

*Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 46(1), pp 111–118 February 2015.  
 © The National University of Singapore, 2015 doi:10.1017/S0022463414000630

## Review Article

# Political leadership in Singapore: Transitional reflections amidst the politics of bifurcation

Alan Chong

### *The ruling elite of Singapore: Networks of power and influence*

By MICHAEL D. BARR

London: I.B. Tauris, 2014. Pp. 224. Index.

### *Goh Keng Swee: A legacy of public service*

Edited by EMRYS CHEW and CHONG GUAN KWA

Singapore: World Scientific, 2012. Pp. 333. Photographs, Index.

### *We also served: Reflections of Singapore's former PAP MPs*

Edited by CHIANG HAI DING and ROHAN KAMIS

Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2014. Pp. 456. Photographs, Index.

### *Asianism and the politics of regional consciousness in Singapore*

By LEONG YEW

Abingdon: Routledge, 2014. Pp. 241. Index.

Singapore's politics post-2011 is increasingly exhibiting symptoms of a bifurcation into two broad 'paradigms'. Assuming that the result of the 2011 General Elections, when the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) garnered only 60.1 per cent of the vote — its lowest since fully competitive elections began in 1959 — represented a turnaround in the majority of Singaporeans' willing embrace of the PAP's policies and leaders, the political landscape appears headed towards a scenario of democratic pluralism. This is a landscape where a still inchoate 'alternative ruling party' might yet arise to challenge the PAP in a possible two-party system. The Workers' Party emerged as the biggest winner amongst the opposition parties by picking up a four-member Group Representation Constituency (GRC) in Aljunied, while retaining its stronghold of a single member constituency

Alan Chong is Associate Professor in the Military Studies Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Correspondence in connection with this review may be addressed to: [icschong@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:icschong@ntu.edu.sg).

in Hougang, earning a sum total of 12.8 per cent of the popular vote. The remaining 27.1 per cent of the vote was distributed amongst several other opposition parties who had won no formal seats under the first past the post electoral system. The three 'non-constituency' members of parliament allocated through the highest personal vote totals of the losing candidates amongst the opposition could hardly be considered as solid electoral gains since they appear more as constitutional gestures of political compensation. Hence, it is possible to posit that a bifurcation of political leadership pits two paradigms against one another. The first suggests that the prevailing pattern of the PAP's parliamentary and electoral dominance, while under threat from a mostly disenchanting populace, is potentially resilient, as it had been after the party's second worst showing in 1991, when the then-untried prime minister Goh Chok Tong attempted to secure a sizable mandate to demonstrate that he could command a level of support comparable to Lee Kuan Yew's.

The second paradigm points to the uncharted waters of a Singaporean populace democratising from the ground up, or outside the PAP's institutionalised channels of recruitment and control. Certainly, there is evidence from the biographical sketches of the winning opposition candidates and anecdotal reports of the popular mood on key issues of housing, transport, employment and nationalism, that change is being demanded of the PAP from the ground. The opposition candidates were able to match the PAP's newest recruits' much touted professional and popular credentials. It was also quite significant that the PAP's loss of Aljunied GRC cost the Minister for Foreign Affairs, George Yeo, his seat and status as a party 'heavyweight', prompting him to publicly warn his party that they were dealing with a mostly disaffected electorate that required internal PAP soul-searching. Moreover, the results of the presidential election of 2011, as well as the two incidental by-elections in 2012 and 2013, revealed that many Singaporeans were voting for either opposition or anti-establishment candidates out of frustration with the ruling party. The unprecedented range and visibility of self-merchandising and youthful volunteers deployed by many opposition parties during the 2011 General Elections also amplified the idea that the wellspring of an alternative political leadership may potentially be found within the non-PAP, non-institutionalised, and non-elite grassroots.

This extensive context is intended to situate the four books under review within a transitional period in the politics of Singapore. Indeed, political leadership whether in terms of personalities, organisations, variants of idealism, or the manufacture of ideology, cannot be adequately reviewed without reference to existing trends. All four books imply, through both

commission and omission, that they are sensitively reading a potential turning point in the island state's political evolution. The first three books clearly hail from the first paradigm by attempting to incisively plumb the resilient nature of the PAP's leadership. The fourth adopts a critical reading more attuned to the second paradigm of indirectly questioning the hegemonic leadership of dominant party government through its cultural productions. These four books also offer us three different readings of the transition within the politics of bifurcation.

