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New Modes of Political Participation and Singapore's Nominated Members of Parliament

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Abstract

Despite growing recognition that authoritarianism can be far more durable than transition theorists previously expected, transition theory assumptions continue to constrain attempts to understand authoritarian regimes. In particular, alternative avenues of political participation to opposition political parties and electoral contests are under examined. Singapore's authoritarian regime involves a range of such innovative institutional and ideological initiatives, one of the most significant being the Nominated Members of Parliament scheme. This promotes notions of representation different from democratic parliamentary representation which are not without appeal to targeted, emerging social forces. Singapore's political economy dynamics contribute to this responsiveness by obstructing independent power bases.

Key Words: authoritarianism; representation; democratization; civil society; political regime; political institutions.

Introduction

After decades of transition theorists' preoccupation with when, how and why transformations to liberal democracy occur, the inability of this framework to anticipate or understand the enduring and dynamic nature of authoritarian rule came under critical notice.¹ Yet as some writers respond to the challenge of taking the durability of authoritarianism more seriously,² the transition theory assumption about the analytical primacy of strategic choices of incumbent elites and focus on a comparatively narrow range of political institution persists. So too does the failure to examine how inter-relationships between variables are influenced by dynamic power relations and interests associated with capitalist development. Even where analyses of institutional choices made by incumbent elites take greater account of the systemic effects of structural and historical factors,³ this does not extend to a full recognition that conflicts and alliances rooted in political economy fundamentally shape how and where state power is exercised.⁴ Consequently, while recent work from both these approaches

significantly enhances our appreciation of the factors mediating the extent and impact of manipulation of elections and political parties within authoritarian regimes, it is not much interested in, nor able to adequately explain, the expansion of political participation through creative institutional and ideological alternatives to electoral competition.

Analytical bias towards elections and parties is explained by Gandhi on the basis that ‘the institutional inventiveness of dictators is most apparent when they govern within nominally democratic institutions, such as legislatures and political parties,’⁵ while Brownlee contends that elections ‘are the autocrat’s latest fashion.’⁶ But while the incorporation of elections and parties into authoritarian strategies of cooption are undeniably important, whether this is the only fashion – or even the most important and inventive fashion – among authoritarian regimes is open to challenge. New modes of political participation are increasingly emerging as alternatives to opposition parties and electoral competition in the strategies of authoritarian regime reproduction, from the world’s most populous authoritarian regimes in China to one of the smallest in Singapore. This includes policy deliberations between authorities and citizens, deliberative budgeting procedures, as well as formal complaints and grievance mechanisms.⁷ Jayasuriya and Rodan have argued that, through these innovative institutional developments, more political participation and less contestation can go hand in hand.⁸

According to Geddes, ‘Relatively few authoritarian regimes have hit upon a formula for successful and stable inclusionary authoritarianism.’⁹ However, Singapore under the People’s Action Party (PAP) certainly qualifies – both in terms of harnessing nominally democratic institutions and in creating new institutions outside and inside Parliament. For leaders of other authoritarian regimes seeking to ensure social changes ensuing from advanced capitalist development do not translate into effective pressures for political liberalization, the PAP experience offers encouragement, if not inspiration. Yet while

Levitsky's and Way's depiction of Singapore as a 'façade electoral regime' where 'electoral institutions exist but yield no meaningful contestation for power' is descriptively accurate, it doesn't capture the institutional and ideological means by which political elites attempt to reproduce authoritarianism in Singapore have been changing, nor why this is happening.¹⁰

An especially significant part of this process is the development of non-democratic structures and notions of representation. Gandhi argues that the presence of legislatures and parties within authoritarian regimes offers 'little in the way of representation and accountability to participants and ordinary citizens.'¹¹ However, it is not the objective of the PAP to institutionalize democratic representation and accountability but viable alternatives to them – something unexplored in the general literature on authoritarian regimes. The nature and purpose of representation remains the subject of continuing debate among theorists of liberal democracy. Hobbes underlined the importance of formal authorization of representatives; Burke the substantive virtue and expert knowledge of the representative; and Jefferson the importance of participation by the representative. Arguments are now surfacing about the importance of range and competition in representation.¹² This alone should caution against being instantly dismissive of the PAP's institutional and ideological innovations in representation.

The PAP promotes ideas of representation through various new modes of political participation. However, it is through the Nominated Members of Parliament (NMP) scheme that the concept of representation has been most explicitly articulated. This initiative is not intended to harness electoral politics and opposition parties to authoritarian reproduction, but is another element of the broader project of actively fostering alternatives to such competitive politics based on democratic representation. This essay attempts to identify exactly what notions of representation are embodied in the NMP scheme, why this is happening and what the implications are for the regime. Given that the People's Alliance for Democracy in

Thailand – which has mobilized against two elected governments and supported a military coup against one – is pushing for a parliament that is 70 per cent appointed, a look at attempts to develop non-democratic notions of representation in Singapore has a wider practical and theoretical significance.

At one level, the NMP scheme gives new expression to a longstanding ideology of technocracy that previous analysts of the PAP have observed. Barr,¹³ in particular, has already provided a rich account of how ruling elite rhetoric claiming reason, objectivity and the insulation of vested interests characterize processes at all levels of political and bureaucratic decision-making in Singapore.¹⁴ Importantly, he points out that despite personal connections and privilege being intrinsic to the way that power is actually exercised, this legitimating ideology has serious traction because there is enough ‘truth in the myths of meritocracy, elite governance and pragmatism to ensure that the city-state is stable and profitable.’¹⁵ At another level, though, how the PAP is adapting and institutionalizing this ideology through new state-controlled modes of political participation is largely unexplored – especially as it involves ideas of representation. We now witness an attempt to more systematically embed the technocratic idea that politics is fundamentally a problem-solving exercise requiring logical solutions and expertise; not a struggle over normative goals.

