



Article

# Selective history and hegemony-making: The case of Singapore

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## Abstract

This article attempts to analyze the process of selective history and hegemony-making in Singapore, and makes the following arguments. Firstly, the birth of the nation-state led the political elites to rely on several hegemonic ideologies as founding myths, chief of which is the idea of 'survival'. Secondly, to create and sustain these ideologies, two things needed to be done concurrently: de-emphasize the Malay-ness of the nation's past; and accentuate the racial/religious nature of sources to instability. Finally, the article makes the claim that these ideologies have been successfully perpetuated, and outlines the contours of this success. In making these arguments, the article hopes to argue against Singapore 'exceptionalism' in studies on democratization, and further contends that the link between ideas, history and authoritarianism needs to be considered more seriously.

## Keywords

Ideological dominance, hegemony, authoritarianism, Singapore, People's Action Party, selective history, single-party rule

## Introduction

'States can easily dominate their subjects physically; but to effectively rule over them – to establish hegemony over their lives in the Gramscian sense – they must also control their subjects ideologically – that is, control the cultural underpinnings of their sociopolitical outlook' (Nasr, 2001: 8). While Nasr's observation applies to all states – democratic, liberal or authoritarian – one can put forth the argument that establishing hegemony was even more imperative for post-colonial states. Perhaps there have been very few post-colonial states which can boast the success of Singapore in this regard. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government has been in power continuously since independence in 1965, winning super-majorities in Parliament in each of the twelve General

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Elections since. While significant impediments exist to prevent opposition parties from competing with the regime on an equal footing (Mutalib, 2003), it is undeniable that elections are not rigged, opposition parties are given space to participate in the political system, and voters are not coerced into supporting the ruling party. The PAP's longevity is even more remarkable considering that Singapore is a developed country with one of the most highly-educated citizenries in the world, defying modernization theories that predict democratization would accompany development (Geddes, 1999).

This article aims to shed light on the PAP's success, by focusing on the hegemonic ideologies it efficaciously promulgates. It makes several arguments. Firstly, I contend that the preponderance of the political party is dependent on its hegemonic ideologies, chief of which is 'survival'. Secondly, I argue that to ensure that these ideologies were accepted by the populace, a selective reading of history had to be conducted whereby the nation's Malay past was de-emphasized, and the racial and/or religious nature of threats to the nation-state's stability were accentuated. Finally, I postulate that these ideologies have been extremely successfully perpetuated and I will discuss the contours of the ideologies – especially 'survival' – in the Singapore context. The theoretical contribution that this article is thus as follows: in analyzing the success of authoritarian regimes, one needs to look beyond institutional features, and examine the significance of ideologies. These ideologies are often dependent on particular understandings of historical events. A link between history, ideas and authoritarianism is explicitly made. This study is situated within the literature on authoritarianism and democratization studies. It is not the aim of this study to make the claim that only ideological explanations can elucidate the PAP's preponderance. Many authors have highlighted the PAP's institutional controls that contribute toward its success, and these studies definitely have more than grains of truth in them (Mutalib, 2003; Rodan, 1998; Slater, 2010). Rather, the purpose of this paper is to give credence to 'ideas', and show how they can be as significant in explaining political phenomena as institutional explanations.

## **Hegemony-making, states and nation-building**

Scholars have discussed the various methods via which authoritarian regimes maintain their dominance, which include a mixture of co-optation, repression, electoral manipulation, control over political institutions, and so on (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Slater, 2010). This study extends the analysis to ideological domination. All states rely on ideologies to maintain their power, and authoritarian states are no different. Ideology can be understood as fundamental presuppositions underlying any system of belief (Mullins, 1972), and consists of 'understandings and attitudes' (Hamilton, 1987). Ideology does not merely serve as an abstract concept; it can shape the worldview of citizens, directly affecting the way they interpret particular social or historical phenomena. Hegemony can be defined as 'an order in which a certain way of life or thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional manifestation.'<sup>1</sup> Once a hegemonic ideology takes root, 'leaders can legitimize their priorities, rationalize their mistakes, and convince the people that they should be followed because it is the right thing to do, even if the followers would suffer no consequences even if they did not obey' (Byman and Lind, 2010: 49). As Lau asserts, 'In the context of nation-building, the continued legitimacy use of the past has, traditionally, been invoked for the purpose of fostering national consciousness and identity – and its corollary, instilling patriotism and citizenship' (Lau, 2005: 222).

The creation of a particular hegemonic ideology by focusing on history bears resemblance to Ernest Renan's contention that a nation is constructed from shared memories (Hue-Tam, 2001). Hegemonic ideologies however, are propagated by parties not just to create a sense of nationhood, but also, to help perpetuate the dominant actors' rule. In dominant one-party systems, the ruling

party's ideologies are often considered to be state ideologies as well. There is a conflation between the party and the state, as citizens have largely not been exposed to differing ideologies (Greene, 2007; Magaloni, 2006). In these systems, the party is essentially the state. When parties such as the PAP urge citizens to support state ideologies, they are in fact asking for approval of party ideologies. The discourses then are constructed in a manner that challenging those ideologies equates to being disloyal to the state.

