

## Ritual and Identity Elections and Voting in Singapore

Ming Hwa Ting

### Abstract

According to recent press reports, the influx of migrants has been a source of much unhappiness among Singaporeans. Furthermore, this development could undermine Singapore's national identity in the long-term. To address this problem, the People's Action Party (PAP) reduced or removed housing, healthcare, and education subsidies noncitizens previously enjoyed. The rationale is to treat visitors well, but citizens better. However, this policy deals only with the symptom and not the cause of the influx problem. To strengthen national identity, this essay argues that having a more competitive electoral contest which allowed more Singaporeans to vote would be a more effective long-term policy. This essay views voting as a political ritual that differentiates citizens from noncitizens. This political ritual is necessary because it permits Singapore citizens to identify with the larger and often abstract political forces within the country. Yet, a detailed examination of Singapore's elections since 1968 indicates a general downward trend in the number of Singaporeans voting, as many seats are uncontested. Hence, this essay argues that a more competitive electoral process that honors the act of voting in its *observance* and not its *breach* is more effective in maintaining a strong and durable identity than a policy of increasing or decreasing subsidies, especially in view of demographic changes in Singapore.

**Key words:** Singapore, national identity, elections, demography, political rituals.

---

Since Singapore became independent in 1965, the People's Action Party (PAP) has been the ruling party, winning every post-independence election, beginning with the first one in 1968. Despite Singapore's authoritarian complexion, no general parliamentary elections have been cancelled. All citizens above the

---

Ming Hwa Ting, Ph.D., is an Associate Lecturer at the University of Adelaide. <mh.ting@gmail.com>

age of twenty-one are allowed to vote. Having become independent forty-five years ago, Singapore is a very young nation. The ruling party has attempted to cultivate a durable national identity by introducing into schools during the mid-1990s subjects such as National Education that emphasize Singapore's history. However, this move may not be very effective now. The recent influx of migrants into Singapore, made necessary due to the country's low fertility rate, might undermine Singapore's national identity, as citizens constitute a decreasing percentage of the country's population. To ensure that Singaporeans identify with the country, the government stresses its commitment to treat visitors well, but citizens better. To this end, it has reduced or removed health-care and educational subsidies previously extended to noncitizens. This essay argues that such a policy is able to achieve only superficial results. Instead, a more relaxed approach to politics by the PAP, which allowed for increased electoral competition, making it necessary for more Singaporeans to vote, would be more effective in achieving long-lasting and far-reaching results. A more liberal electoral system is chosen because voting is perceived as a highly symbolic ritual in modern society. Not only is voting in elections the most straightforward way to differentiate between citizens and noncitizens, but also it allows individuals to have a common experience that is limited only to insiders. Apart from differentiating citizens from noncitizens, such a move also would do much to increase new citizens' identification and sense of belonging to Singapore, making for a win-win situation.

## **Demography of Singapore**

According to the Singapore Department of Statistics, the city-state's population in 2009 stood at almost five million. In the period between 1990 and 2000, Singapore's rate of population growth was the fastest since 1965, primarily due to the influx of permanent residents and foreign workers. According to Singapore's Department of Statistics:

With the large inflows of foreigners into Singapore, the population share of the non-resident population had increased, from 10 per cent in 1990 to 19 per cent in 2000. Permanent residents accounted for 7.2 per cent, up from 3.7 per cent a decade ago. There were proportionately fewer Singapore citizens in the population—74 percent in 2000 compared with 86 per cent in 1990.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Statistics, "Census 2000—Population Size and Growth" (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 2000), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

During the same period, the average rate of population growth for Singaporeans was 1.3 percent and the average rate of population growth for permanent residents was 10 percent.<sup>2</sup> The percentage of residents born in Singapore between 1990 and 2000 also fell slightly from 84.8 percent to 81.7 percent.<sup>3</sup> Ngaim Tong Dow, the former head of Singapore's civil service, reflecting popular sentiments, admitted that one of his recurring nightmares "is that someday [Singaporeans] will find ourselves strangers in our own land."<sup>4</sup>

The numbers of Singaporeans emigrating is another reason there are proportionately fewer Singaporeans in the population, an issue that has concerned the government. Goh Chok Tong, in his former capacity as prime minister, stated:

Singapore faces a more fundamental challenge: rooting our best and brightest in this country. A recent survey by MasterCard found that 1 in 5 Singaporeans wishes to emigrate, despite Singapore's economic success. I am not sure how much to believe this survey, but there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest a potential problem.<sup>5</sup>

The government of Singapore does not make available the number of emigrating Singaporeans. The most reliable estimate of this figure would be from the number of "Certificate of No Criminal Convictions" [CNCCs] issued to Singaporeans. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a "CNCC is issued for immigration-related purposes and is required for immigration to some countries. [A] CNCC is issued to Singapore Citizens...above the age of 16."<sup>6</sup> This is therefore the best yardstick available to estimate the number of Singaporeans who are emigrating. But, it has to be stated that the number of CNCCs issued does not equate to the actual number of Singaporean emigrants. Certain countries do not require a CNCC. Not every individual who has been granted a CNCC decides to emigrate, and not all applications of the individuals to whom CNCCs are issued have their emigration applications approved by the destination countries. Similarly, Singaporeans under the age of sixteen do not need a CNCC. Despite the statistical inaccuracy of these figures, they are still useful in illustrating general trends that are applicable in this present context.

---

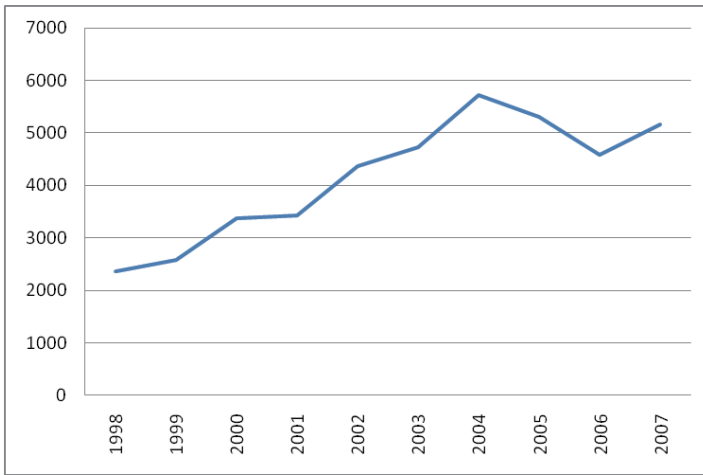
<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>4</sup> Seah Chiang Nee, "Concern over Rising Foreign Population," *Star Online*, October 3, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Selvaraj Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007), 93.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Certificate of No Criminal Conviction (CNCC)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://app.mfa.gov.sg/generator/asppages/berlin/certnoc.asp> (accessed January 18, 2010).

