

Democratization and the Discourse on Stability in Hong Kong and Singapore

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Abstract

Democrats in both Hong Kong and Singapore face a discourse on stability that is hostile to liberal democracy, but only activists in Hong Kong have successfully reframed this discourse to motivate potential supporters to actively push for democratization. The difference between the situations in Hong Kong and Singapore can be explained by the concept of collective action frames, which demonstrates that it is not sufficient to associate stability with democracy, for supporters also need to establish a motive for activism. The study shows that the success of reframing rests with the saliency of the notion that authoritarianism is a problem for stability, in part influenced by the degree of access to the media.

Keywords: Discourse on stability, opposition, Hong Kong, Singapore, collective action frames.

While liberals have argued that good governance requires democracy, the ruling governments of many authoritarian regimes promote the idea that political, economic, and social stability depend on an authoritarian form of “good government,” which is more important and less risky than participatory democracy. Faced with this situation, the democratic opposition in both Hong Kong and Singapore has tried to change the hegemonic discourse that delegitimized political opposition and weakened political mobilization. As its many large protests make clear, this has been much more successful in Hong Kong, where from the 1970s onward, opposition groups have been able to successfully reframe the vague concept of stability in their campaign for greater democratization. In contrast, in Singapore, a similar discourse contributed to the immobilization of opposition parties and civil society, at least until the 2011 general election. This raises the question how and under what circumstances

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activists can change a dominant discourse to mobilize potential supporters for greater democratization.

This study considers Hong Kong and Singapore, which share many similarities including rapid economic development, a majority ethnic Chinese population, and soft-authoritarian rule based on performance legitimacy.¹ The analysis interprets speeches, books, Web sites and other texts to understand how “stability” is cast and how that interpretation influences the behavior of the political opposition. These sources over a period from 1970 until today are used to represent the discourse of the opposition and the ruling elite about stability, as well as to document both its change and continuity. The literature demonstrates that the opposition’s decisions are deeply influenced by the prevailing discourse, which means that ideas and concepts cannot be ignored in a holistic understanding of political change. Due to their power in the society, the ruling elite are instrumental in setting the agenda and thus in framing the realm in which oppositional activity is considered admissible. At the same time, the discourse of the ruling elite is translated and transformed into a symbolic rhetoric from which movement action could result. In this case, the meaning of “stability,” which in the grammar of the ruling elite is used as a warning against liberal democracy, becomes a mobilizer for democracy when the movement is capable of successfully reframing “stability” in terms of, rather than in opposition to, democracy.

The first part of this essay develops an analytical frame for analyzing discourse in the process of democratization by highlighting the significance of the concept of collective action frames. Next, I trace the discourse in Hong Kong’s history and how it has been used by the ruling elite over the years to legitimize the continuation of soft authoritarianism, while an opposition movement has emerged and reframed the discourse for its own purpose. As a consequence, for many Hong Kongers, democracy has become synonymous with continued stability. In contrast, Singapore’s opposition movement has been much less successful in reframing the discourse. Using the government-influenced media and its hegemonic position, the ruling party has effectively linked its electoral authoritarian rule to Singapore’s prospects for stability. Only recently, with the help of the Internet, have activists drawn attention to government failures in order to push for greater democracy. Finally, I conclude with some consequences for opposition movements elsewhere which are also faced with a similar dominant discourse.

¹ While Hong Kong is technically not an independent state, its unique position in international politics has made the city a “state” in many regards. Under colonial rule, the British government rarely intervened in the city’s internal affairs. Since the handover in 1997, under “one-country two systems,” Hong Kong has tried to maintain this situation, although there are increasing signs of greater interference by the Chinese government in the Special Administrative Region.

The Role of Discourse in the Democratization Process

The majority of research into democratization processes has focused on concrete and tangible factors, such as economic development, economic class, cultural traditions, and elite politics, while much less attention has been paid to ideational politics. Even when the latter was studied, the focus was largely on discussions within the intellectual community, especially in China.² The focus here is on hegemonic discourses about the goals of the state, which are subconsciously accepted by the majority of actors and influence their behavior. The main problem obviously is that these discourses are extremely complex phenomena which are difficult to separate from external factors. Nevertheless, the dominant belief system which undergirds political institutions, and thus legitimizes the status quo, has an impact on the ability of political activists to challenge the regime because, as Gaventa notes, “it shapes or determines conceptions of the necessities, possibilities, and strategies of challenge in situations of latent conflict.”³ As Dryzek and Holmes recognized in their study of democratic transitions in Eastern Europe, “Political development and discourses of democracy (and authoritarianism) interact: discourses help determine what is possible and likely in political development, which in turn can change the terms of discourse.”⁴

This essay analyzes the hegemonic antidemocratic discourse surrounding the vague concept of stability, which is promoted by the ruling elite in both Hong Kong and Singapore to legitimize their rule. The rulers in both city-states argue that stability should be achieved through effective or “good” government and not necessarily through participatory democracy. However, because the concept of stability is vague it has provided the democratic opposition with the political opportunity to reframe the concept for its own purpose.⁵ Indeed, activists are making the case that democracy is essential for long-term stability.⁶ So far, activists in Hong Kong have been much more successful in reframing the dominant discourse to legitimize their public campaign for

² Thomas Heberer, “Discourses, Intellectuals, Collective Behaviour and Political Change: Theoretical Aspect of Discourses,” in *The Power of Ideas: Intellectual Input and Political Change in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Claudia Derichs and Thomas Heberer (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2006), 16-35.

³ John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 15.

⁴ John S. Dryzek and Leslie Templeman Holmes, *Post-Communist Democratization: Political Discourses across Thirteen Countries* (Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ix.

⁵ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁶ For Hong Kong, see Agnes S. Ku, “The ‘Public’ up against the State: Narrative Cracks and Credibility Crisis in Postcolonial Hong Kong,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 1 (2001): 121-144.

greater democratization than their Singaporean counterparts, even though the recent strengthening of political opposition in Singapore suggests that the regime's ability to control the hegemonic discourse is waning.