The argument here is that the NMP scheme attempts to extend and reconcile technocratic ideas about governance, on the one hand, with a political objective of strategic inclusion of diverse and emerging social forces to pre-empt oppositional politics gaining from their concerns, on the other hand. In particular, representation is meant to structure political participation in such a way as to bypass or control intermediary organizations and, in so doing, limit the sorts of conflicts permissible in the political process. This new phase in authoritarianism, and the prospects of it achieving ruling party goals, must be understood in relation to Singapore’s dynamic political economy – not least the consolidation and extension

of state capitalism, which has helped entrench interests served by a technocratic ideology and militated against new independent economic and social bases for political opposition. The scope for political cooption, reflected in the growing appeal of the NMP scheme – especially among the professional middle class – and some tensions it generates within the PAP itself reflect this structural context.

Authoritarian Consensus and the NMP Rationale

The stirrings of a refinement to the authoritarian regime in Singapore were first in evidence by the early 1980s following a 12.9 per cent swing against the government at the 1984 general election. Within hours of the polls closing, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew raised the spectre of watering down the one-person-one-vote system to prevent a future toppling of the PAP.¹⁶ What subsequently transpired, though, was a more sophisticated strategy for limiting the threat to the PAP's stranglehold on power involving new avenues for political participation.

This has included government parliamentary committees, major government policy reviews and vision statements, and the establishment in 1985 of the Feedback Unit – renamed in 2006 REACH, or Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home.¹⁷ All are examples of state-sponsored administrative incorporation, a specific mode of political participation depicting political problems as issues of administrative delivery and efficiency in public policy. Administrative accountability may be increased in the process, but the forms of political conflict permissible within these modes is highly constrained and deliberately steered away from party politics and political competition more generally. Such fragmented political processes expressly marginalize independent, intermediary organizations – either in favour of multiple individual forms of participation or by working with state-defined and endorsed groups deemed relevant to public policy. However, new state-sponsored modes of

political participation in Singapore also extend to societal incorporation, under which various forms of non-governmental-organization participation is provided for, including by genuinely independent organizations.¹⁸

Arguably the most significant new mode of political participation in Singapore is precisely such an innovation, namely the NMP scheme. This institution hovers on the conceptual border between administrative and societal incorporation, fostering avenues for political participation by individuals in their own right, as members of state-conceived social categories and as members of independent social groups. The NMP scheme is also significant in operating within an established mode of participation – the Parliament. This highlights the complex layering that can involve new modes of political participation, sometimes superimposed on an existing mode of participation and with implications for how the latter functions.

NMPs are appointed by the President for terms of up to two-and-half years on the advice of a Special Select Committee appointed by Parliament.¹⁹ In contrast with elected MPs, they cannot vote on money bills, bills to alter the Constitution, or motions of no confidence in the government. However, they can speak on these issues and vote and speak on any other bills and motions. Even among government MPs, the scheme initially proved contentious when it was introduced as a parliamentary bill in November 1989. Indeed, in order to allay concerns within its own ranks, the government's bill required that each new Parliament would have to approve the continuation of the appointment of NMPs. Yet not only has that approval been secured without exception thereafter, but in 1997 the number of NMPs allowed for was increased from the original maximum of six to up to nine.

In explaining the need for NMPs, Prime Minister Goh sought to address what he saw as a public misconception that the PAP was closed to alternative points of view on policy. It was clear that he didn't consider the views advanced through opposition political parties as

valuable to policy deliberations. NMPs were therefore intended to be non-partisan and ‘concentrate on the substance of the debate rather than the form and rhetoric’.²⁰ The legislation altering the Constitution referred to ‘independent and non-partisan views’ in the selection criteria for NMPs.²¹ Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also expressed the hope that NMPs would help arrest the increasing support for opposition candidates.²² Significantly, though, Goh made mention not only of the value of incorporating talented people with special expertise in the professions, commerce, industry, social services, cultural domains but also of sections of society currently under-represented in Parliament, including women.

From the outset, then, the rationale for NMPs straddled a couple of arguments: one was the elitist and technocratic argument that the Parliament needed apolitical experts who could help elevate debate beyond combative engagement towards constructive public policy contributions;²³ the other was the admission, in effect, that various social interests and segments of society were under-represented and needed to be more effectively incorporated into Parliament – presumably to pre-empt their drift to oppositional politics.

By the standards of Singapore’s Parliament, the NMP bill aroused exceptional controversy. Not surprisingly, opposition parties saw the scheme as an attempt by the ruling party to further marginalize by stacking Parliament with pro-PAP stooges. Yet many PAP backbenchers were also concerned that this initiative would erode their own status as representatives, almost one-third of PAP MPs expressing opposition to the scheme when the bill was first introduced into Parliament. There was no more concerted PAP critic of the NMP proposal than Tan Cheng Bock. Tan was chairman of the Feedback Unit from 1985-89, so was a strong supporter of new modes of political participation. However, he voted against the NMP scheme in every Parliament until he retired, principally on the basis that NMPs were not accountable to any constituency. Meanwhile, his PAP colleagues soon came to accept the

scheme as part of the wider set of institutional innovations meant to protect the PAP from a transition towards a more competitive party system.

Absorbing Social Interests

Since the first two appointments of NMPs to Parliament in 1990, the scheme has expanded significantly to involve 48 different people and a total of 59 appointments, with some NMPs serving more than one term. The complexion of appointments suggests they have been intended to both supplement existing mechanisms of political co-option, particularly in regard to labour and ethnic minorities, and to provide avenues for absorbing emerging social forces among business and middle classes associated with Singapore’s advanced capitalist development. The scheme has also proven to be a dynamic one, with shifts in the emphasis of appointments reflecting changing PAP perceptions on the forces and issues warranting political accommodation or engagement.

