Singapore's Vulnerable Risk-free Democracy[1]

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Introduction

The respected Political and Economic Risk Consultancy (PERC) Group has consistently assessed Singapore's domestic political risk as low. Since 1997, on a scale of between zero and 10, with zero being the best grade possible and 10 the worst, the city-state's worst grade for domestic political risk was below 3 (PERC 2005). Singapore's scores hover mostly around the 2 mark. PERC partly attributes Singapore's low domestic political risk to the fact that it is 'very difficult for a formal political opposition to unseat the PAP (People's Action Party) from power even if there were a vibrant multi-party system' (PERC 2005).

This observation is shared by Freedom House, an international NGO that publishes an annual report on global trends in democracy: 'Citizens of Singapore cannot change their government democratically' (Freedom House 2005). Political risk is often associated with the threat of potential changes of government that may result in changes in policies that may adversely affect the country's business climate. Political risk is a concern to all countries. Unlike many other countries that boast of their mature and institutionalized democracies that allow for the smooth change of governments without jeopardizing the business climate, the case of Singapore is apparently different. Singapore scores low on political risk because the Singaporean government, under the PAP, sees domestic political opposition as a potential site of instability and has actively taken steps to curtail and contain critics. Paradoxically, Singapore's good rating on the 'political risk' scale has jeopardized Singapore's democracy.

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[1] This paper was written as an introduction to the "Stability, Risks and Opposition in Singapore" special issue of the *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, No. 23-2006, 2006. It was deemed to be too long by the chief and associate editors of the journal. This paper may be cited as Ooi, Can-Seng and James Gomez (2006) *Singapore's Vulnerable Risk Free Democracy,* INT Working Paper. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School, Dept. of International Economics and Management

However, what is good for international and domestic business is not necessarily good for civil society.

The Singaporean PAP government has entrenched its dominant political position over a period of some four decades. Efforts continue to be taken to ensure that political activism remains low and managed through controlled channels (George 2000; Koh and Ooi 2000; Mauzy and Milne 2002). Alternative political expressions are often treated as dangerous and are met with efforts to neutralize them to maintain the country's 'stability'. Many PAP critics tread warily when making any statements against the PAP because many have suffered the consequences of being 'dissidents'.

For instance, in 2006, opposition politician Chee Soon Juan was declared a bankrupt for failing to make libel payments of S$500,000 to former prime ministers Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong. The case dated back to the 2001 parliamentary elections when Chee questioned the use of public funds (Wong 2006). As a bankrupt, Chee would not be able to stand in elections for five years; that mattered little because Chee was already banned after being fined for making a public speech without a licence in 2002. During his bankruptcy hearings, Chee alleged that the judges lacked independence. As a result, he was charged for the contempt of court. Chee was then further sentenced to one day in jail and fined S$6,000 or seven days in jail (Chee did not pay the fine). And in April 2006, when he was leaving the country to attend the World Movement for Democracy assembly in Turkey, the authorities impounded his passport and prevented him from leaving the country because he had failed to draw up a plan to pay libel damages to the two former prime ministers (Wong 2006). Few other countries in the world that share Singapore's wealth and economic success have a history of such political suppression.

As a soft authoritarian regime, Singapore has become one of the most politically stable and economically competitive countries in the world. The Singaporean model suggests that some elements of democracy must be controlled to maintain the country's stability. So, what are some of these political 'risks' that the ruling PAP is so keen to control? What are the examples of control and how have the strategies evolved over the years? What insights can we gain from examining how the PAP government has responded to domestic critics? Is the inability to effectively challenge PAP policies necessarily a good thing? These concerns are addressed in this special issue of the *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies.*

The Unbearable Vulnerabilities of Singapore

Singapore attained self-governance from the British in 1959; the PAP has been in power since then. The first PAP prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, is still a prominent and influential member of the cabinet, although he stepped down in 1990. His son, Lee Hsien Loong, is the current prime minister. Since 1959, the PAP's management of instability is based on one key premise: Singapore is always at risk from economic collapse and social upheavals. The fears of the state, however, have not been frozen in time, rather they have evolved. The risks that the PAP has identified have changed over the years and the manner in which they are managed have also been adjusted.

