

Reforming the PAP

Future leaders must make changes their predecessors resisted.

Picture a PAP government that lets an independent election commission draw constituency boundaries, introduces freedom of information laws, and fights to defend the space for avant-garde artists and unpopular minorities. This would be a People's Action Party that committed itself to democratic institutions, open government and civil rights.

When I first blogged about these and other hoped-for reforms (Chapter 26), one reader replied, "I am inclined to adopt your checklist as my own as it resonates well, but where we are not aligned is your optimism on the PAP's ability and will to cross the chasm." I can't say I'm optimistic either. But it's all relative. The prospects of internal PAP reform may be slim, but it's not as if there's a much higher chance that the opposition will win power in the medium term and usher in positive change from the outside. What's more, other countries' experiences tell us that democratic transitions can come from any direction. Looking at societies as diverse as Poland, the Philippines, South Africa, Indonesia and Myanmar, we see transformations sometimes being instituted by

ruling elites within the palace walls, and sometimes imposed only after insurgents break open the gates and seize control. Although historians can join the dots in hindsight, it is hard to predict the path to democracy that any nation will take. People power movements that forced out seemingly immovable leaders like Suharto took most by surprise. Equally, radical reformers who transformed the establishment from within, like Mikhail Gorbachev and Thein Sein, seemed to emerge from out of the blue.

Perhaps the lesson for those who want political change is to be firm about our chosen destination but not too dogmatic about which routes will get us there. Nobody knows what will ultimately work. Indulging our imaginations for a moment, one possible source of change would be a kind of sleeper candidate: a pure white PAP leader who takes command, and only then reveals his democratic colours. He embarks on an aggressive programme of political reform because he's wise enough to know it's in the long-term interest of the PAP and Singapore. Such fairy tales occasionally materialise in the real world. Take Bhutan's former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who stunned his devoted subjects by announcing that he intended to abdicate and set his Dragon Kingdom on the path to becoming a constitutional monarchy with democratic elections. Because he did this at the height of his popularity, his dynasty's place in the hearts of Bhutanese is secure for a few more generations.

The more common scenario, though, involves regimes embarking on political reforms under duress. They may need to appease protest movements, for example. Or, despite all their efforts to subvert democratic processes, they may face an unstoppable opposition tide. When they realise they are on the brink of spending the coming years out of power and on the receiving end of the state's coercive machinery, they suddenly discover the merits of checks and balances. This is probably the single most important reason why ruling parties in competitive democracies don't dismantle democratic institutions. It may be tempting to turn the courts and the press into your playthings when

you are the government of the day, but since your opponents will probably get their turn, enlightened self-interest tells you to preserve most of the rules of the democratic game.

Going by this logic, the PAP might engage in a flurry of democratic reforms when an opposition victory is no longer unthinkable, but a very real possibility. Nobody knows better than the PAP how incumbents could use Singapore's existing laws, regulations and administrative procedures to make life difficult for their challengers. It would want to blunt those tools or place them out of the executive's reach before it's too late. Having the Elections Department under the Prime Minister's Office is perfectly acceptable to the PAP as long as the PM can only come from their ranks. If that is no longer guaranteed—and they are haunted by nightmare visions of a Prime Minister Pritam Singh of the Workers' Party, say—they may suddenly see the wisdom of delinking the elections regulator from the executive branch. Similarly, the government's power under prevailing press laws to plant loyalists at the helm of the national media won't look so attractive when it faces the realistic prospect of a non-PAP government making a Chen Show Mao chairman of Singapore Press Holdings and a Gerald Giam editor of *The Straits Times*.

Thus, it is conceivable that PAP leaders facing serious challenges will want to decommission some of its weapons. But then there's the question of timing. The Bhutanese way, ushering in democracy before anyone asks for it, is an exception. Most reformers would wait until the last minute, a bit like how the British handed Hong Kong more democracy in a promissory note that could only be encashed upon the territory's return to China. As long as they were in charge, British governors clearly did not want to deal with the inconvenience of an empowered Hong Kong public.

In Singapore's case, the anticipated decline in PAP dominance will probably be gradual, taking several years for the advantage to shift away from the ruling party and toward insurgent forces. But the longer the PAP waits to institute democratic reforms, the greater the chances it would be doing so from a position of

weakness. It would have less say over the new institutional arrangements that it's being pressured to introduce. In contrast, by reforming long before it has to, the PAP can ensure it remains the main force in Singapore's new order. Do it tomorrow, and the PAP would still win by a landslide because the opposition wouldn't have had the time to build itself into anything that resembles an alternative government.

Political scientists Dan Slater and Joseph Wong call this scenario "democracy-through-strength"—when authoritarian governments realise that most people willingly support them for their performance, and decide to open up their politics without waiting for a revolutionary or electoral reversal of fortune. Their research on East Asia has found that this is not a far-fetched storyline. It's basically the path Japan, Taiwan and South Korea took. Slater and Wong muse that the PAP is even better placed to benefit from democracy-through-strength than the dominant parties in other Asian societies.

