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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449050500348659>

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### Citation

TAN, Eugene K. B. Multiracialism Engineered: The Limits of Electoral and Spatial Integration in Singapore. (2005). *Ethnopolitics*. 4, (4), 413-428. Research Collection School Of Law.

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# Multiracialism Engineered: The Limits of Electoral and Spatial Integration in Singapore

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines Singapore's innovations in electoral and spatial integration. In examining the Group Representation Constituency and the Ethnic Integration Policy, a critique is made of the official discourse that multiracialism is internalized and entrenched in Singapore's political psyche and electoral process. While the electoral and spatial integration policies are driven by the objective of enhancing multiracialism, their actual workings do not adequately advance the development of norms and values that would be truly supportive of the need for a multiracial legislature and an abiding commitment to multiracialism. The layering of the electoral system with other political objectives, such as administrative decentralization and ensuring the continued dominance of the ruling party, has undermined the effectiveness of electoral and spatial integration.

Ethnic conflicts continue to afflict many postcolonial societies. Too often the causes of these debilitating conflicts have been attributed to the legacy of colonial policies that ruled over but divided people. Yet, on gaining independence, postcolonial societies had the option to chart their destinies in an inclusive approach to nation-building. Singapore has enjoyed relative ethnic harmony since its independence in 1965 and has been cited as a model for other postcolonial societies to emulate. 'Racial and religious harmony' is enshrined as one of Singapore's five Shared Values, a putative national ideology,<sup>1</sup> and is a cornerstone of Singapore's impressive transformation to a newly industrializing economy. Singapore's policy of 'multiracialism', in which no race is privileged or disadvantaged by state laws, institutions and policies, has resulted in substantive constitutional and institutional engineering in the late 1980s to ensure the sustainability of ethnic stability and harmony in Singapore society.<sup>2</sup> An island city-state in Southeast Asia, Singapore's 3.4 million population comprises 76.8% Chinese, 13.8% Malay (the indigenous people), 7.9% Indian, and 1.4% 'Others'.<sup>3</sup> Despite constituting about 15% of Singapore's population, geopolitics and history have given the Malay community (almost all of whom are Muslims) a significant influence that is disproportionate to their size.<sup>4</sup>

This article examines Singapore's legal and institutional endeavours at electoral and spatial integration. It critiques the official and popular understanding that the ethos of

multiracialism is internalized and entrenched in Singapore's political psyche and electoral process. First, an overview is presented of electoral integration and Singapore's electoral system. The article then examines electoral and spatial integration as represented by the Group Representation Constituencies and the Ethnic Integration Policy, respectively. The third part examines the paradoxical weakening of the multiracialism ethos and highlights possible remedies for the shortcomings. The article argues that the layering of the electoral system with other political objectives, such as administrative decentralization and the ruling party's quest for continued dominance, has weakened institutional efforts towards electoral and spatial integration. It also argues that institutional designers must be alive to unintended consequences flowing from the actual workings, the lived realities of well intentioned integrationist policies that ultimately define, articulate and affect ethnic politics.

### **An Overview of Electoral Integration and the Singapore Electoral System**

As part of the global spread of democratization, electoral system reforms and innovation play starring roles in the rehabilitation and development of post-conflict societies. Electoral systems "represent, perhaps, the most powerful instrument available for institutional engineering, with far reaching consequences for party systems, the composition of legislatures, and the durability of democratic arrangements" (Norris, 2004, p. 209). The literature has evolved around Lijphart's (1977; 2004) seminal theory of consociation (power sharing), the suitability of majoritarian *vis-à-vis* proportional representation systems, and how electoral systems can generate mass support for the political system, especially from minorities (Norris, 2004, pp. 209–229). Not surprisingly, greater care is now given to the pivotal role of elections and political institutions in divided societies in developing a stable and inclusive political process of representation (e.g. Hicken & Kasuya, 2003; Wolff, 2003; Reynolds, 2002; Reilly, 2001).

Proponents of electoral integration champion an electoral system that generates inducements for moderate behaviour and cross-cutting loyalties (Horowitz 1985; 2003). To secure as many votes as possible to win, politicians need to reach out and establish a broad-based appeal that transcends ethnic lines. Thus, the policy prescription is to 'engineer' a system of healthy political competition that facilitates the development of cross-cutting cleavages and encourages inter-ethnic cooperation, while making racial chauvinism and extremism politically counterproductive. This approach lends critical support to and emphasizes the virtues of moderation, racial non-partisanship, and the development of inter-ethnic trust and cooperation.