Michael Barr's book tracks a very conservative perspective on Singapore's politics, namely a centripetal political leadership system characterised by 'networks of power and influence in Singapore, which, because of their high levels of cohesion, integration and dependence on a single, central source, can be considered to be merely different parts of a single network' (p. 6). Barr backs up this pyramidal framework by acknowledging earlier scholarship by Chan Heng Chee, Frederic Deyo and Garry Rodan throughout the 1980s to the early 2000s. He insists that only a historical method of process tracing can uncover this power elite and its operation. This is all fair and tidy provided one believes that the Singaporean body politic operates through completely transparent arteries and veins of power. Take, for example, this description from Barr's ambitiously titled second chapter 'Floor plan of the elite':

The most privileged and potentially the most powerful are members of the Lee family. Beyond them, we move into an elite network whose members have risen through a more complicated process, with mixed and even contradictory criteria .... Beyond the inner circles, there lie extensive mid-range networks of power and influence in official and government-linked institutions such as less central ministries, statutory boards and GLCs [Government-Linked Companies]. (p. 13)

While Barr observes objectively that the miniscule size of Singapore's geography lends itself to close-knit control, it is surely too far of a stretch to locate a singular centre of political gravity especially after Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong succeeded Lee Kuan Yew as prime ministers. While the size of the Lee family's influence seems evident from statements made to the public and media from time to time, it is also inexact and speculative in nature. In fact, one would have expected Barr to have taken note of Lee Kuan Yew's philosophy of leadership, emphasising the appointment of good men as a higher priority than simply engineering a good system as the most reliable backbone of sound government. This point can be found on page 735 of Lee Kuan Yew's *From Third World to First: The Singapore story, 1965–2000*. After trekking through Barr's other chapters that are predictably titled 'The creation and entrenchment

of a national elite', 'Lee Kuan Yew supreme', 'Making a new elite', 'A new chapter: The son rises at last' and 'Mapping the networks of power and influence', one gets to 'Singapore without Lee Kuan Yew' where Barr's analysis should really have started from. Speculating about Singapore's post-2011 democratic moment ought to have begun with discussions of attempts by the PAP government at incremental self-devolution throughout the mid-1980s and 1990s, through the institutionalisation of the government parliamentary committees, non-constituency MPs, nominated MPs, town councils, and the elected presidency. These measures ought to be read as the re-politicisation of the citizenry, albeit couched in typically Singapore official parlance as constructive politics. Barr could surely supplement his elitist framework with a more nuanced reading of the effects of these measures.

Given the sharpening politics of bifurcation in the island state, the steady publication of a number of retrospective reviews and autobiographies of persons in leadership within the PAP's foundational core and at its peripheries must surely be welcome. The volume edited by Emrys Chew and Kwa Chong Guan on Goh Keng Swee follows sterling efforts in the 1990s by Lam Peng Er and Kevin Tan in editing reviews of the legacies of 'Lee's lieutenants' and the contributions of the successive presidents of Singapore. The Chew and Kwa edited volume brings together ten different scholars to detail Goh's contributions to the building of modern Singapore to focus attention on the idea that the 'heroic founding leaders' in the Singapore story inhabit more than one social strata. He or she is also thrust into prominence by the accidental circumstances of history. In Chew's words,

a vibrant heroic theme animates the diaspora and migrant discourses of the 'plural society', from the pioneer spirit at the new frontier, through stages of anti-colonialism or proto-nationalism, to the emergence of a genuine spirit of nationalism .... Goh's contribution to that heroic discourse, reflecting a genius and discipline but also fallibility, was perhaps most evident in the arena of public service and policy-making. (p. 22)

That said, the rest of the chapters could have adopted a more critical evaluation of Goh Keng Swee. Even so, the historical revelations will be enlightening for future citizens of Singapore on the mettle of their leaders during the island state's first three decades of independence. Ho Chi Tim's chapter reveals Goh's intellectual leadership in pushing for social policies across the realms of education, defence, and finance stemming from his immersion in the colonial-era Social Welfare Department and his London School of Economics doctoral dissertation, 'Techniques of national income

estimation in underdeveloped territories, with special references to Asia and Africa'. This is symbolic of a man who played a considerable part in ideological solidarity with Lee Kuan Yew, S. Rajaratnam, and other early PAP members in driving the campaign for federation with Malaysia on practical economic grounds as well as an anticolonial strategy for convincing Britain to grant Singapore independence. As Kevin Tan's chapter points out, Goh nonetheless had the gumption to face up to the burgeoning disillusionment with the tortuous negotiations over forging win-win financial arrangements and the much anticipated common market with Malaysia.

