

# Challenging Democracy: Singapore's Increasing Rejection of Democratic Values

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## ABSTRACT

Singapore is a relatively young country that earned its independence from Malaysia in 1965, yet this developing democracy has achieved a remarkable GDP per capita that in 2019 was higher than the US's. Fostering economic growth has been a top priority for the country's dominant political party, the People's Action Party (PAP) who has controlled the country's executive branch since 1959. However, in order to remain the dominant political party, the PAP has compromised the country's democratic institutions and the people's civil liberties. In the general parliamentary elections, the PAP has increased the usage and severity of electoral manipulation tactics in order to ensure elections in their favor. Not only have they eroded the legitimacy of elections, but they have also repeatedly abused control of the judicial branch to push for decisions that suppressed opposition parties and protected PAP leaders. Lastly, the PAP, in order to suppress the spread of anti-PAP sentiment, has shut down news websites, jailed journalists, and threatened the livelihood of anybody who criticizes the PAP, contradicting constitutional civil liberties. The People's Action Party has brought a number of economic benefits to Singapore, yet economic growth has come at the expense of the liberal democracy, trending Singapore in the direction of autocracy and challenging the notion that democracy is the only path for a developing nation's success.

## Historical Context

Singapore's democracy is structured to be a semi-presidential regime, which utilizes a dual executive model and a single legislative body. The model has both a president and prime minister along with the parliament.<sup>1</sup> The parliament is elected through general elections that occur every four years and are called by Singapore's election department. The prime minister is chosen by the party who wins the majority of seats in parliament. The prime minister, therefore, is guaranteed a majority in parliament and it is easier to pass any legislation as long as party discipline remains intact. The PAP has maintained this electoral majority by large margins since 1959 and as a result, has been able to rely on the power of the prime minister to execute their vision for Singapore as hub of international trade and political stability.<sup>2</sup> Though the president does have veto power, it is reserved only for the public appointments and government budgets without any power to veto any legislation. By law, the president has to act in accordance with the advice of the Council of Presidential Advisers as well as the prime minister.<sup>3</sup> This is intentional in case an opposition party

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<sup>1</sup> Election Department, *July 2020 Election*, July 2020, <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3338/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Explainer: Singapore's Electoral System," *New Naratif*, last modified March 26, 2020, <https://newnaratif.com/explainer-how-singapores-electoral-system-works/>.

<sup>3</sup> President of the Republic of Singapore, *President's Duties*, <https://www.istana.gov.sg/The-President/Presidents-Duties/Constitutional>. This limited power of the president is another facet of the PAP's stability. In 1994, parliament passed a bill that scaled the presidential power back from being able to interfere in constitutional legislation after their presidential candidate in the 1993 presidential election won by a smaller margin than expected. See: Tim Healy and Santha Oorjitham, "Muzzling the Watchdog? The Government Cuts the President's Veto," CNN, last modified November 30, 2000, <http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/96/1122/nat7.html>.

defeats the PAP in the presidential elections. The PAP took measures to severely limit any power they could have. As a result, the president is a largely ceremonial figurehead and is elected every six years.

The PAP's longstanding dominance in elections has resulted in Singapore's remarkable economic growth which has received international recognition. Singapore is the US's largest Southeast Asian trading partner and has been invited to the international G-20 summits. Their success as a small country with almost no natural resources is a result of the PAP's prioritization of economic growth. Specifically, the three prime ministers in Singapore's history, Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Chok Tong, and current prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, are all from the PAP and facilitated the growth of an attractive economy for international business. In a developing country that lacked a unifying ethnic identity and natural resources, Lee Kuan Yew, commonly known as "The Father of Singapore", pushed for economic stability as the number one priority. During Lee Kuan Yew's era from 1959-1990, his initiatives of low corporate taxes and a business friendly environment turned Singapore from a poor fisherman village into a thriving economy in a remarkable span of 60 years. These initiatives continue today. In 2017-2019, the PAP invested 8.3 billion dollars in business growth and fostered the growth of 3 million startups. Their low corporate tax rate of 17% compared to a global average of 25% has brought major wealth from businesses into Singapore. Furthermore, total US Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Singapore until 2020 has totaled to around 527 billion with Singapore's total received FDI summing to around 2 trillion dollars. The economic benefits are extended to the citizens of Singapore as well. Singapore's GDP per capita of 65,000 USD topped the US's in 2019.<sup>4</sup> However, in order to achieve such an economic feat, the PAP leveraged their continued power to create a manufactured political stability and sacrificed democratic values.

