

Research on the Reform and Transformation of Singapore's Political Election System and Political System

Kai Ye^{1,*}

1 Electronic Engineering and Optoelectronic Technology, Nanjing University of Science and Technology ZiJin College, Nanjing, China

* Corresponding Author Email: chendong622@njust.edu.cn

Abstract. Singapore is an important country in Southeast Asia, which has been established for less than 60 years. In the early days of its establishment, its survival situation was very difficult. But under the struggle of the People's Action Party (PAP) led by Lee Kuan Yew and the "founding generation" of the people, Singapore has harmoniously coexisted with different ethnic and religious groups and has forcefully embarked on a rapid development path. According to data released by the World Bank, as of 2022, Singapore's per capita GDP has reached over 82000 US dollars and has been steadily increasing for many years. The People's Action Party has won every election since its founding and has been in power ever since. However, as the public increasingly enjoys the oversight and balance of the government by the opposition in parliament, the party's support rate for the election has gradually declined, and its vote share in the most recent election has dropped to 60%. The rapid development of Singapore since its founding cannot be separated from the continuity policies implemented by the fixed ruling party, which attract a large amount of foreign capital investment. However, the people's call for democracy forces the ruling party to face strong opposition in the upcoming general election. For the ruling party, more support from voters for the opposition party has entered an irreversible path. This article will explore the path of political system reform in Singapore.

Keywords: Singapore; people's action party (PAP); political election; political reform.

1. Introduction

Singapore is a multi-party country ruled by the People's Action Party (PAP) for a long time, with a political system deeply influenced by the British parliamentary system. Political elections are divided into parliamentary elections and presidential elections. The president is the head of state and has little actual power. To supervise and balance the possibility of an irresponsible government in the future, Singapore officially implemented a democratically elected president system in 1993, which is directly elected by voters for a term of six years. Considering ethnic minorities, the Singapore government introduced a presidential retention system to ensure that each ethnic group produces at least one president within 30 years, and it was first put into use in 2017, with Malay Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob serving as the president. The prime minister also the congressman come from the party with the highest number of seats in Singapore's parliamentary elections, and cabinet ministers are also selected from the elected congressmen. The parliamentary elections in Singapore are divided into single constituencies and collective constituencies, with each candidate running separately in a single constituency. The candidate with the highest vote rate is elected as a member of the parliament in that constituency. In the 1980s, the government introduced a collective constituency system to ensure that minority groups could be represented and elected as members of parliament, to promote clan harmony. That is, each candidate in each constituency is elected by a group of candidates including minority representatives by each party. Voters cannot vote alone for individuals, but can only vote for a whole group, thus ensuring that minority groups can obtain a certain number of representatives of their ethnic group in elections in Singapore with a majority of Chinese. Unlike the Western electoral system where political parties need to comply with the electoral system, Singapore's general elections are conducted under the leadership of the PAP. In the design of the electoral system, there are many restrictions on the opposition and voters [1]. With the rapid development of Singapore's economy and the expansion of the middle class, the public sympathizes

with the opposition party's years of government suppression and hopes that while the PAP continues to govern, the opposition party can have greater influence to supervise them. The largest opposition party in Singapore, the Workers' Party, won 10 parliamentary seats in the 2020 general election, including two constituencies. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong subsequently decided to invite the leader of the Workers' Party, Pritam Singh, to become the leader of the opposition party in parliament. This is the first official appointment of this position in Singapore's history, indicating that the government will be more open to criticism and supervision from the opposition. Before taking office, the new Prime Minister Lawrence Wong also admitted in an interview that there may be a possibility of a coalition government in Singapore in the future when the two opposition parties win more than half of the total number of seats in the general election. The new general election in Singapore cannot be held until the end of 2025 at the latest. At that time, the People's Action Party led by the newly appointed young Prime Minister Lawrence Wong on May 15 of this year will face the strong impact of the growing opposition party. This article will explore what reforms and transformations Singapore's political system can undertake.