In order to achieve change, the discourse of the ruling elite, which legitimizes authoritarian rule, must be challenged. Only when the authoritarian regime's ideological dominance can be undermined, will an oppositional movement be able to mobilize enough support for its cause. As social movement research has found, injustices and other problems do not necessarily lead to collective action.⁷ This means that the opposition needs to recognize the "language of legitimacy" to redefine what constitutes legitimate political activity.⁸ Legitimacy is not only the result of objective factors (economic growth, ability to fulfill the demands of the population, and so on), or a normative prescription (only a fully democratic polity can be legitimate), but also a construct, which takes on different meanings under varying circumstances. In an authoritarian regime, which lays claim to popular legitimacy, it is part of the discourse of the ruling elite. As Alagappa⁹ notes, "legitimacy also frames the discourse among strategic groups—and even between these groups and the public—in their endeavor to control the use of state power." The prevalent discourse which defines what constitutes legitimate political activity poses a serious obstacle for potential opposition and thus needs to be effectively challenged.

In order to systematically capture the effect of the "stability discourse" on the behavior of the opposition and its ability to manipulate it for its own purpose, it is important to take a closer look at the concept of framing. The study of frames has become a dominant aspect of social movement research and also has been used recently to understand elite discourses.¹⁰ A frame is an interpretive schema through which the understanding of the world is simplified.¹¹ Because framing occurs through discourse, it inherits the basic power relationship between the ruling elite's discourse and the counter-discourse shared mainly by opposition groups. It is important to see the "discourse" of the ruling elite and of the democracy movements in relation to the interaction in which the two groups of actors are located.¹² The analysis of these frames, therefore, is a method of determining how people comprehend and interpret different events.

The ideological work of social movements, such as a democracy

⁷ William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁸ Muthiah Alagappa, "Introduction," in *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 1-10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ John A. Noakes, "Official Frames in Social Movement Theory: The FBI, HUAC, and the Communist Threat in Hollywood," *Sociological Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2000): 657-680.

¹¹ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row-Colophon, 1974).

¹² Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Collective Action, Social Movements and Politics* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

movement, can be analyzed through collective action frames, which refer to the negotiated meaning of what constitutes the problematic situation with which the movement is concerned and contains information about who or what to blame as well as an alternative solution. These frames also provide arguments to encourage others to help change the situation. In their study on collective action frames, Benford and Snow identified three different core framing tasks: *diagnostic framing* (how a group identifies and attributes a problem), *prognostic framing* (what a group considers as the adequate solution to this problem), and *motivational framing* (which provides to the group the rationale for collective action).¹³ The first two tasks are designed mainly to generate consensus within the movement, while the latter serves to mobilize activists to participate in collective action. Although case studies show that prognostic framing is one of the primary ways in which social movement organizations differ, the present study analyzes cases in which the diagnostic and prognostic framing tasks are the same (both movements argue that democracy is needed for long-term stability) and only the motivational framing task differs (the willingness to actively push for democratization).

While social movements attempt to frame their collective action in a way that mobilizes individuals, they are confronted with an elite or master frame. As Noakes recognizes, “Most frames support existing versions of reality by reiterating dominant expressions or reinforcing elite interpretations of events and, therefore, discourage collective action by aggrieved populations.”¹⁴ Opposition groups are therefore often forced to reinterpret existing discourses, which I consider a form of “reframing.” This comes closest to Snow et al.’s concept of *frame alignment* and, in particular, to the aspect of *frame transformation*, which argues that there must be “a change in the perceived seriousness of the condition such that what was previously seen as an unfortunate but tolerable situation is now defined as inexcusable, unjust, or immoral, thus connoting the adoption of an injustice frame or variation thereof.”¹⁵ This highlights the importance of increasing the saliency of a problem to mobilize potential supporters. While originally democracy was seen as an impediment to stability, democrats in the two cases are trying to reframe it as a necessary precondition. In other words, most individuals can be mobilized for the democracy movement only when they realize how important democracy is to their personal lives. In Hong Kong, democracy is framed as a shield against corrosive mainland Chinese influences and, in Singapore, increasingly as a protection against a government that is considered to favor the rich and new immigrants.

¹³ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611-639.

¹⁴ Noakes, “Official Frames in Social Movement Theory,” 657.

¹⁵ David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (1986): 474.

The Discourse on Stability in Hong Kong

From the beginning of the British colony, colonial administrators were worried about social instability. The management of the relatively small colony avoided any major conflicts between the British colonizers and the Chinese residents. Despite the setback of World War II, the British returned to full power afterward. Amid the civil war raging on the mainland, the city provided a refuge for thousands of fleeing Chinese. Social conditions, however, deteriorated under the massive population increase. As a consequence, there were two major riots in the 1960s, which shook the colonial government that had preferred a hands-off approach to governance. One was the 1966 Star Ferry riot, which even though it was triggered by a mere five-cent price increase for first-class fares, reflected widespread discontent with the colonial authorities.¹⁶

For fear of greater Chinese subversion, the government decided to emphasize “good government” and efficient rule. Amid the challenges, the government resorted to a “discourse on stability” which sought to contain any political opposition. While initially meant to stem Chinese influence, colonial administrators soon also framed democracy to be counterproductive to economic development, which was described as a paramount goal to maintain “stability.” Opposition should be incorporated into the political system as far as possible. A government report investigating the circumstances of the 1966 riot concluded that the increased interest to participate in politics was due to a gap in the communication between the government and the public.¹⁷ The report stated, “We were left with the impression that those who complain are seeking not so much a change in Government, as readier access to the Government.”¹⁸ The government’s plan included the introduction of the City District Officer (CDO) scheme in 1968, which had the stated goal of better understanding the people and the added benefit of depoliticizing the population. It placed officers in Hong Kong’s ten districts, who conducted surveys, study groups, and meetings with various district organizations and local leaders. While it was an attempt to create a more responsive government, the plan also generated the expectation among numerous newly emerging groups that the government would have to listen to their demands.

The riots also justified the use of coercion against more “sinister” groups. A crucial event was the 1967 riots, which started as a labor dispute in March but turned violent in May and lasted until July. The leftist unions involved in these

¹⁶ Lam Wai-man, *Understanding the Political Culture of Hong Kong* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004).

¹⁷ Tai-lok Lui and Stephen W. K. Chiu, “Social Movements and Public Discourse on Politics,” in *Hong Kong’s History: State and Society under Colonial Rule*, ed. Tak-Wing Ngo (London: Routledge, 1999), 101-118.