This desire to prioritise the fortunes of the people of Singapore in as scientific and logical a manner as possible is a common thread that weaves through chapters treating Goh as the development economist, his stints as finance minister, defence minister, education minister, and progenitor of Singapore's industrial base. Some of Goh's educational initiatives were controversial at the outset — including the mother tongue language policy and streaming of schoolchildren at pre-tertiary levels — but they were earnest experiments in social engineering in a developmental context. Despite these missteps, Goh comes across in this primarily historical volume as the intellectual multitasker who had humbly observed, with perhaps a partial sense of irony in relation to his own efforts, that Asia had yet to produce its Max Weber, and yet ended up, by Lee Kuan Yew's own admission, as the latter's economics tutor in university (1940–41) (p. 220). Goh was professorial and not charismatic in the usual sense, 'a man with "a large Adam's apple and a gruff voice" who "mumbled his comments on the essays of the five students who appeared before him for tutorials"' (p. 220).

From the gruff man who mumbled that became the architect of Singapore's economic miracle, we continue tracking the experiences of the non-ministerial leaders in the PAP in Chiang Hai Ding's and Rohan Kamis's edited volume, *We also served*. This volume, unlike Barr's study and Chew and Kwa's edited retrospective on Goh Keng Swee, is a collection of mostly primary material — personal recollections by former PAP members of parliament from 1959 to 2001. Spanning nearly 42 years, these chapter-length biographies supply a composite sketch of the heady mix of voluntarism and idealism that inspired ordinary Singaporeans of the first and second generations to sign up as PAP candidates, and subsequently to serve the nation and party. If Lee Kuan Yew's *Singapore story* tracked the state's modernisation from the cockpit, these recollections showcase motivations from the ground up. As insights into the mentality of the pioneering generation, one is quickly impressed by a sincere, and at times, defiant spirit to make a go of the postcolonial 'project Singapore'. It may

seem trite to most scholars of Singapore politics to remark on the deep impressions left on the social psyche by the Japanese Occupation, the intimidation of the Communist United Front, and the racial bigotry that propelled the riots of 1964 and 1969. But these events were formative experiences for most MPs serving between 1959 and the 1980s. Defiance of the perceived ‘troublemakers’ joined with an awakened sense of local destiny. Growing up in poverty also stirred their desire for ‘serving the people’ who were hapless against forces beyond their comprehension and control. One MP, Mahmud Awang (1963–68), summed it up: ‘It is important for Singaporeans to remember our humble beginnings, and to be aware that the welfare and needs of people are the most important things. Singaporeans must always look at issues from the perspective of others, and consider their views in making policies that maintain and enhance our country’s relationship with others’ (p. 69). In this sense, *We also served* proffers important advice to both the current PAP and the fledgling opposition parties: practice empathy with grassroots concerns and build on that connection. Singapore’s politics should be about forging identity from the ground up.

Leong Yew’s provocatively titled book *Asianism and the politics of regional consciousness in Singapore* serves as a deeply reflective contrast to the previous three books that locate leadership in personalities, their strategies and motivations, and ultimately legacies. Leong asks how and why Singaporean identities are hegemonically constructed as a collective example of corrected and modernised ‘Asianness’. The entire Singapore story of progress from a fishing village to bustling high-rise metropolis within one generation is interrogated through what Leong interprets as an elite-controlled, tendentious appropriation of aspects of the complex social and geopolitical history of Singapore. ‘Asianism’, like so many other ideological ‘isms’ in politics, is yet another project that artificially makes ‘it possible to conceive of Asia as a process and movement that demonstrates Singaporeans’ constant consciousness of Asia’s presence, although there may not be an agreement over what it means or signifies’ (p. 8). Leong argues that Singapore’s political culture is framed by what he calls a ‘franchised Orientalism’ whereby a modern citizenry is encouraged to imbibe good, modern Western models of efficiency and rationality, and the micro-management of social change, while at the same time finding locally synthetic modes of subverting the bad Western ways of indulgence and social excess (p. 33). Therefore, the teaching of modern Singaporean history needs to draw the line between the indeterminate pre-modern political order on the island of Temasek, and the start of the modernising narrative from straightforward visions of the island’s colonial

