

Singapore's Sham Political Reforms

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The island republic sends forth yet another electoral Trojan horse

Given the Singapore government's oft-repeated mantra that multi-party politics is not appropriate for a small city-state, it might have surprised outside observers when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recently unveiled plan to boost the number of opposition MPs in parliament.

Only last November at the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) annual conference, Lee insisted that a "two-party model cannot work in Singapore" and that "the country is much better off with one dominant party".

Just seven months later, Lee seems to have changed his tune somewhat. Now, he acknowledges that "Singaporeans want national issues to be fully debated" and that the government should "improve our political system to encourage a wider range of views in Parliament, including opposition and non-government views".

The government thus plans to change the constitution to ensure that there are at least nine opposition MPs in Singapore's supine Parliament (currently just three of the 85 voting MPs are not PAP apparatchiks) by expanding the existing system whereby the best-performing electoral losers are awarded parliamentary seats with watered-down powers.

Coming after recent decisions to permit public protests (albeit only in one specified location) and allow the release of some political films (subject to government vetting), it almost appears as if the prime minister and his PAP allies have undergone some sort of damascene conversion to liberal democratic principles.

But, in reality, the latest reforms are nothing more than Trojan horse politics, designed to head off the growing clamor for more alternative voices and to sow discord between Singapore's spattering of brave but fractious opposition politicians. The PAP has maintained an iron grip on power since Singapore won independence from Britain in 1959 not by locking up its opponents, although it does occasionally resort to such tactics, but by dominating public discourse, castrating opposition politicians through libel proceedings and manipulating the electoral system to its advantage.

Lee junior's proposed parliamentary reforms are just the latest example of this approach.

From its once-impregnable lock on power, the ruling party's share of the popular vote has declined steadily, from 75 percent in 2001 to a still-formidable 66.6 percent in 2006 and, with Singapore facing the worst recession in its history, the PAP is concerned that support could fall even further at the next general election, which is due by 2011.

While most political parties around the world can only dream of winning such support, the PAP remains nervous because it knows that the rapid rise of the internet has eroded its ability to control public opinion through state-owned newspapers and broadcast news outlets.

Although many of the city-state's bloggers and citizen journalists dedicate as much time to bashing each other as they do to taking on the government, the PAP fears that the next generation of Singaporeans, who are internet-obsessed, will be much less craven than their parents.

By guaranteeing a limited amount of greater opposition within Parliament, the PAP hopes to defuse the growing calls for more debate without giving up any control. For the real bulwarks of PAP rule – control of public debate and gerrymandering – remain fully intact.

To illustrate the first bulwark, you need look no further than Amnesty International's latest annual report, which concluded that "a climate of fear and self-censorship discouraged Singaporeans from fully participating in public affairs".

With regard to the second pillar, the bizarre system of Group Representative Constituencies (GRC), in which the party that wins the most votes in a single constituency sees their whole slate of candidates elected, remains intact despite some minor tweaking.

Although officially intended to ensure that ethnic minority (i.e. non-Chinese) MPs are elected, the GRC system provides a massive boost to the PAP as the embattled opposition parties cannot risk losing five or six of their best candidates in a single battle where the odds are tilted heavily against them.

While the reforms do nothing to weaken the PAP's electoral position, they will further undermine the public credibility of the opposition, which has already been damaged by persistently negative government spin and a tendency for internecine warfare.

The election of "best-losers" – who are known officially as non-constituency MPs (NCMPs) – began in 1984 and led to bitter divisions among opposition politicians, who differed about whether it was better to feed off the PAP's crumbs or take a principled stand and turn down the opportunity to gain a rare seat in Parliament.

The proposed expansion of the NCMP scheme will only deepen the tensions between Singapore's handful of opposition politicians, who are damned if they do and damned if they don't. Accept the NCMP scheme and some activists will criticize them for being unprincipled, self-aggrandizing lackeys. Reject it and the government can once again paint the opposition as irrelevant, ungrateful and uninterested in the real machinery of democracy.

Sylvia Lim, an existing NCMP from the Workers' Party, has welcomed the latest reforms cautiously while others in her party remain opposed to them as do competing opposition groups such as Chee Soon Juan's Singapore Democratic Party.

Opponents point out that NCMPs are second-class representatives, without the right to vote on amendments to the constitution, motions of no confidence or issues relating to public funds. Devoid of a physical constituency, it is also extremely difficult for NCMPs and their parties to build the support bases that they will need if they are to be anything more than isolated voices singing in the wind.

Those who reject the scheme also insist that the government guarantee of nine opposition MPs in Parliament will only add to the PAP conceit that there's no point in voting for the opposition.

Singapore's voters are habitually threatened by the PAP that upgrading projects for their shabby housing estates and other manifestations of government largesse are solely dependent on their support for the ruling party in general elections. The opposition, by contrast, can make no such promises or threats.

With the presence of nine alternative parliamentary voices guaranteed, Singapore's cautious and brow-beaten electorate will have even less reason to cast their compulsory vote for anyone other than the PAP.

P.S.

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