Singapore has long been averred to be an intriguing, if not unique, case when it comes to democratization. Geddes identifies Singapore as the exception to modernization theories (Geddes, 1999), while scholars like Slater, Rodan and Barr have all attempted to explain the PAP's durability in various ways, from analyzing strategies of co-optation, to critically assessing the narrative of 'exceptionalism' (Barr, 2016; Rodan, 1998; Slater, 2010). The continued superiority of the PAP government, in the face of an educated and globalized populace and the rise of alternative media, is simultaneously fascinating and somewhat baffling. The Singapore model has also been lauded as a successful alternative to the 'Western' trajectory of development (Huff, 1995). Ortmann and Thompson detail how China has endeavored to imitate the Singaporean model that combines authoritarian features with development (Ortmann and Thompson, 2016).

This article intends to contribute to the debate on 'Singapore exceptionalism' in studies on democratization. I argue that the strategies employed by the PAP government in ensuring its preponderance are not unique; like other states, it propagates a national narrative which, at its core, strives to ensure its continued rule, via preserving its ideological dominance. To do so, it had to select historical events and craft them into a coherent narrative. However, what is perhaps different about the Singapore case is the degree of success of the state's attempt to generate ideological hegemony. Whether the Singapore model is a viable alternative to liberal conceptions of democracy is a normative assessment that is beyond the scope of this essay; rather, I hope to understand and examine the importance of 'ideas' in studying democratization. This would then shed light on the Singapore model, and its applicability towards comprehending other systems. It is worth reiterating I do not deny the salience of institutional controls that other authors have elucidated that contribute toward the PAP's dominance; instead, I simply focus on ideas and their geneses to complement institutional explanations.

Research on ideology and voting behavior has been divided: scholars such as Feldman downplay the role of ideology in determining a voter's choice (Feldman, 1988), whereas others like Charron and Bagenholm contend that there is evidence that voters are willing to tolerate corruption based on their ideological leanings (Charron and Bagenholm, 2016). This essay builds on these works and postulates that ideological predispositions – not limited to left–right divisions as commonly understood in the Western contexts – is an immensely important factor in determining electoral outcomes. The ideological predisposition specifically referred to here is the belief in the PAP's core ideology, namely 'survival'.

### **'Survival': the core ideology**

The PAP swears by a few immutable ideologies which have been the bedrock of Singapore society, and have formed the basis of both domestic and foreign policies. These ideologies are 'survival', 'meritocracy', 'multiracialism' and 'pragmatism' (Tan, 2008). Of these, survival is undeniably the most fundamental ideology that guides everything else.

Singapore is a small city-state, with a majority ethnic Chinese population, which is surrounded by larger Malay and Muslim-majority nations, Malaysia and Indonesia. The country has been described as a 'Chinese nut in a Malay nutcracker' (Huxley, 1991: 208). This self-assessment has formed the basis of Singapore's 'survival' mindset. The belief is that Singapore is perpetually

facing existential threats because of a few factors: firstly, the international system of nation-states favors large states; secondly, the primordial forces of ethnicity and religion are perennial causes for concerns; and thirdly, history has proven beyond doubt that its neighbors have harbored ill-intentions towards the nation-state's survival.

Consider the quote then by founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, the most influential figure in the shaping of PAP policies and these ideologies: 'Seventy-five percent of our population of two million were Chinese, a tiny minority in an archipelago of 30,000 islands inhabited by more than 100 million Malay or Indonesian Muslims. We were a Chinese island in a Malay sea. How could we survive in such a hostile environment?' (Lee, 1998: 23) An even more telling quote emerged when Lee was addressing the lack of civil liberties in Singapore, and why Singapore could not be as 'free' as Denmark or New Zealand:

Their neighbours are different. My neighbours both have problems with the Chinese. They are successful, they're hardworking, and therefore they are systematically marginalized, even in education.... And they want Singapore, to put it simply, to be like their Chinese, compliant (Rahim, 2009: 60).

The insecurities of being a Chinese-majority nation in a predominantly Malay-Muslim region has led to 'survival' dominating discourses in the country, so much so that 'survival has become a "one word political slogan" that has underpinned the PAP's reading of Singapore's many national challenges' (Rahim, 2009: 78). Lee's worldview is by no means an outdated one. Successive PAP leaders have echoed similar sentiments. K. Shanmugam, then Foreign Minister, articulated in 2014 that Singapore faced challenges from Malaysia and Indonesia, especially as domestic politics in the two countries could result in politicians making 'adverse comments' about Singapore.<sup>2</sup> Ambassador at-large Bilahari Kausikan, often the government's spokesman when it comes to articulating Singapore's foreign policy principles, stated in early 2016 that Singapore's sovereignty should never be taken for granted, as the city-state is in a 'complicated and dangerous region'.<sup>3</sup> Leaders have also consistently raised alarm bells about the rising 'Islamization' patterns in the region. Shanmugam noted that Islamization in Malaysia 'had gone past the tipping point', warning that Singapore's social fabric would be adversely affected.<sup>4</sup> Lee had previously lamented that Singapore's integration was going well until the rise of Islamic fervor (Han et al., 2011). Current Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, has uttered on numerous occasions that race and religion remain to be 'fault lines' that 'could tear society apart'.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, Singapore's survival as a nation – both in terms of its status as a sovereign state and its domestic stability which is dependent on cohesion between the different ethnic groups – is perpetually uncertain, due to the geo-political environment it finds itself in, and the potential polarizing forces of race and religion.