¹⁸ Quoted in Norman J. Miners, *The Government and Politics of Hong Kong*, 3rd ed. (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1981), 381.

violent protests were closely linked to the communists, who were influenced by the Cultural Revolution raging on the mainland.¹⁹ Following the 1967 riots, members of the ruling elite noted that “the local communists have changed their tactics, their aim remains the same: the undermining of Government’s authority, the undermining of law and order and the imposition of their will.”²⁰ The fear of communism, furthermore, provided a serious impediment against greater democratization for the British colonial power. A British official noted in 1959, “Overt aggression by the Chinese is less likely than an attempt to get the Colony by subversion.”²¹ The threat from Communist China, therefore, played a significant role in oppositional politics in Hong Kong and created the limits in which interaction was possible. Nevertheless, the emphasis on *laissez-faire* and the influence of the British government also circumscribed the suppression of opposition groups, which in spite of the existence of strict rules, had to be conducted in secret.

While Hong Kong experienced tremendous economic growth and rapid social changes, from the early 1980s until 1997, it also underwent a process of partial democratization, which allowed citizens more direct participation in the political process. Nevertheless, full democracy was denied because of the handover of the British colony to the government of the People’s Republic of China in 1997, which has so far limited the extension of suffrage and has even tried to restrict the political freedoms of Hong Kongers.²²

The elite discourse in Hong Kong often frames political opposition in negative and destructive terms. For instance, the Occupy Central Movement, which proposes to block roads in the central business district if demands for democratic elections are not met, is portrayed as a grave danger to Hong Kong’s “stability.” The call for stability has a long history, as can be seen in a 1980 government report by the secretive Standing Committee on Pressure Groups (SCOPG), which was set up in 1978 to monitor the activities of the newly arising interest groups. The report, which was leaked to the British press, stated:

It is the potential of pressure groups which is disturbing: the possibility of their developing into something more sinister or unleashing forces damaging to the whole community. The activities of pressure groups can encourage a widespread

¹⁹ The riots are described in more detail in Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

²⁰ *Hong Kong Hansard: Reports of the Meetings of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong*, 1968, 81.

²¹ David Faure, *Colonialism and the Hong Kong Mentality* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 2003), 180.

²² Nicholas Thomas, *Democracy Denied: Identity, Civil Society and Illiberal Democracy in Hong Kong* (Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 1999).

critical and argumentative attitude when knocking the Government is fashionable.²³

Political opposition was seen as potentially harmful to “stability.” A similar argument was made by former Chief Executive Donald Tsang, who said in 2006:

Some politicians have chosen to be in the opposition and will oppose every policy raised by the Government whether or not the policy is reasonable. Their intention is to undermine the Government’s prestige and popularity, for fulfilling their self-image, for media limelight.²⁴

The former head of the Special Administrative Region thus framed political opposition to be potentially illegitimate. He accused his critics of trying to destroy the reputation of the government for their own personal interest. At the same time, he suggested that opposition is not necessary when the government pursues the interests of the general public.

Maintaining social “stability” is often used as an argument against (rapid) democratization. This line of argument is reflected in Chief Justice Denys Roberts’ comment, who in 1980 wrote about the courts: “The maintenance of this respect for the authorities is a potent factor in the stability of society.”²⁵ This opinion suggests that criticism of the government could potentially blemish the image of the government and consequently harm the stability of Hong Kong. Social stability thus becomes an important cornerstone in the justification of authoritarianism. The conservative Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB) also states in its party program that Hong Kong “must build and develop its democracy in a steady pace—engaging democracy with unrelenting fervor without foregoing stability or neglecting to address the growing demands and issues of society.”²⁶ Social concerns, which are separated from democracy, are of primary importance, while rapid democratization is framed as a potential problem.

From an administrative perspective, the ruling elite have attempted to frame democracy as inefficient. For instance, during an English-language radio interview, Donald Tsang argued that the Cultural Revolution was an extreme example of democracy. Furthermore, he claimed, “In other democracies, even

²³ *Hong Kong Hansard*, 1995, 3596.

²⁴ *Hong Kong Hansard*, 2006, 7362.

²⁵ Quoted in Judy Chan, “Praise for Free Society,” *South China Morning Post*, January 8, 1980.

²⁶ Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, *Party Platform* (1997), <http://www.dab.org.hk/eng/en/content/web.do?id=bb3c8871222b185501222b6f48c30002> (accessed September 13, 2011).

if you have an elected person, then you overturn the policy in California, for instance, you have initiative number, number, number what, then you overturn policy taken by the government, that's not necessarily conducive to efficient government."²⁷ Instead of focusing on democracy, the rulers argue that it is more important to achieve "good government."²⁸ This argument was first made during the 1970s, when the Hong Kong government rejected an increase in the number of elected Urban Council members or an enlarged franchise. The discourse on stability influenced the opinion that elected representatives would not necessarily perform better than nominated officials,²⁹ and that granting people the right to vote would politicize the administration and thus potentially undermine its effectiveness.

In the eyes of many conservatives in Hong Kong, democracy also would hinder economic growth. The government claims not only that democracy could harm relations with mainland China and thus the local economy, but also that more popularly elected officials would lead to greater expenditures for social services, causing a negative impact on economic competition. For instance, on the eve of the massive July 1, 2014 protest march that drew hundreds of thousands of people, Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying emphasized recent economic achievements, such as stable housing prices and increasing salaries, to warn the people against doing anything that "affects Hong Kong's stability and damages Hong Kong's prosperity."³⁰

Finally, in the rhetoric of some Hong Kong government officials, the desire for stability also has been framed as a cultural trait and thus been given a sense of immutability. For instance, pro-establishment politician Regina Ip wrote in 2008:

[W]estern liberal democracy revolves around the rights of the individual, while China's political system has, from early times, been built on the family as the basic unit. ...The Chinese have always accepted government by "guardians", not dissimilar to Plato in ancient Athens, who are supposedly endowed with a superior art of government. Such a system might seem nightmarish to the west, but can you blame an

²⁷ Radio and Television Hong Kong, "Chief Executive Phone-in," *Radio 3* (October 12, 2007), http://www.rthk.org.hk/rthk/radio3/policy_phonein/20071012.html (accessed June 16, 2008).

²⁸ Lo Shiu-hing, *The Politics of Democratization in Hong Kong* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Eng.: Macmillan Press, 1997), 50.

²⁹ " 'Best Talent' May Not Win Elections," *South China Morning Post*, March 12, 1980.