When the PAP government came to power in 1959, the main threat was communism. That threat persisted until the end of the Cold War. In the articles by Rerceretnam and Cheong in this volume, we see that as late as 1987, Singaporeans were arrested on allegations of being communists. Without a trial brought against the supposed perpetrators of a 'Marxist conspiracy', the plot was never judicially proven by the authorities. The Internal Security Act (ISA) is another highly undemocratic instrument that can be used to control legitimate political opposition – the ISA assumes that the arrested person is guilty even before they are tried. Francis Seow and Chia Thye Poh are two people who have suffered from this kind of suppression: they were arrested under the ISA because it was deemed that they constituted a serious threat to Singapore (see Seow 1994).

Another big threat to Singaporean society, according to the PAP, is racial and religious unrest. Singapore experienced racial riots in the 1950s and 1960s. The Religious Harmony Act of 1990 sought to prevent people from spoiling the religious calm of the city-state. This agenda is reflected in Singapore's electoral system, where most Members of Parliament (MPs) are grouped together for election purposes into Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs). Each GRC covers a bigger electoral division and is represented by three to six MPs. At least one of the MPs in the group representing a GRC must belong to a minority racial community, that is a non-Chinese (Ooi 1998). Through these means the PAP has seized the high moral ground and any challenge to its racial and religious policies will be attacked as an invitation to racial and religious hatred and instability. Opposition members have sometimes been framed as racist and a grave threat to Singapore's racial harmony.

A popular opposition figure, Tang Liang Hong, for instance, was accused of being a 'Chinese chauvinist' in the 1997 general election (Jeyaratnam 2003). In the run-up to the 2006

general election, the Workers' Party was accused of trying to destabilize Singapore's multi-cultural harmony on the basis of its election manifesto. The party had suggested that the racial quota that ensured a particular racial mix in public housing estates be removed (Workers' Party 2006). This policy suggestion was based on any premise other than destroying racial harmony; rather it recognized that people should be free to purchase flats where they want and not be restrained by their ethnicity. The safe option is for opposition parties to avoid all references to any emotive issues about race and religion, even when their policy reforms seek to improve racial harmony and equity. The mere mention of these issues, however, opens them up to attack regardless of their motives. The result is that typically, Singapore's policies on race and religion are never challenged. It is ironic that after more than 45 years of social engineering, the PAP government is convinced that it has not been successful in creating a population mature enough to freely discuss racial and religious issues in a democratic manner.

The visual images from the attacks of 11 September 2001 have focused the attention of the world against terrorism. Singapore is no exception. Singapore has a long history of feeling insecure both within its boundaries itself and in the region, but now a new preoccupation with Islamic extremism has emerged, and has strengthened perceptions of threats to stability. Located in the Malay world, Singapore is sandwiched between Indonesia (the world's largest Muslim country) and Malaysia, where the ethic Malays or *bumiputera* represent some 60 per cent of the population. As discussed by Cheong in this volume, 9/11 has strengthened the hand of authoritarianism in Singapore. The government has acquired more powers to tackle this new threat with little concern for accountability or transparency.

The Singapore government's construction of new forms of control enables it to benefit politically even from viruses. In 2003, the Singaporean economy nose-dived, as the country and region experienced the negative impact of SARS. The current ongoing bird flu outbreaks around the world are also threatening Singapore's economy. While these 'natural' threats have been handled well by the PAP government, these incidences are also public relations opportunities, as the articles by Jin *et al.* and Woodier in this volume show. The PAP has presented itself as the only party that can solve the country's problems, including viral invasions. Given the media's reluctance to report any negative stories about the government, the general political atmosphere under the PAP government feels like a perpetual election campaign for the party.