Figure 1. Number of CNCCs Issued to Singaporeans, 1998-2007



Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, [http://www.mha.gov.sg/news\\_details.aspx?nid=MTI5OA%3D%3D-jWmXhMWZx8%3D](http://www.mha.gov.sg/news_details.aspx?nid=MTI5OA%3D%3D-jWmXhMWZx8%3D) (accessed December 20, 2009).

## Demographic Changes and Singapore's National Identity

Current demographic trends discussed above could undermine Singapore's national identity since the newly arrived migrants might not identify with Singapore's nation-building narrative, as put forward by S. Rajaratnam:

There is no shared past for us before 1819 when Raffles landed in Singapore and opened the island's doors to people from the four corners of the earth. Our memories before 1819 go back to different lands, different times, different histories and different peoples. These are memories that Singaporeans cannot share collectively. Our common memories are the joys, sorrows, disappointments and achievements since 1819. This is our only and relevant history to shape and guide our future. The history before 1819 is that of ancestral ghosts.<sup>7</sup>

Put simply, the nation-building narrative revolves around how Singapore developed into a bustling trading port after being founded by Sir Thomas

---

<sup>7</sup> "S'pore's Future Depends on Shared Memories, Collective Amnesia," *Straits Times*, June 20, 1990.

Stamford Raffles in 1819. When Singapore became independent in 1965, under the PAP's astute leadership consisting of individuals who had experienced the effects of the Japanese Occupation, the country managed to defeat the communist threat from the 1950s to the 1980s. It then became the most economically developed state in Southeast Asia. However, this narrative may hold no traction for new migrants, since they do not have either direct personal experience or indirect memories through their families of these pivotal moments in Singapore's history. Consequently, they are less likely to find this national narrative credible. Lysa Hong rightly notes that if national history is to establish and maintain a national identity, it must have resonance.<sup>8</sup> A cornerstone of the national narrative was how Singapore defeated the communist threat. In the 1960s, it was "Operation Cold Store" that detained communist sympathizers such as Chia Thye Poh; in the 1970s, it was "Operation False Flag" in which Tan Wah Piow was arrested for inciting labor unrest; in the 1980s, it was "Operation Spectrum" during which Vincent Cheng and twenty-one other individuals were arrested for their involvement in a Marxist conspiracy. From a pragmatic and practical perspective, this narrative in which "anti-communism remains central to the PAP's autobiography,"<sup>9</sup> is less likely to be accepted by new migrants, many of whom are from China, which is still a socialist state today. Furthermore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong admitted that communism is now dead as an ideology and younger Singaporeans do not know and are not interested in learning about the severity of the communist threat in the past.<sup>10</sup> It therefore appears that a revised version of PAP's autobiography is needed, one that takes into consideration current demographic changes in Singaporean society.

### ***Ubi Bene Ibi Patria: People as Homo Economicus***

Singapore is a migrant society. Economic opportunities drew many to seek better lives in Singapore in the past, an observation that is equally valid in the present. When asked why his ancestors came to Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew replied, "To find a livelihood and to get rich. My great-grand father came here from China to seek a living, just like the others."<sup>11</sup> Economic considerations are important in explaining why people emigrate. However, good economic prospects alone are insufficient to make individuals identify with their country. This is because the prospects of greener pastures in other countries may easily lure them away. Therefore, a commonly held belief among Singaporeans is that foreigners are here "only for the benefits they can derive and will have no

---

<sup>8</sup> Lysa Hong, "Singapore and Its Tensed Past: History and Nation-Building," in *ARI Working Paper No. 82* (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, 2007), 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Lee Hsien Loong, "Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Internal Security Department 60th Anniversary Dinner" (Singapore: Prime Minister's Office, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Alex Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, 1968), 73.

commitment to the country in times of crisis.”<sup>12</sup>

A *Straits Times* column in January 2007 reported that Singaporeans were unhappy that permanent residents received almost as many medical and educational subsidies as citizens. They felt that citizens ought to be treated better than noncitizens and they wanted to “see the tangible benefits of citizenship.”<sup>13</sup> In response, the government reduced subsidies for noncitizens to address such grievances.<sup>14</sup> In a speech to PAP cadres in December 2006, Lee Hsien Loong noted that Singapore needed migrants in order to sustain economic growth and development. In order to reassure citizens, Lee stated that, “while we have non-Singaporeans here, citizens always come first. We have to treat visitors well too, but citizens have to be treated better.” He said:

So when we introduce the Progress Package or we take other asset-enhancement measures, these are for citizens only.

And for the next offset package, when we raise the GST, that’s what we are going to do, too. There are two other areas [healthcare and education] where we have not made a clear distinction between citizens and non-citizens, and I think that we have to do so more clearly.<sup>15</sup>

Such a move may work in the short term, but it has considerable limitations. In the event of a sustained economic downturn during which the government were unable to provide such subsidies, the sense of rootedness would be severely undermined.

The dangling of financial incentives to elicit a desired response is not new. It has been used since the 1990s, but with limited effect, to influence Singaporeans to have more children. From the 1960s to the early 1980s, it was common for Singaporeans to have large families.<sup>16</sup> However, less educated Singaporeans were the ones who tended to have more children, “a trend which can leave our society with a large number of the physically, intellectually, and

---

<sup>12</sup> Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, “‘Foreign Talent’ in Our Midst: New Challenges to Sense of Community and Ethnic Relations in Singapore,” in *Beyond Rituals and Riots: Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press and Marshall Cavendish, 2004), 333.

<sup>13</sup> Ong Soh Chia and Lynn Lee, “The Dollars and Sense of Citizenship,” *Straits Times*, January 20, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> For a full list of the various subsidies that are reduced, see Immigration and Checkpoints Authority, “Benefits for Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents Education Subsidies & Scheme” (2009) [http://www.ica.gov.sg/data/resources/docs/BenefitsPrivilegesRightsObligations\\_20080429.pdf](http://www.ica.gov.sg/data/resources/docs/BenefitsPrivilegesRightsObligations_20080429.pdf) (accessed January 10, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> “Priority: Securing Home Base,” *Straits Times*, December 5, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Department of Statistics, “Marriage and Fertility,” Department of Statistics, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/papers/people/c2000adr-marriage.pdf> (accessed January 10, 2010).

culturally anemic,”<sup>17</sup> and so it had to be stopped. This was because poorer families were deemed to lack the resources and abilities to educate and nurture their children. Lowly educated Singaporeans were therefore encouraged to “Stop at Two.” This campaign worked too well, as the birth rate fell below the replacement rate of 2.1. In response, the government introduced various tax breaks to encourage Singaporeans to have more children, but to no avail. Goh Chok Tong spoke candidly on this issue:

Ideally, we want Singaporeans to have as many children as they can afford to have so that we do not depend too much on foreigners. But we have tried with baby bonus, maternity benefits, tax incentives, and child care support. They have not worked. We even tried state-sponsored matchmaking! For all our effort in encouraging marriage and procreation, our total fertility rate climbed only marginally from 1.26 in 2004 to 1.28 last year. This is still far short of the 2.1 needed to replace father and mother. In absolute terms, we need about 60,000 babies per year. Last year, we had only 32,400 citizen babies! How do we make up for the shortfall?<sup>18</sup>

This shows the limitations of economic inducements. Hence, present birth rates continue to remain below the replacement rate and are also declining,<sup>19</sup> which is why the government has had to adopt a liberal immigration policy in order to maintain the prevailing ethnic ratio, in which Chinese constitute the majority at approximately 75 percent, Malays at approximately 15 percent, with Indians and Eurasians making up the rest.