³⁰ Cited in Chris Lau and Lo Wei, "Pro-democracy Rally and Burning of White Paper Kicks off July 1 Day of Protest in Hong Kong," *South China Morning Post* (July 1, 2014), <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1544112/pro-democracy-rally-kicks-july-1-day-protest-hong-kong> (accessed July 1, 2014).

apple for not being an orange? And does the world need seismic change overnight?³¹

The argument here is that Chinese culture does not support “Western” or liberal democratic values because of the attendant destabilizing effects of individualism.

In order to challenge the ruling elite, the democratic movement has used various attempts to reframe the elite discourse on stability to mobilize activists in their campaign to promote democratization. The liberal nature of the state and the official strategy to include the public in the decision-making process allowed challengers to legitimize their own role. For example, in 1973, Brook Bernacchi, the head of Hong Kong’s oldest political group, the Reform Club, and longtime advocate of direct representation, declared, “The duty of the Opposition is to oppose. The Reform Club strongly supports the wishes, the wants and needs of Hongkong citizens.”³² Even when Hong Kong became part of China in 1997, the democratic opposition continued to refer to the liberal basis of the government institutions. This explains the support for filibusters to block legislation. As the electoral system favors the pro-establishment camp, some pan-democratic legislators consider it their duty to stymie any laws they consider to be against the public will. The increasingly frequent use of this tactic, however, has led to a strong reaction from the ruling elite, who have described it as a serious threat to the city’s economic stability, among other things.

The democratic activists often agree with the government that “stability” is the most important goal of the state, but they consider democratization as essential to it. Democracy is thus framed as a pragmatic decision instead of a moral choice. As most political parties aim to speak for the whole population, they and interest groups, alike, often frame their issues and concerns in the context of stability. For example, in 1984, the head of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union (HKPTU), the late Szeto Wah, wrote to his members and to prospective new members:

At the eve of this history-making change, it is more important than ever that we should strive to strengthen and expand our unity and solidarity so that we may continue to protect the labour rights of our members, promote the healthy development of education, and, in co-operation with all members of the public who are well-intentioned about the future of Hong Kong, contribute towards its *prosperity*, and *stability* (emphasis added).³³

³¹ Regina Ip, “Rights to Govern,” *South China Morning Post*, May 26, 2008, 26.

³² Quoted in “English Test for Urbco Candidates Questioned,” *South China Morning Post*, February 16, 1973.

Labor rights and the promotion of education are clearly framed in the context of prosperity and stability, which appear as the ultimate goals of the group. Unity and solidarity within the group as well as cooperation with other people in Hong Kong are seen as the preconditions for lasting economic stability.

In order for the democratic opposition to successfully argue for political change, it needs to challenge the dominant discourse. Because stability trumps all other concerns, the opposition has to reframe the dominant understanding of stability in order to associate it closely with democracy. For instance, Audrey Eu of the Article 45 Concern Group makes it clear that stability and democracy are not a contradiction: “Every society longs for harmony, stability, and prosperity but this does not at all mean that it rejects democracy, freedom, and human rights.”³⁴ The Democratic Party of Hong Kong (DPHK) tries to reframe the dominant discourse on stability in a similar way. Even though the following quote from its 1994 manifesto does not use the word “stability,” it links democracy to prosperity, a concept that has been closely associated with stability in the Hong Kong context.

Democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law are the foundations for progress and prosperity in a modern society. In Hong Kong, it is necessary to speed up the development of a democratic system of government, to strengthen the protection of freedom, human rights, and the rule of law.³⁵

Many government critics assume that greater representation of the public would lead to a more stable and prosperous society. The prodemocracy groups regard the West as a model of political development because democratization there has led to extremely stable countries. By aligning modernity and stability with democratic rights, these oppositional groups and individuals try to use the prevalent discourse on stability and prosperity to propagate democratization.

However, while the democratic opposition argues that stability requires democracy, the activists also are aware of the danger that the process of democratization may come at the expense of stability. For example, the pan-democratic Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China (the Alliance) emphasized the importance of economic and social stability:

³³ Hong Kong Professional Teachers Union, *Let Us All Join HKPTU*, recruitment flier, 1985.

³⁴ Audrey Eu, “Fazheng Suibi - Yao Wending = Buyao Puxuan?” [Essay on the government: Wanting stability = not wanting a general election?] *Article 45 website* (2005), http://www.article45.org/public/contents/article?revision_id=9439&item_id=9438 (accessed June 19, 2009).

³⁵ Democratic Party of Hong Kong, “Manifesto,” *Democratic Party Website* (1994), http://www.dphk.org/e_site/policydet_e.html (accessed June 27, 2008).

[T]he “Alliance” put forward the five major guiding principles...to achieve the democratic rights, freedom, human rights and the rule of law in China, but not forgetting to consider Hong Kong’s economic stability and social order; and also to conduct all the actions in a peaceful and nonviolent way.³⁶

This quote shows that the achievement of democratic values is viewed as contingent on maintaining “stability.” Since the introduction of democracy is necessarily accompanied by uncertainties, this argument potentially could have an adverse effect on the ability of the democrats to mobilize prodemocracy movement members, thus inhibiting the transformation of the stability discourse.

As mentioned above, the persuasiveness of the reframing effort is important for the development of a motive for activism (the *motivational framing*) if activists seek to increase support for the democratic movement. Uncertainties in the post-handover system, which have contributed to institutional weaknesses³⁷ and ineffective governance, enabled democrats to mobilize supporters to fight for democracy, which was reframed as essential for the continued stability of Hong Kong. The pan-democrats have used government failures to draw attention to the need for greater democracy. Christine Loh of the Civic Exchange, for instance, wrote that “due to the inexperience of the current administration and a series of policy failures in various areas over the last six years, Hong Kong faces a crisis of governance, which may be curable only with fundamental reform of the political system.”³⁸ Following the handover in 1997, a number of crucial events significantly increased the saliency of this new understanding of stability and highlighted the threats of authoritarianism and thus the urgency to confront it. The most crucial event was the government’s proposal to enact an Anti-Subversion Act, which was supposed to lay out the details for Article 23 of the Basic Law but was widely seen as a threat to the civic freedoms that Hong Kongers enjoyed. Other governance problems such as the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the 2003 SARS epidemic, declining social mobility, and growing income inequality fueled anti-government sentiment. In 2003, half a million people protested against

³⁶ Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China, *Dishibajie Changwu Weiyuanhui: Quannian Gongzuo Baogao* [18th Standing Committee: Work report for the year] (2007), http://www.alliance.org.hk/about/report/report_new.html (accessed June 12, 2008).