Singapore is a one-party-dominant state; its parliamentary elections system is modelled on the British electoral plurality system but with significant modifications (Rieger, 2001; Ooi, 1998). The People's Action Party (PAP) has won, with handsome margins, all nine post-independence general elections. Between 1968 and 1981 it was the only party in the unicameral parliament. Since then the PAP has consistently garnered at least 95% of all parliamentary seats. As Table 1 shows, the PAP has a disproportionate share of parliamentary seats when compared with its share of popular votes.<sup>5</sup> Despite a large middle-class and growing affluence, weakening electoral competition in Singapore suggests that the PAP's political hegemony will persist into the foreseeable future. This political dominance arises from a variety of factors, including the impoverishment of the opposition, the opposition's inability to convince the electorate that it can form a viable political alternative, and the configuration of the political system (Kadir, 2004; Hussin, 2003;

**Table 1.** PAP's electoral performance, 1968–2001

Date of general election	Total no. of parliamentary seats	Total no. of parliamentary seats contested by PAP only	PAP's % share of total valid votes cast	PAP's share of parliamentary seats
13 Apr 1968	58	51 (87.9%)	86.7	58 (100%)
2 Sep 1972	65	8 (12.3)	70.4	65 (100)
23 Dec 1976	69	16 (23.2)	74.1	69 (100)
23 Dec 1980	75	37 (49.3)	77.7	75 (100)
22 Dec 1984	79	30 (39.8)	64.8	77 (97.5)
3 Sep 1988	81	11 (13.6)	63.2	80 (98.8)
31 Aug 1991	81	41 (50.6)	61.0	77 (95.1)
2 Jan 1997	83	47 (56.6)	65.0	81 (97.6)
3 Nov 2001	84	55 (64.7)	75.3	82 (97.6)

*Source:* Author's compilation based on information available at the website of Singapore's Elections Department and Rieger (2001).

Mauzy & Milne, 2002; Jesudason, 1999; Chan, 1976b). Although voting is compulsory, the majority of eligible voters did not need to vote in the past three general elections since between half and almost two-thirds of all parliamentary seats were only contested by the PAP. Parliamentary elections are one-sided and effectively a limited referendum of sorts on the PAP's performance and legitimacy (Mauzy, 2002; Rodan, 1996). Although there is no foul play, the PAP is "adept at changing the electoral rules to its advantage" in the electoral process (Hicken, 2004, p. 459; see also Kluver, 2004). The PAP government has rejected repeated calls for the establishment of an independent electoral commission.<sup>6</sup>

#### *An Apparent Non-racial Electoral Regime*

Political parties organized along racial lines are almost non-existent in Singapore's political landscape.<sup>7</sup> This legacy, coupled with legislation protecting national security and public order, provides a strong measure of political stability, since the emotive and divisive issues of race, religion and language are excluded from political contestation and prohibited during electoral campaigning.<sup>8</sup> This fortuitous state of affairs has persisted since the mid-1950s when the British colonial authorities first encouraged limited indigenous political participation in preparation for Singapore's self-government. The PAP has sustained the putative non-racial electoral regime by eschewing racial politics.<sup>9</sup> The PAP's broad-based appeal and effective governance enables it to garner political legitimacy and electoral support across the racial, socioeconomic and political strata (Khong, 1995). Notwithstanding this avowed non-racial approach, racial issues do take on a salient importance in the structuring of the electoral system, the parties' electioneering strategy, and the electorate's voting behaviour.

#### **The Group Representation Constituency Innovation**

Preceding the slew of constitutional engineering from the mid-1980s were the PAP's less than impressive electoral victories in the 1984 and 1988 general elections. In both

elections the PAP not only failed to win every seat but also garnered slightly less than two-thirds of the total valid votes cast, a poor outcome by the PAP's high standards. To arrest this significant weakening of electoral popularity, the PAP introduced the Nominated Member of Parliament and Non-Constituency Member of Parliament schemes. Rather than deepening democratic tendencies, these innovations superficially addressed the electorate's desire for alternative voices in parliament without liberalizing the political system. They also indirectly stifled the opposition. It was in this context that the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) scheme was introduced. First implemented in the 1988 general elections, the GRC electoral system is Singapore's *sui generis* attempt at sustaining multiracialism through electoral integration. Unsurprisingly, the GRC scheme is regarded as a shrewd attempt to stem the PAP's electoral decline and perpetuate its electoral dominance (Thio, 2002b; Rieger, 2001, p. 242; Li & Elklit, 1999).

The GRC was created "to ensure the representation in Parliament of Members from the Malay, Indian and other minority communities" (Article 39A(1), Singapore Constitution, 1999 Revised Edition). The PAP government argued that the GRC system ensured that the minority races' needs, concerns and views were not ignored or neglected in an ethnically Chinese-dominant Singapore.<sup>10</sup> Further, the PAP government claimed that the electorate, especially the young voters, had a tendency to vote along racial lines, "preferring candidates who were best suited to their own needs without being sufficiently aware of the need to return a racially balanced slate of candidates."<sup>11</sup> This supposed racial bias in the electoral process would particularly threaten the representation of the ethnic Malay community, the most significant minority race community. The then First Deputy Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, explained:

It is make-belief to pretend that race and language do not affect voter preferences . . . Paradoxical as it may seem, to ensure that multi-racialism succeeds in Singapore, we have to openly recognize that race does play a part in politics . . . Loyalty to one's own community, to race, to one's religion and language is stronger than loyalty to the nation, particularly if that nation is a new one and has many races . . . [I]t is wise of us to strengthen the political framework before it is weakened by disillusionment, despondency and despair when one community finds itself thrown out of Parliament by the electoral system. (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 1988a)

Under the GRC scheme, voters elect on a 'one person, one vote' basis a team of MPs rather than an individual MP in an enlarged electoral district. A political party contesting in a GRC has to field a multi-member team of which at least one member must be from a designated minority race. To ensure adequate Malay parliamentary representation, three-fifths of the total number of GRCs are designated constituencies where at least one of the candidates in every group shall be a person belonging to the Malay community.<sup>12</sup>