2. Political Electoral System, Ethnic and Religious Conditions

2.1. Electoral System

Singapore's elections mainly include parliamentary and presidential elections. The parliamentary elections include elected members, non-constituency members, and official members. The Singaporean parliament has legislative power, budget approval (financial supervision) power, and the power to supervise the government. The parliamentary elections have no fixed date and are held approximately every 4-5 years. Among them, the most elected members have a total of 93 seats, including single and collective constituencies. A single constituency refers to a constituency where voters elect the sole member of parliament representing that constituency, and the candidate who receives the most votes is elected, just like most countries around the world that implement the British parliamentary system. The constituency system is an innovation made by Singapore in the 1980s based on its national conditions. Each group of candidates in a constituency consists of 3-6 people, and each group must include at least one candidate from an ethnic minority such as Malay or Indian. Voters can choose to vote for a certain group, and the group with the highest vote rate will be elected. The government's purpose in introducing this system is to protect the rights of ethnic minorities, encourage them to actively participate in politics, and promote ethnic harmony. However, some dissenters believe that the ruling party wants to suppress the opposition party through this move, to achieve parliamentary monopoly.

In the early days of the founding of the PAP, it once monopolized all parliamentary seats under a single system of elected members. Due to the difficult situation in the early days of the founding of the country, many Singaporeans were hardworking people from China and had a natural sense of alienation from politics. They were willing to obey Lee Kuan Yew's early paternalistic authoritarian management style [2]. With the rapid development of the economy, more and more middle classes have emerged in the country, eager to see more opposition voices in parliament. However, the opposition party has been suppressed for many years, making it difficult to obtain enough votes to enter parliament. Therefore, the government introduced a nonconstituency member system in 1984 to help several opposition party members who have a certain number of votes but are still unable to be elected enter parliament. According to the Singapore Constitution, the number of nonconstituency member seats is reduced from 12 to the number of opposition party elected seats, ensuring that the parliament has at least 12 opposition party seats.

Official members are nominated by a special committee and appointed by the President, representing the views of independent individuals in Congress. They usually have two seats and are appointed by individuals who have made significant contributions to the country or society.

In the Singapore general election under the control of the People's Action Party, some voters are concerned that voting for the opposition party may result in accountability from the ruling party, such

as delaying HDB flats reform; The opposition parties are often investigated by relevant departments [1].

2.2. Ethnic and Religious Factors

Singapore is a small red dot on the map, lacking abundant resources. Its geographical location is surrounded by two major Malay countries, so it is crucial to maintain racial harmony. As a country with a predominantly Chinese population, safeguarding the rights and interests of ethnic minorities such as the Malay people and reducing suspicion from the two neighboring Malay countries is the primary task. Singapore has three major ethnic groups: the Chinese, Malay, and Indian, accounting for about 70%, 20%, and 10% respectively. The national language is Malay, and the official languages are English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. Singapore's national anthem is sung in Malay, which is believed to be goodwill towards the two major Malay countries in the surrounding area and to create a peaceful environment for its development. To enhance national cohesion, the government needs to introduce common values that are in line with all ethnic groups, so that each ethnic group can identify themselves not only as members of a certain ethnic group but also as Singaporeans.

For a long time, ethnic minorities have often been less enthusiastic about participating in politics due to their disadvantaged numbers. The government, concerned about the conflicts between ethnic groups caused by the decline in their willingness to participate in politics over time, introduced a constituency system at the end of the last century to ensure that ethnic minorities have a certain proportion of their members of parliament. In addition, on this basis, it is ensured that enough outstanding minority members of parliament can be selected from the elected members of parliament to serve as ministers in the cabinet, to achieve racial diversity in the cabinet. As for the head of state, to protect the rights and interests of ethnic minorities, the government has implemented a presidential reservation system, ensuring that two ethnic minorities have at least one president of that race within thirty years.