³⁷ Ian Scott, “The Disarticulation of Hong Kong’s Post Handover Political System,” *China Journal* 43 (2000): 29-53.

³⁸ Christine Loh, “Introduction: Enhancing Democratic Participation in Hong Kong,” in *Building Democracy: Creating Good Government for Hong Kong*, ed. Christine Loh and the Civic Association (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 1.

a government that was portrayed as inefficient and inept. The protest allowed democrats a partial victory when the government withdrew its proposal for an Anti-Subversion Act on September 3, 2003, and when Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa resigned on March 12, 2005, before the end of his term. However, the government rejected the call for immediate greater democratization and postponed the introduction of direct election of the full Legislative Council and the Chief Executive. In recent years, the Hong Kong government has been increasingly criticized for its pro-China policies, such as the attempt to introduce “national education” to create a more positive image of China’s authoritarian system in the minds of Hong Kong’s youth. National education is often portrayed by opponents as undermining Hong Kong’s uniqueness and thus as a threat to the stability of Hong Kong. The existence of regular mass protests attests that activists have successfully reframed the discourse about stability and now use it effectively to mobilize supporters to participate in their campaign for democratization.

The Discourse on Stability in Singapore

Similar to Hong Kong, Singapore’s turbulent post-World War II years created fertile ground for a discourse on stability. The years prior to independence were characterized by vibrant social and political spheres that revealed many of the problems of a multi-ethnic society under colonial rule. The racially charged atmosphere exploded in a violent riot which motivated the colonial government to co-opt ethnic leaders and deemphasize racial politics. The Maria Hertogh Riot of 1950 occurred in response to a court decision that had awarded the thirteen-year-old Maria Hertogh to her biological parents, who were Dutch Catholics, after having been raised as a Muslim. The sad result of the violence was that eighteen people were killed and 173 injured. Other race riots in the 1960s also involved a struggle between Muslims and non-Muslims, which after independence in 1965, led to the government’s promulgation of four founding principles: multiracialism, multilingualism, multireligiosity, and multiculturalism. This justified ethnic quotas in public housing and the introduction of Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs), which require at least one minority candidate in a district of three to six candidates, a policy introduced to minimize potential threats to the dominance of the ruling party. Furthermore, GRCs delegitimized oppositional politics based on race or religion and even allowed the ruling party to use coercion against the opposition. In 1997, for example, Workers’ Party candidate Tang Liang Hong was accused of being a Chinese chauvinist by the leadership of the People’s Action Party (PAP). When he called this a lie, he was sued for defamation. As a consequence, he fled Singapore and was prosecuted in absentia.³⁹

³⁹ Diane K. Mauzy and R. S. Milne, *Singapore Politics under the People’s Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002).

The communist movement had perhaps an even greater effect on the justification for authoritarianism in Singapore in the 1950s, where, as in Hong Kong, communists were linked to a number of protests that turned into riots. In three consecutive years, communists were blamed for their involvement in protests that turned violent. In 1954, student protests against the introduction of the draft became violent, in 1955 a labor dispute resulted in violence (known as the Hock Lee Bus Riots), and in 1956 the dissolution of the student political organization, the Chinese Middle School Students Union (SCMSSU), for its links to the communist movement, led to thirteen people killed and one hundred injured. While these riots were a great challenge to the colonial regime, they were also used as a justification to undermine the leftist opposition.

After independence in 1965, Singapore's rulers repeatedly framed liberal democracy as a threat to the political, economic, and social stability of the state. For example, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister, stated in 1992:

A country must first have economic development, then democracy may follow. With a few exceptions, democracy has not brought good government to new developing countries. Democracy has not led to development because the governments did not establish stability and discipline necessary for development.⁴⁰

Lee has played a dominant role in the city-state since independence. He casts democracy as a "net-loss," because the government has less time to focus on policy-making. A progovernment opinion printed in the *Straits Times* succinctly summarizes the official stance, which emphasizes Singapore's size and geopolitical location:

Given that Singapore is such a small country with big neighbours and limited resources, then perhaps the existence of a Leviathan-type government is more beneficial than a liberal democracy. ... I maintain the argument that Singapore's form of democracy serves to establish an efficient and effective government that is able to deliver the goods.⁴¹

This demonstrates that the official discourse on stability associates liberal democracy with inefficiency, which is seen as a major cause of instability.

⁴⁰ Lee Kuan Yew, "Democracy, Human Rights, and the Realities," *Ministerial Speeches: A Monthly Collection of Ministerial Speeches* 16, no. 6 (1992): 29.

⁴¹ Reza Shifdar Buang, "Singapore's Style of Government Delivers the Goods," *Straits Times*, Forum Section, January 31, 2007.

Instead of democracy, this discourse elevates effective rule. As Lee Kuan Yew stated in 1994, “Whilst democracy and human rights are worthwhile ideas, we should be clear that the real objective is good government.”⁴²

The government in Singapore has repeatedly tried to stigmatize opposition. Pressure groups and opposition parties are characterized as troublemakers and threats to the state. Members of the ruling elite have stated in unequivocal terms that opposition parties are a threat to national survival.⁴³ Sinnathamby Rajaratnam (better known as “S. Rajaratnam”), Deputy Prime Minister from 1980 to 1985, for example, called opposition to the ruling party “non-Communist subversion” that was “extremely inconvenient and very irritating.”⁴⁴ Current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Lee Kuan Yew’s elder son, asserted in 2006 that if the opposition could gain enough support in parliament to challenge the government, he would not have enough time to develop right policies but instead would “have to spend all my time thinking what is the right way to fix them, what’s the right way to buy my own supporters over.”⁴⁵

Despite the fact that virtually all developed countries are liberal democracies,⁴⁶ Singapore’s rulers, much like their counterparts in Hong Kong, also have argued that liberal democracy would have a negative impact on economic growth. Often, the Singaporean government uses other countries as negative examples. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong claimed, “Prime Minister Howard [prime minister of Australia, 1996-2007] spends all his time dealing with this party politics. The result is you don’t have a lot of time to worry about the long-term future.”⁴⁷ Similarly, Lee Kuan Yew has insisted that democracy would be harmful to investor confidence. He said in an interview session with Western media, “If they think Singapore is a...chaotic country, we won’t have such investments.”⁴⁸ He also asserted that the Western media

⁴² Quoted in Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez, and Sumiko Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1998), 381.