The GRC concept did not start off with electoral integration as its core objective when it was first raised publicly in January 1987. Once popularly known as the 'Team MPs scheme', the concept was initially geared towards administrative and quasi-political decentralization, in which town councils led by their elected MPs were responsible for the daily running of the public housing estates and estate improvement, important roles which were previously handled by the government's housing agency, the Housing and

Development Board (HDB). By giving their votes an intimate link to the well-being and market value of their public housing estates, the Team MPs' proposal was intended to concentrate the electorate's minds, when voting, on which party would best meet their material concerns. Since the PAP had always staked its claim to fielding the best candidates, the Team MPs concept was expected to stem the PAP's declining electoral support.

However, the original rationale for the 'Team MPs' idea was not well received by the public. This "forced the PAP government to subsequently reveal its real, though unstated, goal" of entrenching multiracialism in the legislative process (Quah, 2001, pp. 299–300). Given the virtues of the GRC, it is highly unlikely that the PAP government needed to conceal the scheme's real objective. Rather, the poor reception to the Team MPs concept necessitated a radically different tack in order to make it palatable to the electorate, who were by then increasingly dissatisfied with the PAP and its lack of sensitivity to the electorate. The objective of electoral integration was subsequently and strategically tagged on about a year later.

In January 1988, at the introduction of the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) proposal, First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong disclosed that Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and he had first discussed in July 1982 the need to secure a multiracial parliament. The voting trend, if it continued, would result in the Malays being under-represented in parliament. Prime Minister Lee had proposed a 'twin constituencies' solution wherein two single-member constituencies would be 'twinned' and where one of the two candidates must be Malay. This did not find support among the Malay MPs because of their concern that a minority race candidate would be perceived to have 'leaned on' a Chinese candidate to win office. However, after suffering significant electoral setbacks in the 1984 elections, the minority PAP MPs agreed to the GRC proposal to ensure that minority race candidates, especially first-time Malay candidates, would be elected in future elections in fair numbers. Given the significance of the proposed amendments, the GRC proposal was referred to a Select Committee. Based on the public submissions, the Select Committee found widespread support for the GRC concept, especially from the minority communities.<sup>13</sup> At the third reading of the Bill First Deputy Prime Minister Goh remarked:

[Our Team MP concept] is benevolent. The constitutional change is initiated by the majority to directly benefit the minority communities without any direct benefit to itself. . . On its own, [the GRC] will not ensure success in building up or strengthening our multi-racial society. It is a formal institutional arrangement. For us to succeed, we must have the same spirit as the Swiss to search for consensus, to work through informal as much as formal arrangements, to make every citizen, whichever community he belongs to, feel that he is a Singaporean. (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 1988b)

Given this ostensible bias in favour of the minorities, parliament was careful to explicitly provide for Article 39A(3) of the Constitution, which states that laws relating to the GRC scheme are valid, despite being inconsistent with the equal protection clause under Article 12,<sup>14</sup> or must be considered a 'differentiating measure' under Article 68.<sup>15</sup>

Under Singapore's rigid, state-assigned Chinese/Malay/Indian/Others (CMIO) racial classification, every Singaporean is racially designated at birth based on his or her patrilineality (racial self-definition is not permitted). This definitive racial identity is used in a variety of purposes, including the eligibility choice of mother tongue instruction in

schools, ethnic quotas under public housing, and opportunities within military service. Interestingly, however, the racial classification on a candidate's official identity documents (the birth certificate and the identity card) is not conclusive for the purposes of the GRC scheme. Under the Parliamentary Election Act's (PEA) section 27, the Presidential Council of Minority Rights would establish the Malay Community Committee, and the Indian and Other Minority Communities Committee at every election to determine whether a minority candidate in a GRC team is indeed Malay or Indian, or other racial minority. Section 27A(8) of the PEA enlarges the pool of eligible minority candidates: a person belonging to the Malay community is "any person, whether of the Malay race or otherwise, who considers himself to be a member of the Malay community and who is generally accepted as a member of the Malay community by that community." Similar provisions are prescribed for persons of Indian origin, and any other minority community. Thus, mixed-parentage candidates or even 'classified' ethnic Chinese can probably compete as a minority race GRC candidate if they meet the two-stage eligibility requirement of appropriate self-definition/self-identification and the relevant community's acceptance of the candidate's self-definition. The Committees' decisions are final and shall not be appealed against or called into question in any court.

#### *GRC Idealism: Operational Realities, Electoral Politics and Strategic Expediency*

The GRC has significantly transformed Singapore's electoral landscape. In its idealized conception the political parties competing in a GRC have to portray a multiracial orientation that appeals to the ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese alike in order to secure as many votes as possible. Taking an overtly racial line would risk alienating segments of the electorate. While the GRC scheme ensures that there is adequate parliamentary minority representation, the actual workings over the past two decades have not unequivocally strengthened the ethos of multiracialism. For instance, it has reinforced the perceived subordinate role of the minority race candidates in the electoral process. Indeed, the GRC scheme may well "institutionalize and rigidify divisions that have no substantive purpose other than formalizing consciousness of 'difference'" (Hassall, 1997, p. 16).