Besides communism, racial unrest, terrorism and health hazards, another problem that is projected as a perpetual threat to Singapore is the economy's vulnerability. As a country with no natural resources and heavily dependent on international trade and commerce, Singapore is more immediately affected by the troughs and peaks of the global economy. In the last ten years, Singapore's economy suffered adversely from the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the burst of the dotcom bubble, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and SARS. At the same time, the PAP government has embarked on a Singapore Inc. strategy to make Singapore a bigger player in the global economy (Low and Johnston 2001). Temasek Holding, an investment vehicle of the Singapore government, has been acquiring assets and companies around the world as part of a diversification strategy to minimize Singapore's dependence on the domestic economy. Many of Singapore's biggest companies, such as Singapore Airlines and the DBS Bank, are in Temasek's portfolio. With the constant reminder of Singapore's economic vulnerability, it is difficult for many Singaporeans to conceive of an alternative to PAP's successful management of the economy.

Occasionally, the PAP and the government are embroiled in bad news. For instance, Choo Wee Khiang resigned as a PAP MP after he was found guilty of cheating in 1999. He was sentenced to two weeks in jail and a fine (Agence France-Presse, 7 June 1999). Choo is not the first or last case. PAP minister Teh Cheang Wan committed suicide in 1987 because he was allegedly corrupt (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 1987). These cases show that the PAP is not above the law, and that not all their members are honest. Recently, the National Kidney Foundation – a high-profile, lauded charity – was pushed into the news by the local newspaper, *The Straits Times*. The chief executive officer of the charity, T. T. Durai, unsuccessfully sued the newspapers for libel. *The Straits Times* reported that donated monies had not been properly used, and the allegations were proven to be true. The wife of former prime minister and current senior minister, Mrs Goh Chok Tong, was the patron of the charity. The minister of health had to diffuse the public outcry by introducing more mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability in all charities. Bad publicity of this kind is rare for the PAP government compared to the large amount of negative publicity some opposition figures receive (see Gomez's article in this volume).

Some 40 years after independence, and as a result of living under a one-party dominant system, many Singaporeans have come to believe that the PAP represents the only feasible and workable government for Singapore. Singapore has to be vigilant against communist

plots, racial and religious instability, terrorism, health epidemics and its economic vulnerability. It is assumed that only the PAP is capable of delivering good results which underpin domestic stability while simultaneously providing for economic growth and increased living standards. The world economy has also come to recognize Singapore as one of the most competitive economies and to attribute this to the PAP. In these circumstances, a decrease in support for the PAP could be construed as the start of instability in Singapore. The bulk of domestic and international opinion seems to be convinced that Singapore's economic successes are directly attributable to the PAP and that the safest option is not to mess with a well-functioning system. But not all Singaporeans are convinced that the PAP, and the authoritarianism on which it depends, is the only answer.

Justifying the One-Party System: Casting the Opposition Parties as 'Risky'

As part of the political game, the PAP needs to cripple its political challengers – the opposition. The PAP is using a three-pronged approach to frame the opposition as 'risky' in Singaporean politics. With the first prong, it offers a successful development model for Singaporeans. As the discussion above shows, the PAP has defined the threats that Singapore faces and persuaded many that it is the only party that can mount an adequate response to them. The PAP argues that opposition parties are a risk, that they do not have the capacity to deal with these manifold threats, or they even question that such threats exist.

With the second prong, the PAP government attempts to convince Singaporeans that they do not need a functioning multi-party democracy. Despite this, it is ironic to note that Singapore has more than 20 registered political parties. Most of these parties, however, do not represent genuine sectional interests – many of them are formed simply at election times. Any suggestion that Singapore should head in the direction of a genuinely more vibrant multi-party democracy continues to be rejected by the PAP on the pretext that Singapore has established its own unique political system. It is said that a multi-party democracy is untenable in a small country like Singapore. In contrast to other Asian countries that are experimenting with democracy (e.g. the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia), the PAP government argues that Singapore cannot afford the inconveniences and inefficiencies of democracy. Furthermore, the PAP likes to project Singapore as being Asian and conservative. The political system reflects the values that Singaporeans hold, it is said; therefore in such an

'Asian values system', the conflicts and turmoils of other democratic models are neither necessary nor desirable.