The other core ideologies of the PAP essentially serve to buttress the notion of survival. Meritocracy and multiracialism are seen as the only logical methods to ensure that different racial groups will have equal opportunities to thrive and thus secure social cohesion.<sup>6</sup> Meritocracy is also needed to ensure that the brightest and most capable people will lead the country, which is the only way to guarantee the nation-state's continued survival and relevance in the international arena. Pragmatism means non-adherence to any dogma in terms of political or economic ideologies (such as socialism, and communism, *inter alia*) and instead, to do 'what works'. Such nimbleness in domestic and foreign policy is crucial towards 'surviving', as small states cannot afford to be ideological (Tan, 2012: 75). Survival is evidently the theme that defines Singapore politics. Some authors have identified economic pragmatism to be the defining ideology of the PAP (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006); however, I contend that this is a mistaken assumption. To be sure, economic pragmatism is an important facet of the PAP's discourse. However, economic pragmatism is ultimately utilized to ensure 'survival': small countries like Singapore need to be

economically exceptional, and thus cannot be anything other than ‘pragmatic’, in order to survive. Both economic and socio-political decisions are justified by the PAP via the ‘survival’ rhetoric, such that it is the political slogan used under any circumstance (Rahim, 2009).

The PAP has displayed consistency from the outset in championing these ideologies. Within the party, there has never been dissent with regards to recognizing that Singapore’s utmost priority is to ‘survive’. This could possibly be attributed to the party’s structure. The PAP is a cadre party, and its careful selection of cadres by the top leaders continue to ensure that cadres are always in line with the party’s major ideologies and direction, and the potential for dissent is tremendously reduced (Abdullah, 2016).

## Selecting events for a complete narrative: the Singapore story

The historical narrative that Singaporeans are familiar with is as follows: Singapore was an almost completely abandoned island in 1819, when Sir Stamford Raffles ‘founded’ it.<sup>7</sup> Because it was a British colony, the island observed considerable security and prosperity, until 1942, when the Japanese Occupation took place. The British regained control in 1945 but by then, the myth of colonial invincibility had been shattered (Lee, 1998). In a bid to attain independence and ensure Singapore’s economic and political survival, the leaders then engineered a merger with the Federation of Malaya, to form Malaysia (Chan, 1971). The merger was short-lived due to the ugly racial and religious tensions that reared its head, as Malaysia’s version of Malay-led multiracialism was at odds with the PAP’s ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ ideal, where every person is an equal regardless of race, language or religion (Milne, 1966). Singapore was then forced to leave Malaysia under acrimonious circumstances in 1965, in what has been termed the ‘separation’. Before the separation, Indonesia, the largest country in Southeast Asia, fought an ‘undeclared war’ with Malaysia (with Singapore being part of it) known as the ‘*Konfrontasi*’ (Confrontation) as the former opposed the merger of its two smaller neighbors.<sup>8</sup> The threat of communism was another challenge that almost destroyed the country in the 1960s (Lee, 1998). Nevertheless, in spite of all the odds, through competent leadership, especially under the stewardship of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore has managed to transform itself from a fishing village to one of the countries with the highest standards of living in the world.<sup>9</sup> Together, these events serve to create some sort of a siege mentality for Singaporeans, whereby the country cannot rely on anyone else for its survival. The forces of race and religion, if not carefully managed, can be utterly destructive; and as a small state, the very existence of the city-state is always under threat, especially in such a volatile neighborhood. The PAP then becomes the sole candidate to navigate the country under such precarious circumstances, due to its ‘proven’ track record in dealing with the international environment. Opposition representation in parliament is discouraged because it would take time away from focusing on the only thing that matters: Singapore’s survival.

This is the official narrative that has been enshrined not only in the National Education curriculum for students, in what is termed as the ‘Singapore Story’ (Lau, 2005), but also in government speeches, election campaigns and on unofficial platforms. Hong and Huang perceptively describe the official history as understood by elites in Singapore in the following terms: ‘there is only one political movement – the PAP; two important personalities in Singapore – Stamford Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew; and three dates – 1819, 1942 and 1965 – that are worth remembering’ (Hong and Huang, 2008: 15). While there are other important dates that are emphasized in the official story (merger and *Konfrontasi* in 1963; and racial riots in 1964), Hong and Huang’s broader point is largely accurate: the official history of Singapore has been carefully scripted by giving credence to certain events over others. I build on their work and posit that the scripting of history is ultimately to ensure the perpetuation of the survival mentality.