In an attempt to capture the chief characteristics and dynamics of the various NMP appointments since the beginning of the scheme in June 1990 through to the eleventh Parliament beginning in November 2006, Table 1 identifies these on the basis of interest groups or sectors. The individuals involved can generally be depicted as principally belonging to one or other interest group or sector, but many straddle these categories. This would appear to be a strategy by the Parliamentary Select Committee responsible for the appointments to simultaneously incorporate or address different target interest groups and sectors.

Table 1: Single and Multiple Categorization of NMPs by Sector

Parliament		NTUC	Academia	Professionals	Business	Women	Societal	Ethnicity	Youth
11th	2006—	1	2 (1)	1 (1)	1 (1)	(4)	1 (1)	(2)	2 (1)
10th	2002—2006	2	2 (2)	2 (2)	6 (3)	(8)	1 (1)	(2)	2 (2)

9th	1997—2001	2	1	2 (2)	5 (1)	(1)	2	1 (3)	
8th	1992—1996	2	2	2 (3)	3 (1)	1 (1)	(2)	1 (1)	
7th	1989—1991			1	1 (1)				
	Sub-totals	7	7 (3)	8 (8)	16 (7)	1 (14)	4 (4)	2 (8)	4 (3)
	Total	7	10	16	23	15	7	10	7

Bracketed figures refer to the cross-categorizations of NMPs and are additional to un-bracketed primary categorizations.

Note also that some NMPs have been appointed in more than one Parliament so they are counted for each Parliament.

One of the striking themes has been a sustained bias towards inclusion of people from the professions and academia, with medical and legal professionals especially prominent.²⁴ Whether by single or multiple categorizations of NMPs, academics and professionals collectively account respectively for 32 per cent and 25 per cent of all NMP appointments. In addition to being appointed in their own right, academics and professionals have often been appointed as notional representatives of women, ethnic minorities or as champions of environmentalism or social welfare. In this way, the link between formal educational credentials and public policy expertise is reinforced at the same time as functional groups are politically incorporated. This evidences elitist and functional premises of the PAP's technocratic ideology.

The most heavily 'represented' single category of NMPs has involved the business sector, accounting for 31 per cent of the single and 22 per cent of the multiple categorizations. What is especially significant in these appointments is the repeated incorporation of senior past or present figures from within peak employer and business bodies.²⁵ Historically, the PAP was apprehensive about the potential the domestic private sector represented for an independent political base that might be exploited by political opponents.²⁶ Yet while state capitalism may have subsequently eroded that potential capacity,

Singapore's increasing exposure to economic globalization has brought continuing challenges for the private sector. The consolidation and expansion of government-linked-companies (GLCs) has not been without its critics from the local business community either.

The starkest use of NMP appointments in an implicit admission that existing mechanisms of political cooption are no longer sufficient involves state-controlled trade unions. Since the eighth Parliament there have been seven separate appointments of senior officials from the PAP-affiliated NTUC, including: two vice-presidents, John De Payva and Nithiah Nandan; the Director of the Industrial Relations Department, Cham Hui Fong; and Secretary for Financial Affairs, Teo Yock Ngee. The unions whose secretary-generals or executive-secretaries have comprised the seven NMPs traverse public and private sectors as well as utilities and manufacturing industries. As the PAP has more vigorously embraced economic globalization in recent decades, material inequalities have widened significantly in Singapore, testing trade union officials' ability to represent workers' interests to the government.²⁷ Increasingly exorbitant ministerial and senior civil servant salaries justified in elitist terms have only compounded resentment within the working class about rising inequalities. The generous representation of the NTUC in NMP appointments might thus be seen as a symbolic statement to counteract the idea of NTUC impotence.

Among the most fascinating appointments are those in the three categories in Table 1 of Women, Societal and Ethnicity, since these have been the areas involving embryonic civil society organizations. The number of appointments principally to incorporate 'constituents' under these categories has not been substantial, but they have been strategic. Moreover, when we take into account crossover with other appointments it becomes clear that the Select Committee has been keen to project the idea that the concerns and interests of advocacy groups can be accommodated through the NMP scheme.

The appointment of orthopedic surgeon Kanwaljit Soin to the eighth Parliament was a conspicuous attempt to encourage activists within the feminist Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) towards direct engagement within a PAP-controlled institution. Soin was a founding member and President of AWARE, which was established in 1985 as a genuinely independent organization seeking to influence public opinion and policy. Whilst its reform agenda has been moderate, its independence and preparedness to focus on issues such as domestic violence and discrimination against women in the civil service, which opposition parties had not yet seriously pursued, appeared to render it a priority target in PAP cooption strategies in the early years of the NMP scheme. The articulate Soin did much to give the NMP scheme credibility. She dominated parliamentary question time and occasionally shaped public debate, as in 1995 when she introduced a private member's bill – The Family Violence Bill. Although this was defeated, Soin reflected that:

The media took up the subject of family violence in an earnest and responsible way and gave it a great deal of coverage, and this contributed to increased general awareness of the issue...Also the government made amendments to the Women's Charter and these incorporated many of the principles and concepts of the aborted Family Violence Bill.²⁸

Soin reasoned that, 'in Singapore's achievement-oriented society,' being a surgeon 'added a little more weight to what I had to say'.²⁹ However, she not only endorsed the NMP scheme in view of the existing limits to political space, but also declared that: 'Even if a bipartisan system should eventually evolve here, there will still be a role for non-partisan NMPs to add another perspective to issues'.³⁰

Another president of AWARE, Braema Mathiapparanam, successfully applied to be an NMP after centring her AWARE-supported application around foreign domestic labour advocacy. Braema was foundation President of the Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), an organization that was officially registered in 2004 but which had informally existed since March 2003 under the title of The Working Committee 2. Its initial focus was the plight of

foreign domestic workers in Singapore, subsequently broadened to issues facing migrant workers generally. Banned from joining unions and with minimal legal or other institutionalized rights, migrant workers are vulnerable in Singapore. It is remarkable how little attention their conditions have received from opposition parties.

