the actors performing them. Meanwhile, I define urban political regimes as political arrangements among political actors that make ruling coalitions a possibility based on informal networks, formal relationships and

¹⁷ Cheng, K. (2016). People's Association is not politicised: Chan Chun Sing. *Today*. Accessed from: <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/peoples-association-not-politicised-chan-chun-sing>.

shared political practices (Stone, 1989; Mossberger & Stoker, 2001). Regimes deal with the political task of “...access to...and the distribution of political resources, authority and legitimacy” (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007: 775). The regime approach presents an opportunity to understand political order as a constant “work-in-progress” It is maintained through repeated interactions of negotiation, contestations and cooperation by political actors based on their objectives, political positions, the power to (capacity), as well as power over (coercion) influencing politics in response to other actors and situations in the field of power. Political dominance may be framed through regime resilience, where political regimes extend their political legitimacy beyond elections and enroot durable incumbent advantages through programmatic control, policy reforms and political machines in political arenas (Weis, 2020; Hutchcroft, 2014; Scott, 1969).

The current scholarship over PAP’s regime resilience in Singapore politics is ubiquitous (See Weiss, 2020; Singh, 2017; Milne & Mauzy, 2002; Tan & Tan, 2003 Quah et al, 1985; Chan, 1976). Despite conducting procedurally fair and open elections, the PAP has continued to exert its hegemonic control by entrenching its political regime through co-opting, grooming or alienating leaders in the public, private and people sectors (Ortmann, 2011). In doing so, the PAP has found various means to intervene into the organizational dimensions of the civil service, labour unions, the media industry and civic organisations to mobilise them for political purposes (Singh, 2017; Milne & Mauzy, 2002). Termed “parapolitical institutions”, or ostensibly apolitical or non-partisan institutions which have been turned for political uses (Singh, 2017; Seah, 1985), the PAP exerted its hegemony over these institutions, subjecting its members to various forms of calibrated social control ranging from co-optation, ideological projects and political grooming, to coercion and censorship within these institutions in authoritarian fashion (George, 2007; Rodan, 2004; Chua, 1995).

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between GRLs and parapolitics through the grassroots sector with three main questions. Firstly, how are GRLs involved in these specific instances of parapolitics? Secondly, how do these different instances of involvement contribute to PAP's local regime resilience? Lastly, how do GRLs reconcile their involvement in parapolitics? I address the first two questions by demonstrating the roles GRLs play in Singapore's neighbourhood politics through four encounters of parapolitics – home styles, grassroots core groups, township management and political inter-convertibility. In home styles, I focus on how PAP-MPs utilized grassroots resources and GRLs to cultivate political visibility and link municipal achievements to their political brand image. In core groups, I examine the active participation of GRLs who served in bolstering the political capacities of PAP-MPs in their local regimes. In township management, I show how GRL-councilors in town councils support their MPs' and wards' municipal interests in township management. In political inter-convertibility, I trace how GRLs enabled PAP-MPs to develop a system of tracking and converting political performance between grassroots popular support and local vote shares. In addressing the last question, I shared the different ways GRLs interpreted their involvement by appealing to MPs, PAP or eschewing both, and how these appeals demonstrated the political heterogeneity of community powers in Singapore's urban neighbourhoods.

6.2 Home Styles

Home style is defined as the cultivation of a “local” political identity by politicians to strategically influence the electorates of their wards and maintain/increase political support (Fenno, 2003). Here, I address how GRLs make parapolitics possible by supporting the central figure of local PAP regimes, the PAP Member of Parliament (PAP-MP), in developing their home styles. Previous studies have primarily discussed the overlapping roles of the PAP-MP as constituency representative, grassroots adviser (GA) and elected town

councillor as the central figure of parapolitics and local regimes (Tan, 2009). Concurring with these works, I have observed that these overlapping roles have allowed for achievements made in the grassroots and town management roles to be carried over as the PAP-MP's political legitimacy both during and outside of elections. However, one major empirical finding I observed on the ground which differed from the current scholarship was that the political legitimacy obtained from these channels at the local level was primarily tied to the political identities of PAP-MP with their constituents, instead of solely to the PAP. I define political identities as the social construction, deployment and mobilization of one's identity to seek power or political goals for political support. Except during General Elections (GE) where PAP-MP played up their party colours prominently by channelling their political achievements as party achievements, I observed that the accumulation of political legitimacy during GE periods was shored up to individual MPs rather than to the political party. To frame this empirical finding, I used Fenno's "home style" (2003), which illustrated how PAP-MP managed public impressions and expectations of their political selves (Goffman, 1959) in their local constituencies as re-election strategies. Regime resilience is achieved when these home styles served as a way to control how regime partners and voters made sense of their local MPs' political identities and contributions. Here, I argue that PAP-MP maintained or increased their local regime resilience by cultivating home styles using grassroots resources and interactions in two main ways.

First was in producing everyday political visibility:

[Analytical Note] One activity PAP-MPs did in their GA roles was attending community events organised by GRLs or community leaders, or conducting regular house visits, as a way of showing presence in the neighbourhood. When MPs were pressed for time, they sometimes spent half a minute to make contact with residents – even a brief hi-bye was sufficient. When residents did not open

their doors or were not at home, GRLs would leave the MP's calling-card or door hangers to make their visits known.

Residents evaluated their MPs' presence as a proxy of political performance by referring to the number of times they saw their MPs during house visits or community events. Resident typically spoke about MPs "showing face", with the ones they recalled seeing infrequently as "not hardworking" or "absent", while those who were present were perceived as "hardworking", "always on the ball", and "grounded". When I asked a MP why he/she invested a significant amount in being visible, he/she said, "...residents can have different opinions about me...you can't please everyone...they can like or hate me. But they cannot say I am not around or not hardworking...you can count the number of times I am around. That is a fact that cannot be disputed."

Figure 17 (Left): Different types of collaterals used for political visibility (Source¹⁸)

Figure 18 (Right): Competing notice boards - Town Council under the opposition (top left) and local GRO, under the PA (top right).

MPs cultivated their home styles by producing political visibility. This ubiquitous but crucial practice in the grassroots scene may be understood in what Zevnik (2016) described as a "scopic regime", an arrangement of seeing and knowing political figures which influenced

¹⁸ Pictures were either taken by researcher or obtained with permission for thesis's use only

how and who people recognized as the “faces” of politics. In this instance, the face and figure of the MP, both in-person and as portraits on grassroots collaterals such as banners, flyers, notice boards, served as a daily reminder to constituents who the “face” of local political authority was. The most direct way PAP-MPs engaged in political visibility was by attending community engagements through their GA roles. These engagements ranged from conducting weekly house visits to gracing community events in-person by “showing face” as a mark of recognition (Hsien, 1944). I found that the “showing face” had two implications for political visibility. Firstly, it was perceived as a mark of endorsement for events’ organisers and allowed MPs to convert their social and cultural capital into achieving political objectives when organisers were expected to reciprocate. By organizing these events and inviting MPs as distinguished guests, GRLs help to legitimize the MP’s local political authority as a respected figure. Secondly, I observed that residents linked the MP’s presence, or showing face, as a measure of their local performance and ties to the neighbourhood. Likewise, MPs recognized residents’ expectations and reciprocated by boosting their image as a “hardworking” or “present” MP through political visibility.

The management of political selves was also enacted through portraits. Portraits were used in two ways (See Picture 17). First were in “greeting collaterals” which reproduced political visibility through grassroots-based festive/public greetings or event publicity. The PAP-MPs were featured through their portraits (top left of Picture 17) or listed as a “guest of honour/special guest” (top right of Picture 17). In both instances, PAP-MPs were recognized as authority figures of their neighbourhoods (Shils, 1975). The next type was “broadcast collaterals” which portrayed PAP-MPs during events or in municipal publicity featuring community enhancements. These broadcast materials were used to strengthen the link between tangible benefits and the PAP-MP’s political presence. It reproduced political legitimacy when MPs claimed direct/indirect credit for the contributions/efforts for the

benefits. Both types of materials sustained a recurring visual narrative that occupied residents' line of sight in the neighbourhood, a privilege non-PAP politicians have little access to as these platforms were deemed as "apolitical" and accessible through PA GROs. Even in oppositional wards, PAP candidates disrupted opposition MPs scopic regimes by running parallel visual narratives through PA-managed banner poles, notice boards and community newsletters (See Picture 18). Despite the potential social media possessed to disrupt the efficacy of local scopic regimes (Leng, 2012; Zhang, 2016), mainstream communication platforms such as national newspapers remained a reliable source of obtaining political information (Soon & Samsudin, 2016). Similarly, I found that while PAP-MPs have taken their social media game seriously by posting regularly to beef up online political presence, local scopic regimes remained a vital strategy in dominating their political visibility in the neighbourhood.

Scopic regimes also enabled MPs to cultivate and calibrate public impressions they hoped to present to residents to reflect their political persona or as re-election strategies:

[Field Note] Over dinner, a fellow GRL shared about Ms Tin Pei Ling [TPL], a PAP-MP for MacPherson SMC [2011-Present]. He explained how TPL's image began from "the bottom", referring to negative media and public portrayal of her since her entry into politics in 2011. He shared that TPL re-branded herself from ground up to improve her political image. She took advice from various sources, including her GRLs' and residents' feedback that helped shaped her image into what he described as a "caring and reliable" MP with a "motherly feel"¹⁹. He shared that TPL's example was a positive case study as she has won the hearts

¹⁹ As discussed in the above vignette, Figure 19 depicted TPL's image from 2011 (shown in left half), and the change in 2015 (shown in right half). Note similarities in the posture and image used for the grassroots collateral and that of the PAP campaign poster of Ms. Tin for GE2015 (right half), which indicated what the GRL in the vignette depicted as an "improved" political image, since her entry into politics in 2011.

and minds of her residents, who initially thought she looked too “young” to lead compared to her mentor and predecessor, Matthias Yao. The GRL also shared that TPL’s new political image played a key role in her improved public image, which reflected her dedication to her residents. He attributed her new public image to her re-election win in 2015 with a vote share of 65%. In GE2020, TPL was re-elected with a vote share of 71.7% in her SMC, with the national average at 61.2%.

Figure 19: Photos referencing Ms. Tin Pei Ling’s change in “image”.

Previous studies have shown robust positive links between managing one’s political image and electoral success through appearance-based voting patterns (See Rosenberg et al, 1991; Olivia & Todorov, 2010; Olivia et al, 2012; Sanghvi & Hodges, 2015; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Similarly, I observed that MPs spent considerable time finding different ways to work out their political images to suit their constituents’ preferences, a strategy which the PAP political leadership emphasized (Lay, 2018). One common way PAP-MPs do so through the grassroots channel is by using grassroots collaterals to test different ways of presenting themselves and calibrating their image to fit residents’ preferences. GRLs enable PAP-MPs by using their social capital to provide access to local grassroots channels and networks to receive feedback from residents. I found that these tests were often done during

“peacetime”, referring to non-election seasons, where MPs experimented with postures and aesthetics of their physical self to produce their desired political images without significant political cost through grassroots channels and resources. By attaching these trials to grassroots collaterals, PAP MPs had ample access and time to receive ground feedback to produce a calibrated political image as a re-election strategy.

Leveraging on scopic regimes and their overlapping roles, the second way PAP MPs cultivated their home styles through the grassroots sector was by personalizing municipal achievements to accentuate their local political achievements. MPs used grassroots resources at their disposal such as the Community Improvement Project Committee (CIPC) Funds and other public schemes through local GROs and GRLs to make political contributions in municipal and social developments. Using their roles as GAs and town councillors, they tied local benefits to political achievements as a form of incumbent advantage (Tan, 2014; Chin, 1997).

Figure 20: Example of two framing videos (QR codes for video reference)

This was often done by framing MPs as the progenitors/organizers of grassroots programmes or projects and highlighting their roles as a factor in local political performance. These ranged from being seen as leading and consolidating municipal enhancements in the neighbourhood, to being linked as key contributors of new municipal projects through grassroots collaterals (See Picture 20²⁰). I observed that these municipal identities helped PAP-MPs in two ways. Firstly, it allowed PAP-MPs to derive a local political identity to augment PAP-MPs' narratives of valence politics (Oliver & Ostwald, 2008). Residents who were voters were constantly reminded of how much their PAP-MPs did for their communities. The goal was to play up political contributions of PAP-MP through efforts at bringing municipal developments which benefitted residents such as new covered link-ways, opening a new park or initiating a local social service programme. It offered a way for PAP MPs to capitalize on municipal developments funded by public resources as an effective re-election strategy, which complemented PAP's credibility when PAP-MPs emphasized their local track records during electoral campaigns in working in the direct interests of voters (Oliver & Ostwald, 2018), something opposition candidates could not do due to their exclusion from leading grassroots initiatives under the PA.