It is uncontroversial to suggest that the official narrative could have been constructed in a radically different way. For one, the history of Singapore before 1819 is regarded to be almost of complete insignificance. Singapore is said to have been a fishing village before Raffles founded the island, and in some accounts even up until 1965, before Lee Kuan Yew single-handedly transformed the nation into a first-world country.<sup>10</sup> Both accounts are evidently questionable. Many historians have shown that Singapore was never the deserted island as it is often depicted as, but rather, was 'a thriving trading post well before 1819 and a centre for the sea silk route' (Hai and Eng, 1997: 303); what is being questioned here is not Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew's contributions towards the eventual prosperity of Singapore; indeed, both men have left significant imprints on modern-day Singapore. Rather, what is being contested is the notion that Singapore virtually had no important history to speak of before 1819.

It is salient to note that the selective omission of historical events from the official narrative is closely linked to another impetus: the desire to decouple the history of Singapore from that of the wider region of which it has historically been an integral part. The idea that Singapore is part of the Malay world has been intentionally de-emphasized. While Malays are constitutionally regarded as the indigenous people of Singapore<sup>11</sup>, quite paradoxically this is almost never emphasized in official speeches or discussions. The choice of Raffles' 'founding' of Singapore as the starting point for official history has the effect of disconnecting the island from its Malay historical roots. The acknowledgment of Malays as indigenous to Singapore can be regarded as a political move to appease Malaysia after separation, as part of what Chan terms the 'politics of survival', rather than a genuine attempt to engage with history (Chan, 1971).

Additionally, the geographical advantages of Singapore that make it a good location for a sea port were always present, which is why it is not at all unexpected that the island has an effervescent past. Archaeologist John Miksic details that Singapore was a vibrant trading port by the fourteenth century, centuries before Raffles 'founded' the island (Miksic, 2004). Singapore, or as it was previously known, Temasek, played a vital role in the sea trade that occurred in the region, and between the region and other empires such as China and India. Chinese records, including that of Wang Dayuan from the fourteenth century, acknowledged Singapore as part of the Malay region (Heng, 2002).

As noted by Rahim (1998) in *The Singapore Dilemma*, the Malays always saw the entire archipelago as their homeland. The Malay Archipelago – which includes Indonesia, Malaysia, parts of Borneo, Singapore, Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines – was also known as the *Nusantara*, and Malays in Singapore had a sense of belonging to the entire region. The modern concept of the nation-state does not do justice to this transnational notion of identity; Rahim cites many examples to prove her point that the concept of the *Nusantara* as the homeland for all Malays was etched in the psyche of Malays. In many ways, this was the 'imagined community', as described by Anderson, for the Malays (Anderson, 1983). Other scholars take this discussion further by introducing Islam into the mix: Mutalib argues that Islam has always been a primary identifying marker for Malays (Mutalib, 2012). There also exist earlier works on the role of Singapore as a cultural center of the Malay world. Roff notes that Singapore in the early nineteenth century was a 'metropolis for an area that embraced the whole Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, from Kedah and Aceh to the Celebes' (Roff, 1964: 75). The history of Singapore prior to 1819 is obviously not unknown to the PAP. In fact, S. Rajaratnam, one of the key ideologues of the PAP, admitted that the government chose to acknowledge Raffles as the founder of the island for practical purposes. He stated in 1984:

The government fixed responsibility (for Singapore's founding) on Sir Stamford Raffles and officially declared him as the founder of Singapore. Singapore's knowable past began in 1819. We could have

contrived a more lengthy and eye-boggling lineage by tracing our ancestry back to the lands from which our forefathers emigrated, but the price we would have to pay for this more impressive genealogical table would be to turn Singapore into a background for endless racial and communal conflicts (S. Rajaratnam, as quoted in Loh, 1998: 13).

Interestingly, Rajaratnam did not acknowledge that the Malays did not emigrate from anywhere, or are the natives of the island.

Not only are the Malay–Islamic roots of the country not acknowledged, the potential of race and religion as forces of disruption are constantly emphasized. The entire separation saga with Malaysia is couched in such terms. The ethnic dimension to the course of events that eventually led to Singapore leaving the federation has been intentionally underscored. The PAP and Lee Kuan Yew’s unwillingness to compromise on the meritocratic ideal is often juxtaposed with the Malaysian leadership’s refusal to relinquish Malay privilege. In the 2015 National Day Rally, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated unequivocally that ‘We separated from Malaysia because we believed in this idea of a multi-racial society. We believed that before race, language and religion, we should first and foremost be Singaporean.’<sup>12</sup>

A few points should be noted. Firstly, it is unquestionable that ethnicity was a major factor shaping the course of events in the separation episode. Indeed, up until today, ethnicity continues to feature prominently in both Malaysian and Singapore politics (Chin and Wong, 2009). At the same time, it is noteworthy to mention that historians who study the episode have listed other reasons for the bitterness between the two sides, which have mostly been neglected in official discourses. For one, the personality clash between Lee Kuan Yew and many of his Malaysian counterparts, including the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, seems to have played a role. Lee is said to not have understood the nuances of the Malay culture and language, which contributed to several misunderstandings between Tunku and himself (Barr, 1997: 3). Lee was also accused of being a ‘prima donna’, who behaved as if he was the Prime Minister of the country;<sup>13</sup> for instance, Lee visited other countries and promoted the idea of a ‘Malaysian Malaysia’.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Lee was charged with breaching the ‘gentleman’s agreement’ between himself and Tunku, whereby he had agreed that the PAP would not contest in elections in the Peninsula, but did so anyway (Wong, 2003: 257–258).<sup>15</sup>