Appointments of women from other sectors could also be projected as further accommodation to women's issues. For instance, academic Kelyani K. Mehta has conducted research on the interrelated domains of women, families and the elderly. The incorporation into Parliament of successful business figures such as Claire Chiang and Olivia Lum also serves in a different way to broaden the scope for female participation in parliamentary debate.

Another of the few independent advocacy groups in Singapore, the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS), has also been recognized through the appointment of orthopedic surgeon Geh Min, who was not only the first female president of the NSS but also a past president of AWARE. Again, like AWARE and TWC2, while not a radical organization, NSS's independence and comparative activism from the late 1980s posed a question about the adequacy of existing structures of political cooption on issues of potential appeal to Singapore's expanding middle class. While the Societies Act barred social organizations from forging links with opposition parties, the NMP scheme appeared in part intended to obviate the desire for such a direction.

The importance of officially sponsored conceptions of ethnic identity and consciousness to the PAP's political strategies has long translated into structures of political cooption through the state and ruling party. However, for Singapore's ethnic minorities this cooption has not been without its controversy. In 1991, the independent Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) was established out of frustration with Mendaki, the officially sanctioned council representing ethnic Malays and controlled by Malay PAP MPs. Many

Malays saw Mendaki as inadequately representing the interests of the Malay community. Subsequently, among the 1994 NMP appointments was AMP Chairman Imram bin Mohamed. PAP tolerance of AMP independence is in part a function of ruling party preference for problems of socio-economic disadvantage being viewed through an ethnic rather than a class prism. But the AMP's attempts to test this tolerance have been instructive. In 2000, the AMP proposed replacing Mendaki's monopoly of official Malay representation with a 'collective leadership' comprising 'independent non-political' Malays. The AMP claimed this would be consistent with the spirit of 'active citizenship' being promoted by then Prime Minister Goh.³¹ However, the idea got short shrift, with Goh warning the AMP not to stray into the political arena and it promptly retreated.³²

The only other explicit ethnic minority appointment has been Shrinivas Rai, a lawyer and author of *The Common Heritage: A Survey of Hindi Words in Malay*, published in 1987. In 1988, Shrinivas assisted the Singapore North Indian Hindu Association in preparing materials relating to the debate over a PAP-proposed national ideology, which subsequently translated into the Shared Values legislation. However, through the appointments of Kelyani K. Mehta, who was on the Executive Committee of the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) between 1994 and 1997, as well as Braema Mathiaparanam, Kanwaljit Soin, Zulfiki bin Baharudin and Eunice Olsen, the Select Committee has been able to include ethnic Indians, Malays and Eurasians to project an inclusive attitude towards minority ethnic communities.

Finally, nothing better illustrates how changing PAP perceptions of its own political challenges affects appointments than the category loosely referred to in Table 1 as 'Youth'. This has involved two appointments in each of the last two parliaments, including the re-appointment of Eunice Olsen – television show host, volunteer youth worker, part-time musician, 2000 beauty queen and winner of the 2006 Singapore Youth Award. Born in 1977,

Olsen became in October 2006 the youngest person to enter Singapore Parliament. Also appointed to the tenth Parliament was Patricia Soh-Khim Ong, a Ph D in mechanical engineering and the recipient of the 2004 Singapore Youth Award for Science and Technology. Meanwhile, lawyer and political blogger, Siew Kum Hong, entered the eleventh Parliament in 2006 as a thirty-one year-old with the most obvious background of interest in political affairs. Each emanating from different social milieu, collectively these NMPs give expression to the rapidly changing age demographic of the Singapore electorate. At the most recent general election, around 40 per cent of eligible voters were born after Singapore became an independent nation in 1965.³³ The PAP has therefore recently begun to explore new mechanisms and approaches to more effectively guard against future erosion of its vote from so-called Generation X (born between 1965 and 1982) and Generation Y (born between 1983 and 1994).

Rapidly-developing capitalism in Singapore had generated new issues and conflicts. Amongst other things, these related to the effects of fuller exposure to globalization on different social and ethnic groups, the treatment of guest workers, the changing role and expectations of women inside and outside the workforce and concerns about the environment. The PAP did not want this to create opportunities for the development of independent civil society organizations or opposition parties.

A key factor in the ability of the PAP to attract different notional representatives of target groups and sectors has been the absence of a domestic bourgeoisie and/or middle class seeking to challenge the state's economic, social or political dominance – whether motivated by democratic ideals or more self-serving material objectives. Consolidated control over the commanding heights of the domestic economy and the lead role in offshore investment by GLCs, most notably Temasek and the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation, has largely resigned domestic companies and professionals to strategies of riding on the coat-tails

of state companies.³⁴ Meanwhile, the resources at the disposal of the PAP for punishment and reward have been bolstered so that access to jobs, contracts public housing and even superannuation is controlled through the PAP state,³⁵ further undermining the propensity and structural base for pockets of independent political space. In a theoretical sense, this point has some resonance with Brownlee's emphasis on the structural bases of coalitions sustaining authoritarian regimes,³⁶ although the argument here is that this needs to be extended beyond consideration of electoral politics.

Representation and NMPs

While Gandhi found little evidence of representation emanating from inclusive authoritarianism in her comprehensive study,³⁷ a brief examination of the most recent NMP appointment process underlines a very definite attempt to institutionalize some notion of representation within this scheme in Singapore. Importantly, the idea of representation being developed here is meant to compete with or supplant the sorts of democratic parliamentary representation that Gandhi was searching for.