⁴³ Can-Seng Ooi and James Gomez, *Singapore’s Vulnerable Risk Free Democracy*, INT Working Paper (Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School, Department of International Economics and Management, 2006).

⁴⁴ S. Rajaratnam, “Non-Communist Subversion in Singapore,” in *Trends in Singapore: Proceedings and Background Papers*, ed. Seah Chee Meow (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1975), 118.

⁴⁵ Cited in Associated Press, “Premier in Singapore Apologizes to Opposition,” *Washington Post* (May 6, 2006), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/05/AR2006050501561.html> (accessed June 14, 2010).

⁴⁶ According to Huntington, high- and upper-middle income countries are almost all democracies. See Samuel P. Huntington, “Democracy for the Long Haul,” *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996): 3-13.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Lydia Lim, “Aussie Party Politics behind Stalemate: PM,” *Straits Times*, June 21, 2006.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Li Xueying, “MM: Making Western Media Happy Is Not S’pore’s Business,” *Straits Times*, November 12, 2007.

“want me to listen to them, have more democracy, more protests like Taiwan—that’s a democracy.”⁴⁹ Thus, he not only attempts to link protests with chaos and inevitable economic decline but also aims to discredit democracy.

The goal of good government has led to an elitist view of politics that delegitimizes opposition. This sense of superiority of the ruling elite has been the result of the perceived success of the government and therefore, as Regnier notes, “the PAP has identified itself as the guarantor of stability and prosperity.”⁵⁰ This concept of unabridged rule by one party over the polity was embedded in the introduction of the elected presidency in 1991, which included very tough requirements for prospective candidates, such as the need to have held a top position in politics or in the private sector for at least three years. In 1992, Lee Kuan Yew asserted, “The weakness of democracy is that the assumption that all men and women are created equal and capable of equal contribution to the common good is flawed.”⁵¹ This view has led Lee to the opinion that Singapore’s future depends on a small, highly educated elite with a technocratic understanding of politics. In 1971, he already had assumed that the then present leadership was so crucial that if the top three hundred in the government “were to crash in one Jumbo jet, then Singapore [would] disintegrate.”⁵²

It should be noted that the discourse on stability is directed mainly against liberal democracy. Instead of abandoning the term “democracy” altogether, the rulers claim that their political system is, in fact, an Asian form of democracy (the main features are maintaining electoral procedures, placing the community above the individual, promoting consensus rather than contention, and respecting authority and one-party dominance⁵³). This interpretation of democracy is based chiefly on a traditional understanding of Confucianism, which emphasizes obedience to the ruler, unless he loses the “mandate of heaven” (i.e., destabilizes the country). Lee Kuan Yew is convinced that Confucian culture is the basis for economic success, which he sees confirmed by the rapid economic development of Confucian societies. He contrasts this growth to the West, where he believes “they’ve lost steam.”⁵⁴ The Asian financial crisis, which had a comparatively smaller impact on Singapore than on neighboring countries, has been used to remind Singaporeans of the need for uninterrupted order and discipline to maintain economic prosperity.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Philippe Regnier, *Singapore: City-State in South-East Asia*, trans. Christopher Hurst from French (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 233.

⁵¹ Quoted in Han, Fernandez, and Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew*, 383.

⁵² Quoted in *ibid.*, 315.

⁵³ Lam Peng Er, “Singapore: Rich State, Illiberal Regime,” in *Driven by Growth: Political Change in the Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. James W. Morley (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 255-274.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Han, Fernandez, and Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew*, 188.

⁵⁵ Mark R. Thompson, “Whatever Happened to ‘Asian Values’?” *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 4 (2001): 154-165.

Officially a parliamentary democracy, Singapore thus became an electoral authoritarian regime in which the rules have made it very difficult for any opposition party to challenge the power of the ruling People's Action Party. The government has not shied away from using repression against dissidents, as during the 1987 "Marxist conspiracy," when twenty-two social activists were arrested for supposed links to the communist movement,⁵⁶ or by initiating occasional lawsuits against opposition politicians and other government opponents.⁵⁷ Despite many institutional barriers and a climate of fear, however, the strength of the political opposition has changed over time, to some extent influenced by prevailing discourses. When the rulers were able to control the dominant discourse, they more easily could fend off political pressure for democratization, even during difficult times. Singapore experienced an economic recession in 1988, and, by 1992, the economic growth rate had decreased to 5.6 percent, its lowest point since 1986.⁵⁸ In the 1990s and 2010s, income inequality had increased rapidly.⁵⁹ As Singapore's success story reached its limits, there could have been important opportunities for a strengthening of the political opposition, as expected in the political process model.⁶⁰ However, this was not the case. Even though economic difficulties can be linked to the return of the opposition in 1981 and the 1991 parliamentary election in which four members of the opposition entered parliament, the opposition remained very small and powerless. Moreover, it usually contested less than half of the seats and even when this changed in 2006, it was only slightly more than half. The unwillingness to challenge the government in a majority of constituencies can be understood only with reference to the impact of the stability discourse on the motivational framing.

Until recently, the regime had been able to successfully equate "stability" with continued PAP rule. This was buttressed by Singapore's record of rapid economic development, improved living standards, government-linked media, and government control over virtually all societal actors such as labor unions and business associations, creating almost insurmountable barriers to supporters of democracy. In fact, the PAP had achieved a hegemonic regime that was as

⁵⁶ Michael D. Barr, "Marxists in Singapore? Lee Kuan Yew's Campaign against Catholic Social Justice Activists in the 1980s," *Critical Asian Studies* 43, no. 3 (2010): 335-362.

⁵⁷ Notable cases are the Workers' Party leader J. B. Jeyaretnam and the Singapore Democratic Party leader Dr. Chee Soon Juan, who were both forced out of politics due to bankruptcy resulting from these lawsuits.

⁵⁸ Hussin Mutalib, "Singapore in 1992: Regime Consolidation with a Twist," *Asian Survey* 33, no. 2 (1993): 194-199.

⁵⁹ Pundarik Mukhopadhaya, G. Shantakumar, and Bhanoji Rao, *Economic Growth and Income Inequality in China, India and Singapore: Trends and Policy Implications* (Oxon, Eng.: Routledge, 2011).