These occurrences have been sidelined in Singapore’s official narrative. The separation is instead described entirely as an instance where race and religion (since Malay-ness is intertwined with Islam) guide politics in the neighboring countries, and a confirmation that Singapore holds radically different values as compared to its Malay–Muslim neighbors. The personality differences, or alleged lack of cultural sensitivities on Lee’s part, are rarely mentioned. Again, this involves the agency of political elites, who consciously chose to interpret the separation as a matter of irreconcilable ideologies instead of other plausible factors.

It is not startling then that Malaysia and Indonesia continue to be perceived as the biggest existential threats to the nation (Huxley, 1991). What could have been a story about a shared history of belonging to the same region, with similar trajectories and experiences as part of the Malay world, instead became a narrative of conflict, mistrust and suspicions, which ultimately necessitates the ‘survival’ mindset. In a speech at Cambridge in 2015, shortly after the twelfth General Election in which the PAP succeeded resoundingly with a popular vote of 70%, Ambassador Kausikan, after outlining the challenges of being a multiracial meritocracy with a Chinese majority in Southeast Asia, concluded:

The key challenge is internal: that a new generation of Singaporeans will take the achievements of Mr. Lee and his comrades for granted and be persuaded that Singapore was no longer vulnerable. Some opposition

politicians and their fellow travelers among the intelligentsia have tried to do just that. They either do not understand their own country and region or place their personal ambition above the national interest. Fortunately, as the results of our recent General Election have demonstrated, the majority of my compatriots do not believe them.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from Kausikan's observation that majority of Singaporeans have accepted the notion of Singapore's vulnerability, which will be discussed later, he perfectly encapsulates the government's position on the historical narrative Singaporeans should be exposed to.<sup>17</sup>

As such, it becomes abundantly manifest that the PAP notion of the need for 'survival', predicated upon the city-state's vulnerability, was able to take root because of a carefully constructed history. Of course, this is not to say that the PAP distorted history or worse, made up aspects of it. This is not the contention here; the events that the PAP chose to be the bedrock of the Singapore story clearly did happen, and in many ways were extremely important moments in any reading of the country's history. Nevertheless, those events were not the only important ones, and even they could have been interpreted in various ways.

### *The PAP's survival ideology and its contours*

Ambassador Kausikan's assessment of the PAP narrative is particularly telling: it is manifest that the government believes that the overwhelming mandate given to it by the voters in the 2015 elections is a ringing endorsement of its ideologies. I concur with Kausikan's opinion. Apart from the fact that the PAP has been returned to power in each of the twelve General Elections since independence, I posit that two other observations display the contours of the PAP's ideology: firstly, the most successful opposition party in Singapore is one that is closest to the PAP ideologically; and secondly, when it comes to security matters, there has been almost a complete absence of alternative discourses. This section thus serves to show that the importance of ideological dominance of the PAP amongst the electorate must be explored.

While the electoral preponderance of the PAP does reveal the preferences of Singapore society, I argue that the nature of the most successful opposition party in Singapore is even more significant. The party in question is the Workers' Party (WP). The WP is similar to the PAP ideologically, and does not challenge the PAP's core ideologies. Rather, it seeks to implement incremental change to the system, and usually in areas where the PAP allows contestation. There is thus a lack of ideological distance between the PAP and WP.<sup>18</sup> WP allows the PAP to define the national interest, and in essence is ready to 'accept subjugation to the ruling elite' (Ortmann, 2010: 168). WP does not question the assumptions behind the PAP's core ideologies or historical narrative. On the other hand, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) is an opposition party that seeks to question the political philosophies behind the PAP's policies, and not just the policies themselves. For one, the party has claimed that Singapore spends excessively on defense and has called for redirecting excess funds from the military to the healthcare sector instead and this is indubitably a bold move, as it directly calls into question the PAP's notion of vulnerability<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, the party has also been willing to challenge the PAP's historical narrative – unlike the WP – and is even reluctant to condemn the actions of communists in the past.<sup>20</sup> The SDP also opposes the Internal Security Act (ISA) more vociferously than the WP.<sup>21</sup>

While it is not necessary to document the differences between the two parties in detail, it is pertinent to note that the WP does not pose an ideological challenge to the PAP, while the SDP does.<sup>22</sup> Even more importantly, the WP is the more successful opposition party, by far. The WP is the only opposition party that possesses seats in parliament. The SDP on the other hand, has not managed to gain any in recent years.