The public advertisement calling for NMP nominations in 2006 identified six groups to propose candidates: business and industry; labour; the professions; social and community service organizations; tertiary institutions; and media, arts and sports groups. Each group had a coordinator to seek views and submit names on their behalf. The Speaker of Parliament, Abdullah Tarmugi, appointed the coordinators.³⁸ In making their applications, prospective NMPs are required to outline a case – in effect, through a short essay – as to their ideas and social base. A committee of eight MPs, chaired by Speaker Abdullah Tarmugi, considered and interviewed nominees before seeking President SR Nathan to approve recommendations. In the 2006 round, there were 47 applications, up significantly from the 37 for the 2004 round and well up from the 11 nominations a decade earlier in 1996.

This firming up of NMPs as representatives of a sort, rather than just as expert or non-partisan individuals contributing to public policy debate, recently prompted retired government MP Tan Cheng Bock to again condemn the scheme and claim that all his original fears had been realized. On 2 December 2006, he wrote an article for *The Straits Times* entitled ‘Danger of sectarian representation’, elaborating on his opposition and arguing that if elected MPs are doing their job there is no need for NMPs. Implicit in Tan’s critique is the idea that PAP backbenchers were being further marginalized, although the argument can be extended. Indeed, the NMP scheme could be seen, in effect, as adding a new flank to the PAP – both by bringing into Parliament some members of the state capitalist and establishment network and more generally as a source to the government of new ideas. The party and not just Parliament has been in transformation. Yet Tan was now a lone government voice of public dissent on the NMP scheme.

If the NMP scheme is now embedded and beyond serious challenge, what form of representation then does it involve and what are the implications of this for the political regime’s durability? The first matter to pursue here is whether NMPs see themselves as representatives. Towards answering this question interviews were conducted with NMPs from the last two parliaments. The responses were mixed, suggesting a variety of interpretations of their roles and the expectations of them. By way of reinforcement of the discussion immediately above, many of the respondents felt that the Select Committee was interested in establishing the extent and nature of their links within a functional constituency. Thio Li-Ann observed, for example, that ‘they were clearly sounding people out as de facto representatives or at least people who could be projected as such’.³⁹ However, to the extent that the NMPs regard themselves as representatives this varies between notions of representing people, interests and ideas.

Among those respondents to see themselves most clearly and unambiguously in a representative role were Edwin Khew and Jessie Phua. The former unequivocally saw himself representing local business and had a clear idea of his constituents – members of the manufacturing and business community. The Singapore Manufacturers' Federation (SMF) (of which Khew is President) and the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) jointly proposed his application. According to Khew, people within the SMF in particular were of the view that 'the interests of manufacturing weren't well represented in Parliament'.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the problem appeared to be attributed in part to the fact that not since Robert Chua, an NMP in the eighth Parliament who was chairman of the Singapore Manufacturers' Association, as it was then known, had there been any direct representation of the manufacturing sector. This suggests that within this sector at least, NMP appointments are viewed as strategic.

Consistent with Khew's conception of himself representing a constituency, he has established groups of major business leaders within the SMF and the SBF who chair various committees to receive and review input from the business community. These groups are conversant with the routine of parliamentary procedures and schedules, and thus ensure recommended questions are supplied two weeks before any parliamentary sitting. There is also a screening process by small groups. In Parliament, Khew has thus served as a conduit for concerns within the local business community. He has also been a particularly vigorous advocate of Singapore as hub for environmentally sustainable technologies and contributor to most major debates.

Phua also became an NMP against a background of heavy involvement in established organizations, although in her case grassroots sporting bodies. She sees herself as representing the sporting fraternity and advancing the opportunities and social benefits of sport – especially for youth.⁴¹ The sporting and business fraternities were the two main supporters in her eight nomination letters to the Select Committee. Her essay submitted to the

Committee was entitled 'The Average Woman of Singapore', emphasizing that she would be the only non-university graduate should she be appointed. In contrast with Khew, though, Phua indicated that she did not engage in any structured process for ascertaining the concerns and interests of the sporting fraternity but relied instead on a wealth of direct experience with those involved in sport. Thus far in Parliament, Phua has been closely disciplined to raising issues related to sport. However, she did speak on the controversial issue of ministerial salaries during that debate, which she explained many people had approached her about.⁴²

A theme evident in other responses was a claim not so much to representing a clearly defined constituency with whom some sort of structured or even unstructured engagement occurred, as a claim to be representing views and interests neglected by the political parties. Geh Min, for example, did not hesitate to assert that she represents 'environmental issues and interests' and other issues neglected by the parties.⁴³ Technically, the Singapore Medical Association nominated Geh, but the nominees were fellow medical professionals Jennifer Lee and Kanwaljit Soin, friends with whom she had previously worked, among other things, on challenging female quotas for medical school entry. However, it was environmentalism that Geh championed in her application and during her term in Parliament she raised such issues as the illegal wildlife trade and animal rights. Although she was President of the NSS, she explained that she regularly received solicited and unsolicited feedback from members and her own network but there was no routine process of consultation with groups or individuals. For Geh, the inability to seriously claim representation of identifiable constituents brought advantages and disadvantages. 'NMPs don't have any ground to stand on if they take a confrontational stance' observed Geh, since they weren't voted by an electorate.⁴⁴ By the same token: 'The luxury of being an NMP is bringing up issues that are relevant but won't win many votes, such as issues of interest to the NSS, which enjoys niche support'.⁴⁵

Goh Chong Chia, a professional architect who was also an NMP in the ninth Parliament, echoed this perspective. He had been nominated by a professional body and saw himself 'representing views not readily expressed in Parliament by either the PAP or the opposition,' emphasizing how 'NMPs are not beholden to anyone and are not seeking re-election from a constituency, they are at liberty to pursue those interests'.⁴⁶ Much like Geh, Goh saw himself as having experiences and networks that could not be conceived of as constituencies, but which availed him of perspectives and information useful to Parliament. He was a past President of the Singapore Institute of Architects, also chairman at the time of the Physical Development Feedback Group working on housing, transport and environmental issues and had close links with the Handicapped Society, whose concerns about urban design were a matter of professional interest to Goh. All of this meant he had a network of contacts and engagement around issues related to his application to enter Parliament, but nothing systematic in terms of consultation with parties potentially affected by the ideas being advanced in Parliament. While his contributions to Parliament generally focussed on the issues signalled in his application, he did not see himself as limited to those and acted accordingly.