And under the pretext of maintaining good political order, the Singapore opposition faces structural impediments to communicating with its potential electorate. In his article in this volume, Gomez shows how the ruling party has tried to block free-speech options to opposition parties. The lack of fair access to voters makes it difficult for opponents to convincingly challenge the PAP government. Instead, the opposition parties suffer from a large amount of negative publicity that they cannot overcome unless alternative communication avenues are opened up. For instance, in the run-up to the 2006 general elections, the PAP government announced that podcasting and vodcasting would not be allowed for campaigning. These are both new technologies that several opposition parties and individual politicians had begun to develop and use to good effect (*The Straits Times* [hereafter *ST*], 4 April 2006). Such barriers to communication are not healthy for the growth of a multi-party democracy but according to the PAP, Singaporeans do not need such a system.

With the third prong, the PAP tries to convince Singaporeans that the opposition is not capable of playing even the role of a good opposition; instead the PAP claims that it can function as its own opposition. In the 2006 general election, the PAP attempted to win back the only two opposition wards (out of a total of 84 wards). Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong suggested that if the PAP's candidates were to win back the Potong Pasir and Hougang constituencies, the candidates could 'play opposition' in Parliament. Goh suggested that the PAP party whip could be lifted specially for them, that is, they would be allowed to go against party-line in Parliament (*ST*, 27 March 2006). In another incident, a *Straits Times* journalist Peh Shing Huei was bemused that new PAP candidates for the 2006 general election constantly highlighted their willingness to challenge the official party line, as they tried to prove their 'rebel credentials' (*ST*, 29 March 2006). The PAP is essentially trying to convince the electorate that the opposition is irrelevant in Singapore; the PAP can do the job of the opposition itself, in addition to acting as a wise government

To sum up, the PAP is offering Singaporeans a no-risk approach to parliamentary democracy by arguing that it alone can represent all Singaporeans as both the government and opposition and in a manner that poses no risk to the country. Such a view, however, is controversial, unwise and unsustainable to people who believe that the best way of ensuring

the effective functioning of a democracy is to set up appropriate institutions for it. Such institutions need to include the full complement of democratic mechanisms and processes: the separation of the legislative from the executive and judiciary, the countervailing powers of lobbies and opposition parties, and accountability and transparency in all government business. As things stand today, the whole political and economic system hinges on the capacities and successes of the PAP. Apart from constituting an unwarrantably authoritarian system, there is also the risk that in the long run Singapore will be left with no tenable political alternatives if something should go horribly wrong with the PAP and the system it has built up. In the short run, the so-called 'Singaporean model' has ensured the negation of democracy in Singapore.

The papers in this volume address many of these issues. This published work began as part of the Singapore Studies Project which we describe next.

Singapore Studies Project

The collection of papers presented in this special issue emerged out of the Singapore Studies Project initiated in 2004 at the Monash Asia Institute (Melbourne, Australia). The project was launched because many scholars saw that within the general rubric of Southeast Asian studies, Singapore has often been under-represented as a subject of research. This is especially odd given the critical role that Singapore plays in the social, economic and political stability of the Asia-Pacific region. The Singapore Studies Project was designed to address this problem, specifically to stimulate debate and discussion about Singapore's future at a time when the country's dominance as a regional hub is being contested by its nearest neighbours.

More specifically, the aims and objectives of the Singapore Studies Project were to (i) promote research on Singapore, especially about the neglected aspects of Singapore's recent history; (ii) publish relevant monographs and discussion papers; (iii) encourage senior and junior researchers to work together and share ideas; and (iv) facilitate institutional partnerships.