First, in its quest for a decisive and overwhelming electoral victory, the PAP's approach relegates the GRC's multiracial intent to a subordinate status. For instance, the PAP's electoral strategy is to have each GRC team headed by a Minister. The PAP presents the electoral defeat of any PAP GRC team not only as a loss for the PAP but one where the country loses the services of a (valuable) minister. Another strategy is to field new (and/or 'weaker') PAP candidates in teams led by stronger and more established colleagues in order to ensure the former's election (see also Thio, 2002b, pp. 202–203; 2002a).

Second, the GRC scheme has expanded dramatically since 1988, resulting in the adulteration of its core function. This expansion has taken place along two fronts: the doubling in the maximum size of a GRC team, and the significant increase in the proportion of GRC parliamentary seats. In 1988 each GRC team comprised three MPs, and close to 50% of parliamentary seats were for GRCs. By 1997 the size of a GRC team had increased to either five or six MPs, and the GRCs constituted almost 90% of parliamentary seats (see Table 2).<sup>16</sup> The GRC scheme's enlargement has worked very well to the PAP's advantage, as the opposition parties have had immense difficulties fielding GRC teams. Yet this enlargement of the GRC scheme did not find its inspiration in the furtherance of the multiracialism ideal. Rather, the enlargement rationale was driven by the desire

**Table 2.** Distribution of SMC and GRC parliamentary seats, 1988–2001

Date of General election	Total no. of parliamentary seats	No. of SMC seats	No. of GRC seats	Make-up of GRCs
3 Sep 1988	81	42 (51.9%)	39 (48.1%)	13 three-member GRCs
31 Aug 1991	81	21 (25.9)	60 (74.1)	15 four-member GRCs
2 Jan 1997	83	9 (10.8)	74 (89.2)	15 GRCs: 5 four-member, 6 five-member, and 4 six-member
3 Nov 2001	84	9 (10.7)	75 (89.3)	14 GRCs: 9 five-member, 5 six-member

Source: Author's compilation, based on information available at the Singapore Elections Department's website, [http://www.elections.gov.sg/past\\_parliamentary.htm](http://www.elections.gov.sg/past_parliamentary.htm), last accessed 29 December 2004.

to harness economies of scale by consolidating housing estate operations through larger town councils.

Third, the constitutional intent of the GRC scheme is marginalized as a consequence of its being closely tied to the non-electoral accoutrements and administrative structures of the town councils and the Community Development Councils (CDCs). Although the town councils and the GRCs have fundamentally different objectives and missions, the PAP government regards them as compatible. This alliance of two distinctly different objectives—while administratively convenient—only detracts from the GRC's fundamental aim of electoral integration. In deciding which team to support, a voter is confronted by a gamut of considerations, which more often than not have nothing to do with ensuring a racially balanced legislature. The CDCs, “the social parallel of Town Councils”, were introduced in 1997 to promote social cohesion and strengthen community bonding (Goh, 1997). Each CDC embraces several GRCs. There are presently five CDCs, each headed by a Mayor (who is also a PAP MP), providing an array of community and social assistance services delegated from the ministries.<sup>17</sup> The recently government-launched ComCare Fund, a critical component of Singapore's social safety net infrastructure, intimately involves the CDCs and PAP-linked grassroots organizations as key players in the establishment and delivery of various social assistance programmes.<sup>18</sup> As with the town councils, voters fear that CDC-based community services and resources could be threatened in opposition-held constituencies (Thio, 1997, pp. 47–53). Ultimately, the pragmatic electorate has a strong material and rational incentive to cast their ballots in favour of the PAP in order to continue receiving the tangible material benefits.

Although the GRC is distinct from the town councils and CDCs, the electorate perceives all three institutions as related entities and closely linked with the PAP. This association, even if unintended, significantly distracts from the substance of the GRC, resulting in the dilution of the multiracialism credo when voters go to the polls. The policy rationale of minority representation is poorly imprinted in the electoral process and on the electorate. Consequently, the *raison d' être* of multiracialism forms, if at all, only a small part of the electorate's decision-making process. The election of minority candidates becomes an incidental and procedural, rather than motivating, outcome of the GRC scheme. The situation is compounded by the PAP's offering material incentives, such as subsidized



upgrading (extensive facelift and renovations) of public housing precincts if they vote the PAP into office.<sup>19</sup>

### **Spatially Integrating Singapore: Dispersing the Electoral Incentive for Multiracialism?**

The management of ethnic relations in Singapore extends to the careful micro-regulation of the spatial distribution of the races in a city-state no larger than 700 square kilometers. Large-scale urban resettlement, which facilitated the break-up of colonial ethnic enclaves, was the norm in the first two decades after independence (Hill & Lian, 1995, pp. 113–139; Gruber, 1997, p. 271).<sup>20</sup> In 2003 84% (or 2.84 million) of Singapore’s population lived in public HDB estates, facilitating the PAP government’s fulfilment of multiple political, economic and social goals, and lending credence to its performance legitimacy. After the 1988 general elections the government expressed its concern over the formation of racial enclaves within public housing estates and immediately implemented the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 1989a, col. 652). The EIP aims to promote racial harmony in public housing estates by creating ethnically integrated communities at the apartment block (micro-level) and neighbourhood levels (macro-level) by mandating a racial composition that reflects the overall national situation. The EIP formalized and widened the scope of a long-standing policy of deliberate, race-based quota system for spatial integration in public housing. Until 1 March 1989 the quota of Malays in any estate or new town was maintained at no more than 20% (Chua, 1997, p. 143).