Two NMPs in the eleventh Parliament located in Table 1 under 'Youth', Siew Kum Hong and Eunice Olsen, have even less structured avenues for consulting any supposed constituents. Yet Siew sees himself 'representing a specific segment of the population – young, late 20s, English-educated, western in outlook, fairly liberal, Internet savvy'.⁴⁷ Siew thinks the select Committee saw him 'representing the internet bloggers, the Mr Brown set'.⁴⁸ In his letter of application he did not purport to represent anyone, but he signalled helping people on low incomes, consumer rights, animal welfare, intellectual property and privacy as the issues of most concern to him. Yet in Parliament he has spoken on a wide range of issues, gaining most notoriety for introducing a petition with 2,341 signatures to repeal Penal Code

377A to decriminalize homosexuality. This was something that gay groups had lobbied him on. Olsen concedes that technically she cannot represent anybody but she nevertheless ‘would like to represent the thoughts of the youth’ in particular. She maintains that her role in the media and her music affords informal opportunities to gauge youth issues.⁴⁹ In practice, she has spoken on a surprisingly diverse range of topics, including on GLC accountability.

Interestingly, both Siew and Olsen were invited to apply to become NMPs by government ministers, underlining the importance the government attaches to this new category of appointments. Such initiatives also resonate with an observation by another former NMP that ‘NMPs are for the government’s use. They do the feedback for you.’⁵⁰

Academic lawyer Thio Li-Ann provided one of the clearest articulations from an NMP about the distinctiveness of the role as ‘representative’. According to her, NMPs provide ‘indirect representation’ and she sees herself as representing issues rather than people as constituents. Invited by the President of the National University of Singapore to be nominated, the issues she expressly came to Parliament to advance were constitutional matters and human rights. Her application essay, entitled ‘Why I’m Willing to Eat My Words’, discussed constitutional matters in general and the Elected Presidency in particular. However, as with some other NMPs, Thio did not think she should be confined to the areas identified in her application and could exercise ‘a roving commission’.⁵¹ Thio made absolutely no claim to consulting anyone on the matters raised in Parliament and she has been true to her claims in both pursuing human rights issues and branching out to other topics. Indeed, although she has pursued issues about Singapore’s international treaty obligations, changes to the Constitutional Entrenchment Provision and detentions under the Internal Security Act, she has gained most media attention from her opposition to the proposed decriminalization of homosexuality initiated by fellow NMP, Siew.

This admittedly limited sample of NMP respondents on the extent and nature of their roles as representatives nevertheless highlights two points. First, there is no uniform conception among them on whether they see themselves as representative or, if they do, how. Arguably the ambiguity of the scheme invites and promotes this variation. Second, few of the respondents have at their disposal developed structures of feedback and consultation to facilitate engagement with large numbers of citizens. Yet through the Select Committee it is clear that the PAP has been fostering the idea of NMPs as representatives, albeit in a functional sense rather than in terms of accountability to citizens. What appears to matter to the government is that NMPs conform in some way with those elements emphasized in Burke's account of representatives: substantive virtue and expert knowledge. That expert knowledge, though, may increasingly extend beyond technical expertise to include a good feel for views and aspirations among sections of the population not adequately incorporated into the PAP state through other means.

Making a Difference? What Sort?

After 18 years, only one piece of legislation initiated by an NMP has been approved in Parliament – Walter Woon's Maintenance of Parents Bill in 1994 – and a mere handful of other pieces of legislation have been NMP-initiated. As we have seen above, former NMP Kanwaljit Soin maintains that the substantive content of her failed legislation nevertheless found partial expression in other reforms taken up by the government. In interviews, a few NMPs made similar though less substantial claims to indirect public policy influence, such as improvements to public transport provisions for the disabled and the establishment of a Clean Energy Programme Office. Overall, though, the record of tangible policy impact is unimpressive. Nevertheless, the numbers of people seeking appointments or accepting nominations for appointment rises. Why?

Soin's views on the scheme offering at least some opportunity for greater political engagement without the risks associated with formal political opposition may well be shared by other NMPs. However, a recurring theme from NMP interviews was the assertion that the scheme enabled issues to be raised that are not taken up with any seriousness, if at all, by political parties. Included here are environmentalism, feminism, gay rights, treatment of foreign workers, urban design and constitutional reform issues. These might be described as middle class or socially progressive issues, which neither the ruling party nor the opposition parties can easily embrace without risk of alienating the socially conservative Chinese-speaking working class, or so-called 'HDB Heartlanders.' So while the political timidity of the middle class is in itself a constraint, the building of alliances with the emerging middle class forces around some of the issues important to them has not been a priority for opposition parties. Consequently, these issues have been finding expression through the NMP scheme. Ironically, the technocratic approach to politics fostered by the PAP through the NMP scheme affords these issues legitimacy not readily available through the existing parties – even if that legitimacy hasn't translated into significant policy reform.