I contend that the WP's position as the undisputed number one opposition party is reflective of the electorate's preferences. The fact that the SDP is not even close to usurping the WP, much less the PAP, points towards Singaporeans rejecting the party's brand of politics. The WP on the other hand, as the more 'moderate' opposition party, is more palatable to citizens who do not wish to vote for the PAP, yet who would like to have alternative voices in Parliament (Cunha, 2012). While the PAP's electoral success can be attributed in part to its financial and political advantages over the other parties, the WP's success cannot be easily explained in such terms. In the 1990s, the SDP actually had more seats in parliament than the WP, and was thus in a better position to establish itself as the number one contender. However, following the SDP's shift to more 'radical' ideologies, and the WP's "moderate" turn, the WP displaced the SDP as the undisputed leading opposition party. This is evidence of how pervasive the PAP's ideologies have been: the SDP, which questions the PAP's worldviews and core ideologies instead of merely proposing policy alternatives, does not get much traction amongst the electorate. Even when the electorate does vote against the PAP, most choose the party most aligned to the PAP's ideologies.

During the National Day Rally in 2015, a couple of weeks before polling day, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong emphasized the theme of vulnerability. The Prime Minister was candid about the rising Islamization threat in Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>23</sup> The theme that was to be iterated throughout hustings was the vulnerability of the city-state and how it needed a strong government to overcome these challenges.<sup>24</sup> Judging from the results, it is difficult to argue that the PAP's constant call for the need to 'survive' was not heeded by voters. Singaporeans' penchant for 'stability' is reflective of ideological hegemony; generally, the majority of Singaporeans willingly give up their social liberties in exchange for material welfare (which includes safety of its citizens from both internal and external threats). The fact that Singaporeans judge the ruling party by its ability to guarantee this welfare, and by no other standards, is testament to the party's ideological domination.

Furthermore, there seems to be a conspicuous lack of discourse surrounding security issues. While civil society in Singapore is thoroughly engaged when it comes to the rights of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transsexuals groups (Chua, 2014), participation is subdued when it comes to matters relating to national security. Consider two incidents which happened in the past couple of years. In early 2014, an Assistant Professor from the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS), Syed Khairudin Aljunied, caused an uproar amongst many students and civil society activists when he was deemed to have criticized lesbianism on his personal Facebook page. A petition was written against him by some students.<sup>25</sup> Fellow NUS faculty expressed their unhappiness towards his comments via a letter to the press<sup>26</sup> and the incident provoked a lot of discussion from different civil society groups and ordinary Singaporeans in both the mainstream and online media.<sup>27</sup>

Contrast this to the arrest of 27 Bangladeshis under the ISA in late 2015. The government announced that the Bangladeshis – who were foreign workers in the construction industry in Singapore – had been planning 'nefarious activities' in their own country, and hence were arrested.<sup>28</sup> What followed were expressions of shock and outrage, and the discourses quickly took on a security slant as they centered on the questions of why radicalization took place and how the intelligence services could detect such instances early on.<sup>29</sup> The arrests of these 27 individuals did not generate intense debates on the need for the ISA, where detainees could be arrested without proper trials.<sup>30</sup> Rather, the discussions went on a mono-directional path about radicalization and the need to stamp it out from Singapore society, and how Singapore was always vulnerable to the threat of religion-inspired violence. This essay does not seek to take a normative stance on whether the ISA is ethical and should be retained or abolished; rather, what I seek to do here is to point out that there was almost no questioning of the relevance of the ISA in the subsequent discourses.

Another relevant example is when Minister Shanmugam outlined the challenge of radical Islam in Singapore, in which he mentioned both rising Islamophobia and religious exclusivity on the part of Muslims as potential causes for concern. In an interesting move, he made the link between some Muslims refusing to wish adherents of other faiths ‘Merry Christmas’ or ‘Happy Deepavali’, and religious extremism.<sup>31</sup> What followed were Muslim leaders – from politicians to academicians and religious scholars – affirming Shanmugam’s standpoint.<sup>32</sup>

Absent from most of the discourses were two things: firstly, the acknowledgment that there have always existed different jurisprudential opinions amongst traditional Muslim scholars on the permissibility of wishing others on their religious occasions;<sup>33</sup> and more importantly, the questioning of Minister Shanmugam’s premise itself. The link between declining to greet others and religious extremism is a tenuous one at best, and the Minister seemed to conflate religious conservatism with extremism. Instead of challenging this crucial point, the Muslim leaders were instead eager to ‘prove’ that Islam did not prohibit such greetings. Even political commentators who at times are known to be more impartial and critical of the government appeared to accept Shanmugam’s premise. Bertha Henson, founder of the socio-political website, *The Middle Ground*, describes the refusal of some Muslims to give such greetings as a “new and dangerous sentiment”, but did not assess its connection with religious extremism.<sup>34</sup>

While linking religious conservatism and Muslim extremism may be considered to be problematic, such was not the case in the discourses that ensued following Shanmugam’s speech. This, together with the above-mentioned points, bolster my claim that the absence of alternative discourses in the realm of security points toward the pervasiveness of the PAP hegemony.