The EIP operates in the following manner. On the primary market (flats purchased directly from the HDB), the HDB allocates new flat units to eligible buyers on a first-come-first-served basis until the quota for each race is reached at either the apartment block or neighbourhood levels (see Table 3). Once the quota is reached for any particular race, no more flat units will be allocated to buyers of that race. The same principle is applied to the secondary (resale) market. Sellers and buyers are free to enter into sale and purchase agreements as long as the relevant quota is not reached. However, a sale would be prohibited if it caused any race to be over-represented as a consequence of that transaction.

#### *Assessment of the EIP and Its Implications for the GRC Scheme*

From a policy perspective the EIP’s impeccable and prudent objectives provide an effective but intrusive means of regulating the size and distribution of the races in each public housing estate, and the entire city-state. No particular race would be disproportionately represented and, more importantly, the minority races would not constitute the majority in any electoral district. This reduced potential for the manifestation of a racial card

**Table 3.** EIP public housing quotas

Race	Neighbourhood (%)	Block (%)	National population (%) in 2000
Chinese	84	87	76.8
Malay	22	25	13.8
Indian/Others	10	13	7.9

Source: *Parliamentary Debates Singapore* (1989b) and Singapore Population Census, 2000.

and dilution of the political impact of the Malay vote in elections has been advantageous to the PAP (Rodan, 1996, p. 75). Malay electoral support for the PAP tended to be less affirmative and less predictable than that of the Chinese community and opposition parties generally perform relatively well in electoral wards with a large Malay constituency (Hussin, 2003, pp. 199–233; Chih, 2003).

The assessment of the EIP's effectiveness is mixed (Chua, 1997, pp. 142–145). From the government's standpoint the EIP has ensured that there is less 'ethnic regrouping' in public housing estates. In 1989 28% of the 105 neighbourhoods had at least one ethnic group that reached or exceeded its neighbourhood limit. In September 2003, out of 165 neighbourhoods, only 25% were not 'ethnically balanced' (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 2003). In contrast, the population's views of the EIP are more equivocal (e.g. Lai, 1995, pp. 121–132; Chih, 2002a). In most instances the EIP quotas affect the minorities most adversely since the pool of potential flat buyers, especially during a poor housing market, is reduced (Chih, 2002a, pp. 1360–1364). Even if the EIP does not have a discriminatory intent, it certainly has a discriminatory effect as it affects the minorities most significantly and they perceive the EIP as being discriminatory. Despite acknowledging the grievance and MPs' regular appeals, the government is steadfastly against any attempt to relax the EIP on the grounds of the larger good of ethnic integration.

While the EIP has a laudable policy objective of ensuring people of various races live together, meaningful interaction cannot be purposively effected by legislative or policy fiat. The EIP is premised on the contact hypothesis, where inter-group relations are predicted to be more positive when individuals from different groups interact in situations where contact is personal, of equal status, cooperative, and supported by institutional authorities (McCauley *et al.*, 2004, p. 312). However, community life in Singapore's public housing estates is characterized by the dominance of state-centred community development organizations, which are often not regarded as being relevant or attractive to the minorities (Chih, 2002b).<sup>21</sup> In addition, the Chinese Singaporeans show the least receptivity to inter-ethnic mixing as a consequence of their being such a large majority at every housing level (Ooi, 2005). Although 75% of public housing neighbourhoods are racially balanced, the quality of interracial ties and the lack of interracial interaction are matters of concern. This was vividly demonstrated in the heightened mutual suspicion and distrust between Malay Muslims and non-Malays (especially the ethnic Chinese) over the arrests of Muslim Singaporean members of Jemaah Islamiyah, an alleged Al-Qaeda-affiliated radical Islamist terrorist network, in Singapore in 2002. This prompted the accelerated creation of the Inter-Racial Confidence Circles in an attempt to encourage greater interaction as well as confidence building among residents (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2003).

More critically, the EIP casts a significant limitation on itself and the GRC scheme's ability to secure integration by blunting the incentive for interracial appeal. With the EIP strictly enforced, minority races constitute no more than one-third of the voters while ethnic Chinese voters are the dominant majority (since they comprise at least two-thirds of the electorate in any electoral district). Minorities, even when acting in concert, would be unable to constitute an effective swing-vote bloc. The ethnic Chinese voters' substantive numerical superiority, coupled with the Singaporeans' supposed propensity of voting along racial lines, results in their having a potentially larger electoral leverage over their non-ethnic Chinese counterparts. Consequently, the EIP reduces the ethnically conciliatory features of the GRC scheme, as the minorities possess significantly reduced collective voting power to ensure the dominant majority remains sensitive to

them. In competing in a GRC it could be strategically advantageous to adopt a Chinese-accented stance, rather than an even-handed racial approach, in order to appeal to the predominant ethnic Chinese electorate.<sup>22</sup> This did indeed happen in the hotly contested Cheng San GRC during the 1997 elections, where the PAP had to aggressively counter a member of the opposition team who allegedly campaigned on Chinese chauvinist and anti-Christian sentiments (Chin, 1997; Da Cunha, 1997). Conversely, it may not be as beneficial to adopt a pro-minority or race-neutral stance as this may render that GRC team less attractive to the ethnic Chinese voters who have been observed to want further recognition as the dominant majority race in Singapore (Tan, 2003). The incentive for political parties to ‘vote pool’ across ethnic lines is detrimentally affected. Thus the operational realities of the EIP can potentially result in the accentuation of the ethnic Chinese electoral leverage while circumscribing the already limited countervailing power of the minority races. This can weaken the commitment and incentive towards moderation.