The gulf between some of the more socially progressive NMPs and the opposition parties was poignantly highlighted in the debate over the Penal Code (Amendment) Bill section 377A, initiated by NMP Siew Kum Hong in his attempt to have homosexuality decriminalized. Although the Singapore Progressive Party leader Chiam See Tong spoke briefly on the Bill, he made no comment whatsoever about 377A. Meanwhile, Workers' Party leader, Low Thia Kiang, failed to speak at all on the Bill. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted Low's failure to enter the debate, using it to bolster his argument that 'Chinese-speaking Singaporeans are not strongly engaged, either for removing section 377A or against removing section 377A'.⁵² Indeed, arguably this particular episode revealed just how useful the NMP scheme can be for the PAP, providing a space for such debate without ever having

to seriously entertain real change. It serves the PAP well that these issues are not embraced by the opposition, lest its failure to do likewise cost it middle class support.

To be sure, the difficulty of alliances between the expanding middle class and opposition parties do not rest principally on the above differences. Material redistribution to address social inequalities have historically been a key plank in the social democratic alliances across working and middle classes in other countries but the latter has shown little or no enthusiasm in Singapore for such an agenda. Crucially, the scope for this developing is not aided by the fragmentation and compartmentalization of political debate encouraged by the NMP scheme. First, the scheme promotes the idea of politics as a set of public policy choices, which obscures the fundamentally normative nature of politics – the recognition of which is more conducive to an acceptance of the need to develop alliances rather than rely solely on the logical power of argument to prevail. Second, through the NMP scheme the issues to be represented are not only, in effect, shaped by the Select Committee, but individuals and social organizations are drawn into a process of atomization as they each work away on their respective, specific agendas. For this reason, former NMP Goh Chong Chia's hope that the scheme will prove 'a transitional institution, not an alternative to a civil society' appears optimistic.⁵³ Indeed, it is precisely the contribution of the NMP scheme in discouraging the formation of alliances between independent organizations in joint political action – outside PAP controlled institutions – that renders it most significant to the project of authoritarian renewal.

Conclusion

While many observers emphasize the absence of democratic transition in Singapore to highlight political continuity, there has been significant change to the regime to accommodate new social forces and contain tensions associated with the city-state's particular path of

capitalist development. In this phase of authoritarianism, political participation is of heightened importance to the process by which contestation is obstructed. This includes new structures and notions of representation meant to limit politics to exercises in problem solving governance rather than more explicit debate and challenge over normative policy choices.

Importantly, the NMP scheme through which the PAP has most explicitly sought to develop new forms of representation to stymie political competition has met with a degree of acceptance – especially among business and professional classes generally denied opportunities for collective, independent political space. This must be understood in its political economy context, which is pivotal to the ‘formula for successful and stable inclusionary authoritarianism’ which Geddes observes as so generally elusive.⁵⁴ Consolidating state capitalism in Singapore has limited the scope for independent bases of power and shored up the resources of the PAP state and citizens’ direct and indirect dependence on it. Meanwhile, the technocratic worldviews and assumptions of an ever-more powerful and increasingly homogenous class of politico-bureaucratic elites not only permeate and penetrate deep into existing institutions, but now also drive the direction of new ones.

Significantly, although the state capitalist trajectory of Singapore under the PAP is not a general feature of authoritarian rule, there are some points of intersection with the political economies of other countries in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. This includes the legacy of Western support for repressive governments to shore up capitalism during the Cold War. This has meant that civil societies have often had to be built from low bases and in a context of late industrialization under globalized capitalism that has not been conducive to strong, independent trade unions linked to reformist political parties. Much contemporary middle class political activism is expressed, therefore, through NGOs rather than via broader social movements involving labour/middle class coalitions and is potentially vulnerable to other institutional alternatives, as in Singapore. Crucially, it is not just the choices of incumbent

authoritarian elites that are shaped by political economy relationships, but the choices and modes of political opposition.

Endnotes

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¹ Marina Ottaway, Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism, Washington D.C., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003; Thomas Carothers 'The End of the Transition Paradigm', Journal of Democracy, 13:1 (2002), pp. 17-33; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', Journal of Democracy, 13:2 (2002), pp. 51-65; Andreas Schedler (ed.), Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition, Boulder, Colorado, Lynne Rienner, 2006.

² Jennifer Gandhi, Political Institutions under Dictatorship, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008; Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, 'Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats,' Comparative Political Studies, 40:11, 2007, pp. 1279-1301; Barbara Geddes, 'Stages of Development in Authoritarian Regimes' in Vladimir Tismaneanu, Mac Morjé Howard and Rudra Sil (eds), World Order after Leninism, Seattle, Washington University Press, 2006, pp. 149-70.

³ Jason Brownlee, Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

⁴ For theoretical approaches in this vein, but which have not yet been applied to new modes of political participation, see Stephen J. King, 'Sustaining Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa,' Political Science Quarterly, 122:3, 2007, pp. 433-60 and Eva Bellin, 'Contingent Democrats: Industrialists, Labor, and Democratization in Late-Developing Countries', World Politics, 52:1, 2000, pp. 175-205.

⁵ Gandhi, Political Institutions under Dictatorship, p. 1.

⁶ Brownlee, Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization, p. 42.

⁷ Literature on new forms of political participation is rapidly expanding, although much of it reflects the transition theory emphasis on, and optimism about, possible openings for democracy these initiatives might in time unleash. See, for example, Ethan J. Leib and Baogang He (eds), The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; Jamie P. Horsley, 'Public Participation and the Democratization of Chinese Governance' in Yang Zhong and Shiping Hua (eds), Political Civilization and Modernization: The Political Context of China's Reform, Singapore, World Scientific Press, 2006, pp. 207-50; Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman (eds), Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2007.

⁸ Kanishka Jayasuriya and Garry Rodan, 'Beyond Hybrid Regimes: More Participation, Less Contestation in Southeast Asia,' Democratization, 14:5, 2007, pp. 773-94.

⁹ Geddes, 'Stages of Development in Authoritarian Regimes,' p. 161.

¹⁰ Levitsky and Way, 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', p. 54.

¹¹ Gandhi, Political Institutions under Dictatorship, p. xxiv.