### *Comparative implications: lesson for others or Singapore exceptionalism?*

The selective usage of history is by no means limited to post-colonial states, or even authoritarian ones. It can be argued that every state, in selecting which events to thrust upon the consciousness of its citizenry, engages in such an endeavor. The Singapore case is then perhaps unique not for its attempts at defining history in a particular manner, but rather, the extent to which it has been successful in doing so. It is also different in the sense that the ruling regime is electorally authoritarian; citizens do have a genuine choice to vote against the ruling party, but have consistently returned the regime to power. This shows the voters’ endorsement of the ideologies, if not historical narratives, espoused by the PAP.

The tendency to view Singapore as ‘exceptional’ in examining theories of democratization may not be thoroughly useful. Indeed, there are many features of the Singapore system from which lessons can be drawn, and comparisons made, to other countries. For instance, while Singapore is often compared to other stable micro-states such as Luxembourg, the political situation in the two countries differs: Luxembourg regularly elects a coalition government, while the PAP’s dominance is almost unfettered. This essay has attempted to tease out the nuances for one such area of comparison, that is, the ideas that emanate from selective usage of history. What would make for meaningful comparisons is the acknowledgment that most states engage in narrative-making, including Singapore, and subsequently, analyzing the similarities and differences that make ideological dominance in Singapore more prevalent. This would perhaps be more fruitful than to dwell on the ‘uniqueness’ of Singapore and evaluate it in isolation. This is the most important theoretical contribution to the literature on democratization that this essay intends to provide. The importance of history and narrative-making in the perpetuation of ideas can be crucial in promoting an authoritarian regime’s durability; in fact, without ideological hegemony, institutional dominance may not guarantee such success.

The interaction between institutions and ideas is another aspect of democratization studies that is worth further exploration. This essay has attempted to show how a particular ideology was

created, and evidence for the success of that ideology was provided. However, further research can take this forward in even more meaningful ways. Ideas do not exist in a vacuum, and the conditions for a particular idea to gain more traction than others need to be interrogated. This is another area in which scholarly works on Singapore can add to the overall literature. The role of formal institutions, such as the media and educational system, and informal institutions like charismatic personalities, norms and culture, in disseminating or halting the spread of ideologies should be investigated.

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## Notes

1. Antonio Gramsci (cited in Woolcock, 1985).
2. Antonio Gramsci (cited in Woolcock, 1985).
3. Cheong Suk-Wai (2016) Singapore's Sovereignty 'Never a Given': Bilahari Kausikan. *Straits Times*, 30 January 2016. Available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapores-sovereignty-never-a-given-bilahari-kausikan>
4. Charissa Yong (2015) Singapore cannot exist in a cocoon: Minister. *The Jakarta Post*, 28 August 2015. Available at: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/08/28/singapore-cannot-exist-a-cocoon-minister.html>
5. AsiaOne (2012) PM Lee warns of new fault lines in Singapore. *AsiaOne*, 22 July 2012. Available at: <http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20120722-360540.html>
6. The first President of Singapore, Yusof Ishak, said of meritocracy: "No man need feel that to belong to a particular religion puts him at a disadvantage or gives him an advantage. This is how things are in Singapore and this is how things must always be in our country; only in this way can a multiracial society like Singapore live in peace and prosperity" (see "Meritocracy, Multiracialism and Modernism. *Straits Times*, 18 August 2014. Available at: <http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/meritocracy-multiracialism-modernism>).
7. The National Library Board website states that 6 February 1819 is the date of the official "founding" of Singapore. That was the date Raffles established authority in the island. See National Library Board, Raffles's landing in Singapore. Available at: [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_131\\_2005-01-03.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_131_2005-01-03.html)
8. Bilahari Kausikan (2014) Indonesia's Naming of Navy Ship: Sensitivity is a two-way street. *Straits Times*, 13 February 2014. Available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/indonesias-naming-of-navy-ship-sensitivity-is-a-two-way-street-says-ambassador-at-large>
9. Kishore Mahbubani (2015) Why Singapore is the World's Most Successful Society. *The Huffington Post*, 4 August 2015. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kishore-mahbubani/singapore-world-successful-society\\_b\\_7934988.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kishore-mahbubani/singapore-world-successful-society_b_7934988.html)
10. This narrative is widespread till today. A twelve-year old student remarked after Lee's death in 2015 that he read about how Lee "transformed Singapore from a fishing village to a green city." See Siau Ming En (2015) Mr Lee Kuan Yew Placed an Emphasis on Educating the Young 'So They Can Have A Future'. *Today*, 25 March 2015. Available at: <http://www.todayonline.com/rememberinglky/tekok-kurau-primary-school-remembers-lee-kuan-yew>
11. See Articles 152 and 153 of the Singapore Constitution.
12. Prime Minister's Office Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2015 National Day Rally 2015. Available at: <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/mediacentre/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-national-day-rally-2015-speech-english>
13. See interview with Abdullah Ahmad, on the Discovery Channel's documentary "The History of Singapore: The Accidental Nation." Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtYvpXpW2CM>