Another advantage of home styles is that they allowed MPs' to curate their personal "brands" of local political performance in appealing to voters. On the ground, I have observed different ways MP crafted uniquely defined home styles in response to their constituencies' needs. Returning to the PAP-MP above (Figure 20), she framed her municipal brand of politics as being able to balance public and private estates' interests by ensuring a similar number of municipal improvements in her videos to residents and constituents. This was crucial in her

²⁰ The PAP-MP constructed and capitalized her municipal contributions through an annual list of community improvements in the first video (below). This was later used to prove her valence as a local MP during elections period in the second video (above). (Source: Facebook)

constituency where both public and private estate voters were similar, unlike in the national demographics which favoured public estates as they consisted of a rough estimate of 80% of the national votes. In BlueBricks estate, the MP capitalized on his/her municipal brand as an ardent provider of elderly-friendly facilities and bringing in essential social services through her local GROs and GRLs into mature neighbourhoods with high numbers of older households. Meanwhile, in another constituency of new public housing estates with young families, the MP there crafted his/her political identity in being a family-conscious politician, pushing for higher numbers of and quality childcare facilities, as well as introducing family-friendly initiatives that were popular among his/her residents. Here, GRLs support the MPs by promoting their brands in ways that appeal to the different local groups they are associated with:

“The 47th District’s MP has different political images, depending on which GRLs you ask. In the public estate, she is lauded for improving barrier-free accessibility and responding to community needs in increasing popular recreational facilities such as public BBQ pits and community gardens. In the private estates, she has been promoted as a hardworking, and fair yet empathetic representative among residents in dealing with neighborly disputes and municipal concerns such as traffic issues. Among older Mandarin speaking communities, she is known to support preservation of local Chinese heritage by supporting their local celebrations. These different personas are the local political images constructed by GRLs as they interact with residents in their local communities that help PAP-MPs contextualize their political brands” (Analytical note: GRLs and PAP-MP political brands)

By helping PAP-MPs craft their local municipal brands as tied to grounded tangible benefits and relevant to dominant demographic groups of residents, GRLs help residents make the

connections between public and political work of MPs as GA and as a political representatives. This augment PAP-MPs' track record of promising and delivering targeted political goods which appealed to voters as a political brand strategy, reminding local voters in their constituencies that these benefits would be diminished if the local regime led by the PAP-MP was no longer in power. This sometimes compensated for or even negated, poorer election sentiments for the PAP at the national level, allowing PAP MPs to win local ground through municipal-driven factors despite the party's national performance (See Lau, 2020; Yip, 2020). At the same time, this does not suggest that residents immediately associate these benefits solely to PAP-MPs' home styles as they do recognize that some of these political goods are also systematically advantaged by the fact that it is a PAP constituency and continue to vote "pragmatically" to maintain such status. Despite such inclinations, these "pragmatic voters" residents also rely on PAP-MPs' home styles to interpret and assess PAP's party credibility at the national level. These practices are echoed by Oliver & Ostwald (2018; 2020) who pointed out that the relationship between party credibility and valence politics has emerged as a significant factor in voters' behaviour in Singapore's contemporary electoral politics. PAP-MPs' home styles, therefore, emerged as one of the most relatable experiences of assessing PAP's party credibility among voters at the local level.

By tapping into grassroots institutions and initiatives, GRLs help PAP-MP cultivate their home styles in two main ways. First, I observed that GRLs provided physical and social access as brokers for PAP-MPs into various neighbourhood spaces. Physical access referred to the opening up of non-public spaces such as residents' homes or private estate residences such as condominiums where PAP-MPs do not automatically have access. GRLs provided physical access for PAP-MPs by accompanying them on house visits as well as inviting them as distinguished guests to private estate functions. For instance, I observed that it was a common practice for GRLs to join in on PAP-MP house visits in the neighbourhoods they

belonged to. One form of assistance they provided was in producing what they called “foot-in-the-door” contact, or having residents open up their doors to local community leaders they were familiar with, and allowing the MP to interject into the encounter. GRLs I spoke to explained that this was a strategy used on residents who did not wish to interact with the MP, but might do so, on the account of the GRLs with whom they have good relations. Other “foot-in-the-door” examples included inviting PAP-MPs as distinguished guests in condominium gatherings to gain access to speak to residents in community settings as well as share grassroots collaterals with MPs’ presence on condo notice boards or community Whatsapps and Telegram groups. While skeptics may counter that such access can be established by the PAP-MPs just as easily by mobilizing the institutional resources under their charge as Grassroots Advisers (GAs), I found that PAP-MP often chose to rely on or embed themselves into GRLs’ existing networks or build new ones as they capitalized on the organic characteristics of these networks to downplay the risk of such networks being seen as too highly orchestrated for political purposes.

The social capital and local networks developed by GRLs are just not limited to neighbourhood micro-governance uses. GRLs also use these networks to provide social access by helping PAP-MPs identify and engage with various local groups who have a local influence on community relations. These local groups were formed either through common social demography (eg. “Mommy” groups or retirees “clubs”), or by common activities (eg. Community gardeners, Lunar 7th Month prayer groups), and were part of local networks which connected and socialized residents over shared practices. Like PAP-MPs who utilized their grassroots status as GAs to connect community powers to electoral politics, GRLs also utilized their member status in local groups to link local interests to community powers by acting as brokers between MPs and local groups. In doing so, they linked local groups’ expectations to MPs’ political legitimacy by allowing MPs to channel grassroots resources to

fulfill local groups' community requests in return for local political support. These instances reveal how GRLs politicize their social capital by tying their local communities to PAP-MPs. This opens up the social trust to be transformed into political trust as PAP-MPs are seen as connected to multiple local communities, effectively increasing MPs' influence over these communities in shaping voting preferences during elections (Callahan, 2005).

Secondly, GRLs also supported PAP-MPs' home style by managing PAP-MP political visibility in their roles as grassroots organisers. The most direct way was through GRLs planning events that were aligned with the MPs' home styles. I found that while grassroots events were organized with local communities' and residents' interests in mind, it was not uncommon for PAP-MPs to steer new projects or existing programmes as GAs to align community objectives with their home styles:

“[Field Note] 5 RC chairmen were called up to a meeting. The most senior GRL amongst them shared that the GA wanted to organize a series of family-centered events to attract new BTO residents to community events. The GA felt that current events in 47th District were too “conventional” [read old fashioned] and did not connect young families. Using 5 events, the GA wanted to show that he/she was in sync with the younger population in the BTO estates, whom he/she felt were ambiguous in their impression of him/her compared to older counterparts. The senior GRL surmised it was probably due to General Elections being in the horizon that this display was necessary, but since it fit with their plan to organize something major to boost their community leadership performance and it was a personal request from the GA, the senior GRLs agreed. The team brainstormed and came up with 5 events that fitted the GA's criteria. Each chairman pledged \$10,000, to a total of \$50,000, and manpower from their RCs to organise these events”

“[Field Note] In an event I was helping to organise, I got a chance to work on the GA itinerary. This was a step-by-step programme of the GA was supposed to do at the event. As I was new, I asked senior GRLs for their advice. They noted that the GA loved to be seen mingling with residents, so I had to plan some time for that. The entourage following the GA was crucial too. I had to make sure it was multiracial, but had key people included – the CCC chairman, CCMC chairman, lead organisers, and GRLs “picked” by the GA to be present. I had to also ensure there were “photo op” opportunities so that the GA and entourage could take a good shot with residents for commemoration.”

Figure 21: Donated liquor as “grassroots collateral” (left) and entourages (right²¹) designed by organizing GRLs for political visibility.

GRLs planned and executed these events as part of their roles as community leaders and found ways to complement both community and political objectives by using grassroots resources or organizing norms to indirectly support political objectives by fulfilling the GA’s preferences. One way GRLs complement objectives is by creating/offering “grassroots collaterals”, or publicity items designed for GAs to create value for community stakeholders such as supporting fundraisers while adhering to public governance surrounding political donations and gifts. One typical example of grassroots collaterals came in the form of “donated” items from the GA to these community stakeholders such as local merchants,

²¹ Link to video depicting the political visibility of entourage provided in QR code.

religious or clan associations. These items are usually gifted to the organisations hosting the events, and are usually later auctioned off to patrons, guests or sometimes even GRLs themselves, and the money deemed as fundraised to these organisations. These grassroots collaterals ranged from hard liquors, paintings or calligraphy works, items belonging to notable individuals with symbolic significance to the community stakeholders, and other items of value.

The above vignette also depicted how these complementing of objectives also included GRLs weighing their interests into the equation. The RC chairmen agreed to fund the events at the GA's request as the GA held the de facto powers in the local constituency. While they had the liberty to reject the request using a valid justification such as the lack of funds or questioning the benefits of the community events, these RC chairmen went ahead because it coincided with their interests to also organize and distribute resources to their local communities as well as being aligned what the GA wanted. In most cases, these alignments are also commonly formed because GRLs are incentivized to build such alignments to be seen as effective leaders by both their GAs and residents, which in turn benefits the GRL in terms of gaining legitimacy and approval to increase their social standing in the grassroots. By successfully organizing events that serve both the GA's, their community stakeholders' preferences, as well as their own, GRLs can display their competence as political brokers in the eyes of the GA and other GRLs.

Other tasks included working out events' itineraries to ensure the MP's political visibility is assured through grassroots collaterals (See Figure 21 (left)) which suited the context and significance of recognition instead of physical presence, as well as designing entourages that boosted the MP's physical presence. As depicted in the video, the rousing entrance at the encouragement by the emcee, the subtle gesturing (in 0:17) for the Malay procession band to come up in a coordinated manner, the community "we-fie" with residents, and

complimentary inflatable red-white cheering sticks were all meticulously scripted by GRLs to produce the effects of a “heartlands” celebrations, which complemented the MP’s intended political image of being popular among his constituents. By relying on their knowledge of local communities’ preferences and sensibilities as cultural capital, the role of GRL is to produce local encounters that elevate the political presence of PAP-MPs as not only a local figure of authority but a local celebrity through awe as well. Thus, GRLs enable PAP-MPs to cultivate their home styles through the planning and production value derived from organizing grassroots events.

Lastly, GRLs also supported PAP-MPs’ home style by disseminating and normalizing the latter’s preferences with other GRLs and residents. Earlier in Chapter 6, I described how GRLs were socialized into learning neighbourhood micro-governance by social emulation. This also included picking up preferences of leading regime figures such as the PAP-MPs/GAs whose home styles structured what governing repertoires GRLs chose. In aligning their governing practices with PAP-MPs’ home styles, these GRLs can gain their MPs’ recognition to boost their social status and legitimacy when competing with other GRLs.

Here I have shared how GRLs regularly supported PAP-MPs’ home styles by channelling their roles as community leaders and organizers, which bolstered PAP’s local regime resilience. These parapolitical moments were largely made possible due to PAP-MPs tapping into grassroots institutions through their authority as GAs. Thus these empirical findings concurred with previous findings where PAP-MPs actively utilized grassroots resources to bolster their local political legitimacy during non-election periods through their roles as GAs. However, the new contribution I make to the scholarship is by clarifying that the political legitimacy is tied to PAP-MPs’ home styles in addition to the party’s legitimacy. This raises two points.

Firstly, this underscores the significance of cultivating a figure of political legitimacy and authority through political visibility and branding, an area that has received little attention in Singapore politics but is widely discussed in most other political contexts (Fenno, 1977; Yeh, 2019; Naurin, 2011). I show that local regime resilience is tied to a PAP-MP's political visibility, impressions and brand through grassroots resources, in addition to the system of political spoils distribution through local party channels. In essence, a large part of regime interactions in Singapore involved GRLs supporting PAP-MPs' political brand cultivation to produce an impression of PAP's valence through the MP, instead of pursuing growth-based coalition goals such as working with private developers to balance land value and communities' social mobility (Molotch, 1976; Pertersons, 1981). This suggests a new dimension of local urban regimes which is not tied exclusively to a materialist or economic considerations (Clark, 2001), either because regime players are not pressed to deliver economic benefits to their constituencies, or that other non-growth political concerns were more crucial in maintaining local regime resilience. In Singapore's case, local PAP-MPs steered the administrative state (Chan, 1975) to pursue economic goals while cultivating their local home styles to prove themselves as effective political drivers of the administrative state in their constituents' interests. These findings point to the emergence of a type of local urban regimes which are aimed at reproducing political impressions of its competency in steering the central powers of strong state institutions to meet local demands as a strategy of authoritarian regime resilience (Wallace, 2013). These local urban regimes I found fit into the emerging literature in the relationship between strong state capacity and authoritarian regime types, where the latter's political legitimacy rested not in building state capacity but is being seen as effectively driving strong state institutions to produce outcomes that fulfil local expectations through authoritarian-styled governance (van Ham & Seim, 2017; Slater, 2012; Way, 2005).