### **Of Unintended Consequences: Enervating Multiracialism**

Political institutions such as the GRC and policies such as the EIP provide a framework to promote sustainable multiracialism. However, creating such institutions does not ensure that these policy ends will necessarily be attained. Institutional designers have to be mindful of the unanticipated and contradictory consequences flowing from the mechanical workings of supposed ethnically conciliatory institutions, laws and policies. The means are as important, if not more important, than the ends. Although the GRC delivers a racially representative legislature, its susceptibility to electoral expediency enervates its commitment to genuine multiracialism. While overall minority parliamentary representation has increased steadily from a low of 16% in 1988 to 26.2% in 2001, such representatives are perceived as riding on the coat tails of their ethnic Chinese electoral colleagues in GRC seats.<sup>23</sup> Since 1988 all minority MPs have been elected through the GRC scheme. As Table 4 indicates, Singapore’s parliament was not at all severely unbalanced in terms of the minorities’ representation during the pre-GRC electoral regime.

**Table 4.** Minority representation in Singapore’s parliament, 1968–2001

Date of General election	Total no. of parliamentary seats	No. of Malay MPs	No. of non-Malay (Indian and Others) MPs	Total % of non-Chinese MPs (no.)
13 Apr 1968	58	9 (15.5%)	8 (13.8%)	29.3 (17)
2 Sep 1972	65	8 (12.3)	8 (12.3)	24.6 (16)
23 Dec 1976	69	9 (13.0)	8 (11.6)	24.6 (17)
23 Dec 1980	75	9 (12.0)	8 (10.7)	22.7 (17)
22 Dec 1984	79	9 (11.4)	6 (7.6)	19.0 (15)
3 Sep 1988	81	8 (9.9)	5 (6.2)	16.0 (13)
31 Aug 1991	81	10 (12.3)	7 (8.6)	20.9 (17)
2 Jan 1997	83	11 (13.3)	8 (9.6)	22.9 (19)
3 Nov 2001	84	12 (14.3)	10 (11.9)	26.2 (22)

*Source:* Author’s compilation based on information available at the Singapore Elections Department’s website, [http://www.elections.gov.sg/past\\_parliamentary.htm](http://www.elections.gov.sg/past_parliamentary.htm), last accessed 29 December 2004.

Before the GRC scheme, minority parliamentary representation, except for the 1984 elections, has consistently been between 23% and 29%, approximating and even exceeding the national racial composition. Malay parliamentary representation shows a gradual upward trend but, of significant note, does not vary significantly from the pre-GRC electoral system. Parliamentary representation of Indians and other minorities has increased relatively substantively, from 6.2% to 11.9% between 1988 and 2001, and now matches their pre-GRC representation level. In the pre-GRC regime non-Chinese candidates had defeated Chinese candidates. It appears that even a PAP minority candidate competing in a single-member constituency cannot overcome the electorate's polarizing ethnic voting tendencies and secure enough votes from the Chinese community to win (see further Rahim, 1998, pp. 65–114).<sup>24</sup> This is despite the PAP government's constant praise that the Singaporean electorate is enlightened enough to vote for multiracialism. The PAP's reluctance to field minority candidates in single-member constituencies reinforces the popular notion that Singaporeans continue to vote along racial lines. This attitudinal bias compromises the constitutional intent of the GRC. The PAP's obsession with winning handsomely may well prevent it from taking an exemplary lead in this regard. While recognizing the importance of race in the electoral process, the GRC electoral system engenders multiracial representation in a mechanical manner. The manifestation of the virtue of multiracialism in the elected legislative body is not sufficiently impressed on the electorate, since the voters' primary cares are for material benefits, rather than multiracialism.

#### *Managing the Chinese Vote-bank and its Electoral Dynamics*

In recent years race has presented an increasingly salient subtext in Singapore's political life through the growing political footprint of the ethnic Chinese in domestic political and socioeconomic discourse. Cultivating the large, politically important Chinese-educated/Chinese-speaking constituency is a key concern for the PAP. The PAP regards this group as the traditional bastion of political and moral conservatism (Vasil, 2000, pp. 185–189). The need to woo the Chinese-educated and lower income ethnic Chinese electorate (who tend to be Mandarin- and/or dialect-speaking and who perceive themselves as marginalized in English-speaking Singapore) remains a crucial electoral consideration.<sup>25</sup> In its hegemonic quest the PAP suffers from the constant fear of being outflanked racially or of others being seen as 'more Chinese' than itself.