14. See interview with Abdullah Ahmad, on the Discovery Channel's documentary "The History of Singapore: The Accidental Nation." Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtYvpXpW2CM>
15. See also Lau (1998) for a comprehensive study of the separation.
16. "Bilahari Kausikan on 'The Legacy of LKY'," *Channel NewsAsia*, 3 November 2015. Available at: <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/bilahari-kausikan-on-the/2235302.html>
17. Incidentally, according to the same report, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong shared the speech on his Facebook page, indicating the government's endorsement of Kausikan's position.
18. See Abdullah (2015).
19. See Singapore Democratic Party website, "Is This Why We Spend So Much on the Military?" 7 March 2013. Available at: [http://yoursdp.org/news/is\\_this\\_why\\_we\\_spend\\_so\\_much\\_on\\_the\\_military/2013-03-07-5574](http://yoursdp.org/news/is_this_why_we_spend_so_much_on_the_military/2013-03-07-5574)
20. Singapore Democratic Party website, "MOE Says Schools Should be Neutral, Then Why These...?" 4 February 2016. Available at: [http://yoursdp.org/news/lim\\_chin\\_siong\\_vs\\_lee\\_kuan\\_yew\\_online\\_discussion/2016-02-04-4895](http://yoursdp.org/news/lim_chin_siong_vs_lee_kuan_yew_online_discussion/2016-02-04-4895)
21. Singapore Democratic Party website, "Malaysia Opens Up. When will Singapore?" 16 September 2011. Available at: [http://yoursdp.org/news/malaysia\\_opens\\_up\\_when\\_will\\_singapore/2011-09-16-2540](http://yoursdp.org/news/malaysia_opens_up_when_will_singapore/2011-09-16-2540)
22. For a more detailed discussion, see Abdullah (2015).
23. Prime Minister's Office Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2015 National Day Rally 2015. Available at: <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/mediacentre/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-national-day-rally-2015-speech-english>
24. Charissa Yong (2015) GE 2015: Singapore Needs Strong Government to Shape its Future: Ng Eng Hen. *Straits Times*, 7 September 2015. Available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/ge-2015-singapore-needs-strong-government-to-shape-its-future-ng-eng-hen>
25. Pearl Lee (2014) NUS Prof's Comments on Lesbians Spark Protest From Past and Present Students. *Straits Times*, 28 February 2014. Available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/nus-profs-comments-on-lesbians-spark-protests-from-past-and-present-students>
26. Lavinia Borzi (2014) NUS Professor's Facebook Posts Draw Criticism. *Yale News*, 7 March 2014. Available at: <http://yaledailynews.com/blog/2014/03/07/nus-professors-facebook-posts-draw-criticism/>
27. Many of the subsequent participants in the discussion defended Dr Aljunied's position, even if they disagreed with his choice of his words. Regardless, the point to be made here is that the incident evoked a wide range of emotions and subsequent discussions on the topic.
28. Lee Min Kok (2016) 27 Radicalised Bangladeshis Arrested in Singapore Under Internal Security Act: MHA. *Straits Times*, 21 January 2016. Available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/27-radicalised-bangladeshis-arrested-in-singapore-under-internal-security-act>
29. For example, see Yoong Ren Yan (2016) 10 Burning Questions for those 27 Terrorists. *The Middle Ground*, 21 January 2016. Available at: <http://themiddleground.sg/2016/01/21/10-burning-questions-27-terrorists/>
30. Some civil society groups, such as Maruah, have expressed opposition to the Internal Security Act (ISA) before. See Maruah (n.d.) ISA. Available at: <http://maruah.org/isa/>. However, these groups are few in number and rarely does their opposition affect public discourses or perceptions on the issue, unlike the more vociferous opposition by both civil society and some ordinary citizens towards anti-homosexuality laws in Singapore.
31. Walter Sim (2014) Collective Effort Needed to Safeguard Racial, Religious Harmony in Singapore: Shanmugam. *Straits Times*, 20 January 2014. Available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/collective-effort-needed-to-safeguard-racial-religious-harmony-in-singapore-shanmugam>
32. See Channel NewsAsia (2016) All Hands on Deck in Fight Against Extremism: Maliki Osman. *Channel NewsAsia*, 26 January 2016. Available at: <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/all-hands-on-deck-in/2458936.html/>; and Nizam Ismail and Aisyah Nordin (2016) Tidak Salah Beri Ucapan Perayaan Kaum Lain (Nothing Wrong in Wishing Others on Their Festive Occasions). *Berita Harian*, 26 January 2016. Available at: <http://www.beritaharian.sg/setempat/tidak-salah-beri-ucapan-perayaan-kaum-lain>
33. Pergas (Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association) eventually did release a statement on the existence of both opinions within the Islamic tradition, but states that it is inclined towards the permissibility of sending greetings to non-Muslims. See Pergas' Facebook page, 5 February 2016.

Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Pergas.Singapore/photos/pcb.1072978482754631/1072976996088113/?type=3&theater> In spite of this, Pergas did not question the validity of Shanmugam's statement in making the connection with religious extremism.

34. See Bertha Henson (2016) A Blunt Speech that Cuts Deep. *The Middle Ground*, 20 January 2016. Available at: <http://themiddleground.sg/2016/01/20/32772/>

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