Yet, thus far, what the PAP government has done to increase citizens’ identification with Singapore and to allay the concern over the declining birth rate has been to rely on financial inducements,<sup>20</sup> which may not ensure that Singaporeans will necessarily identify with the country during a crisis. This strategy of economic incentive is still used today. In March 2010, the government announced that housing subsidies would be adjusted with immediate effect. Singaporeans purchasing public housing would receive on average SGD\$10,000 more in subsidies than permanent residents. However, if permanent residents were to convert to Singaporean citizenship after purchasing their flats, they would still be entitled to this housing subsidy by having it retroactively applied. In a press statement, Mah Bow Tan, Minister of

---

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 104.

<sup>18</sup> Goh Chok Tong, “Speech by Mr Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister, at Deepa Thirunal, 07 November 2009, 8:00 PM at the Braddell Heights Community Club,” 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Diana Othman, “Fertility Rate Still Falling,” *Straits Times*, September 28, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Salma Khalik, “Wider Gap in Health Subsidy,” *Straits Times*, January 29, 2010.

National Development, said that, “These measures will give greater assurance to citizens that they are our priority, and at the same time encourage our PRs to view citizenship more favourably.”<sup>21</sup>

Although the Singaporean government has introduced many new measures to differentiate citizens from noncitizens, and Singaporeans generally approve of these recent changes, it has to be acknowledged that the effects of such policies are very limited. For instance, the housing grants discussed above are available only to first-home buyers, who represent only a small percentage of Singapore’s population, and changes to medical and educational subsidies do not affect Singaporeans since the amount of the subsidies they receive has not increased. It is only a case of reducing or removing subsidies previously enjoyed by noncitizens. Hence, such measures have very limited effect on strengthening national identity in Singapore.

As early as 1991, Goh Chok Tong was worried that national identity among younger Singaporeans was declining, and that they did not have “the Singapore heartbeat.”<sup>22</sup> He said:

They are educated in English, they travel abroad, they study abroad, and the slightest hiccup over here, they think of emigration. Their bond with the country is not there because the bond to the community is not there. They become individual economic animals, looking for the greenest pastures in the world.<sup>23</sup>

In 1997, Goh publicly expressed his vision for Singapore in the twenty-first century. He wanted the country to have a change in mindset and not to put material progress ahead of social development. He recognized that “affluence cannot be the only glue holding Singaporeans together in the face of economic competition and external shocks.”<sup>24</sup>

Goh revisited this theme when delivering his 2002 National Day Rally speech. Then, he divided Singaporeans into two categories: “stayers” and “quitters.” In Goh’s classification, stayers are individuals who are committed to Singapore and are around for the long-haul to help the nation develop. On the other hand, quitters are fair-weather Singaporeans, “who, after having benefited from Singapore, will pack their bags and take flight when our country runs into a little storm.” He also brought up two letters published in the local press in which the authors complained about the high costs of living in Singapore, and

---

<sup>21</sup> Esther Ng, “Lower HDB Subsidy, New Quota Hits PRs,” *Today*, April 10, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Singapore 21 Committee, “Singapore 21: Together We Make the Difference” (Singapore: Singapore 21 Committee, 1999), 40.

<sup>23</sup> Raj Vasil, *Governing Singapore* (Singapore: Mandarin, 1992), 282.

<sup>24</sup> “PM Aims to Put ‘People First’ in His Vision for S’pore in 21st Century,” *Straits Times*, June 6, 1997.

stated that they were better off emigrating to Australia. In response, Goh asked rhetorically, “Are these two potential emigrants so sure that the cost of living will never go up in Australia? Which other country will they run off to next, when the bus fares go up in Australia?”<sup>25</sup>

Lee Kuan Yew once said, “To build a country, you need passion” and “[if] you just do your sum—plus, minuses, credit, debit—you are a washout.”<sup>26</sup> Lee is right. Nation-building is a Herculean task that requires more than just “materialistic, rational calculations,”<sup>27</sup> a reality that must be recognized by citizens. In a speech to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Real Estate Developers’ Association of Singapore, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong expressed similar concerns. He said that for Singapore to differentiate itself from other cities and countries,

[it] must go beyond being clean, green and safe. It must be a vibrant place which boldly embraces talents and ideas. And most importantly, it must hold special meaning as Home for its citizens, both here and abroad.<sup>28</sup>

The “Remaking Singapore” Committee that was commissioned in 2002-2003 and tasked with the responsibility to explore measures that could strengthen national identity among Singaporeans, asked:

How can we increase ownership and belonging over and above material needs and physical requirements? How do we create in Singaporeans a sense of passion for this country, that they would stick it out here because this is their home?<sup>29</sup>

The committee suggested that increased political and civic participation by Singaporeans is one way to achieve the objective of increasing the sense of stakeholdership.<sup>30</sup> In order for Singapore to hold special meaning for its citizens, this essay argues that an option that ought to be considered is to ensure that

---

<sup>25</sup> Goh Chok Tong, “Remaking Singapore—Changing Mindsets,” in *National Day Rally Address by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the University Cultural Centre, NUS* (Singapore: SG Press Centre, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> “Nation-Building ‘Requires Passion and Conviction’,” *Straits Times*, August 21, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Goh Chok Tong, “A Distinctive City, a Harmonious Home,” Speech at the REDAS 50th Anniversary Dinner at Shangri-La Hotel (Singapore: SG Press Centre, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Government of Singapore, “Changing Mindsets, Deepening Relationships: The Report of the Remaking Singapore Committee” (Singapore: Government of Singapore, 2003), 91.