¹² See Mark B. Brown, 'Survey Article: Citizen Panels and the Concept of Representation', The Journal of Political Philosophy, 14: 2 (2006), pp. 203-25; David Runciman, 'The

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¹⁴ For an account of the changes within the PAP during this process, see Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne, Singapore Politics Under the People's Action Party, London, Routledge, 2002.

¹⁵ Barr, 'Beyond Technocracy', p. 14. Also see Ross Worthington, Governance in Singapore, London, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

¹⁶ The Straits Times, 'PM replies to voters' signals', 24 December, (1984) p. 1.

¹⁷ Garry Rodan and Kanishka Jayasuriya, 'The Technocratic Politics of Administrative Participation: Case Studies of Singapore and Vietnam', Democratization, 14:5 (2007), pp. 795-815.

¹⁸ Jayasuriya and Rodan, 'Beyond Hybrid Regimes'.

¹⁹ Terms can be shorter depending on when general elections are held. For example, the 2004 appointments served for only one-and-a-half years. Terms are also potentially renewable.

²⁰ Goh Chok Tong, Parliamentary Debates, Singapore, 54:8, 29 November (1989), column 705.

²¹ As quoted in Ho Khai Leong, The Politics of Policy-Making in Singapore, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 90.

²² The Straits Times Weekly Overseas Edition, 'Nothing to lose from having Nominated MPs, Says GG Lee', 9 December, (1989) p. 6.

²³ In this respect, there is a parallel with the notionally competitive electoral institution of the Elected President introduced in 1991. This involves stringent eligibility criteria, couched in terms of requisite capacities and talent. See Kevin Tan and Lam Peng Er (eds), Managing Political Change in Singapore: The Elected Presidency, London, Routledge, 1997.

²⁴ Medical appointments include cardiologist and physician Maurice Choo, haematologist Toh Keng Kiat and qualified surgeons Tan Sze Wee and Loo Choon Yong, the former also being the current official spokesperson and council member for the Singapore Medical Association and the latter the executive chairman and co-founder of the Raffles Medical Group, a private healthcare provider. Legal professionals include practising lawyers Chandra Mohan and Shriniwas Rai as well as academic lawyers Walter Woon, Simon Tay, Thio Li-Ann and Fang Ai Lian.

²⁵ Including: Lawrence Leow (President of the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises); Stephen Lee (a past president of the Singapore National Employers' Federation); Tay Beng Chuan (President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry between 1998-2001); Chuang Shaw Peng (who has chaired the Property Committee of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry); Robert Chua and Edwin Khew, respectively past and current presidents of the Singapore Manufacturers' Federation; and Claire Chiang (who has chaired the Economic Committee of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry).

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- ²⁶ Garry Rodan, The Political Economy of Singapore's Industrialization, London, Macmillan, 1989, p. 98; Carl Trocki, Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control, London, Routledge, 2005; Sikko Visscher, The Business and Politics of Ethnicity: A History of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Singapore, Singapore University Press, 2007.
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- ²⁸ Kanwaljit Soin, 'Woman Doctor in the House', Singapore Medical Journal, 40:4 (1999), cited on 30 April 2008 at <http://www.sma.org.sg/smj/4004/articles/4004ia5part2.html>
- ²⁹ Soin, 'Woman Doctor in the House'.
- ³⁰ Soin, 'Woman Doctor in the House'.
- ³¹ Charlotte Venudran, 'Goh has come down hard on us', New Straits Times, 8 November, (2000), p. 15.
- ³² Ahmad Osman, 'AMP drops idea for separate leaders', Straits Times Weekly, 23 December (2000), p. 2.
- ³³ Seth Mydans, 'Singapore's young challengers beg to differ', International Herald Tribune, 6 May (2006).
- ³⁴ Garry Rodan, 'Singapore: Globalisation, the State, and Politics', in Garry Rodan, Kevin Hewison and Richard Robison (eds) The Political Economy of South-East Asia: Markets, power and contestation, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, pp. 137-169; Worthington, Governance in Singapore.
- ³⁵ Garry Rodan, 'The Coming Challenge to Singapore Inc.', Far Eastern Economic Review, December, 2004, pp.51-4;
- ³⁶ Brownlee, Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization.
- ³⁷ Gandhi, Political Institutions under Dictatorship.
- ³⁸ The Singapore Business Federation chairman, Stephen Lee, was the coordinator for the business and industry group. National Arts Council chairman Edmund Cheng coordinated the media, arts and sports group, while National Council of Social Services chief executive officer Benedict Cheong coordinated the social and community service organizations.
- ³⁹ Thio Li-Ann, interview, Singapore, 16 May, 2006.
- ⁴⁰ Edwin Khew, interview, Singapore, 26 July, 2007.
- ⁴¹ Jessie Phua, interview, Singapore, 17 May, 2007.
- ⁴² Phua, interview.
- ⁴³ Geh Min, interview, Singapore, 6 November 2006.
- ⁴⁴ Geh, interview.
- ⁴⁵ Geh, interview.
- ⁴⁶ Goh Chong Chia, interview, Singapore, 6 November 2006.
- ⁴⁷ Siew Kum Hong, interview, Singapore, 17 May 2007.

⁴⁸ Mr Brown is a popular blog site and pseudonym of Lee Kin Mun, who provides satirical social and political commentaries on Singapore. See <http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/>

⁴⁹ Eunice Olsen, interview Singapore, 14 May, 2007.

⁵⁰ Interview, Singapore 7 November 2007.

⁵¹ Thio Li-Ann, interview, Singapore, 16 May, 2007.

⁵² Lee Hsien Loong, Parliamentary Debates, Singapore, 83:15, 10 December (2007).

⁵³ Goh, interview.

⁵⁴ Geddes, 'Stages of Development in Authoritarian Regimes,' p. 161.