Secondly, these findings support the emerging literature on the complexities of regime configurations that contribute to its resilience (Weiss, 2020). Here I found that instead of channelling local political legitimacy to PAP's local party organs, it is directed to PAP-MPs as local figures of authority and awe instead. This created two layers of political legitimacy – the first being the PAP-MP's home style on the ground, and the second being the party's manifesto at the national level:

“During the 2020 General Elections, the 47th District's MP was at a regular walkabout with other MPs from the same GRC along a busy market district in their constituency. Residents often came up to them to chat or showed their support with words of encouragement. I observed that residents often approached particular MPs which they were familiar with and talked about what the particular MP has done for them, and how grateful they were to him/her for their work. Some residents even commented that they were voting the PAP because of the particular MP's local works and his/her identity as a MP, rather than with the party's manifesto “Our Lives, Our Jobs, Our Future”. To these residents, it is the MP's local presence and style of engaging with residents, not the party organs or what it stands for, that seems to motivate them to support the PAP.” (Field Note: GRC Walkabout, 4th July 2020)

By establishing an additional layer of political legitimacy, it enabled voters to pick the PAP based on its candidate's local incumbent performance over its national-level performance. Regime resilience is therefore constituted through these two layers, where unpopular national level policy-related concerns by the PAP can be compensated for by local MP's performance in winning the hearts and minds of his/her constituents. This can be gleaned from major vote

share differences between certain PAP-MPs and the national average²², which existing explanations such as poor opposition showing or changes in voters' demographics might not fully explain (IPS, 2020).

Constituency	Change MP?	GE2020 vote % difference (compared to GE2015)	Did better than PAP-held average*? (*-6.75%)
Bukit Batok SMC	No	-6.34	Yes
Hong Kah North SMC	No	-13.77	No
MacPherson SMC	No	6.16	Yes (+ve increase)
Mountbatten SMC	No	1.96	Yes (+ve increase)
Potong Pasir SMC	No	-5.74	Yes
Yuhua SMC	No	-3	Yes
Bishan Toa Payoh GRC (MPs retained their wards)	No	-6.36	Yes
Total No MP Change:	-	-3.87	Average Yes
Bukit Panjang SMC	Yes	-14.65	No
Pioneer SMC	Yes	-14.34	No
Radin Mas SMC	Yes	-3.24	Yes
Chua Chu Kang GRC	Yes	-18.25	No
Holland Bukit Timah GRC	Yes	-0.24	Yes
Jalan Besar GRC	Yes	-2.37	Yes
Marsiling Yew Tee GRC	Yes	-5.55	Yes
Ang Mo Kio GRC	Yes	-6.72	Yes
East Coast GRC	Yes	7.34	No
Jurong GRC	Yes	-4.67	Yes
Marine Parade GRC	Yes	-6.33	Yes
Nee Soon GRC	Yes	-4.93	Yes
Pasir Ris Punggol GRC	Yes	-8.73	No
Sembawang GRC	Yes	-4.99	Yes
Tampines GRC	Yes	-5.65	Yes
Tanjong Pagar GRC	Yes	-14.61	No
West Coast GRC	Yes	-26.89	No
Total MP Change:	-	-7.93	Average No

Figure 22: Vote share difference between constituencies without MP changes (in grey) and those with MP changes (in blue).

For instance, in GE2020 where existing PAP-held constituencies had an average decrease of 6.75% compared to 2015's performance, a cursory analysis shows the average vote share percentage of PAP-held constituencies with no MP change at -3.87%, as compared to PAP-held constituencies with MP change at -7.93%. Given the assumption that constituencies with

²² See Figure 22. *New constituencies and opposition-held constituencies not listed* as there is insufficient data.

no-MP change activated local MP performance, while those that have changed did not activate the same effect, it shows that constituencies with no-MP change performed better than those with change. Here, I suggest that local MP performance may partly explain this difference. A lack of investment by the PAP-MP into his/her home style or unplanned movements of PAP-MPs, with investments into their local home style in one local constituency, to another constituency may also lead to dire consequences in local vote share. In both situations, the effect of local MPs' political legitimacy through home styles needs to be factored into the existing analysis of Singapore's electoral studies for observers to better understand how local voters think about their politicians and party preferences.

6.3 Grassroots Core Groups

The GRLs I described above whose grassroots roles aligned or supported MPs' political branding needs to be distinguished from another distinct group of GRLs who also perform the above roles and more. They often identify themselves as members of grassroots "core groups". A political core group consists of individuals who are directly under and led by the PAP-MP, actively reproduce the regime's resilience, and recognize each other as members defining and pursuing the local regime's interests²³. In terms of local standing, core group members were regarded as highly respected and influential as they occupied the upper echelons of local political positions in the constituency. They are however distinguished from primary constituency supporters or political machine actors, whose roles are tied mainly to securing vote blocs through shared political interests or patronage links (Fenno, 2003; Lancaster, 1986; Allen, 1993; Johnson, 2018). While sharing a direct and often exclusive relationship with their MPs, core group members are also distinguished from what Fenno (2003) called the "personal constituency", or close confidantes which MPs relied on for emotional support. A comparative summary of the characteristics of core groups' members

²³ These reasons will be discussed in Chapter 8 under Motivations for joining the grassroots.

and other common types of political groups in the existing scholarship is listed in Figure 22 below.

	Core Group Members	Primary Supporters	Personal Constituency	Political Machine Actors
Political Objectives	Collectively interpret and objectives of regime lead, or threats to local regime	Firmly secured vote bloc which MP is rooted in. MP's political "home"/"base".	Provide emotional support and counsel to MP	To secure votes from vote blocs for political bosses
Group Leadership and Membership	Led by regime lead, usually MP Selected or joined based on one's resources mustered or capacity to mobilize Participate to influence local regime for a variety of reasons	MP-led Part of organization or group which are tied to MP's vote base	No clear leadership Sharing familial or confidante bonds (family, close friends, family friends etc)	Political bosses (non-MP) led. Participate to serve political machine in return for patronage related gains
Affiliation/ Fealty	Directly to MP as regime lead	Indirect, via group affiliation	Directly to MP as confidante	Directly to boss; indirectly via underbosses
Political Interactions/ Processes	Part of regime lead's political capacity reserve Lead or members mobilize other members' resources to achieve objectives or address threats to regimes	Part of MP's primary vote bloc Vote for MP as linked to MP's exclusive ties to the group – in return for political interests/projects	Part of MP's circle Support MP as linked to familial or confidante relations	Part of political machine Support MP as directed by machine boss or underbosses
Examples	Elite/Regime-based <i>Political cliques, policy teams, (Hunter, 1953); growth-coalitions (Molotch, 1976); Urban regime actors (Stone, 1989)</i> Pluralism-based <i>Interests groups (Dahl, 1961)</i>	<i>Primary constituencies (Fenno, 2003); Constituency Service (Lancaster, 1986), Koenkais (Bouissou, 2018)</i>	<i>Intimates (Fenno, 2003; Trump, 2020)</i>	<i>Tammany Hall, (Allen, 1993); Irish American Machines (Erie, 1990); Tanaka Machine, (Johnson, 2018)</i>

Figure 23: Characteristics of core groups members compared to other political groups

“[Analytical Note: Brief of Core Group in 47th District, 2017 - 2020] Core group consisted between 12 and 15 members. All core group members were card-carrying PAP activists, although not all were GRLs. The group included the CCC chairperson, PAP branch vice-chairperson, and PAP local branch secretary, which meant the most senior members in terms of social status were included.

Generally, core group members were influential in the local political scene and other GRLs or branch activists deferred to them for decisions or guidance. More than two-thirds were initially GRLs before being recruited into the local PAP branch, then into the core group. 2 others started off as branch activists before going into the grassroots.

The core group ran three operations in the local constituency: leading the weekly Meet-the-People sessions [MPS], managing the “troubleshooting” team which handled any local issues on behalf of the PAP-MP, and a political opposition surveillance team monitoring opposition members’ political movements linked to the constituency in both online and offline spaces. Members shared that their roles were to make sure everything ran smoothly, and managed contingencies in the interest of the MP as they emerged. Members recognized the various resources each brought to the group. Two members were highly regarded for their links or ability to bring in money for core groups’ initiatives. Other important members led the three operations with their managerial or professional skills. Some had specific skillsets which were deemed useful to the core group operations. One such example was filming and video editorial skills, which members were co-opted in for despite volunteering for only 3 years and 1 GE. Their filming and editorial skills were deployed not just in promoting grassroots video content; they were also involved in doing surveillance activities using their skills and equipment. All of them have also professed that they primarily served the MP, and shared that other than competencies, fealty to the core group and MP was paramount.”

PAP local regimes I observed commonly consisted of core groups formed around the constituencies’ PAP-MPs as their political leads to guide the group’s political agendas and

activities. Political allegiance or fealty in the core group was directed first to the PAP-MP, then the political party. I observed that this notion of fealty was particularly significant among core group members. As a core group's identity was tied to the MP they served, the strength and fealty of its members also represented the political capacity of the associated MP. The expectation for fealty by the core group was therefore a way to ensure that its members could be counted on to serve in their local regime's interests by exclusively channelling their skills and resources to support the regime. In that same vein, no core group member could be seen as attempting to pledge allegiance to two MPs; such an act was seen as being disloyal to both MPs and the offending member risked being ostracized or excluded from his/her core group. The basis of core group members' allegiances ranged from individuals fulfilling personal obligations to personal ties with the MP. What is common is a demand for members' secrecy and loyalty to political plans, and group discipline and coordination when it came to enacting political actions. These core groups are therefore also closed groups with membership only given to those whom the MP, or other core group leaders with the auspice of the MP, approved.

In terms of group demographics, core groups share some similarities in terms of social statuses with the MP through shared social networks. Core groups' members I observed consist of leader, senior and volunteer GRLs, and came from a mix of age range between the early 30s to late 50s. The groups I studied are also disproportionately made up of Chinese males who are of the middle to the affluent class. Most occupy professional or management-level occupations or are business owners. GRLs in core groups concurrently held leadership positions in the local PAP's branch alongside their leadership roles in PA's GROs. Changes in core groups' membership occurred during unsettled periods, after "power struggles" between core group members to bring their members into the fold, or when the local regime required an injection of capital or mobilization capacity in response to new regime objectives.

GRLs were either co-opted by the PAP-MP or senior core-group members or have worked their way up into occupying a position in the core group by actively joining and participating in PAP-related activities. More than 2/3 of core group members reported first as lead GRLs in their GROs before joining or being recruited into the PAP's local branch, and became a part of the core group. One reason for this recruitment pattern was that core groups often used the grassroots sector as a talent pool, picking up members whom they felt not only had the skills or resources they needed but often also possessed the right "heart". This "heart" was described by members as both the willingness to serve the community as well as not having pledged any fealty to another PAP-MP. In the former, by their participation as GRLs, these candidates have already shown their commitments to community service. As for fealty, GRLs in the local grassroots sector were often less likely to have been associated with an existing MP, as if they did, they would go on to serve in the respective grassroots sector of the MPs they sided with. Therefore, they could be relied on to side with the MP's interests as they were deemed "unclaimed" by other MPs or core groups. The local grassroots sector, therefore, became an ideal space to co-opt potential core group members as it was a convenient talent pool to pick candidates with the skills and right "heart".

Core groups supported regime resilience through two main roles. They served as political minders in managing local political initiatives and supported MPs by raising their political capacities. In "minding" local political initiatives, I observed core group members were often tasked with leading the major constituency's initiatives, with the expectations to oversee them on behalf of the MP and pursue what they thought was in the best interests or expectations of the MP. In doing so, it relieved the MPs of having to constantly manage different local political institutions directly, instead of delegating to core groups to run in their stead. One such example was the weekly Meet-the-People Session (MPS), where the core group was expected to manage its operations from recruiting volunteers, to the handling

of residents' issues and ensuring petitions were submitted and resolved. As PAP's most ubiquitous and direct touch point with residents, the MPS served as an essentially political activity that bolstered the political legitimacy of the PAP-MP as a representative to his/her constituents (Ong, 2015). The core group managed the MPS by ensuring that the MPS was well-staffed, making executive decisions on residents' appeals on behalf of the MP, and mobilizing resources to arrange local solutions for residents at the behest of the MP. For instance, in one case I observed, the MP promised a resident who came to MPS with temporary lodging after her house was damaged in a major fire. The case was later brought to the core group to mobilize to make the arrangements without requiring the MP to intervene. Core group members also served as political minders in grassroots initiatives through their roles as GRLs. Their goal was in ensuring that the PAP-MP's political mileage, in what these members referred to as "political value", was derived or properly represented in ways that benefitted the PAP-MP. They performed their roles by guiding or nudging other non-core group GRL counterparts into reproducing instances with political value, with the latter often following the former's guidance due to their high social status and position in the grassroots sector.