James Gomez, a PhD Candidate at the Monash Asia Insitute, was appointed coordinator of the project. He organized a series of meetings at various universities in Australia as a way of identifying the scholars and doctoral students interested in the subject of Singapore and its future. The first workshop to bring together the interested parties was hosted by the Monash Asia Institute (MAI) with Professor Marika Vicziany (director of the MAI) acting as the

project advisor. The event was held on 10 May 2004 and was entitled 'Politics and Civil Society in Singapore'. The second workshop was organized in partnership with the School of Applied Communication (Asian Media and Culture) at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), with Chris Hudson acting as the project advisor. The workshop was held on 9 August 2004 and was entitled 'Celebrating Singapore: Identity, Ethnicity, Nationalism and Civil Society'. The Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies (CAPSTRANS) at University of Wollongong hosted the third meeting in New South Wales on 22 October 2004. The project advisor was CAPSTRANS director, Dr Lenore Lyons, and the meeting was entitled, 'Handing over the Rei(g)ns: Civil Society under Lee Hsien Loong'.

After these discussions, contact was made with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore. The purpose was to involve an even more diverse range of scholars and also ensure that the results of the research reached a wider audience to Asia. The choice of ISEAS was also important given that it was a Singapore-based institution. This would ensure that the project findings would have an audience in Singapore itself. It was also our hope that as the audience expanded, so too would feedback and debate about our conclusions. The result of this partnership was that the October 2005 issue of *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 20/2 had a Special Focus on 'Democracy and Civil Society: NGO Politics in Singapore'. In this way, ISEAS helped to disseminate the findings of the workshops held in Australia and speak to a wider audience.

In order to disseminate the findings even further and to expand coverage and generate interest in Europe, contact was made with the Asia Research Centre (ARC) in the Copenhagen Business School. For this purposes the *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, which has a strong tradition of publishing research on many aspects of contemporary Asia, was identified an invaluable resource. With the positive support of the ARC, a set of papers was assembled related to questions about how Singapore manages the many 'risks' it faces in the modern global economy. These papers constitute the present collection in this volume.

The ability of the Singapore Studies Project to attract scholars and journals from such a wide range of countries indicates that the subject of Singapore is not an esoteric one. Indeed, there has been widespread interest in exactly how the Singapore model has been a success and what the costs of that success have been. Coming from more open civil societies, many foreign scholars, politicians, journalists and economists find it difficult to accept that the successes of Singapore have not incurred any costs. Questions continue to be asked and the

Singapore Studies Project seeks to address these by working with scholars drawn from a variety of international institutions.

The Papers in this Collection

After the rigour of the double-blind peer review process, five papers have been assembled for this collection. They all deal with the management of (in)stabilities in Singapore. The collection begins with Marc Rerceretnam's 'Beyond the Clutches: The 1987 ISA Arrests and International Civil Society Responses to Political Repression in Singapore'. This provides an overview of how the 1987 crackdown on alleged dissidents in Singapore spurred international NGOs and expatriate Singaporean communities to focus attention on human rights abuses in Singapore and mobilize international opinion. We can see that the ISA was an effective tool for dealing with critics, but the PAP government had to pay the price of negative publicity from the international community and media.

In his article, 'Selling Security: The War on Terror and the Internal Security Act of Singapore', Damien Cheong demonstrates how the Singapore government, despite its respect for the rule of law, has been able to justify the use of the long-standing ISA on terrorist suspects. We see here that a new security environment has helped legitimize old laws in dealing with dissenters. We also see the creeping application of sophisticated public relations strategies to manage negative perceptions internationally.

Jonathan Woodier's article, 'Securing Singapore/Managing Perceptions: From Shooting the Messenger to Dodging the Question", shows how the Singaporean government uses public relations in its various social and economic programmes. Singapore is of course not the only country that attempts to manage and cultivate public opinions and perceptions. This city-state, however, is in the forefront of this public relations engineering in Asia. The public relations campaigns are complex and driven by the need, first, to persuade and coerce Singaporeans and the rest of the world to regard Singapore as a good place for investment, tourism and residence and, second, to simultaneously project Singapore as a socially and economically vulnerable city-state.

The fourth paper in this collection, by Yan Jin, Augustine Pang and Glen T. Cameron, analyses public perceptions of how the government managed the SARS crisis in 2003. Based on their survey, the paper concludes that the PAP government has been supremely successful

in managing the perceptions and emotions of Singapore's residents by building on their ingrained fears of future insecurity.