3. Electoral Reform Considerations

3.1. Constituency Area

The collective constituency system began in the late 1980s. Each group of candidates in a constituency consists of 3-6 people, and each group must include at least one candidate from ethnic minority such as Malay or Indian. Voters can choose to vote for a certain group, and the group with the highest vote rate will be elected. The government introduced this system to protect the rights and interests of ethnic minorities, encourage them to actively participate in politics, and promote ethnic harmony. However, some dissenters believe that the ruling party wants to suppress the opposition party through this, to achieve parliamentary monopoly. Under this system, although the opposition party's vote share has slightly increased, there has not been a significant increase in parliamentary seats. On the contrary, the ruling party can gain over 90% of seats with a vote share of 70%, consolidating its dominant position [3]. However, in recent years, the opposition party has also achieved some success in the constituency showdown in the general election. In the 2020 election, the largest opposition party, the Workers' Party, won 10 seats, including two constituencies, becoming the first opposition party in Singapore's history to win two or more constituencies. The strong performance of the Workers' Party in this election to some extent contributed to the milestone moment when the ruling party officially announced the establishment of the position of opposition party leader in parliament.

3.2. Presidential Reservation

Singapore was influenced by British colonialism, and most of its political elites had studied abroad in the UK, so its political system followed the parliamentary system of the UK. The President, as the head of state, served for six years and initially had no real power, only responsible for some ceremonial activities. The 1991 presidential election system reform gave elected presidents more

power, including supervising the government, obtaining the "second key" to safeguarding the national reserve, and appointing high-level government officials. After the President has a certain amount of real power, the ruling party hopes that the President can have good cooperation with the government. Although it is generally required that the President be independent and elected through popular voting, the eligibility of presidential candidates is issued by relevant departments controlled by the government. Therefore, it can be found that since the implementation of the democratic presidential system more than 30 years ago, Singapore has not yet produced a true "grassroots president", that is, the President did not hold leadership positions in relevant government departments before being elected. The presidential reservation system is a system created by the ruling party to cater to the disappointment and concerns of ethnic minorities who have not been appointed as national leaders for a long time. It was first introduced in 2017, and the only eligible candidate among the four Malay candidates, National Parliament Speaker Halimah, was automatically elected without competition. However, due to Halimah being automatically elected without any competitors, and a series of obvious political actions by the Singaporean government on this issue, Halimah has been referred to by some Singaporeans as the "chosen president rather than the elected president", and therefore "not my president", in an awkward situation. Some Singaporeans have expressed disappointment and dissatisfaction with this matter through sit-in demonstrations [4].

3.3. Parliamentary Leader of the Opposition

The 2020 general election in Singapore was a milestone moment in Singapore's political arena. In this year's election, the Workers' Party, which won 10 seats in parliament, became the first opposition party in Singapore to win two constituencies. The party's leader, Pritam Singh, was also officially appointed as the leader of the opposition party in parliament by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. This is also the first time that Singapore has seen an opposition leadership position similar to the British Parliament. The government has also listed a series of accusations and privileges, including the right to listen to confidential reports on diplomacy and other aspects. Pritam Singh, who became the official leader of the opposition parties in Congress, repeatedly challenged the ruling party in Congress since as the leader of opposition parties, such as launching attacks on whether to disclose and use national reserves. This has to some extent prompted the ruling party to provide more detailed explanations to the public, which is conducive to the opposition party's supervision of the government, which is well received by the public.

4. Further Perspectives on Electoral Reform

4.1. Abolish the Presidency

The original intention of establishing a presidential system in Singapore was to assume that an irresponsible government would emerge in the future, but the Presidential Office could supervise its existence. However, it found that Singapore's democratically elected presidential system has been in place for more than 30 years, and there has yet to be an "independent president" with low relevance to the government. Many presidents have served as Cabinet Ministers, Speakers of the National Parliament, and even Deputy Prime Ministers before becoming president, which makes it difficult for some people to believe whether their supervisory role in the government has been effective. Therefore, if presidents are often held by their own members of the government, whether this position is still necessary is a thought-provoking question. In the future, it is possible to consider implementing a role similar to that of the head of state in the United States personally serving as the head of government, with the responsibility of supervising the government being more borne by the growing opposition camp in Parliament.