Core groups also supported MPs by accumulating capital in raising their political capacities to meet regime objectives or threats. Core groups functioned as the personnel base where the PAP-MP's direct local political capacity is situated. In other words, the more members and the more resources or skills these members offered to the core group, the more "politically competent" the PAP-MP was perceived to be by other MPs in their respective constituencies. A central activity of the core group was therefore to grow its strength by accumulating different forms of capital. Top on the list was financial capital. Every core group had members who were the "bankrollers", individuals who were able to raise funds at a short notice either through personal means or via their access to those who did. These members

were responsible for bankrolling all core groups' activities such as sponsoring core groups' celebratory gatherings to maintain morale, to funding community projects initiated by the PAP-MP. These bankrollers also helmed the roles of vice-chairpersons or branch secretary in the local party branch and/or CCC or CCMC chairpersons in the local grassroots sector, which reflected their high social status in the local regime. In return, these bankrollers I spoke to or observed in the study reported having individually spent/raised anywhere between \$50k and a million dollars in a single financial year for the MP or core group activities.

Next were those who were able to recruit people with or had access to cultural capital in the form of organizational or managerial skills in managing initiatives. These members were able to co-opt professionals for their cultural and social capital to lead major core group projects or resolve crises such as the political risks of losing the incumbent seat for the MP. This was especially crucial when MPs needed political minders to lead local political initiatives. Last but not least, the core group also helped identify specific skills to respond to local demands in new political contexts. One instance I frequently came across was the rise in MPs using video and other new styles of content media in delivering political communications. Linking back to PAP-MP home styles, this was due to the increasing expectations of local audiences to build more immersive and engaging forms of political communications through social media and the internet to generate political visibility. Owing to the exorbitant cost of hiring professional content creators such as photographers and designers, this led to strong demand among core groups for volunteers who were able and willing to produce, edit and publish high-quality content for political purposes. As shown in the vignette alongside Figure 22 above showed, these led to new GRLs who were brought in for their specific skill sets in producing visual content to meet the MP's needs in building political visibility.

Summarizing grassroots core groups in parapolitics, this study clarified three common assumptions in the existing scholarship. First was that core group GRLs actively participating

in parapolitics were initially party activists who infiltrated or were co-opted into community leadership positions, transmitting party ideology into grassroots practices. Secondly was that these members were long-standing political activists who were co-opted primarily for their allegiance to the party. Lastly was that political primary support groups in PAP constituencies were local extensions of PAP's party apparatus. Responding to the first assumption, what I found suggests that the reverse seemed to be more dominant among the existing membership of core groups. Core group members were more likely to be selected through their competency and contributions in other spaces such as the grassroots sector and then co-opted into local PAP branches as core group members. Such trends are also commonly reflected in the of civil service elites into political office under the PAP (Barr, 2006). In both trends, the blurring of boundaries between public service and party politics can be seen through such co-opting strategies by the PAP. This suggests two implications. Firstly, the findings suggest that, barring the PAP-MP who doubled as the branch's chairperson, the local PAP branch leadership seemed to be increasingly tied to pragmatic demands such as resources or skills the regime needed, and perhaps less so to party activists' duration of party membership or participation in local PAP activities. Next, it further supported the argument surrounding complementary institutions in forestalling PAP's party decay (Ong, 2015) by ensuring a constant supply of potentially active party leaders to replace retired or irrelevant counterparts.

Secondly, I found that the more highly sought after the GRL was for his/her skills, resources and/or endorsement from other core group members, the more likely and quickly he/she obtained a position in the core group. This was particularly supported by their common experience in participating in the GE, where new members were often scouted for their contributions and skills to the local regime. These findings provided an important piece to the puzzle of how PAP-MPs as regime leads accumulated and mobilized sufficient political capacity to meet their political goals (Stone, 1989). GRLs are seen as an important source of

personnel to be recruited into core groups where they are recognized through their grassroots contributions as well as their heart to serve. As the demand for new skills or replacing old core group members emerged, the local grassroots sector became a convenient and accessible talent pool that PAP MPs or senior GRLs tapped on owing to the complementary competencies they possessed.

Lastly, I concluded that while core groups may be considered as local extensions of PAP's influence, their loyalties are tied to the PAP-MP as the face of the PAP, and not necessarily to PAP as a political party. What this means is that core groups are more accurately direct reflections of the PAP-MPs' political strength at the local level than that of the party itself. In local PAP regimes, the PAP-MP is the central locus of power. This finding matched up with previous studies that explain why PAP's elite cohesion strategies are directed mainly to the MP as the locus of control to establish a centralized system by the PAP's top leadership, the Central Executive Committee (CEC) (Tan, 2020). Here, the CEC minimized factionalism or "break-away" MPs by picking like-minded candidates and use of party mechanisms such as regular political turnovers which reminded MPs that the fate of their political careers is ultimately tied to top leadership decisions rather than their constituency strength, including their core groups. This also partly explains why PAP core groups could not fully evolve into MP-specific political machines or vote blocs as seen in other political contexts (Fenno, 2003; Johnson, 2018), as PAP-MPs balance between building a useful local political support team they can rely on while keeping to constraints set up by the party leadership such as toeing party lines to show deference. This limits the expansion of core groups into full political machines as well as removes incentives for MPs to invest in vote blocs if they know they might be moved to another constituency, rendering their investments invalid. Furthermore, a move to build an independent base of support without adhering to party lines would have been regarded by the PAP-CEC as an emergent sign of factionalism, and have the PAP-MP

moved or replaced. Regardless, core groups have served to preserve PAP's regime resilience by supporting the direct interests of PAP-MPs at the local level as quasi-political machines. Within them, GRLs played an important role by actively participating in parapolitical activities such as political minders and political capacity builders, further blurring their roles between party activists and community leaders.

6.4. Calibrating Electoral Performance through PAP's Vote Tracking System

One of the basic concerns political candidates faced in competitive electoral contests is the process of knowing if political performance, legitimacy and capital can be reliability converted into local vote share (Casey, 2008; Bourdieu, 1992). In local PAP regimes, one of the ways this knowledge is produced just before General Elections (GE) is through the grassroots sector, where GRLs perform the role of information mediators to augment PAP's vote tracking system by polling districts:

“[Field Note: Discussing grassroots support and vote share] A group of 47th District's chairpersons got together for a dinner to meet up and shoot the breeze. This was just weeks after GE2020 and the results of the election were still on everyone's conversations. As the chairpersons discussed election performance, one recurring topic during that conversation was in comparing and justifying local polling district performance, or the vote share in each polling district. As a student of politics, I knew that vote share was always only ever formally announced at the electoral district-scale [GRC or SMC level]. How did the chairpersons know about these numbers when the numbers they are talking about were never formally published anywhere? Later I found out that all the chairpersons got the info from the local PAP branch secretary, who informed them of their “political knowledge” as part of their assessment of their grassroots performance. But why was electoral votes a part of their assessment as

community leaders? One of the chairpersons explained that as the polling district was geographically similar to the boundaries of their RCs, RNs or NCs, it was one of the ways GRLs compared among themselves in terms of community leadership performance to see how well they cultivated “ground sentiments”. Another chairperson explained that it was one of the common ways they use to indirectly measure grassroots contribution as the GA, who is part of the local core group, measured community leadership success by how well GRLs kept the ground sentiments positive for them. If the PAP vote share went up in proportion to other polling districts [compared to the last GE], it was a sign that the GRLs have supported the GA to increase ground sentiments. If the PAP vote share went down (compared to the last GE), then the chairperson would have to think about what happened locally to explain the poor ground sentiments. When asked how this practice started in the grassroots, nobody could tell for it was happening for as long as anyone remembered. What they were certain was that this practise of talking and thinking about this link between local votes and ground sentiments has always existed.”

~

[Field Interview with Mr P, a chairman for 8 years – when asked about what are the concrete ways GRLs know how well they have done as GRLs] “Depends on who you ask... residents’ support can sometimes be felt if you served long enough...the ground sentiments will tell you during house visits or when residents want to join your events. Sometimes the MP will ask you “how well do you think your estate will do?” or “do you think the votes will be better than the last time?”, especially when it’s nearer to GE...[when asked why the MP would ask that]...they want to test the ground and see if the support is on their side...[when

asked the link between ground support and GE]...there's a connection between residents' feelings and their votes...those on the ground most like...GRLs will be able to tell if the ground is good or poor because once you serve long enough, it comes naturally. [when asked what happens if the ground sentiments were not good]...then the GRL can share what can be done to make sure it's good enough to hit at least the same or better (referring to PAP votes) that the last time [referring to last GE]...but of course it cannot be a last-minute thing...have to be done consistently to make sure the ground sentiment is strong. Otherwise, residents will think that "oh GE is coming, so that's why got so many things going on"...residents can be quite sharp."

Beyond the published vote share results by electoral districts under the Elections Department Singapore (ELD), a district polling level vote tracking system is made possible through two processes. The first is the cartographical overlapping of demarcated polling districts with RC, NC or RN estates' boundaries (See Figure 23²⁴). In the study's sites, the electoral boundaries of polling districts often overlapped with the boundaries of anywhere between 1 – 3 RC, NC or RN boundaries. This is complemented by a second boundary tag system during vote counting where each polling district is given a serial number and its counting station. This allowed counting agents appointed by political parties to accurately find out the vote share of each polling district and report the results to party coordinators, who will put all the local numbers from each station in the constituency into a comprehensive list. The vote tracking system by the polling district level allows PAP-MP to determine not only their vote share performance within a GRC where multiple members are elected, but it also delineated vote

²⁴ The polling district is indicated in blue lines, with the tag "JR12", with "JR" referring to Jurong GRC, and "12" indicating the 12th polling district in the GRC. In this instance, the polling district boundaries overlapped with the Faber Estate Neighbourhood Committee's (NC) boundary perfectly. The vote numbers reported for JR12 is therefore the vote share of residents in Faber Estate NC

count to the polling district levels, where it is possible to know how residents voted at the estate level.

Figure 24: JR12 polling district in Singapore (Source: ELD, Singapore Government)

Core group GRLs usually ranked highest in the list. Together with GRLs who are also card-carrying PAP activists, they both play more active roles such as being appointed as counting agents or in other campaigning roles. They also assist with sense-making exercises which enable PAP-MPs to gain a better picture of how well each estate would do for him/her to sufficiently win in their constituencies. In estates where MPs are anticipated to do poorly, GRLs provide recommendations on what can be done to improve the MP's political image before the General Elections (GE) begins. Other GRLs who are less comfortable to be seen as directly associating with the PAP often helped discreetly by sharing critical remarks or views they have received from their residents, or shared grassroots collateral designed to boost their MPs' political brand. On the other hand, GRLs who refused to support are also "marked" in the list and this information is passed on to local senior party activists who would work on influencing or socially pressuring them over to join the elections efforts. Failing to join, these "marked" GRLs are alienated or deemed as potentially disaffected or unreliable community leaders by pro-PAP GRLs. Some GRLs shared instances where leadership opportunities or commendations were awarded to pro-PAP GRLs over better-performing and more popular counterparts who chose not to support the PAP. These instances depict the implications of non-participation, and GRLs explained that most of them would either openly or discreetly support the system to not get marked, as they felt that refusing support could affect their standing or relations in the grassroots hierarchy.

The appeal to draft GRLs into PAP's vote tracking system is owing to their cultural and social capital. Firstly, the vote tracking system capitalizes on GRLs' local networks and knowledge of their neighbourhoods to develop a link between neighbourhoods' ground sentiments and political support for the PAP. Using polling districts' vote numbers to match GRLs' evaluation on ground sentiment and vice versa, PAP-MPs can develop a method of knowing which neighbourhoods they need to improve on and how, as well as evaluate their

political performances based on the work they have made and the home styles they have established. A second reason is that PAP-MPs can rely on GRLs with whom they have interacted and formed trust relations through their interactions in the grassroots. Capitalizing on their social capital with GRLs whom they are closer with, PAP-MPs get them to support the vote tracking system on the basis that these GRLs will do so in serving their MPs' best interests. Similarly, GRLs who shared a good rapport with their PAP-MPs also saw such opportunities as a sign of trust and a way to establish deeper relations with their political leaders.

The above findings contribute to the existing literature on how political parties utilized poll-watching strategies to form durable means to track the conversion of political performance into votes (Er, 1994; Ascencio & Reuda, 2019; Goerres & Funk, 2019). I show that in Singapore, a part of the tracking process is conducted through the grassroots sector, where alignment between electoral and grassroots boundaries as well as the electoral innovations in poll-watching made it possible to connect grassroots ground sentiments and vote share. Thus beyond influencing voters' turnout or electoral choice, as other studies have focused on, I expand GRLs' roles as informational mediators which enabled the PAP regimes to track how well they have done at the polling district/estate level and compare them to local knowledge of ground sentiments to maintain its regime resilience (Lee, 2016)

These findings also point to the role of GRLs in the production of local political knowledge. The parapolitical moment emerges when GRLs become "knowing subjects" in translating ground sentiments into vote share and vice versa for the PAP through their systems. Thus GRLs offer a crucial repository of local knowledge which makes the electoral district a more legible site for political interventions by the PAP, anticipating poor ground sentiments before they are reflected through votes in the elections (Lee, 2016; Weiss, 2017; 2020). At the same time, these findings open up a new puzzle in Singapore's electoral analysis – if vote tracking

strategies were made available to PAP regimes, how might this explain for some less-than-national-average vote share of PAP incumbent candidates? Based on GRLs' testimonies, GRLs I spoke to offered three possible scenarios.