So far, government leaders have lacked the confidence to operate in a wide-open contest with opposing ideas. But anyone rooting for the PAP to remain relevant must hope that reform-minded leaders will emerge in the fifth-generation leadership, and perhaps even in the fourth. This new vanguard within the PAP might realise that coercion is not the way to get the best out of any society. If people are merely acquiescent, they won't be inspired to fight for the common good. Increasingly, those who don't feel positively engaged can just opt out. PAP reformers would see that more and more aspects of Singapore life are spinning out of the government's gravitational field, giving Singaporeans the choice to disengage from public affairs and privatise their lives if they don't believe in their leaders' vision.

One clear example of how Singapore has changed is people's media diet. In old Singapore, when there were just two local and two Malaysian channels on television, most families were happy to watch government-controlled programmes for want of any better way to spend their evenings. Today, cable TV and the internet

present viewers with mind-boggling screen choices. The government still controls 100 per cent of local TV news, but the statistic that should matter more to policymakers is the proportion of viewers that watches *any* local news daily. It's much less than half. The government can't assume that if it's the only or loudest voice the public hears on a subject, that it has succeeded in setting the agenda. Many citizens may have already tuned out, turned off by a monotony that's unreflective of their reality.

Singaporeans are also talking back. Civil servants used to ask me, as a media researcher, how I thought the government could adjust to the new communication environment. I advised them that the days of pulling rank in dialogue were over; respect would have to be earned, not demanded by virtue of status. To cultivate the required capacities for this new world, government officials could practice on the local news media: stop using either implied or explicit threats when telling editors how they'd like a piece of news covered. They should use only persuasion, like any private sector newsmaker. If a ministry can't last three months without pulling out their old weapons against mainstream media, there is no chance it's ready to deal with the chaos of the online world. Unfortunately, it's proven hard for the government to give up on traditional ways of managing the media. In the short term, it is far simpler to rely on rank.

The dilemma that those officials were concerned about, though, hasn't disappeared. And the challenge goes well beyond having to communicate policies in the internet age. On most fronts, the government needs to adapt to an environment that it cannot control as easily as before. Singapore is being impacted by other states and foreign corporations that we can't even call external factors anymore, because we are such a global city. In many respects—financial flows, especially—they blend into our economy and society so completely that it is hard to distinguish the local from the foreign. The global has become not just more penetrating but also more complex. The main challenge is how to adjust to a risen China after two centuries of looking West. Foreign policy czar

Bilahari Kausikan has observed that we now operate in an “age without definition”. The Cold War—which for all its insanity was at least a game with obvious rules—has been replaced not with a clear new framework for Singapore to operate within, but with an indeterminate, confusing flux.

In short, Singapore and its policymakers are in a new world, more fluid, diverse and competitive than anything we’ve known before. I’ve not come across anyone anywhere on the political spectrum who doesn’t share this prognosis. The disagreement is only over what this should mean for our domestic politics. So far, every generation of leaders has been convinced that our external challenges demand unity on the home front. Not just in terms of a national resolve to protect Singapore militarily, but down to the level of forcing a consensus on domestic issues. They believe an uncertain world requires them to preserve their dominance as long as possible. They consider the complaints of liberals to be rather childish, as if only those who have represented the country against foreign adversaries count as real men.

We do have real and inescapable external vulnerabilities, but the government’s response may not be the wisest. Learning to adapt to freewheeling domestic political contention isn’t something our leaders cannot afford to do. They can’t afford not to. It would make them sharper global players. Top football clubs in the European Champions League wouldn’t be half as good if they didn’t face strong opponents in their domestic competitions. Every wannabe Real Madrid needs a Barcelona. Of course, political polarisation, gridlock and instability are serious problems in many countries. But Singapore faces the opposite danger. Our leaders are dangerously insulated from politics. When they swim out from their protected local pond into the wide-open ocean, they may lack the skills to deal with sharks they can’t domesticate.

That’s one case for a more open politics. PAP reformers could come to appreciate this, resulting in a tension within the party. Self-delusion will urge sticking with the old formula: snuff out challenges to PAP dominance using less than democratic means.

Self-confidence will recommend more open political competition, on the grounds that the PAP doesn't need dirty tricks to remain a leading force in Singapore.

In more typical political parties, leaders with different visions are allowed to compete for influence, build a base within the party, and eventually bid for the party leadership. This competitive process allows those with bold new ideas to move from the fringes to the centre. It allows parties to carry out revolutions from within to keep up with the times. Unfortunately, the PAP is not set up for transformative regeneration. It is constituted to protect itself from internal competition (Chapter 14). This accounts for the party's extraordinary cohesion and stability thus far. But it could also produce paralysis.

The PAP's best hope lies with men and women with the wits, guts and entrepreneurial skills of the republic's first generation of leaders, ready to respond to the call of their times with a bold new vision that would reenergise their party and country. This team would face a Catch-22. They cannot reform the PAP until they reach the top. But they cannot reach the top unless they shelve their reformist ambitions. It's only with the blessings of godfathers within the current leadership that they will get anywhere.

This is the irony of the national movement that is the PAP. The party built by formidable individuals like Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam would today repel such iconoclasts. The first generation of leaders had to fight multiple foes to build a strong party. A 5G leadership may need to be as determined and creative if it wants to remake the PAP. We have to hope that the current old guard heed the same advice they regularly give to citizens, that we should avoid burdening the next generation with our self-serving decisions. Political reform may not be in the short-term interests of current PAP leaders who have grown comfortable with the status quo, but if they do it soon and manage it right, it will help their successors secure Singapore's long-term interests.