⁶⁰ Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

invulnerable as possible in the modern world. Democracy activists therefore initially lacked saliency in their attempt to argue that democracy was important to guaranteed stability in the future. The Workers' Party of Singapore (WP), for instance, made this argument in its 1994 manifesto:

The Party is committed to the political stability necessary for a confident investment climate. However, the Party believes that true political stability exists only where a country has developed strong democratic institutions which ensure full accountability of government to people and allow peaceful changes of government.⁶¹

Stability is considered the status quo, which needs to be protected by means of democracy. Surprisingly, the more radical Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) agreed with this viewpoint in its 2006 manifesto:

No amount of warm pronouncements by the PAP about the state of the republic can replace the truth brought about by a transparent and accountable polity. Democracy remains the surest way forward for nations yearning for progress and stability. Singapore is not exempted. To achieve this, major political reform cannot be avoided.⁶²

This shows that opposition parties have tried to use the dominant frame to make their arguments for an alternative solution. While opposition parties agreed with the ruling elite that stability was necessary for economic growth, they stressed the problems of unaccountable undemocratic rule. This reframing effort failed to mobilize supporters, however, because it was unable to achieve sufficient saliency among most members of the opposition. Even during growing socio-economic challenges such as rising inequality, the stability discourse continued to be successfully propagated in the state-owned media, which monopolizes the traditional media. As a consequence, the parties were hard-pressed to convincingly argue how democracy could enhance “stability.”

When the Singapore opposition first returned to the political playing field in 1981, the prevailing discourse on stability dampened the demands of the opposition, which at the time claimed to be a “constructive opposition”

⁶¹ Workers' Party, “Towards a Caring Society: Programme of the Workers' Party 1994,” *Workers' Party Website* (1994), http://www.wp.org.sg/party/manifesto_1994.htm (accessed June 27, 2008).

⁶² Singapore Democratic Party, “Manifesto: The Political System,” *Singapore Democratic Party Website* (2006), <http://www.singaporedemocrat.org/manifestopolitics.html> (accessed March 8, 2006).

with no intention to try to replace the ruling party. In contrast to oppositional groups in Hong Kong, the WP even declared in 2002 in its party magazine, *The Hammer*, “We did not set up the Workers’ party because we want to ‘oppose’ the government or oppose for the sake of opposing.”⁶³ Moreover, in 2006, the party proclaimed:

WP is Pro-Singapore and believes national interest should precede party interest. As such we would be prepared to support government policies if they are for the common good of the nation.⁶⁴

By accepting the official idea of “national interest” in the first sentence of its 2006 manifesto, the Workers’ Party subordinated its own objectives to the discourse of the ruling party. In terms of the stability discourse, the manifesto might have included aspects detrimental to the country’s “stability.” By allowing the ruling party to define the national interest, the WP was clearly unwilling to challenge the prevailing discourse. In 2011, the party declared that it “continues to believe that it is in the national interest for the governing party to be subject to political competition, so as to promote higher standards of performance and guard against complacency.”⁶⁵ Clearly, the concept of national interest had been extended to include multiparty democracy, reflected in the manifesto’s title which called for a first world parliament.

The saliency of the frame “democracy is needed for stability” was influenced by the degree of freedom of the press. In contrast to the Hong Kong press, which is relatively free, Singapore’s near total governmental control over the traditional media has for a long time allowed the ruling elite to significantly influence the public perception of the regime’s successes. Despite limited access to the media, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) repeatedly used its own media to emphasize the failures of the government to counter the dominant discourse: “The stability achieved by manipulating public opinion through a controlled press is illusory. When economic uncertainty appears, much of this stability evaporates.”⁶⁶ This statement frames the ruling elite’s hold on power as a threat to the stability of Singapore. In fact, stability is created only through successful propaganda and is contingent on the continuation of economic success. Moreover, the party argues:

⁶³ Workers’ Party, “Excuse Me, Are You a Good Opposition?” *The Hammer* (2002), http://wp.sg/news/hammer_online/02_good_opp.htm (accessed September 22, 2006).

⁶⁴ Workers’ Party, “You Have a Choice: The Workers’ Party Manifesto 2006,” *Workers’ Party Website* (2006), <http://www.wp.sg/wp/beliefs/manifesto.php> (accessed June 27, 2008).

⁶⁵ Workers’ Party, “Towards a First World Parliament, Manifesto 2011,” *Workers’ Party Website* (2011), <http://wp.sg/manifesto/> (accessed September 15, 2011).

⁶⁶ Singapore Democratic Party, 2006.

We have been brainwashed over the years by the media and government into believing that demonstrations are: aggressive, detrimental to social stability, untypical of Asians, will affect business and investor confidence, and affect tourism.⁶⁷

This expresses the deep frustration with the inability of the party to influence the hegemonic discourse.

The difficulty to transform the concept of stability in Singapore to align it with democracy seriously weakened the legitimacy of the democracy activists. Explaining the lack of mass support for nonviolent protests such as Dr. Chee's protest during the 2006 IMF and World Bank meeting in Singapore, political activist Goh Meng Seng wrote:

It is not "fear" alone that prevented a mass support of Chee's protest moves. If Fear is that pervasive, there would not be tens of thousands of Singaporeans attending WP's political rallies in the last elections. The culture of "Fear" is definitely wading off but the fundamental desire of stability is still very much intact.⁶⁸

According to Goh, the dominant discourse had been accepted by a majority of Singaporeans. Even though the average citizen might have been interested in change, he or she was wary of the process that could achieve this change.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the strength of the opposition movement, partially attributable to the growing awareness among Singaporeans of the shortcomings of their government. Singapore's rulers presently face a number of governance crises, such as growing inequality, increasing prices, massive immigration, flooding in the central district, and train breakdowns. In 2011, the ruling party suffered its worst election results in post-independence history when it received 60.1 percent of the popular vote and lost six seats to the opposition. The reasons for the PAP's decline in strength were the growing public perception that the ruling party was unable to perform effectively and a growing recognition of the need for a check on the government. Even the PAP discussed the creation of a two-party system in the run-up to the election, but dismissed the reform because the party leadership believed it was impossible to set up two teams of equally qualified candidates.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Charles Tan, "Student and Youth Movements Are Key to Freedom," *Singapore Democratic Party Website* (June 23, 2004), http://www.singaporedemocrat.org/classic/news_display.php?id=534 (accessed June 20, 2008).

⁶⁸ E-mail from Goh Meng Seng, 2006.