<sup>30</sup> Singapore 21 Committee, “Summary of the Deliberations of the Subject Committee on ‘Internationalisation/Regionalisation vs Singapore as Home’” (Singapore: Singapore 21 Committee, 1999), 17-18.

as many Singaporeans as possible have the opportunity to vote. Even though voting is compulsory for all Singaporeans above the age of twenty-one, there is a general upward trend since the 1991 General Elections in the number of Singaporeans who do not get to vote. This is because many parliamentary seats are uncontested and the PAP secures a walkover victory. For instance, residents of Marine Parade and Tanjong Pagar did not have to cast a vote due to walkover victories in the 1997, 2001, and 2006 elections, so effectively they have been excluded from participating in the country's political process. To maximize the number of Singaporeans who vote, it might be worthwhile for the government to remove electoral innovations such as Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs) and the ban on the use of Internet for political campaigning during election periods.

These reform measures are important because they would lower the barriers of entry for opposition parties, which, in turn, would contribute to more electoral competition. It is important to note that increased competition does not *ipso facto* mean that more opposition members would be elected. Lowering the bar would benefit only opposition politicians who could not meet the previous stringent conditions, so it would have no effect on suitably qualified opposition politicians, the ones who pose a greater threat to incumbent PAP politicians. Suitably qualified opposition politicians such as Chiam See Tong and Low Thia Kiang will still contest upcoming elections. In the 1997 General Elections, MacPherson was carved out from the Marine Parade GRC that was headed by Goh Chok Tong to allow a straight electoral contest between Chee Soon Juan from the Singapore Democratic Party and Matthias Yao from the PAP. In this contest, Yao resoundingly defeated Chee, winning 65.14 percent of the contested votes to Chee's 34.86 percent.<sup>31</sup>

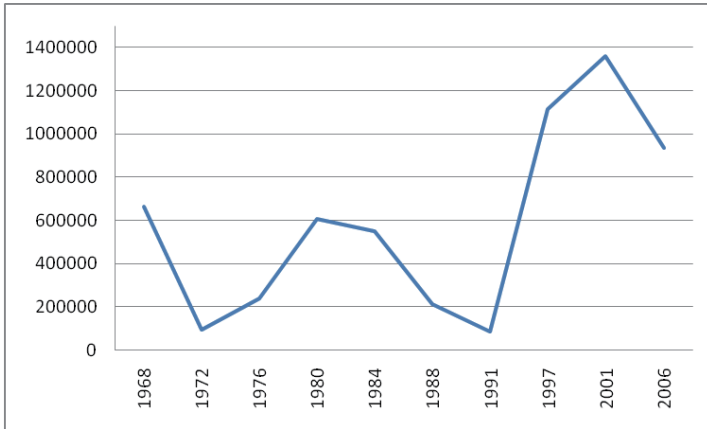
The results from this electoral contest showed very clearly that Singaporeans do not vote for opposition politicians just for the sake of having them in parliament. They vote for opposition politicians only when they are deemed to be good candidates. Yet, the PAP still has no faith in the ability of Singaporeans to make political choices at the ballot box, and so the electoral restrictions continue to be in place, as evidenced by the general upward trend in the number of uncontested votes.

It is also possible for the PAP to retain the GRC system without seriously threatening its political power and still make it possible for more individuals to cast their ballots by reducing the number of parliamentary seats linked to each GRC. When the GRC system was first introduced in the 1988 elections, a GRC represented only three parliamentary seats. In the 1991 elections, a GRC represented up to four seats; in the 1997 elections, it represented up to five seats;

---

<sup>31</sup> Elections Department, "1997 Parliamentary General Election Results," Singapore Government, [http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections\\_past\\_parliamentary1997.html](http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary1997.html) (accessed January 7, 2010).

Figure 2. Uncontested Votes in Singapore, 1968-2006



Author's own compilation based on data from the Singapore Elections Department, [http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections\\_past\\_parliamentary.html](http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary.html) (accessed January 7, 2010).

and in the 2001 and 2006 elections, it represented up to six seats. Reducing the size of the GRC and creating more single-member constituencies would make it easier for opposition parties to contest elections, thereby allowing more Singaporeans to vote. Even a token decrease in the number of seats linked to a GRC or an increase in the number of single-member wards would allow more Singaporeans to vote, without seriously undermining the PAP's hegemonic position. After all, prior to the 1988 elections, electoral innovations such as the GRC did not exist and still the PAP was able to form a government with a very commanding majority

Voting is ideal in increasing citizens' identification with the country because it is a responsibility that is applicable only to Singaporeans. It can therefore be regarded as a highly symbolic ritual in which participation is limited only to insiders. From an anthropological perspective, participation in rituals promotes intra-group identity and cohesion, which is congruent with Gellner's argument that a "mere category of persons...becomes a nation if and when the members of the category firmly recognize certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it."<sup>32</sup>

Singapore does not recognize dual citizenship. In order for permanent residents to gain the right to vote, they have to renounce their original citizenship. Hence, participating in the ritual of voting constitutes a costly signal to fake, which will serve to strengthen group solidarity by ensuring that

---

<sup>32</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalisms* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 7.

only individuals who share the same values as other members in that group are admitted. As Richard Sosis argues, “Rituals promote group cohesion by requiring members to engage in behavior that is too costly to fake.”<sup>33</sup> If the ritual is performed, it advertises the individual’s dedication to the group.<sup>34</sup> Participating in costly rituals helps to promote intra-group cooperation and minimizes the problem of free-ridership. If opportunity costs of joining and the responsibilities expected of members are low or nonexistent, anyone is free to join these groups, thereby undermining the strong bonds among members of that particular group. If an individual does not identify with the values of that particular group or does not believe that the incentives associated with membership outweigh the cost, there is no desire for him or her to fake the costly signals. However, for individuals who are already members of such a group, incurring the high costs strengthens their bonds with other members. It is therefore logical to assume that a group that imposes high opportunity costs on its members, such as renouncing one’s previous citizenship, would be more durable than if dual citizenship were recognized. At the same time, the ritual of voting allows citizens to indirectly script the national narrative, which might result in a version that has greater appeal and traction for them, thereby strengthening national identity to a much greater extent than the mere provision of subsidies.

As compared to their counterparts in 1965, Singaporeans today are more educated and affluent and do not readily accept governmental paternalism. It is necessary for the conduct of politics in Singapore to change in tandem with *zeitgeist*, since a system without the means for change is also a system without the means of preservation. Goh Chok Tong is clearly aware of this development. In an interview with Raj Vasil, he said:

In the past, ...we emphasised primarily the basics, relating to economics... . But that’s primarily a one-dimensional aspect of a society’s development. Now having succeeded in fulfilling the basic needs, we have got to address the question: how do you make life more fulfilling for Singaporeans, what is it they want?<sup>35</sup>

A more relaxed approach toward politics that allows for increased electoral competition and greater numbers of Singaporeans to vote is a policy that would reflect the spirit of the times, a phenomenon that Goh Chok Tong recognizes. Revisiting this theme in April 2010, he admitted that,

---

<sup>33</sup> Richard Sosis, “The Adaptive Value of Religious Ritual,” *American Scientist* 92 (2004): 166.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>35</sup> Vasil, *Governing Singapore*, 298.