James Gomez, the author of the final paper in this collection, evaluates the impact of laws that restrict and control the free speech of opposition parties and politicians in Singapore. He demonstrates how the freedom of speech of opposition parties is often restricted because of its potential to cause 'instability'. The struggle for freedom of expression in Singapore needs to recruit new mechanisms to assist opposition politicians. A greater diversity of means also makes it harder for the PAP to keep control of all the news.

Vulnerability of a Risk-free Democracy

All five papers focus on various strategies used by the PAP to bring 'stability' to Singapore and they all question the need for this. The seriousness of Singapore's vulnerability is debatable. The PAP's approach to bringing about economic growth and social stability in Singapore increasingly depends on crippling political critics and the opposition. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the PAP's claims to being the means towards stability is anything other than a self-serving slogan designed to maintain its hegemony in the Singaporean political system. Unfortunately, having cast all of its critics in the role of 'agents of risk', the PAP has encouraged its citizens to internalize fears of instability and opt for the conservative authoritarianism for which the Singapore model is famous. Such policies may have been easier to sustain during the initial two or three decades of development in the post independence era. But are they sustainable and sensible today?

One factor working against the persistence of the PAP's old strategies is the need for Singapore to become even more entrepreneurial than it has been to date. Today the Singapore government laments the shortage of entrepreneurs who are willing to take economic risks; yet it has failed to see that its own policies have made Singapore society risk-averse at all levels.

Policy announcements during the last few years suggest that the PAP government is now trying to deflate the paradigm of stability. The recommendations of a committee set up to 'remake Singapore' (Remaking Singapore Committee 2003; Singapore Government 2004) have been accepted. The indications are that the PAP government will seek to make Singapore into a more open society: some of the recommendations include encouraging academic research on public policy, removing the requirement for prior vetting of play scripts and allowing more flexibility for schools and universities to manage themselves. The PAP

government wants Singaporeans to take more 'risks' for their own economic well-being in order to transform the city-state. The authorities are also trying to develop Singapore's creative economy, encouraging Singaporeans to be original and to express themselves artistically (Ministry of Information and the Arts [MITA] 2005).

While these are important steps forward, there are also steps back. Clearly the PAP government has not yet worked out a consistent strategy for heading in this new direction. For instance, Martyn See, a young local filmmaker saw his film, *Singapore Rebel*, banned because it is considered to be 'political' (Gomez 2005). The 30-minute documentary is about Chee Soon Juan, leader of the Singapore Democratic Party. See was interrogated under the Films Act which states that it is an offence to import, make, distribute or exhibit a film that contains 'wholly or partly either partisan or biased references or comments on any political matter', including those of a Member of Parliament. A 'party political film' is an offence punishable by a maximum fine of S$100,000 or a two-year prison sentence. After many months, See has yet to be informed of the outcome of his case. His film equipment and copies of his film were, however, confiscated. His encounters with the police can be read at the following URL: http://www.singaporerebel.blogspot.com. In other words, despite the pursuit of recreating Singapore as a global city for the arts, activist artists are still seen as dangerous elements that need to be controlled.

As a result, the news of a new and more open Singapore is not spreading far and fast. For instance, in 2005, the Singaporean authorities managed to convince the management of Warwick University of the United Kingdom to set up a campus in Singapore. The deal was withdrawn at the last minute because faculty members of the university voiced serious concerns about the 'academic freedom' in Singapore. The management of Warwick University was forced to withdraw from the deal (*ST*, 19 and 20 October 2005).

The PAP maintains that it can change its own policies when necessary and that it has the wisdom and expertise to do so. Although it is normal for governments to calibrate their positions, what is unique about the Singapore case is that calibration does not allow for political criticisms and challenges from the opposition. By refusing space for political opposition, the PAP has put Singapore in a position where a change of government is not an established tool of government. Without a tested system that can accommodate changing administrations, the political system of Singapore has remained politically susceptible at its very core. This is the biggest risk for Singapore today, and paradoxically it is the direct result

of a PAP government that has kept a lid on democratic politics and an open civil society under the pretence that Singapore was at risk from perpetual instability.

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