Firstly, the PAP-MP and GRLs might have simply misread or underworked ground sentiments based on unreliable local knowledge they possessed or the lack of incentives to do so. GRLs shared that these instances are not uncommon in situations where the PAP-MP is retiring and saw little need to invest in electoral performance. As explained earlier, when PAP-MP's electoral performances are often directly linked to investments made to augment their home styles and mobilize core group members, they are often disincentivised to work the ground for their successors unless they have vested interests in doing so. Another reason GRLs also offered is due to the disconnections between certain GRLs and their local communities, which led to blindside from the onset (Chong, 2012). This is especially the case in situations where PAP-MPs relied on GRLs whom they trusted as credible but turned out otherwise. Secondly, there have also been instances where local voter focus have shifted from constituency-based matters to national level policy issues, especially when these national matters such as public scandals, incidents or highly unpopular policies have a bigger impact on valence politics than constituency matters (Oliver & Ostwald, 2018). One such example was in GE2011 which saw national issues being fronted as the key challenges to PAP's political legitimacy (Tan, 2012; Tan & Lee, 2011) Thirdly, any pre-electoral insights of ground sentiments might have been overturned by election-based factors such as campaign strategies and electoral fanfare. As Chua (2007) pointed out, elections in Asia have been observed as cultural events where political campaigns can radically influence how voters framed their political choices. This opens up for future work to further elucidate the relationship between ground sentiments and voter share in Singapore's elections. Apart from such occasional scenarios, however, the use of GRLs as informational mediators play a

significant role in giving PAP an edge over other political parties by assessing GRLs' local knowledge and connections to evaluate and anticipate their political performances before elections.

6.5 “Balancing Act”: Minding PAP-MPs’ Municipal Interests in PAP Town Councils

Another significant way GRLs reproduce PAP regime resilience is through their appointments as non-elected Town Councilors in PAP Town Councils (TCs). Here, I argue that they perform a crucial role of minding their MPs' municipal interests on their behalf in TC matters, ensuring that their wards benefit from municipal improvements. TCs were introduced in 1989 and made elected MPs and their political parties directly responsible for the daily management of common facilities in public estate neighbourhoods, a task previously managed by the HDB. This institutional reform further connects local political legitimacy to municipal performance through township management in what Haque (1994) and Ooi (1990) described as decentralization of urban governance to the grassroots. Furthermore, Ng (2018) argued that TCs structurally benefited the PAP due to incumbency advantages in terms of scale and resources over opposition parties in managing public estates. She also found that TCs allowed PAP-MPs to appoint GRLs as co-opted elites (Ng, 2018).

While I found that PAP Town Councils frequently appointed GRLs as town councillors, the appointments followed what one GRL termed as a “balancing act”. This referred to the process where PAP-MPs sought to install sufficient numbers of their GRLs into the different committees in the TC to ensure that their own political ward's interests are covered. Part of the reason for these arrangements was that while major township level projects were directed by the TC, each PAP-MP is still directly responsible for putting up and steering local municipal projects in their wards. Installing their GRLs as appointed councillors enabled PAP-MPs to channel their municipal expectations through GRLs in the respective TC committees. Another reason for the balancing act was that it also ensured that no single PAP-

MP could dominate TC resources by installing GRLs from a single ward while allowing PAP-MPs to use these appointments to reward core group members or co-opt GRLs into positions of the local authority.

Following the Town Council Act's guidelines, PAP-TCs typically consisted of six main committees: (1) Internal Audit, (2) Finance, (3) Contracts, (4) Estate Management, (5) Projects and (6) Publicity. Each committee controlled a specific jurisdiction of township management, and councillors are appointed committee positions such as Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson roles to manage committees' affairs. While the TC Chairman and elected MP-councillors wielded ultimate authority, they allowed each committee to handle their respective jurisdictions with relative latitude. The Town Council Act stipulated that while elected MPs may appoint up to 10 councillors each, or a minimum of 30, whichever is higher, it does not prescribe how they are internally organized in each committee. Instead, each PAP-TC has its internal agreement of GRL ratios in each TC committee. A basic rule of thumb was that elected MPs would appoint at least one councillor from his/her ward to ensure presence. Beyond that, agreements are also linked to the committees MPs wish to influence to channel TC resources to their municipal interests. The Finance, Contracts and Internal Audit committees have less of a direct impact on managing municipal projects due to their jurisdiction in complying with the financial, legal and government regulations set by the Minister of National Development (MND). On the other hand, the Projects, Estate and Publicity committees play a more direct role. For instance, an MP that wishes to quickly shore up his/her political visibility would appoint more GRLs and/or those with experience in publicity-related skills into the publicity committee to influence decision making processes in committee meetings. Different MPs, therefore, have multiple and intersecting municipal interests which they manifest through their councillors.

Appointed GRL-councilors thus see themselves as not just TC councillors, but also as their respective wards' representatives. They serve their MPs' home styles by fulfilling tasks ranging from minding their municipal interests and keeping tabs on local matters in the committee and estate to keep their MPs informed, organizing initiatives to benefit their home styles, and balancing the interests of their MPs and wards by representing them during TC and committee meetings. GRLs' local experience, knowledge and connections are drawn from their grassroots leadership enabled a certain level of local competency which they drew on to carry out their councillor duties and MPs' expectations. While they are remunerated between \$200 and \$300 as an allowance, GRL-councilors I spoke to shared that what motivated them to take on a councillor position was that it gave them a direct chance to participate in local governance while providing them with the recognition and status in doing so. Others shared that the experience, knowledge and networks gained in managing TC matters were sometimes valuable to their professional and community work. These reasons explain why GRLs defer to their MPs, as they are acutely aware that their councillors' appointments, which last two years on a full term, rest with maintaining their usefulness in fulfilling their MPs' municipal interests. The competency and deference factors thus help to partly explain why PAP-MPs chose GRLs from their wards as councillors, instead of simply picking from a pool based purely on technical expertise or resources. The "balancing-act" arrangements however contribute to the PAP regime's local resilience when GRL-councilors reproduce their respective MPs' municipal interests which are then converted into PAP performance at the local level.

6.6: GRLs' Positionalities in Reconciling Grassroots Parapolitics

So far I have discussed the various ways parapolitics have emerged through the grassroots sector, the roles GRLs play in them, and the significance of their roles in contributing to regime resilience. These interactions however do not underscore the heterogeneity of

positionalities GRLs take in interpreting and reconciling their involvement in parapolitics. When observing how GRLs framed their involvement in parapolitics, three main types of positionalities emerged. They are (1) identifying with PAP-MP, (2) identifying with the PAP, and (3) eschewing parapolitics altogether.

In the first type of positionalities, GRLs reconciled their involvements in parapolitics by justifying their association using their relationship with PAP-MPs:

[Interview with Ms Xu] [When asked about how GRLs who are involved in parapolitics due to the MP vs the PAP are different] you know...the difference is you have a relationship with the MP who is like someone you respect so you help him because you respect him...he sees you as someone who is helping him serve the community...this is different from politics...helping the PAP is “political” political, but helping the MP is not like “political” political you know?...I want to help the MP because he is good, and if we can help him to stay on in politics, that is my goal. If another MP comes, then maybe I won’t serve anymore [laughs]”

In this instance, GRLs did not distinguish their involvements in parapolitics as necessarily political when framed as supporting the PAP-MP. Instead, the parapolitical lines are drawn when GRLs saw themselves directly involved in PAP related matters. In the interview above, Ms Xu recognized that her involvement with the MP was political. She however distinguished her political participation differently from those involved in the PAP using the expression “political *political*”, by referring to the latter as involved in partisan politics, as opposed to simply supporting the MP as a political endeavour. Such positions are not uncommon at the grassroots. For instance, I have observed numerous occasions where GRLs evoked their relationship with the PAP-MP as a justification for engaging in parapolitics such as volunteering to support the GE as non-party helpers or by helping the PAP-MPs to

cultivate their home styles by sharing grassroots collaterals (See Picture 7.4). When asked how GRLs distinguished between partisan and PAP-MP politics when both are local instances of PAP's political identities, GRLs explained that their political support is tied primarily to reasons associated with the PAP-MP, rather than to the party. One common reason I found was gratitude. Many GRLs who do so often expressed paying a debt of gratitude to the PAP-MP for having resolved a personal matter, or successfully appealing for a policy decision that had a significant impact on the GRLs' lives such as admission to schools for their kids or obtaining new citizenship for themselves or their family members. Other GRLs cited camaraderie as a key reason for wanting to support the PAP-MP, for which they saw their relationship with the PAP-MP extended into supporting the latter's political career. Regardless of the reasons, these GRLs view their support for the MP as a personal relationship and they did not regard themselves as formally participating in partisan politics.

The second type of GRLs reconciled their involvement in parapolitics by recognizing and expressing their political involvement with the PAP through their grassroots work:

[Interview with Mr Tay] "I don't think you can kid yourself when you say you are doing PA's work, it's separated from PAP. If you look at our [Singapore] history, the PAP and PA have always united in serving Singaporeans well in one spirit and the deed speaks for itself...if you don't believe in the PAP's work, you cannot be an effective grassroots leader"

[Interview with Mr See] "Singaporeans are not wrong when they say that the PA and PAP are similar and (grassroots) volunteers are just lackeys for the men in white (PAP). But I honestly don't see anything wrong with this. As long as we are serving our residents, that's all that matters right?... You can't stop oppies [opposition supporters] who will kao pei kao bu [hokkien term for complaining],

but if everyone got Singaporeans' interests at heart, then who gives a shit which party you side with?

In the above excerpt, Mr Tay described his involvement in parapolitics by linking his role as a PA volunteer as linked to the PAP. Noting his comments that being an effective GRL required subscribing to the “PAP’s work”, I interpreted that as justifying parapolitics through an ideological belief in the alignment between PAP and the PA, where the PAP has historically proven itself by serving Singaporeans. Similarly, Mr See furthered this line of thought by showing that while the PAP is involved in the grassroots sector, he does not see anything wrong as long as the PAP “...got Singaporeans’ interests at heart”. For this group of GRLs, they appealed to the ideological tenets of what the PAP stood for and its contribution to Singaporeans as a justification for engaging in parapolitics. These GRLs however regarded themselves not as extensions of PAP’s political machinery, but that of a similar ideological discourse by which they conducted themselves as GRLs. There is however a difference that further distinguished GRLs’ positions in this category, as depicted by Mr Tay’s and Mr See’s comments. For Mr Tay, the alignment between PAP and PA may be interpreted as non-negotiable, and that a vital condition of community leadership entailed fostering PAP’s ideologies. In Mr See’s case, however, he positioned PAP’s involvement as simply a happenstance. Instead, he appealed to Singaporeans’ interests as his key justification. I found that GRLs who embodied Mr Tay’s characteristics were usually GRLs who were also long-time serving PAP party activists and have served more than one MP in their duration of activism. On the other hand, GRLs who embodied Mr See’s characteristics were likely to also be party activists, but were much more relatively newer, and also younger. I observed that other than their duration of service in the PAP, age or generational factor also partly explained the difference. Younger GRLs between the 20s and 40s were more likely to exhibit Mr See’s positionality and saw their involvement in parapolitics as a matter of political

circumstance while being involved in the grassroots. Meanwhile, older GRLs aged 50s and older were closer to Mr Tay's positionality, where they saw the connection between the PAP and PA less distinguishable. These differences as mediated by age might also indicate a broader trend among younger Singaporeans who recognize the political nature of grassroots work and are less likely to be comfortable with the blurring between PA and PAP.

The third type of GRLs differed from the earlier two by disavowing any associations with parapolitics:

[Field note – GRL keeping grassroots and politics separate] The branch secretary in 47th District met up with some GRLs whom he wanted to summon to discuss logistics of managing political collateral for General Elections. He got to the meeting with another three other core group members to help convince these GRLs. At the meeting, the branch secretary explained what the volunteering role entailed and what he needed the GRLs to do. Among those present, one GRL quietly approached the branch secretary. After a brief conversation, that GRL left the room. I asked the branch secretary what happened, and he said “no la, he said he’s not comfortable with mixing grassroots with politics and excused himself”.