The new generation of Singaporeans wants not only to be heard but also to participate in the decision process. Instead of regarding this development as a vexatious demand for government to be more open, transparent and accountable, it should be regarded as a positive sign of the citizens wanting to join in to build a better society. As basic needs are fulfilled, we must expect such a trend, no matter how much the people trust the government.<sup>36</sup>

Singapore is now one of the most economically developed states in Asia. It has entered, or will soon be entering, the post-materialist stage, in which more emphasis is placed on secondary needs such as self-expression and personal autonomy over basic needs such as material and physical well-being. Consequently, Tamney points out that Singaporeans are increasingly “alienated by puppeteer politicians...because they want greater control over their lives,”<sup>37</sup> a point echoing Rieger’s belief that with “the relative decline in importance of material growth will come an increasing urge for participation... in the moulding of Singapore society and in the discussions leading to policy decision-making.”<sup>38</sup> With levels of education in Singapore rising, Singaporeans are in better positions than in the past to make informed political choices for themselves. The conditions in Singapore are therefore conducive to have what David Miller labels “deliberative democracy” in that,

the decisions it reaches reflect open discussion among the participants, with people ready to listen to the views and consider the interests of others, and modify their own opinions accordingly. ...In a deliberative democracy, the final decision taken may not be wholly consensual, but it should represent a fair balance between the different views expressed in the course of the discussion, and to the extent that it does, even those who would prefer some other outcome can recognize the decision as legitimate.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Goh Chok Tong, “Increasing Public Trust in Leaders of a Harmonious Society” (2010) <http://www.straitstimes.com/STI/STIMEDIA/pdf/20100416/MRGOHSPEECH.pdf> (accessed May 30, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Joseph B. Tamney, *The Struggle over Singapore’s Soul: Western Modernization and Asian Culture* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 77.

<sup>38</sup> Philippe Regnier, “The Quality of Life in Singapore: A Foreigner’s Reflections,” in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, ed. K.S. Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 1042.

<sup>39</sup> David Miller, *Citizenship and National Identity* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2000), 3-4.

In an opinion poll conducted during the election period in Singapore in 2006, 83 percent of the respondents felt that it was important or very important to have different views in parliament, and 82 percent felt that it was important or very important to have checks and balances in parliament; bread-and-butter issues were regarded as less important.<sup>40</sup> Over time, this discrepancy between popular aspirations and actual political developments may result in tension. However, if there were increased electoral competition, more people would be able to vote, which would dissipate some of these tensions because more voters would be given an opportunity to shape and influence the election, and thus, policy outcomes. No government policy or decision can enjoy unanimous support, and so it is important for the government to show that an unpopular policy or decision still has the active consent of the majority of the population. A more competitive electoral landscape in which it is theoretically possible for the PAP to someday lose political power is necessary in order to let citizens play a direct part in the country's governance. In this way, the Government of Singapore could reasonably claim that it had sought the active consent of the voters, and not gained their implicit consent through walkover electoral victories.

### **Voting and National Identity**

A modern government performs many functions and it is difficult for individuals to have much interaction with this impersonal and distant institution. In most cases, the most straightforward way for individuals to have a meaningful relationship with the government is through voting, because it is a physical act that allows them to provide direct input into shaping governmental policies, an activity that also can serve as a common experience.

Benedict Anderson is right. It is impossible for an individual in a country to know each and every one of his or her fellow citizens. Yet, this lack of personal relations does not prevent people from seeing themselves as belonging to the same “imagined community.” Similarly, “[s]ociety,” according to Durkheim, “is not an empirical fact, definite and observable” as it is “merely an idea.”<sup>41</sup> Michael Walzer also supports this point by arguing that, “The state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived.”<sup>42</sup> It is therefore clear that the notion of what constitutes a nation, a society, or a state is malleable, a fact of which Goh Chok Tong is well aware:

---

<sup>40</sup> Gillian Koh, Tan Ern Ser, and Jeanne Conceicao, *Post-Election Survey* (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, 2006), 3.

<sup>41</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J.W. Swain (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1915), 420.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Walzer, “On the Role of Symbolism in Political Thought,” *Political Science Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (1967): 194.

I was born a British subject. Before I could even walk, the Japanese dropped their bombs on Singapore. Soon Singapore fell, and I became, I suppose a Japanese subject. The Japanese lost the war in 1945. Singapore was returned to the British, and I became a British subject again. In 1959, when I was still in school, I became a Singaporean citizen. In 1963, when I was in the university, I became a Malaysian when Singapore became part of Malaysia. Two years later, soon after I started work, I reverted to Singapore citizenship. So, all in all, I have changed nationality five times!<sup>43</sup>

Goh's experience shows that nationality is merely a label that can be changed easily. Hence, it is important to ensure that the substance behind the label remains constant. This is most likely to come about when individuals feel that they are involved constructively in the national narrative, which comes about through increased civic and political participation, most simply achieved through voting.

Some commentators may point out that national service would serve as a better representation of a ritual than voting in creating a national identity. However, national service is compulsory for all males in Singapore, be they citizens or permanent residents. Furthermore, national service is applicable only to males. By default, the female population is excluded. Females can opt to join the military on a professional basis, but not many choose to do so. According to the Singapore Ministry of Defense, as of 2007, there were only 1,715 women serving in the Singapore Armed Forces,<sup>44</sup> so military experience is far from common among Singaporean females. Since this essay aims to explore ways to establish and maintain a national identity, the chosen ritual has to involve all citizens, both males and females, and the political ritual of voting best fulfils such an objective.

Rituals are important. In premodern societies, they served a convenient function in establishing which individuals belonged to the "in-group" and which individuals belong to the "out-group." David I. Kertzer defines a ritual as "symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive," and its main characteristic is that it "follows highly structured, standardized sequences

---

<sup>43</sup> Goh Chok Tong, "The Second Long March," in *Speech by Mr Goh Chok Tong, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, at the Nanyang Technological Institute (NTI) Forum* (Singapore: Singapore Government, 1986).