⁶⁹ Zaki Hussain and Yan Feng, "2-Party System Not Workable Here: PM: Not Enough Talent to Form Two Top Teams to Govern Well, He Says," *Straits Times*, April 6, 2011.

Yet, massive immigration of foreign workers (to off-set a fertility rate of 1.2, far below the replacement rate of 2.1, and thus an aging population) created much discontent and even raised the fear among a number of Singaporeans that the PAP was, in fact, a “Party against People.”⁷⁰

Critical to the success of the reframing effort was the growing significance of the Internet, which the government decided to control less strictly than the traditional media. As it gained in influence, a growing number of people effectively challenged the ruling discourse. Many questions were now raised about shortcomings in government performance, none of which had ever been discussed in the traditional media. In turn, the traditional media reacted to the changing environment by belatedly covering issues which had previously been ignored. The lack of reporting about opposition rallies before the 2006 general election is just one of the more conspicuous examples. Social media allowed activists to connect in new ways and share common perspectives which demonstrated that like-minded individuals were not just a small group of outsiders. This changed the perspectives of opposition activists, as the defunct dissident blog *Temasek Review* clearly demonstrated when it vigorously proclaimed, “Voicing dissent is not unpatriotic; it is our duty as citizens.”⁷¹ This sentiment clearly indicated a change in the opposition’s ability to develop a motive for activism, rooted in the fear of the many negative consequences from massive immigration. While the ruling party sees immigration as a guarantor of economic growth, opponents of the policy see it as a threat to social stability and to their own lifestyles. The 2011 parliamentary and presidential elections as well as two by-elections in 2012 (Hougang) and 2013 (Punggol East), in which the ruling party lost, highlight the declining dominance of the ruling party over the hegemonic discourse as positions of the opposition gain more sway.

However, most Singaporeans still accept the prevailing preference for stability and pragmatic rule. In the 2011 parliamentary election, despite strong antigovernment sentiments, the PAP maintained its absolute dominance in parliament with 60.1 percent of the popular vote. A few weeks later in the presidential election, even though there were four candidates contesting the election, three of the four (Tony Tan, Tan Cheng Bock, and Tan Kin Lian) were moderates and only one of them, Tan Jee Say, declared that he would openly challenge the government once elected. This split the opposition and the candidate favored by the government won the election by a narrow margin.

⁷⁰ This acronym is used in the popular and controversial online comic strip, “Demon-cratc Singapore,” by Leslie Chew, which fictionalizes Singapore’s politics to satirize them. The comic strip can be found on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/DemoncraticSingapore>.

⁷¹ Douglas Chua, “Voicing Dissent Is Not Unpatriotic; It Is Our Duty as Citizens,” *Temasek Review* (August 27, 2010), <http://www.temasekreview.com/2010/08/27/voicing-dissent-is-not-unpatriotic-it-is-our-duty-as-citizens/> (accessed December 20, 2010).

However, most Singaporeans still believe that the ruling party can be defeated in the upcoming parliamentary election in 2016 and that any other political campaign for democratization is unnecessary.⁷² While the ruling party attempted to reemphasize “constructive politics” in early 2014—an effort to recapture its dominance over the discourse on stability—the most powerful opposition party, the Workers’ Party, refused to directly challenge the regime except on particular policies. Its leadership continues to believe in a gradual process of defeating the PAP by its own game. The divisions within the opposition camp over the most appropriate way to challenge the government were apparent in the recent protests at the Speakers’ Corner against the government’s population policy, the fare increase, and the lack of transparency concerning the Central Provident Fund. While the largest demonstration against a white paper on population attracted four thousand people, the WP has kept a low profile. It still fears that antagonizing Singapore’s supposedly moderate voters could jeopardize its future electoral chances. Its leader, Low Thia Kiang, said in a parliamentary speech in 2014:

I believe Singapore will be a more stable and mature democracy if Singaporeans are in possession of democratic values, which will be the DNA enabling us to move ahead as one united people and mitigate against the worry expressed by the President of gridlock and paralysis in the hurly-burly of politics.⁷³

Instead of openly attacking the ruling party, the opposition leader has tried to use rational arguments to convince the government of the advantages of democracy. While the growing discontent with the government’s performance reflects an ongoing process in which the discourse on stability is being reframed and multiparty democracy is increasingly regarded as a guarantor of stability, activists have not yet successfully established the motivational frame which would identify political activism as essential to achieving democratization.

Conclusion

This essay shows that the soft-authoritarian regimes of Hong Kong and Singapore have tried to frame their authoritarian rule as a necessary precondition for the continued stability of the city-state, and have portrayed the political opposition

⁷² Attempts to mobilize against the authoritarian Internal Security Act, which allows for arrest without trial and was used against political dissidents as late as 1987, have so far not received the widespread support for which activists were hoping.

⁷³ Low Thia Kiang, “MP Low Thia Kiang’s Speech (Debate on President’s Address 2014),” *Workers’ Party Website* (May 26, 2014), <http://wp.sg/2014/05/mp-low-thia-khiangs-speech-debate-on-presidents-address-2014/> (accessed June 20, 2014).

as destructive and irresponsible. Under the dominant authoritarian discourse, opposition members have been forced to reframe the concept of stability and equate it with democracy. It is, however, not sufficient just to identify democracy as the real source of “stability,” for activists also need to develop a vocabulary that creates the motive for political activism. This study demonstrates that, while activists in Hong Kong were able to successfully change the discourse in their favor, democrats in Singapore are still struggling. Creating a motive in Hong Kong required activists to emphasize the regime’s shortcomings, which was sufficiently salient to galvanize large numbers of potential supporters. This depended not only on the existence of actual problems but at least to some extent on the ability to make use of the media, either traditional or online, to draw attention to existing problems. It is thus not surprising that information control is an important goal of authoritarian regimes.

For democracy activists in other illiberal political contexts, it is not enough to determine the shortcomings in the ruling discourse. They also must recognize and utilize salient events in order to mobilize potential supporters. Events that highlight weaknesses in the discourse of the ruling elite are particularly helpful. If a regime relies heavily on performance, for instance, drawing attention to government failings can be effective. A crucial aspect is the ability to make good use of the media. In the context of government control over the traditional media, the Internet and social media, especially, can help to increase the saliency of the new frame. By providing alternative perspectives on daily concerns and allowing different people to show their support, the Internet enhances the motivational frame. Once the regime is challenged on the basis of its own terms, political activism is likely to become stronger, forcing the regime and its supporters to react.