Later on, I gave that GRL a call to find out more about what he meant. The GRL must have thought I was calling at the behest of the branch secretary. He profusely apologized for his early departure and did not mean any disrespect. After convincing him that this call was purely out of academic curiosity, he opened up and shared his point. Turned out, while he was happy to support grassroots initiatives, he was uncomfortable in helping out for anything politics related, which he said was “anything PAP related”. Part of the reason stemmed

from his role as a public servant – he was not sure this would sit right with his boss so he did not want to take any chances. Another reason was that he felt that “grassroots is grassroots” as he described. Although he is aware GRLs do “cross the line”, meaning to mix PAP and grassroots, he didn’t think that it would fit into his image as a GRL. “I prefer to keep grassroots and politics separate”, he said.

GRLs I met who professed the distinction between grassroots and politics regarded the latter as directly participating in PAP-related activities. While not professing any concerns with their roles as GRLs in serving the local PAP regime through the grassroots, these GRLs were always cognizant of where or how they limited their participation as “grassroots” as opposed to “PAP related”. I observed that each of them had their “line in the sand”, and interpreted their disavowal differently. The use of public or civil service associations as depicted in the above vignette is one common reason GRLs explained why they had declared a clear distinction between grassroots volunteerism and politics. GRLs in this category I spoke to explained that civil servants were highly discouraged from openly participating in any partisan activities, PAP’s included unless they obtained approval from their superiors. While the rule was not expressly written except for a line in the Civil Servant Handbook barring civil servants from being party members, this was the unspoken expectation in the civil service. Thus GRLs who were part of the public or civil service often used their professional constraints to justify their positions. Another similar reason GRLs relied on to disavow politics from the grassroots were those who saw their roles as GRLs as political but nonpartisan. These were GRLs who expressed discomfort being seen as linked to PAP or were outright critical of PAP’s subversion into grassroots politics. I observed that many of these GRLs who did so were either generally disgruntled or had antagonistic views with the PAP, but remained in the grassroots because they saw their participation as serving the community rather than the PAP-MP or PAP regime. Apart from these reasons, this group

consisted of a wide demographic range in terms of race and class but typically involved younger GRLs.

The sites I observed consisted of all three types of GRLs, but the first group of GRLs was usually more numerous, and typically included more than half of members in the grassroots hierarchy. The chief reason was due to the use of home styles by PAP-MPs to cultivate local support, which correspondingly influenced GRLs to associate their support more closely with their MPs. Furthermore, as discussed above, some GRL also expressed reasons for complying to support their MPs. Some do so for fear of repercussions while others expressed pragmatic reasons to comply so as not to miss out on grassroots promotions or recognition to advance their social positions in the grassroots hierarchy. Meanwhile, GRLs of the second type were usually reserved for those who were tied to the party as card-carrying activists. The last type of GRLs was the least in number, which is one indication of the level of PAP's hegemony over the grassroots. All three types of GRLs could be found in different levels of the local constituency's grassroots hierarchy, but I observed that the top echelons are often made up of a dominant mix of GRLs who exhibited the first two types of positionalities. Correspondingly, when these GRLs interacted with each other, differences in their positionalities often became sources of conflict in terms of defining what GRLs should do and the line between community leadership and partisan involvement. One such example of conflict I commonly found was in the planning of events, where those who sided with the PAP-MP preferred to align grassroots resources to support their political visibility, much to the chagrin of GRLs who felt that grassroots resources should not be spent to benefit the PAP-MP over the constituents. GRLs of the third type often also expressed the perception that their kind were ostracized by the former two types of GRLs because they felt that those who were comfortable with involving with parapolitics were often looked upon as more "loyal" or "useful" to the PAP-MP and his/her core group, and were therefore favoured.

Similarly, I observed that as many as 9 out of 10 of the top grassroots leadership positions and grassroots recognition awards were usually offered to the former two groups of GRLs. Meanwhile, GRLs who appealed to PAP relations were sometimes cautious of GRLs who appealed to PAP-MP as they felt that these GRLs were fair-weather PAP supporters who did not have the party's interests in mind. Inversely, GRLs who appealed to their PAP relations were often seen by the other two as being having political ambitions as they were perceived as not being loyal to the local PAP-MP and therefore did not trust them to serve in the interests of the MP.

The different appeals to PAP-MP, the PAP or claiming political neutrality thus illustrates the heterogeneity GRLs expressed when reconciling their involvement with parapolitics. These findings contribute to the existing literature in two ways. Firstly, it re-emphasized the agency GRLs possessed in expressing and framing their grassroots identities in relation to the blurring between grassroots volunteerism and electoral politics. It underscores the fact that GRLs are not passive subjects that take their participation uncritically. Instead, GRLs are capable of articulating the blurring of lines between grassroots and partisan politics in ways that suited the grassroots selves they wish to impress upon others. Secondly, it also highlighted how GRLs are cognizant of the political consequences of their choices when those who were able to reconcile through their MP's or PAP's interests were those who were also frequently rewarded and recognized for their contributions.

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between GRLs and parapolitics in reproducing PAP regime resilience through PAP-MP home styles, grassroots core groups, links between grassroots performance and electoral vote share, and township management. In home style, I argue that regime resilience is reproduced when grassroots resources are channelled to help PAP-MPs build political visibility, legitimacy and branding. The political legitimacy is

however tied to PAP-MPs as local figures of authority more so than local party institutions. In grassroots core groups, I uncover a group made up of GRL who are directed by their PAP-MPs to accumulate and localize capital, as well as politically mind grassroots initiatives to serve the political interests of the PAP-MP. In doing so, they perform the role of being the political capacity of the local PAP regime in addressing regime objectives and threats. Thirdly, in linking grassroots performance and vote share, I traced how institutional overlaps and electoral innovations made tracking vote shares to the level of local estates possible. From there, I followed GRLs in their roles as “knowing subjects” through poll watchers and sense makers to produce knowledge of vote share for PAP local regimes to coordinate electoral strategies. Fourthly, by examining the role of GRLs as appointed town councillors, I share how they directly contribute to PAP’s municipal performance by using their local knowledge of residents’ municipal expectations to calibrate PAP’s township service delivery. Finally, I demonstrated the heterogeneity of ways GRLs reconciled their participation in parapolitics, showing how these differences enabled them to justify their positions as GRLs in relation to partisan politics with local PAP regimes. These different positionalities however ultimately reveal how most GRLs strategically justify their participation in parapolitics to reproduce PAP’s regime resilience through grassroots channels and resources. In doing so, it also reflects the continued hegemony of PAP’s parapolitical influences in the grassroots.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1: Bringing the Grassroots Back In

In this study, I have positioned grassroots politics front and centre, focusing on how GRLs in Singapore mediate state, communities, party-politics and their own political or civic desires in reproducing urban governance and regime resilience through the grassroots. Situating my work within the scholarship of state-sponsored community leaders and volunteers, I embarked on an ethnographic study of GRLs in 4 neighbourhoods within my primary field, 47th District, and 2 secondary neighbourhoods between 2018 and 2020. In this study, I examined who GRLs are, how they are organized and how their practices and interactions produce urban governance and regime resilience. I also explored the various ways GRLs make sense of their political participation and how these sense-making experiences shape their styles of grassroots politics. Although existing studies have relied on top-down approaches in analyzing Singapore politics (Mauzy & Milne, 2002; Hill & Lian, 2013; Barr, 2014; Abdullah, 2016), my research also has shown that the bottom-up political practices and experiences of political actors such as GRLs are also significantly crucial in understanding how neighbourhood governance and PAP's regime resilience are reproduced. The findings and analysis in this study challenge notion of a highly unified elite group, political/party structure or unitary state in Singapore politics by demonstrating the diversity of experiences, negotiations and contestations within grassroots politics. These findings and analyses are reported across four chapters.

In Chapter 3, I focused on the state of the grassroots sector in Singapore from a local constituency's scale and examined who joins the grassroots, for what reasons, and how their social statuses shaped their grassroots positions and volunteerism experiences. I first introduced the grassroots sector by identifying the grassroots hierarchy, along with the three main strata of GRL types – “leaders”, “seniors” and “volunteers” GRLs. Next, I assess

GRLs' motivations for joining the grassroots through pragmatic reasons such as reciprocity-based participation, using the grassroots to make a difference in their communities, or as a stepping stone to immerse into local politics. Others also cited their involvement through political absorption, where local community leaders are incentivized to incorporate themselves into the grassroots in return for state endorsements. These different motivations highlight the complexities of top-down pressures and bottom-up interests that underlie GRLs' motivation for grassroots participation. Furthermore, I showed that beyond motivations, GRLs strategically deployed economic, cultural and social capital, as well as relied on their membership in cliques as closed groups to maintain or further their social positions in the grassroots hierarchy. I then argued that organizational inequalities and elite capture of the grassroots are present in Singapore's grassroots sector, albeit maintained through specific interactions where GRLs with higher levels and specific forms of economic, social and cultural capital influence social positions in the grassroots hierarchy, grassroots benefits, and prestige for their participation. These findings are significant in showing us how the grassroots sector is neither a homogenized nor an undifferentiated space. Instead, they are shaped by unequal distributions of power, capital and recognition along a grassroots hierarchy that broadly influences GRLs' political experiences in the grassroots.

In Chapter 4, I examined how GRLs framed their positions as community leaders through Singapore's political history, drawing on their narratives to re-centre a history of the grassroots, and traced the historical positions of GRLs as political actors. I argued that GRLs' narratives unsettle existing narratives of Singapore's political history. These retellings reveal the political roles in Singapore's politics through three historical periods. I show the different transitions GRLs' political positions undergo as local notables who were political regime partners with the fledgling PAP government in the late 1950 – early 1960s, to their eventual status as state-sponsored civic leaders who were defanged and captured by both the state and

party-politics in serving their interests. In doing so, I show how the contemporary positions of GRLs as discussed in existing studies are not purely an outcome of institutional design but are also figures produced by Singapore's and the PAP's political transitions. I also show how these transitions are never smooth, revealing the interplay of resistance and domination as GRLs negotiate their positions with the PAP. These findings are significant to Singapore's political history as they clarify the misunderstood political roles early groups of GRLs played in Singapore politics by revealing the political centeredness of their positions first as regime allies. Only later when co-opted as GRLs did they lose their political bases of power. These findings also clarified how GRLs responded to political transitions with the party, and more broadly in Singapore, by shifting their strategies in negotiating with other political elites such as PAP-MPs to maintain their relevance in local politics. These narratives shared in this chapter however do not render state-endorsed or critical narratives of Singapore's political history invalid. Instead, I showed how possible gaps and the discursive impasse between the two might be reconciled using an emic perspective based on the historical frames of how early GRLs saw and understood themselves in those situations. The central significance in this chapter is therefore depicted by the value of using a historical approach in situating and understanding the contemporary positions of GRLs as political actors.

In Chapter 5, I dived into the lives of GRLs as they reproduced Singapore's neighbourhood micro-governance (NMG), defined as the Singapore state's intensive, immersive and interventionist style of governing local neighbourhoods through state-sponsored grassroots organizations. I examined how GRLs perform their roles as "double agents", as they utilize local knowledge and connections of local communities and local state actors to fulfil both top-down governing expectations and bottom-up governing challenges. In meeting top-down governing expectations, I focused on how GRLs discuss three main governing practices – providing "feedback", distributing state resources, and adjudicating local affairs, that help the

state make NMG feasible. These practices highlighted the different ways GRLs facilitated state-society relations as state agents by translating and channelling local expectations and grievances into informing policymaking and policy implementation. In responding to bottom-up challenges, I also explored how GRLs' responses to outsourced governance, the politics of consumption as well as representation unveiled the limits of NMG as they tried to reconcile their relationship with the state with their roles as community agents. These limits echoed the existing literature surrounding how grassroots politics remain subjected to elites' interests in maintaining particular ideological positions that serve the latter's interests (Tan, 2003; Lim; 2007; Weiss, 2017). In this instance, this study further revealed how GRLs negotiate their different positionalities surrounding the outsourcing of community risks, profiling of poorer neighbourhoods as "problematic areas", and the expectations of minority representation among ethnic minority GRLs as they govern their communities. In doing so, GRLs reproduced the ideological work of class and race-based impositions which are endorsed by the state. But such reproductions are not without some expressing strife or frustration, as described in the challenges faced by GRLs as they reconcile with their work in NMG. The main insight which emerged out of these challenges centred on the idea that while individual resistance to social expectations and ideological framing of GRLs illustrated the limits of NMG, these framings also revealed the larger ideological discourses underpinning the state's approach towards the politics of representation and consumption in community politics. At the same time, these frustrations and slippages at the everyday level by these GRLs did not necessarily amount to any substantive challenge to the state's ideological impositions of race-based grassroots representations and class-based framing of consumption of public goods. Instead, these instances illustrated how state hegemony can be established not just through consent as orthodoxy, as in the case of GRLs who unquestionably reproduce their roles as double agents. It is also completed through subjecting GRLs' different positionalities and

enclosing their struggles as part of their encounters as “hegemonic subaltern” (Thomas, 2018: 13). As GRLs find different ways to adapt the state’s ideologies into local context by identifying and providing recourse to the emergent problems of the state’s ideologies, they become the very progenitors of making the ideologies work. In other words, dissent becomes an integral experience of showing that while the ideological underpinnings of the hegemony are not without flaws, they are materialized through GRLs who find themselves reconciling their positionalities as exercises in reconciling the state’s hegemony in itself.