<sup>44</sup> Ministry of Defense, "Interesting Facts and Figures," Ministry of Defense, [http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/mindef\\_websites/atozlistings/army/microsites/armymuseum/army\\_museum\\_singapore/news\\_and\\_events/Women\\_in\\_the\\_SAF\\_Exhibition.-imindefPars-0019-DownloadFile.tmp /Women%20in%20the%20SAF%20-%20Interesting%20Facts%20&%20F](http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/mindef_websites/atozlistings/army/microsites/armymuseum/army_museum_singapore/news_and_events/Women_in_the_SAF_Exhibition.-imindefPars-0019-DownloadFile.tmp /Women%20in%20the%20SAF%20-%20Interesting%20Facts%20&%20F)igures.pdf (accessed December 30, 2009).

and is often enacted at certain places and times that are themselves endowed with special symbolic meaning.”<sup>45</sup> A ritual is therefore an effective measure in promoting intra-group solidarity and identity because it is an activity limited to insiders. Rituals are able to confer exclusivity by admitting only certain individuals and omitting others. Supporting the importance of rituals in promoting and maintaining group identity, Myerhoff writes that they “have significance far beyond the information transmitted. They may accomplish tasks, accompany routine and instrumental procedures, but they always go beyond them, endowing some larger meaning to activities they are associated with.”<sup>46</sup> In the case of Singapore, the ritual of voting allows individuals to perceive themselves collectively as Singaporeans.

From a general anthropological perspective, premodern individuals participate in rituals in order to change or influence certain aspects of their milieu. It might be to pray for rain or for a better harvest. However, participation in rituals does not carry a warranty for success. Rituals might work; they might not. However, when they fail to deliver the desired outcomes, it is likely that the participants do not blame the ritual itself for the ensuing failures. Instead, the ritual’s failure is most likely explained away by factors such as the participants’ failure to execute the requisite actions properly, or that there were not enough participants present to ensure its efficacy. In most cases, blame is not apportioned to the ritual itself. This observation has significant ramifications because it is then possible to see rituals as a safety valve that dissipates tension within a society.<sup>47</sup> Hence, the measure of a ritual’s success or failure is not necessarily always the actual outcome *per se*, but rather its perceived ability to reduce or remove individuals’ psychological anxiety over the unknown and to provide an impression or affirmation to these individuals that they have some degree of control over their lives, even if only indirectly or incidentally.<sup>48</sup> Through participating in and conducting the said ritual, individuals feel that they are not entirely passive and at the mercy of inexplicable and impersonal forces about which they have little understanding or over which they have little control. Hence, Moore and Myerhoff argue that all societies, even modern and secular ones, use rituals “to lend authority and legitimacy to the positions of particular persons, organizations, occasions, moral values, views of the world,

---

<sup>45</sup> David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics & Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>46</sup> Myron J. Aronoff, *Power and Ritual in the Israel Labor Party* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorum, 1977), 200.

<sup>47</sup> It is important to acknowledge that voting is only a safety valve. It may relieve some pressure and tension within a society but it does not necessarily mean that it is able to address the root causes responsible for the formation of such pressure and tension in the first instance.

<sup>48</sup> Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics & Power*, 131-132.

<sup>49</sup> Sally F. Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, “Introduction: Secular Rituals: Forms and Meanings,” in *Secular Rituals*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara Myerhoff (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorum, 1977), 4.

and the like.”<sup>49</sup>

The above analysis is very applicable to the ritual of voting. A modern state performs many bureaucratic, economic, political, and social functions that are not visible. It can, at times, be seen to work in mysterious ways to members of the public. However, since political parties unveil their manifestoes during elections, individuals gain insights into their vision and direction for the country. In order to gain popular support, these manifestoes have to reflect the collective insecurities and problems the population faces. In the context of Singapore in which politics remains almost exclusively the domain of professional PAP politicians, voting is perhaps the only political activity in which ordinary Singaporean citizens can identify with the larger, and often, abstract political forces in the state. Sally Moore’s insightful study of an early post-colonial Tanzanian village in which political rituals, such as meetings, are able to connect the local constituents with national organizations which are often distant is highly relevant even in a contemporary society such as Singapore. She wrote:

Just as religious sacrifice connects the discrete worlds of men and gods, and is an attempt to establish contiguity through the act of sacrifice...so the Party or ward meeting similarly is an act that established contiguity. It puts the village in the presence of leaders who have contact with the next steps up in the Party hierarchy.<sup>50</sup>

Substitute the ritual of a meeting with voting, and the same effect is achieved. Singaporeans gain the impression that they are connected through voting with their government, one that is not keen to allow popular political participation, as reflected in Goh’s belief that,

Singapore will always be like a boat shooting the rapids. Those who have done white-water rafting would understand my analogy. They will understand the importance of the steersman as the boat negotiates the rocks in a fast-flowing, frothy river. The government is like this steersman or captain... . Once in the boat, I put my faith in the captain and did what he told me to do. Consultation took place before I stepped into the boat. Once I was in I had to play my part as a member of the crew. Do not think that Singapore is sailing in calm waters

---

<sup>50</sup> Sally F. Moore, “Political Meetings and the Simulation of Unanimity: Kilimanjaro 1973,” in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara Myerhoff (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorum, 1977), 154.

and therefore we can take risks. Or that we are freer to rock the boat because we now have a sturdier boat and each of us is equipped with a safety helmet and life jacket.<sup>51</sup>

In the context of Singapore's domestic politics, the consultation phase is arguably best represented during the lead-up to elections, when parties present their manifestoes to the electorate, thereby involving voters in the country's political process.

Although electoral competition may threaten the PAP's political position, this development is arguably in the nation's interest. This is because involvement in the country's political process is important in ensuring the cohesion and solidarity of a group, especially one as ethnically and religiously diverse as Singapore. Gellner's argument on how the rise of industrial society has changed the way in which individuals identify themselves is highly applicable to Singapore, where a large proportion of the population is well-educated and the workforce is highly mobile.

Industrial society is different. Its territorial and work units are *ad hoc*: membership is fluid, has a great turnover, and does not generally engage or commit the loyalty and identity of members... . There is very little in the way of any effective, binding organization at any level between the individual and the total community.<sup>52</sup>

Just as geographical boundaries do not stop Singaporeans from working and residing abroad, they also do not stop foreigners from seeking employment there as well. As a result, Kwa Chong Guan believes that, even today, "Singapore as a global city [is] like Singapore in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a transient migratory population...only sojourners, and [they] stay as long as they want to make a money and fortune and then move on."<sup>53</sup>

The Singaporean government is aware of this trend, thus the Prime Minister's Office established the "Overseas Singaporean Unit" to address it. The objective is to "engage Overseas Singaporeans, to connect them back to Singapore and with each other."<sup>54</sup> The first such event was held in New York City's Wollman Rink in Central Park on April 21, 2007. The

---

<sup>51</sup> Chua Mui Hoong, "Let Ideas Bloom, Says PM," *Straits Times*, October 14, 1999.

<sup>52</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalisms*, 63.