The importance of the Chinese vote-bank is given impetus by the ruling elites' view that Chineseness—with its pragmatic and consensus-seeking culture—is necessary for the maintenance of continued political stability. The memories of the political costs of alienating the Chinese-speaking ground in the 1960s and early 1970s still haunt the PAP. It remains acutely conscious that it must now court the loyalty of a Chinese business and cultural elite who do not need the PAP in the same way as before (*Straits Times*, 2003). In this regard, a key concern of the Chinese-speaking community is the maintenance and enhancement of Chinese language, culture and traditions, for which the community elites' expectation is that the government makes a special effort to help the Chinese Singaporeans maintain their cultural and linguistic fluency.

The 1991 and 1997 general elections underlined the undercurrents of the uneasy relationship between the Chinese-educated/Chinese-speaking and English-educated/English-speaking Chinese (George, 2000, pp. 108–113; Vasil, 2000, pp. 196–197;

Li & Elklit, 1999). The PAP's worst electoral showing in the 1991 general elections was partly attributed to the 'silent majority' Chinese electoral backlash, particularly among the less well-off Chinese, against the government's policies, which were deemed to be unhelpful, if not disadvantageous, to the dominant ethnic group (Vasil, 2000, pp. 179–190, 213–216; Ho, 2000, pp. 123–128). In quick response the government-affiliated ethnic self-help groups, the Chinese Development and Assistance Council and the Singapore Indian Development Association, were established as part of the concerted enlargement of the ethnic self-help policy beyond the Malay community. This calibrated response was designed primarily to assure ethnic Chinese and Indian voters that their aspirations and concerns were not neglected. Nonetheless, in seeking to capture the various racial vote-banks, electoral expediency can undermine the multiracial policy by unwittingly encouraging ethnic outbidding.

### *Moving Forward: Returning to the Raison d'Être*

This article has discussed how even well intentioned GRC and EIP institutions can potentially enervate multiracialism. The instrumental use of the GRC scheme has marginalized the substance of having proportionate racial representation in parliament, while the EIP increases the differential and unbalanced electoral leverage that the majority Chinese community has. The PAP government is likely to retain the GRC electoral system for the foreseeable future. Any substantive reform to counter the GRC's and EIP's potentially centrifugal tendencies will very much depend on the PAP taking the initiative; it can catalyze the entrenching of multiracialism given its political cachet and hegemony. Three modest suggestions to strengthen the GRC and EIP are put forth.

First, the government and political parties should ensure that the *raison d'être* of the GRC and the EIP are scrupulously adhered to and are honoured in both form and substance. This entails curtailing practices (including those discussed) that relegate adequate minority representation to a secondary intent and perceptions of political tokenism. A concerted effort should be mounted to demonstrate that minority MPs are not marginal figures in the electoral process. The GRC scheme must not be seen as a political crutch for the minorities and as symbolic multiracial representation. Perhaps the GRCs should be abolished. Instead, one quarter of all parliamentary seats could be designated as SMCs for the candidature of minority race candidates only. This would result in at least one-quarter of all MPs coming from the minority races and being elected on merit and without the stigma of the apparent reliance on their ethnic Chinese colleagues.

Second, assuming that the GRC remains a fixture in Singapore's electoral landscape, the GRC scheme would benefit immensely by being unburdened from its close association with the town councils and Community Development Councils. This will help re-focus the electorate and political parties on the GRC's purpose. All too often the GRC is a convenient but politicized omnibus device for well intended political and administrative objectives. Third, if the EIP remains, it should apply public housing racial quotas in a flexible manner that enables the minority races to be a bulwark against any movement away from moderation and inclusive politics. In implementing the EIP it must be appreciated that putting people together will not necessarily result in meaningful interaction and achieving the desired interracial understanding and appreciation.

The efficacy of the GRC and EIP should not be solely measured in terms of the number of the minority MPs it emplaces in parliament. Instead, a better measure would be whether

they nurture an internalization of and the sustenance of a political culture that is conducive towards genuine electoral integration and which pursues the ideals of multiracialism in both form and substance. Both the GRC and EIP patently need to inculcate in the political elites and the electorate the *sine qua non* of racial equality, political moderation and inter-racial appeal in the governance of Singapore.

## Conclusion

The electoral process presents an ideal opportunity to educate the electorate and entrench multiracialism. Voter preferences and values can be constructively shaped by the electoral system. As such Singapore policy makers need to be mindful of the unintended consequences flowing from the implementation of the GRC and EIP. The GRC electoral system has achieved, albeit mechanistically, a balanced multiracial representation in Singapore's parliament. The jury is still out as to whether the GRC and EIP advance adequately the development of norms and values that would be truly supportive of the need for a multiracial legislature and an abiding commitment to multiracialism. This article has shown how the GRC scheme and the EIP, as an aid to nation-building efforts, can instead generate disincentives for electoral candidates and their parties to seek broad-based appeal, and hinder the development of cross-cutting loyalties. Even as the GRC and EIP institutions are centred on the realities of race consciousness in Singapore's political life, they must be careful not to reify communal identification in political life. Both institutions must encourage the electorate and political parties alike to secure the commitment to moderation, racial non-partisanship and the sustainable development of inter-ethnic trust and cooperation. In the long run this can only strengthen the legitimacy of electoral and spatial integration policies and will entrench the ethos of multiracialism in Singapore's nation-building process.