In Chapter 6, I returned to the debate surrounding GRLs and local politics by examining their roles in maintaining PAP’s regime resilience through parapolitics. I argued that GRLs reproduced PAP regime resilience by backing PAP-MPs in four ways. Firstly, GRLs supported PAP-MPs in cultivating their home styles by building political visibility and brands. Next, they served as grassroots core group members in minding the political interests and functioning as the political capacity of PAP-MPs at the grassroots. Next, they helped maintain local vote tracking systems in supporting PAP-MPs’ electoral strategy. Lastly, they represented and balanced MPs’ municipal interests in Town Councils as appointed town councillors. This study also recognized the multitude of positionalities GRLs take in justifying their participation in parapolitics. GRLs do so by affiliating with the local MP, the PAP, or disavowing parapolitical relations altogether. In appealing to MP loyalties, GRLs saw themselves not as party activists, but as primary supporters of their MPs and situated their political support to the specific MP as a political figure. These GRLs typically made up more than half of the grassroots. GRLs who claimed affiliation to the PAP saw themselves as reproducing PAP’s party work in their service to the MP and the grassroots. These GRLs seldom changed their support even when their current PAP-MPs retired or were replaced as they regarded their support as an extension of their party loyalties. The third group of GRLs disavowed parapolitics by declaring their inability or unwillingness to participate in

supporting both MPs and PAP. These GRLs were a minority due to the immense pressure and incentives available in serving the PAP regime. Many did so as a result of institutional constraints such as being a civil servant which did not allow them to be official political party members, or because of disinterestedness in local party politics. The typology of these different positionalities is a significant contribution to the existing literature on PAP's political regime durability in showing how everyday reproduction of regime resilience is done so through the grassroots and why GRLs do so. It also showed how despite the institutional demarcation of PAP and PA, it has not prevented the PAP regime from utilizing grassroots resources through GRLs to derive political advantages over the political opposition in Singapore.

There are three important points that this thesis makes. The first is in depicting an insider perspective to the world of Singapore's grassroots politics by focusing on the lived experiences of GRLs in them. Existing works on Singapore politics tend to work from outside in, bringing in theoretical insights to bear upon empirical observations obscured by inaccessibility due to political sensitivities or gatekeeping (Mauzy & Milne, 2002; Low & George, 2020). The works that derive insights from within are often confined to "confessionals" where retired statesmen recount their lives over autobiographies (See Goh & Peh, 2021; Jayakumar, 2020), or studies relating to empirical works focusing on grassroots action before the 1990s (See Seah, 1973 & Chan, 1976; Vasoo, 1994). This study adds to the scholarship by presenting contemporary insider insights that can be combined with the rigour of academic scholarship to bring to bear political analysis that benefit both scholars and pundits in Singapore politics. Furthermore, the ethnographic centring of GRLs offers a fresh methodological contribution about the inner workings of grassroots politics through collective contributions, instead of privileging any single individual's narrative. This study focuses on GRLs political experiences as they navigate across different settings in negotiating

various political engagements with political actors ranging from PAP-MPs, street bureaucrats, to other community partners and residents. For instance, in Chapter 3, this insider perspective is depicted through a discussion of how GRLs recognize and respond to the grassroots hierarchy and the various intra-organizational interactions that shape their strategies in preserving their social positions in the grassroots. In Chapter 4, GRLs share their insider narratives which supplement or contest existing accounts of Singapore's political history, providing a more robust approach towards understanding and historicizing the grassroots sector as part of Singapore political development. In both Chapters 5 and 6, insider perspectives are showcased through the organizational challenges that GRLs face in balancing state and community interests in neighbourhood micro-governance as well as the hegemonic pressures in the form of ground expectations from PAP-MPs and pro-PAP GRLs. They also reveal the various ways GRLs negotiate or produce different positionalities in the face of these interests or pressures.

Another significant theme is the emphasis on pragmatism by GRLs through different dimensions of grassroots politics. This has been observed in the way GRLs articulate their motivations for participating in the grassroots, the ways they positioned and perceived their political roles in Singapore's politics, as well as their responses to resolving challenges in enacting governance and supporting the PAP's regime. This appeal to pragmatism by GRLs may also suggest the prevalence of the rhetoric of pragmatism in maintaining PAP's hegemony in Singapore, which at the same time reveals the internal contradictions of its style of governance in partnering capital and state (Tan, 2012). Played out in the grassroots scene, this privileging of economic capital through economically well-to-do GRLs and the reliance on the private sector in the form of vendors to carry the administrative load of community participation also hints at the neoliberal influences within the grassroots sector that undermine its capacity to transform the neoliberal state. Instead, the grassroots sector

becomes its extensions in the everyday reproduction of neoliberal ideas, values and practices when GRLs connect capital to the community and subject the grassroots to the influences of those who wield economic capital. Despite these neoliberal tendencies, this pragmatic front has also allowed the PAP to further its authoritarian practices by focusing on a dominantly technical view of approaching governance. In this study, I found that while a sizable large part of the grassroots politics revolves around “pragmatic” tasks such as finding manpower to oversee community initiatives, securing resources to make governance or regime resilience possible as well as a focus on maintaining relations with different political actors, these are the very encounters that characterized grassroots, and by extension, Singapore’s politics. In other words, this study shows that the administrative state (Chan, 1975) is a product rather than an absence of Singapore’s style of pragmatic politics.

Last but not least, this study also exemplified the significance of social and political networks in grassroots politics or the power of networked grassroots. From recruitment, everyday maintenance of activities, group-based dynamics, to governing and parapolitical practices, a significant part of GRLs’ grassroots experiences involve deploying and navigating social relations to make sense of and do politics. At the same time, the reliance on social capital and networks inevitably also reproduces similar social milieus within the grassroots spaces. This is especially so when GRLs imbue class, ethnic or gendered preferences while fulfilling pragmatic considerations such as skills and capital by influencing grassroots positions through selectorate-styled politics. These selections however also reflected a wider political culture of leadership selection styles that are also seen in the selection of senior civil servants (Tan, 2008) or even PAP’s political candidates (Fong, 1979), where “functional politicization” (Mayntz & Derlien, 1989) results in picking candidates which are not only the best and brightest but also those most aligned with particular sets of political attitudes or dispositions. This position challenges the conventional assumptions in the subjection of

GRLs as passive, constrained individual subjects reacting to PAP's hegemony in a one-dimensional way (Milne & Mauzy, 2002). Instead, I show how the grassroots, along with the relations of power between GRLs and residents, MPs, street bureaucrats as well as other community agents are made up of networked interactions that require constant reproduction through repeated local encounters and interactions in neighbourhood associational politics. Furthermore, these networked grassroots also reveal the highly unequal levels of social capital possess among different individuals and the consequences of these inequalities in grassroots politics. In other words, for GRLs, the grassroots is in larger part is about who one knows based on one's social positions, what one does with these connections, and how these practices shape GRLs' social positions and experiences in the grassroots as well as governance and regime politics.

7.2 Contributions to Current Scholarship

This study contributes to three different sets of debates in the existing scholarship. Firstly in community powers and urban governance, I answer Read and Pekkanen's (2009) call for attention on state-linked grassroots associations, particularly in East and Southeast Asian contexts, by shedding light on the inner-workings of Singapore's grassroots sector at the local level. I share in their appreciation that these middling organizations perform a plethora of governing and political functions for both state and local communities as they interact with them. They cannot simply be dismissed as uncritically reproducing whatever institutional designs they are set out for. Instead, transformations in the political landscape and local dynamics owing to changes in relations between political actors also shape how these organizations operate in local politics. I also further the existing scholarship characterized by works such as Read's (2012) in showing how urban political analysis can develop new insights to support or challenge existing understandings of community powers by focusing on urban actors instead of simply on institutions. At the same time, by applying some of the

theoretical frames drawn from urban political analysis such as Stone's (1989) regime politics and Fenno's (1993; 1977) works on home style and political supporters, I add new empirical data and insights to the existing debate surrounding the significance of community leaders in urban politics. For instance, the case of GRLs in Singapore has become a useful analytical figure to compare with other urban actors elsewhere such as Pekkanen's neighbourhood association members, which he described as inhabiting "membership without advocacy" (2009: 27), or Read's (2009) figure of *lizhang* in Taiwan's neighbourhood associations. This offers opportunities for comparative analysis in the role of state-backed civic volunteers in maintaining particular urban socio-political orders in East and Southeast Asian contexts. This also benefits existing theoretical attempts at bridging Western and non-Western experiences of urban political analysis. Concurring with scholars who posit that urban regime analysis can still yield substantive insights into urban politics by incorporating urban cases from outside of the US context (Bernt, 2019; Lambelet, 2017; Stone, 2014; Holman, 2007), I contribute to furthering Stone's regime political analysis by showing that regime politics can be applied to study Singapore's grassroots politics to answer the question of "who rules?" in this political space. In this study, the mutual dependence of ruling coalitions in urban regime analysis is contextualized by the intersections of the Singapore state, PAP's and GRLs co-dependence in producing urban governance and regime resilience. In doing so, I exhibited the theoretical merit of urban regime analysis by showing that it can be applied outside of the US urban context into other national cases as well. This analytical strand warrants more work in showing how urban regime analysis may shed new light in contributing to studies of Singapore politics. At the same time, other non-US urban political cases elsewhere offer new empirical material to interrogate the theoretical extent of urban regime analysis within urban political works in this region (Read & Pekkanen, 2009).

Next, this study speaks directly to the scholarship surrounding the complex relationship between regime resilience and politics in authoritarian regimes (Slater, 2010; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Alagappa, 1995). Following Weiss's (2020) emphasis on the local dynamics of personal linkages as well as local government and machines, this study makes a strong case for the role of local actors in grassroots politics as they adapt to local challenges to governance and politics at the everyday level to maintain regime resilience. I demonstrate how the strength of the PAP regime lies not just in a neat blueprint of coordinated domination over different aspects of state and society (Mauzy & Milne, 2002), but more importantly in finding and adapting different ways through intermediary actors such as GRLs to reproduce consensus and political orderings that inform other elite actors and regime partners of what to expect within the regime. By extricating the inner workings of Singapore's parapolitics, I also further existing understandings of how grassroots politics can foster and build political legitimacy for authoritarian regimes as well as the other way around (Weiss, 2017; Mattingly, 2019; Luger, 2015). I do so by sharing how at the heart of the legitimacy building exercises in Singapore's grassroots politics are GRLs, and the cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics of legitimacy building they conduct in their roles as community leaders. Drawing on Bourdieu's (2007; 1992) works on the cultural practice of political legitimacy and socio-political orders through various species of capital, I contribute to the scholarship by further clarifying how authoritarian regimes establish, accumulate and deploy capital through politics to maintain regime resilience.

Last but not least, this study contributes to the scholarship on contemporary Singapore politics. Ultimately, the substantive claim I make to the Singapore politics scholarship is the importance of the local or bringing back the local into an analysis of Singapore politics. The use of the grassroots sector is one such example to shed light on how a "local approach" to Singapore politics can provide significant empirical and theoretical insights in more

adequately addressing some of the major debates in Singapore politics. I bring grassroots politics back into Singapore's political analysis by showing how any robust understanding of Singapore politics needs an examination of the transformations at the grassroots. In the thesis, I emphasize the importance of re-orienting the significance of grassroots politics to local politics in Singapore and highlighting the need to allow for grassroots politics to be studied as an empirical domain of political analysis. While the focus on grassroots politics is not new, this study trains a spotlight on the contemporary state of the grassroots sector in Singapore, bringing in fresh empirical findings and analysis to supplement existing debates. These findings support certain existing understandings while challenging others in signifying the role of GRLs and grassroots politics in local politics. Existing studies have often downplayed the importance of this area, relegating this domain as purely reflective of PAP's regime's strength. In this study, I have shown that this is not the case. Instead, regime resilience on the ground is reproduced through everyday governing practices. But these practices are not wholly perfect, as shown in the various challenges and contestations in grassroots politics. These challenges however do not necessarily contest state and PAP's hegemony on the ground. Instead, I show how dissent finds itself a way to become an important marker of reconciling resistance and reproduction of hegemony. This study also opens up possible discussion points with the existing civil society scholarship in local and community politics (Chong, 2005; Koh & Soon, 2012). One such potential example is perhaps seeing them as discursive spaces that form part of the spatial configurations of how the regime governs political communities.