<sup>53</sup> Imelda Saad, "Observers Say Singapore's Future Political System Will Be Shaped by Global Trends" (2009), [http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/media/yr2009/CNA\\_Observers%20say%20Singapore%20future%20political%20system%20will%20be%20shaped%20by%20global%20trends\\_040609.pdf](http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/media/yr2009/CNA_Observers%20say%20Singapore%20future%20political%20system%20will%20be%20shaped%20by%20global%20trends_040609.pdf). (accessed December 30, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> OverseasSingaporean, "About OS Portal," Overseas Singaporean Unit, <http://www.overseasingaporean.sg/about.html> (accessed January 4, 2010).

objective was to allow Singaporeans based in the United States to interact with other Singaporeans at the rink, while enjoying entertainment and cuisines from Singapore. The next occasion will be held in Shanghai in 2011. Through such events, overseas Singaporeans can maintain some links with the country. However, a more significant change, though less publicized, is that overseas Singaporeans in certain countries are now able to vote as a result of the Singapore parliament's amendment of the Elections Parliamentary Act in April 2001, permitting overseas Singaporeans to vote in the 2006 elections. Based overseas, these Singaporeans are unlikely to benefit from various health-care and educational subsidies given to their local counterparts, which, again, undermines the effectiveness of such policies in cultivating a strong national identity, a problem which voting addresses.

Voting in elections is a safe conduit of public opinion, because it allows the general Singaporean population, both within and without, to play a specific role in the governance of Singapore through involvement in the political and legislative process, without the need to be directly involved in politics, which could entail significant opportunity cost. The experiences of opposition figures such as Chia Thye Poh, J.B. Jeyaretnam, Francis Seow, Chee Soon Juan, and Tang Liang Hong, who were variously detained without trial, rendered bankrupt after losing defamation suits, or harassed into self-imposed exile, lend credence to the popular perception that political opposition in Singapore is a very risky undertaking, further reducing the opportunity and desire for active and direct political participation by the citizenry. Hence, voting, which does not entail a steep learning curve, is an ideal way to familiarize individuals with the political process within a society in which a spectator political culture has become deeply entrenched.

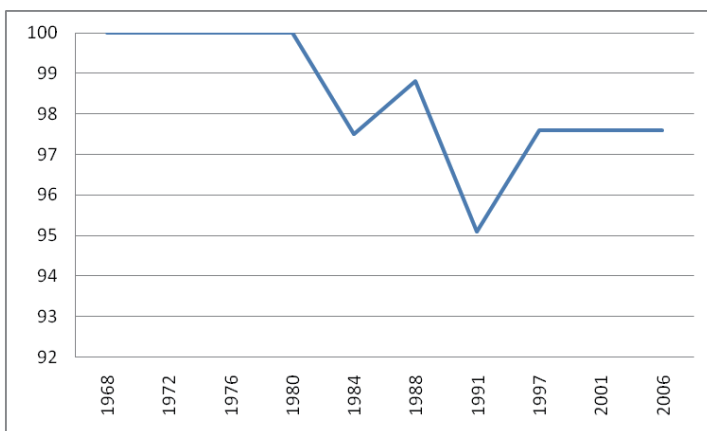
Elections, which serve a very valuable function as a valve for the release of social and political tensions, should therefore not be seen as a threat to the ruling party in Singapore. Since Singapore inherited the Westminster model from Britain, the city-state also practices the first-past-the-post system, not a system of proportional representation. On this basis, the ritual of elections "facilitates popular solidarity even when consensus is conspicuously absent,"<sup>55</sup> as demonstrated by the fact that, even though the PAP's share of the popular vote has decreased, the number of parliamentary seats it has won has remained consistently high. Even though opposition parties may gain more votes, these increases do not translate to more parliamentary seats, as shown in figure 3 below.

It is also important to view election results in context. Even though electoral support for the PAP declined from a high of 86.9 percent in the 1968 elections to a low of 60.6 percent in the 1991 elections, as seen in figure 4

---

<sup>55</sup> Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics & Power*, 153.

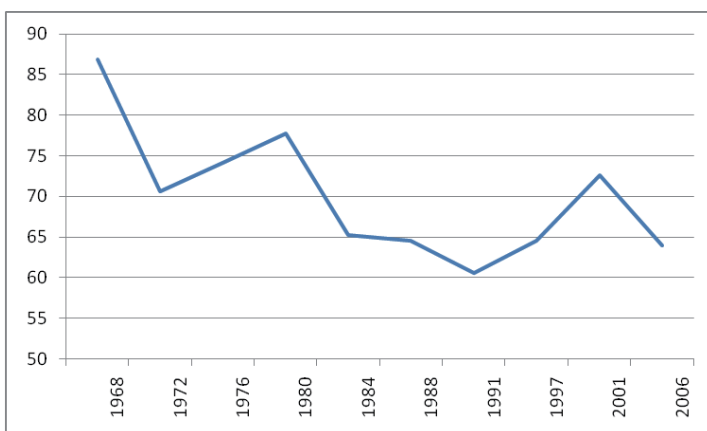
Figure 3. Percentage of Seats Won by the PAP, 1968-2006



Author's own compilation based on data from the Singapore Elections Department, [http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections\\_past\\_parliamentary.html](http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary.html) (accessed December 28, 2009).

below, it must be acknowledged that the PAP's worst performance of 60.6 percent is still a very good performance. In the 2006 elections, support for the PAP rebounded to 64 percent, which demonstrated that the PAP was not experiencing an irreversible decline in its popular support.

Figure 4. Percentage of Votes for the PAP, 1968-2006



Author's own compilation based on data from Singapore Elections Department, [http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections\\_past\\_parliamentary.html](http://www.elections.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary.html) (accessed December 28, 2009).

Although the PAP lost four seats in the 1991 elections, it managed to regroup. Its performance in the 1997 elections improved significantly, winning back two of the four seats it had lost previously. Even in the presence of electoral competition, the PAP always has managed to win the majority of the votes cast. This shows that there is still widespread support for the ruling party, and therefore, that increased competition does not necessarily threaten the PAP's political position. The 1997 turnaround indicated that the PAP continued to enjoy much support and was able to acquit itself admirably in electoral contests. Hence, the possibility of having a "freak election" is very remote, as Singaporeans have a high level of trust in the PAP government.<sup>56</sup> The ruling party can afford to implement a more benign view of elections: competitive elections should be regarded as an opportunity to renew PAP's mandate to govern and not perceived as a frivolous activity that detracts from the serious task of running a country.