4.2. Future Leader Training Mechanism

The PAP established its first Advanced Talent College in the 1970s, specializing in cultivating high-quality political talents to serve the government. The PAP has extremely strict standards for

assessing political elites, with most senior officials achieving excellent academic performance in school. In addition, it also has strict requirements for personal conduct and political qualities [5].

Before appointed as the Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong served as the Minister or Second Minister of multiple important departments, including the Ministry of National Defense, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Finance. He has accumulated considerable experience in many fields, which is a valuable resource that the ruling party can provide for long-term governance. In the future, it is crucial to ensure that future prime ministers from opposition parties have the opportunity to work in multiple cabinet departments before taking office, as the alternation of political parties would come true. The author believes that there are several suggestions for reference. Firstly, the ruling party can allow opposition parties with parliamentary seats to select members to enter the government cabinet as ministers and form a coalition government. Secondly, the ruling party can cultivate a soil for independent participation in politics, allowing more independent members of parliament to enter the cabinet and prepare for joining the winning political party as cabinet members in the future. Thirdly, the government establishes a "vacant minister" in the cabinet department, inviting opposition party members to serve, similar to the vice presidential position in some presidential countries, which is called a reserve president and has no actual duties. In special circumstances, it can act as an acting principal.

4.3. Coalition Government

After in succession to the position of Secretary General of the Workers' Party, former leader Low Thia Khiang changed the style of confrontation which former leaders coped with the ruling party, and put forward the slogan of "not opposing for the sake of opposition". This not only won the support of more voters but also made the ruling party more receptive [6].

With the expectation of democratization among the people, one can imagine that Singapore may one day achieve party rotation, or as predicted, several opposition parties will form a coalition government with less than half of the votes received by all parties. People often hear that democracy is not a good system because when a country is too democratic, it can bring about social instability, policy uncertainty, and sharp conflicts between different ethnic groups that cannot be compromised [7]. One important move for the opposition coalition government to continue Singapore's attractiveness to foreign investment is to continue the widely recognized development blueprint drawn by the PAP over the years, to win the trust of foreign investment in the continuity of Singapore's policies. The national reserve fund is an important asset in times of financial crisis and other crises. The PAP has been extremely cautious on the issue of reserves in the past, and no one knows the exact amount except for the President and cabinet members. Before stepping down as Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong fiercely questioned members of the opposition party in Parliament and sent a campaign message to the opposition party for the next election, asking them to make reserves one of their campaign topics [8]. If the opposition party holds power, besides careful consultation between the government and the opposition, and the attitude of the president, it is crucial to have other strong supervisory mechanisms to examine whether the use of reserves should be made.

5. Conclusion

Singapore has been almost 60 years since its founding in 1965, developing from a small third-world country with almost no natural resources to an international financial center. It is a model of small country development, which is closely related to the leadership of the PAP, which has been in power ever since. In the early days of the founding of the state, people were willing to accept Lee Kuan Yew's "paternalistic" management style, which injected a strong driving force for Singapore's unity and development through hard work. With the rapid development of the economy and the continuous growth of the middle class, citizens were eager to see an opposition party with a certain power in parliament, which could better supervise the government. In recent years, even under the suppression of some government policies, the opposition party has been increasingly defeated and

courageous in the parliamentary elections, as if it is about to achieve the country's first party rotation in the coming years. As a country deeply affected by globalization, Singapore's access to foreign investment has a significant impact on its economic development. A stable government and policies are key factors for foreign capital to take reassurance. Even in the presence of the possibility of party rotation, ensuring policy consistency is something that all political parties must discuss together. As Singapore is a city-state, there is not enough space to set up sufficient mayoral positions, in the future of political party rotation, how to ensure that the future Prime Minister receives sufficient job training before taking office is also a priority that the government should consider in advance.

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