Another significant contribution I make is by unsettling dominant narratives on the role of GRLs in Singapore's political history, recovering insights that were prominent previously (Chan, 1976; Seah, 1973; Loy, 1979) but that have been de-emphasized in contemporary analyses. These include shedding light on how certain political transitions or transformations

are made possible through the political participation of GRLs. By connecting GRLs' oral accounts of how grassroots politics unfolded from their experiences and in memories passed through interpersonal encounters, this study answers Loh et al's (2013) calls for oral history to recover the "fragments" of narratives that do not fit with established narratives. Furthermore, this study bridges various scholarships on Singapore politics into a common arena, allowing existing analysis of community developments to critical accounts of Singapore politics to be evaluated through empirical work.

This task is most critical for Singapore Studies scholarship in light of a growing gulf between those who speak "with" and "within" the establishment, and those who do so in relative ambivalence or antagonism. I situate both my work and position as an exploratory reading of my inquiry, those of my participants in the study, as well as those with similar pursuits in asking the question of what political reasoning could be like in Singapore after Lee Kuan Yew. As a result, my work here could be best described as hoping to further the discussion by making clearer the areas for reconciliation and debate between the two camps, so that it shows the complexities of political identities people possess in Singapore. I do so by drawing the insights from my participants using my negotiated access as a newly minted insider, albeit with my researcher identity as front and center in my conversations with political actors within. I also refrain from seeing this study as an exercise of a "loving critic" (Koh, 2019), because it is not. Instead, I evoke the concept of "*youhuan yishi*" or 忧患意识, a term Davis (2009) described as "patriotic worrying", a line of intellectual praxis among Sinophone scholarship on China on addressing the central question of 'What can we do about China?'. Notable theorists include Lu Xun (2016) and Takeuchi Yoshimi (2005) who contemplated the question of China's political future as both an intellectual as well as a "patriotic" exercise, even as the "patriotism" here embodies a more sombre and serious tone rather than of a chauvinistic or jingoistic one. In a similar inquiry on 'What can we do about Singapore', this

study provides a glimpse of what GRLs think about Singapore's contemporary politics or the various social issues they come across through their roles as political actors in the grassroots. This study suggests that these micro-concerns at the most local levels can become important reflections in informing larger inquiries surrounding the future of Singapore's governance and politics. The intellectual position here, therefore, is showing that the local is not just meant as a sociological inquiry, but also as an exercise of political reflection. The various political positions and perspectives shared by GRLs in performing neighbourhood governance and parapolitics offer insights that help us navigate our own, especially as Singaporeans. Furthermore, it also shows the possibility of how political research can be possible beyond being uncritically committed to the establishment, or being wholly antagonistic to anything establishment-oriented. This new task suggests that a more nuanced politics of research can be possible, albeit difficult, to uncover the multiplicities of local political experiences that exist beneath the larger academic debates.

7.3 What This Study Cannot Address

All works are limited by the theoretical, empirical and methodological constraints set or compelled to deal with. There are seven areas of limitation I address to clarify what this study is not about or qualify the extent of its insights.

Firstly, while this study covered elements of racial, ethnic, gendered and class-based analyses in grassroots politics, I qualify that these claims cannot simply extend beyond what is already purported in the study for two reasons. Firstly, while I have made attempts to balance my interactions across a wider spectrum of social demographics, I am acutely aware that the research sites I have chosen cannot fully capture "representative" attributes to speak of grassroots politics through these lenses. As my field-site information in Chapter 1 revealed, the population's demographics of 47th District is skewed slightly towards a predominantly Chinese, middle to upper-middle-class residents of an older cohort when compared to

national demographic trends, which might have also slightly skewed the present population of GRLs as well, as GRLs are also recruited from the resident population. My study suggests that the local configurations of Singapore's neighbourhoods are much more complex than that, and further investigation is required to draw a typology of neighbourhoods for future research. Instead, due to the interest of time and the research objectives, I made a conscious choice to pick a field site that gained me adequate access and comparable insights to deal with what the study sought to do, which is an analysis of GRLs' governing practices in grassroots politics. Another reason is that this study did not specifically embark on a quest to focus on racial, ethnic, gendered or class-based analysis, to which it would require some level of purposive methodological and analytical constructions to derive these insights. Instead, these social factors emerged out of the research, and are deemed relevant to be highlighted in the study. Thus rather as seeing them as limitations, I regard these insights as cursory groundwork for a more systematic engagement surrounding race, ethnicity, gender and/or class in future work.

Another limitation is the scale of grassroots politics which this study focuses on. While this study acknowledges that the grassroots sector is a complex web of institutions, organizations, groups and networks across different levels of interactions, it focuses primarily on the "neighbourhood" level. This scalar focus limits existing analysis to only what happens at the political ward level and omits observations at the "district", "regional" and "national" levels that may yield additional insights. At the "district" level, these include Group Representation Constituencies where multiple wards are contained within with the PA Group Constituency Office overseeing grassroots initiatives. At the "regional" level, they include the Community Development Councils (CDCs) and new constellations of CDC-linked grassroots organizations that operate differently in terms of organizational aims and grassroots configurations. One such difference is the appointment of GRLs as district councillors under

a district mayoral system that however bears very little resemblance to other mayoral systems in the world (Vogelsang-Coombs, 2007). Meanwhile, at the “national” level, a significant portion of grassroots politics occur behind closed doors through the PA Headquarters and other institutions such as the National Community Leadership Institute (NACLI), GRL councils and a host of working committees consisting of political, community and civil society leaders. This study does not address grassroots politics at these levels for two reasons. Firstly, as the research focus is on neighbourhood politics and with most GRLs primarily operating at the local level, this study sets the analytical parameters to address them. Secondly, due to accessibility reasons and the constraint of managing an ethnographic project of this scale, I have decided to omit these areas to solely focus on local-level grassroots politics instead.

Similarly, due to the length of this study (late 2018 – end 2020), I found that it does not capture what GRLs shared as a “full cycle”. This refers to the full period from the end of one electoral cycle to the start of the next, which is typically an average of about 4 years, barring snap elections. My study coincides with the latter half of the electoral cycle (between mid-2015 and mid-2020), as well as half a year into a new one (mid-2020 till present). These temporal cycles are important in grassroots politics as major changes to the grassroots hierarchy and local dynamics occur during and between these periods. For instance, a change of PAP-MP candidate, even with a local electoral victory for the PAP, may see internal disruptions such as changes among key leadership roles when the outgoing MP leaves with his/her team, while the incoming MP brings his/her group to replace existing members. For GRLs, these cycles might also mean changes or disruptions to the existing grassroots hierarchy or their social positions. While this study captures some of these changes, a study that takes into consideration these “cycles” would yield clearer perspectives on how these

transformations occur across the temporal scale used by political actors to measure and make sense of political changes.

Another limitation of this study is the omission of grassroots politics in opposition wards. At present, there are 10 political wards (2 GRCs, 1 SMC) in Singapore under the Worker's Party (WP). While GRLs' governing practices highlighted in this study are expected not to greatly differ across political wards, this study also recognise that grassroots politics in opposition party wards would entail further insights not found elsewhere in PAP wards. One significant reason is that elected MPs from opposition wards are not appointed as GAs in their local wards, opposition parties often responded to these appointments by creating their own parallel politically-linked grassroots organizations. For instance, in Hougang SMC, the WP set up the Hougang Constituency Committee (HGCC) to support grassroots initiatives under the WP-MP, which is separated from the Hougang CCC led by the PAP branch chairman in Hougang. These institutional peculiarities are expected to present new interactions, relations and practices between political actors in either organization as well as in grassroots politics not found in PAP wards. However owing to issues of access (See Chapter 1 on Involvement and Access) as well as limited duration and resources for the project, I made a conscious decision to solely focus on PAP-wards to control my analysis of grassroots politics within a specific political context.

Beyond operational constraints, this study's duration also overlapped with an unprecedented period of Singapore's urban crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic which occurred from early 2020 to the present. In the research's context, the pandemic's effect on ethnography is twofold. Firstly, as the number of face-to-face interactions drastically decreased owing to safe distancing measures, it hampered the outreach of the data collection exercises which was designed with physical observations in mind. While the study adapted to the new regulations as a result of the pandemic by moving my interfacing with participants to digital platforms

such as social media apps (Facebook, WhatsApp) as well as video conferencing (Zoom, Skype), it limited my outreach to participants or informants who were not as digitally literate. Moreover, studying GRLs' governing practices during this unprecedented urban crisis also constrained my insights in terms of capturing some outlier examples as the study straddled between the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods of 2018 - 2021. I am aware that my observations may have captured a moment of community mobilization that addresses the current state of Singapore's crisis rather than the general tempo of grassroots politics. At the same time, I also acknowledge that the Covid-19 pandemic has provided a way to observe how the grassroots sector adapts to the urban crisis as a governing experience, and have addressed these experiences in my work. Thus I recommend that my findings and analyses need to be qualified within the context of what some GRLs have described as a period of "new normal" in the grassroots sector, where the pandemic has undeniably altered grassroots politics. As for how and why the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted grassroots politics and urban governance, it remains a research project for another day.

7.4 Areas for Future Enquiry

The insights and limitations of this study are also opportunities in several ways. Here I discuss four main areas in which this study informs future research endeavours. Firstly, from a sociological approach, this study motivates more in-depth research into how race, ethnicity, gender, nationality and class intersect to shape how grassroots politics emerge in local contexts. In discussing the issue of politics of representation, this study widens the debate surrounding minority representations in grassroots politics by unveiling the limits surrounding the politics of representation in urban governance expressed by GRLs, as well as how these negotiated representations are mediated by GRLs' appeal to gendered or class-based lenses. It also opens up the question of how much race and ethnicity matter, as well as who, matters more and why in urban governance at the neighbourhood level in Singapore.

Another angle is in the gendered aspects of community participation, which presents itself through the compulsory organization of female GRLs through the Women Executive Committees (WECs) as well as the disproportionately low number of senior and leader women GRLs. Intersecting these social trends, one may also find that most women in senior grassroots leadership are Chinese upper-middle or affluent class individuals in senior management or business leadership positions. At the same time, several women join the grassroots as part of their parental responsibilities to secure grassroots benefits such as primary school priority schemes for their kids. Similarly, the obvious lack of LGBT activism is stemmed from both top-down pressures from the state for the grassroots to steer away from advocacy politics, as well as muted responses from the bottom-up owing to a lack of discourse on how community politics and sexuality can be pursued within the realms of state-sponsored grassroots organizations. This conspicuous absence is however paralleled with a growing discourse of grassroots activism outside of these state-sponsored spaces in Singapore (Luger, 2015; Chua, 2014). The disjuncture between these spaces presents interesting opportunities to examine the grassroots from a feminist or queer scholarship to unravel how states choose particular narratives of grassroots gender empowerment and heteronormativity as part of their gendered governing ethos while steering clear of queer politics within PA grassroots spaces. Furthermore, the phenomenon of new citizens participating in grassroots activities also warrants further research to address this trend (Tan 2020). While this thesis has made a brief account of their presence, a deeper analysis of their experiences will provide interesting comparisons in terms of the relationship between grassroots volunteerism and citizenship building. Last but not least, this study hopes to inspire future works on the role of class-based figures and narratives in shaping grassroots politics – ranging from critiques of community-led financial assistance, to how class-based notions of deservedness and elitism are reproduced through everyday interactions of community volunteerism as class practices.

Another future line of inquiry this study promotes is by exploring the methodological concerns and strategies of doing political research in Singapore, contributing to the growing literature of political elite studies. It offers a possibility for other similar works to converge on common areas or experiences surrounding how to navigate political research in Singapore. It helps researchers better understand how privilege and politics shape access in political ethnography, while at the same time opening a new methodological inquiry surrounding how such works can expand and unsettle existing limits in addressing political questions in Institutional Review Boards in Singapore. In doing so, it hopes to provide greater clarity as to how researchers should navigate the politics of research in the research of politics while being afforded sufficient institutional support and guidance.

Last but not least, I hope to further this study into a series of comparative works about East and Southeast Asia on the role of community leaders in shaping political regimes and urban governance through grassroots politics (Read & Pekkanen, 2009). While Singapore's case may be seemingly atypical, the common historical and political elements it shares with its counterparts such as postcolonial experiences, developmental state politics and competitive authoritarian regimes offer further opportunities in understanding how Singapore's political configurations may be situated within the broader literature of regime resilience through community powers. Following the sustained interests in the legacy of electoral-authoritarian persistence (Weiss, 2020), this study provides a robust case for why future studies should bring the local back in examining the political futures of political leviathans that exist not simply through coercion or consent, but by managed contestations and calibrated accommodations (Slater, 2010; Tomba, 2014; Mattingly, 2019).

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