The Taiwanese political experience also supports this observation. Lee Teng-hui took over as Taiwan's president after Chiang Ching-kuo passed away in 1988. Lee adopted a more liberal approach toward politics, and removed obstacles for opposition parties to compete in elections, culminating in the first direct presidential election in 1996. Even in the face of increased electoral competition, the Kuomintang (KMT) was returned to power with a clear majority. Although the KMT lost the 2000 presidential election, it was largely due to James Soong's defection from the KMT to run as an independent candidate, thereby splitting the KMT's share of the votes and allowing Chen Shiu-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to win. It was not increased electoral competition that undermined the KMT; it was the lack of party discipline, a development that is not directly linked to added electoral competition. Moreover, under Ma Ying-jeou's leadership, the KMT managed to win the 2008 presidential election, again supporting the argument that electoral competition does not necessarily mean that a previously dominant political party will not have the opportunity to regain the political power that it has lost.

Cases of corruption and violence during elections are not unheard of in Taiwan, which shows that voting does not address all the problems within Taiwanese society. Despite the outbreaks of violence and corruption, it is important to note that voting at elections has helped to foster and strengthen Taiwanese identity among the citizens.<sup>57</sup> Since Taiwan does not allow overseas

---

<sup>56</sup> Marissa Lee, "Highest Trust Level in Govt," *Straits Times*, February 5, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> The same could be said for India. It is important to remember that voting is not a panacea for all societal ills. As Amartya Sen points out, even though democratic institutions such as voting have not resolved all social and political problems in India, they have prevented them from becoming more serious. For instance, there may be cases of malnutrition in India, but since gaining independence in 1947, there have been no cases of famines because people have the chance to vote, which ensures that politicians have to consider and protect the interests of even

voting, many overseas Taiwanese choose to fly home to cast their ballots, an act that directly strengthens their links to and identification with their country.<sup>58</sup> The Taiwanese experience shows that voting in elections allows citizens to play a part in the governance of the country, an act that helps to create an inclusive society, which is important in a migrant society such as Singapore.

### **Voting: Making for an Inclusive Society**

Altogether, 20,513 foreigners took up Singaporean citizenship in 2009.<sup>59</sup> Almost all of them do not have the direct experience or memory of pivotal events in Singapore's history, discussed earlier. This endows more importance to the ritual of voting, because it signals their induction into and membership in a special and exclusive grouping. With a multitude of ethnicities and religions in Singapore, national identity cannot be based on exclusive markers such as these; it has to be based on civic considerations so that no groups or individuals are victims of discrimination or marginalization. Leach argues that rituals, which manifest themselves in this essay as voting, can therefore "achieve integration on the social level of interaction, between participants who on the cultural level—the ideological level of beliefs, rationales, interpretation of symbols—in fact, lack consensus."<sup>60</sup> More importantly, voting perpetuates the belief that everyone within a society is equal and that citizens play a part in determining Singapore's policies and development. Such a perception is important in cultivating a sense of national identity among new citizens because it shows that they have been accepted as full members of Singaporean society, enjoying the same rights and responsibilities as other citizens. As Stanley A. Renshon puts it, voting is integral to national identity:

Voting is...an essential marker of full community membership in a democratic republic. It is the ultimate reflection of the mutual consent between prospective [members] and those already members of the...national community by which immigrants become full, legal, and recognized members. In choosing to enter into the naturalization process, immigrants

---

low-caste Indians who constitute the majority of the population. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 178-182.

<sup>58</sup> Mark O'Neil, "Coming Home to Vote in Taiwan," *Asia Sentinel*, March 17, 2008. See also "Tension in Taiwan: The Expatriates; Thousands Head Home for the Vote," *New York Times*, March 22, 1996.

<sup>59</sup> Li Xueying, "Old and New Citizens Get Equal Chance, Says MM Lee," *Straits Times*, April 13, 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Edmund Leach, quoted in David I. Kertzer, "The Role of Ritual in Political Change," in *Cultural and Political Change*, ed. Myron J. Aronoff (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1983), 63.

demonstrate an interest in becoming full members of that community as well as a willingness to spend the time and effort necessary to do so. In accepting an immigrant as a full citizen at the end of the process, the community affirms the formal transition to full membership. In linking the vote to full membership that is the capstone of the naturalization process, the community affirms that new members have shown the requisite emotional attachment and personal commitment to be trusted with helping to make community decisions.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

Singapore is undergoing a profound demographic change. As Singapore's population increases due to its liberal immigration policy, Singaporeans constitute a declining proportion of the overall population. In order to maintain a strong national identity, it is necessary to have policies that distinguish between citizens and noncitizens. Thus far, the PAP government has relied on the provision of subsidies to citizens to differentiate between the two groups. However, the monetization of national identity can achieve only superficial results. After all, a drop in such subsidies might also decrease a citizen's identification with Singapore. Conversely, the provision of better benefits and living standards may entice Singaporeans to emigrate, a development that is taking place today. Hence, this essay argues that it is important for the Singaporean government to adopt a more liberal and relaxed approach to elections that allows for greater political competition. With increased electoral competition, more parliamentary seats would be contested and, naturally, more Singaporeans would have the opportunity to cast a vote. Such a development would be helpful in cultivating a sense of national identity and belonging. This is because voting provides a better way than subsidies to differentiate between citizens and noncitizens, and also allows people to directly exercise their rights and responsibilities as Singaporean citizens.

Voting affirms the notion of citizenship better than the use of subsidies. Receiving subsidies is largely a passive activity, whereas voting is an active act. An individual must physically show up at a polling booth in order to cast a ballot. Voting, therefore, "is the essence of citizenship."<sup>62</sup> To Oldfield, "citizenship is an activity or a practice, and not simply a status, so that not to engage in the practice is, in important senses, not to be a citizen."<sup>63</sup> Hence,

---

<sup>61</sup> Stanley A. Renshon, *Noncitizen Voting and American Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 3-4.

<sup>62</sup> "A Citizen's Right," *New York Times*, April 19, 2004.

<sup>63</sup> Adrian Oldfield, *Citizenship and Community: Civic Republicanism and the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1990), 4.

it is necessary to provide opportunities for citizens to exercise their rights and the responsibilities expected of them, which are embodied in the ritual of voting. The presence of foreigners in Singapore is a reality that cannot be wished away. Rather than focusing on their differences from Singaporeans, a more constructive approach would be to allow them to become more like Singaporeans, which is most apparent through voting in elections.

As a young country, Singapore does not have a long and glorious past to serve as a focal point for its citizens; they can only look forward to the future, and voting allows them to do so. Even though a more competitive electoral system would theoretically undermine the PAP's political hegemony, the ruling party should have little to worry about. It acquitted itself extremely well in highly competitive elections during the 1960s and 1970s. Although a political party's *raison d'être* is to stay in political power, there are times when considerations of the national interest ought to be given precedence over parochial party interest.