founder, Thomas Stamford Raffles, of the East India Company headquartered in London. Where the British colonial power ‘civilised’ the natives on the island, independent Singapore’s politicians have sought to inculcate Asian values in order to render a modern ‘Singapore Inc’ into a miniature oasis-like replica of the standard of civilisation represented by the Group of Seven economies — one that could serve as a beacon for the vast, largely backward rest of Asia. Leong points out that there is no subtlety in the selective amnesia practised by the Singapore state towards the outside world.

Singaporeanness is therefore a synthetic, composite identity that has no equal in appearing to deftly lead the charge that Asian values catalysed Western formulae of modernisation for Asian benefit, and then when convenient, especially after the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98, suggest that some Asian values contributed to corruption and nepotism across Asia, while ‘good’ Western values like transparency and accountability buffered Singapore’s economy (chapter 4). From time to time, Singaporeans are subjected to their government’s campaigns of ideological vigilance under labels such as ‘learning the mother tongue’, ‘ethics and religious knowledge curricula’, ‘shared values’, the ‘Singapore Heartbeat’, and the like. However, in geocultural terms, ‘Asia’ is both a danger zone and a wonderland of enchanting possibilities when it comes to consuming food, news and television programming. As Leong argues, this encounter with complexity ultimately dilutes hegemonic narratives since it ‘enables a state of constant negotiation between state and citizen, commodity producers and consumers, and the attempt to direct particular national discourse while also reacting to the demands of profit-making and global capitalism’ (p. 143). As a result, Singaporeans encounter daily the very real tensions between striving to be nationalistic, ‘globally educated’ and future-oriented towards ‘whatever’ delivers rich business opportunities worldwide. Leong suggests that critical scholars ought to investigate the implications of knowledge capitalism in the way the local universities are being gamed into being ‘world ranking’. Additionally, Singaporeans and the PAP government will, by way of the ‘globalized economy’, now have to accept that sizable communities of expatriate Filipinos, Myanmarese, PRC Chinese, Bangladeshis, Thais, and even Germans and Britons ‘transform public and private spaces into diasporic third spaces’ in the middle of the city centre and government-built housing estates (p. 191).

In sum, when taken together the books reviewed here posit that leadership sustains itself on preaching and exercising that fragile political consensus that is crucial to Singapore’s viability as a nation-state. In the two decades of the post-independence era, it was a closed political consensus

centred upon defiance of geopolitical and ideological circumstances. Despite its historical limitations, Barr's *Ruling elite of Singapore* boldly sets forth an elite-centred reading of the operationalisation of that political consensus, and should be made required reading for courses on Asian governance and development studies. It ventures the argument that soft, constructive authoritarianism can be practised through subtle leadership networks that lie outside the scope of formal institutions. Both the edited volumes reviewed underline the fact that there was an almost ready-made basis for political consensus in governing an independent Singapore, born of the public experience of orchestrated political violence and ideological disruptions imported from abroad. The building of a united Singapore was a collective act of defiance which animated so many of the vintage PAP members who embraced the call of leadership in challenging times. Goh Keng Swee would not have attained a legacy of public service had he not spent time immersing himself in the study of colonial and developing economies, tried his hand at building a defence force through national conscription, and dabbled with controversial educational schemes. Members of Parliament such as Mahmud Awang played an equally vital role in shoring up public morale by serving as the PAP's channel to the grassroots — tending not only to their material needs but also raising their hopes that the party was truly looking out for them.

Leong Yew's reading of Singapore's 'Asianism' complex through a cultural studies perspective is more attuned to the multifaceted and almost porous context of contemporary Singaporean identities. Part of the electoral backlash against the PAP in the elections of 2011–13 can be attributed to the loosening relevance of the grand overarching nationalist narrative that resonated so efficaciously three decades ago. The politics of bifurcation are likely to last for a long while, and these four books represent productive reflections on this uncertain transition to a dauntingly globalised Singaporean trajectory.