## Notes

1. The other four Shared Values are: Nation before community and society before self; family as the basic unit of society; community support and respect for the individual; consensus, not conflict.
2. An accompanying discourse intimately connected with multiracialism is meritocracy.
3. From the 2000 population census. The generic 'Others' includes all other races not captured by the 'Chinese', 'Malay' and 'Indian' racial classifications.
4. Singapore's closest neighbours are Malaysia and Indonesia, both of which have substantive Muslim populations. On the geopolitics of race and religion affecting Singapore, see Leifer (2000).
5. Katzenstein (1985) and Rogowski (1987) argue that proportional representation is more likely in small, trade-dependent countries, given the greater need for political compromise and democratic participation. Singapore's external trade volume is three times its gross domestic product. However, it is unlikely that a proportional representation electoral system will be introduced in Singapore.
6. The Elections Department is under the Prime Minister's Office: see their website at <http://www.elections.gov.sg/organisation.htm> (last accessed 29 December 2004).
7. The Singapore Malays National Organization (PKMS) is the only race-based political party in Singapore.
8. The primary legislation governing the conduct of parliamentary elections is the Parliamentary Elections Act (PEA) (Chapter 218, 2001 Revised Edition). The Internal Security Act (Chapter 143, 1985 Revised Edition), which provides for detention without trial, seeks to prevent any person from acting in a manner prejudicial to the security of Singapore or to the maintenance of public order or essential services.
9. Article 2(c) of the PAP's constitution urges the building of "a multi-racial society, fair, just and tolerant to all, whatever their race, language and religion".

10. Worthington (2003, pp. 63–105) sees the Singapore legislature as being peripheral to policy making. Cf. Ho (2003, pp. 170–215) who notes the MP’s legitimization role in public policy making. See also Chan (1976a).
11. *Parliamentary Debates Singapore* (1988a, p. 180). As voting is secret and no opinion polls are allowed pre- or post-elections, one wonders how the PAP government arrived at its conclusions on Singaporeans’ voting behaviour. Section 78D of the PEA also prohibits exit polls on polling day.
12. Section 8A(3) read with section 8(1)(b)(i) of the PEA.
13. See further *Report of the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Bill (Bill no. 23/87)*.
14. Notwithstanding Article 39(A)(3), the potential inconsistency with Article 12’s equal protection clause arises on two counts: 1) that the GRC ‘prefers’ minority races by giving them a designated number of parliamentary seats; 2) that a vote cast in a GRC is ‘worth more’ than an SMC vote as the GRC places between 4 and 6 MPs while the latter places only one MP. See also Thio (1997).
15. A differentiating measure is “any measure which is, or is likely in its practical application to be, disadvantageous to persons of any racial or religious community and not equally disadvantageous to persons of other such communities, either directly by prejudicing persons of that community or indirectly by giving advantage to persons of another community”.
16. Section 8A(1A) of the PEA mandates a minimum of eight SMCs.
17. In financial year 2003–04 the CDCs assisted 32 000 Singaporeans with SG\$27 million worth of social support and further disbursed SG\$1.3 million through 20 local assistance schemes to help another 8500 (Mah, 2004; <http://www.cdc.org.sg/index.html>, accessed 6 April 2004).
18. On the ComCare Fund, see [http://app.mcys.gov.sg/web/serv\\_grant\\_english.asp](http://app.mcys.gov.sg/web/serv_grant_english.asp), accessed 30 June 2005.
19. All things being equal, a precinct with more popular support for the PAP has priority in the disbursements of such upgrading benefits. Conversely, voters are ‘threatened’ with the disincentive of their housing estates becoming decrepit through lack of upgrading should support for the PAP not be forthcoming (Ooi & Shaw, 2004, pp. 81–102; Hsieh & Newman, 2002, p. 14; Chin, 1997). The HDB’s upgrading programme and the politicization of public housing generally are succinctly discussed in Chua (1997, pp. 124–151).
20. Urban redevelopment was greatly assisted by the Land Acquisition Act (Chapter 152, 1985 Revised Edition). The Singapore Constitution does not provide for a right to property.
21. The government has repeatedly voiced its concern over the Malay community’s preference for the mosque over other non-religious social centers such as community clubs (*Straits Times*, 2005). Cf. Chan (2003) and Ooi (2005), whose survey findings suggest that the non-Chinese Singaporeans’ and Chinese Singaporeans’ relative propensities towards interracial interactions are more nuanced than officially and popularly presented.
22. A pro-Chinese stance could, of course, repulse moderate ethnic Chinese voters. But this is unlikely considering Singaporeans’ electoral behaviour of voting along racial lines.
23. Women have also benefited, incidentally, from the GRC scheme (Lyons, 2005). The last woman elected in an SMC was in 1991. In the 1997 and 2001 elections, all women MPs (all from the PAP) were elected through GRCs.
24. No opposition Malay MP has been elected since 1968.
25. Chinese language as a primary medium of instruction in schools was phased out by the mid-1980s. Since then, a younger generation of Chinese-speakers has replaced the older Chinese-educated as the core ethnic Chinese constituency.

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