## Section I: Manipulation of Free and Fair Elections

In 2017, Halimah Yacob from the PAP was sworn in without a vote because she was the only eligible candidate in the presidential election.<sup>5</sup> The Presidential Elections Committee (PEC) eliminated all candidates except those of Malaysian descent in 2017 to eliminate popular opposition candidate Tan Cheng Bock, who had lost the previous 2011 presidential election by less than two percentage points.<sup>6</sup> By electing Yacob without a vote, the PAP completely eliminated political competition and the electoral process which are key elements of democracy. Yet, the 2017 presidential election is not where the PAP's manipulation ends; electoral manipulation frequently occurs at the parliamentary level to ensure PAP victory. One such measure is the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) scheme in 1988. In a year that proved to be a major turning point in the manufacturing of Singapore's stability, the PAP created the GRC which granted the political parties the power to elect multiple candidates at once. While opposition parties struggled to maintain support in districts, the PAP was granted a tremendous advantage. The second measure is the ethnic minority integration and requirement policies that allowed the PAP to appear as striving for racial equality while subtly devaluing minority votes and further suppressing opposition parties. The last measure is the PAP skewing the fundamental processes of elections through the Election's Department. Ultimately, the PAP's manipulation of free and fair parliamentary elections combined with limited political opposition set the foundation for the PAP's continued political dominance.

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Statistics, *Singapore Economy*, April 2022, <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/economy>.

<sup>5</sup> *Reserved Election for Community That Has Not Held Office of President for 5 or More Consecutive Terms*, report no. 19B,, October 10, 2016, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Bills-Supp/28-2016/Published/20161010?DocDate=20161010&ProvIds=pr9->.

<sup>6</sup> Singapore Presidential Election Won by Tony Tan," *BBC News*, last modified August 27, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-14690176>.

## 1988 Group Representation Constituency Scheme

As a reaction to decreasing popularity in the 1980s, the PAP introduced Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) which severely limited the potential for opposition parties to pose a threat to the PAP's political dominance. In the 1984 general election, the Workers Party (WP), the largest opposition party, broke the PAP's 100% seat share in the last four elections<sup>7</sup> and achieved a record voter share percentage at 41.9% in seats contested by the WP, while PAP voter share sank from 70 to 58%.<sup>8</sup> In order to prevent any further threat, the PAP introduced the Group Representation Constituency scheme in the 1988 general election. Instead of running individually, GRC districts would be reserved for a team of candidates running together from the same party. The resources needed to create a GRC, while easily achievable by the PAP, was a severe limiting factor for opposition parties. The number of uncontested seats that the PAP won after establishing the GRC scheme rose from 13% in 1988 to 50.6% in 1991, indicating the inability for opposition parties to create GRCs and contest parliament seats.<sup>9</sup> The creation of the GRC scheme has resulted in increased PAP dominance in elections and protected them from competition in the legislature. The implementation of the GRC system has another advantage as well that extends to the PAP's control of single member constituency (SMC) seats as well. In the GRC system, the PAP can merge SMC constituencies where the opposition parties had won higher votes in previous general elections into GRC districts to make them harder to contest. As a result, GRCs specifically impacted the ability of the two major opposition parties, the Workers Party (WP) and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), to maintain SMC seats in the subsequent 1991 and 1997 elections. The Workers Party had amassed 42% and 45%<sup>10</sup> of the vote in the Bedok and Fengshan SMCs respectively in the 1988 election and both SMCs were absorbed into different GRCs in the 1991 election.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Singapore Democratic Party received 47% of the vote in the Paya Lebar district in 1988<sup>12</sup> and the district was absorbed into the Aljunied GRC in 1991. The Aljunied GRC went uncontested for the PAP in 1991.<sup>13</sup> In 1997, the Changi SMC and Braddell Heights SMC which had also recorded high opposition voter percentages in previous elections were announced as GRCs.<sup>14</sup> The PAP used GRCs that they had secured in one election to absorb a smaller SMC to eliminate the chance of an opposition party amassing increased support in specific regions. In the midst of an increasing opposition voter share, the sudden electoral switch substantially hurt opposition parties' ability to win seats and gave the PAP the ability to win multiple at once. The PAP went a step further and also prevented the WP and SDP from getting seats through SMC districts by absorbing these districts into GRCs and this pattern continues in the future elections as well, demonstrating the PAP's ease in which they disregard all basic electoral fairness in favor of their own stability. The supermajority in parliament is key to all of the PAP's regime stability, so they have taken steps to maintain it at the cost of honest elections.

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<sup>7</sup> "Singapore: Defamation Suits Threaten Chee Soon Juan and Erode Freedom of Expression," *Amnesty International*, last modified November 5, 2001, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/singapore-defamation-suits-threaten-chee-soon-juan-and-erode-freedom-expression>.

<sup>8</sup> Roy Ngerng, "What Does Data Tell Us about Singapore's General Elections?," *The News Lens*, last modified July 13, 2020, <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/137665#&gid=1&pid=1>.

<sup>9</sup> Netina Tan, "Manipulating Electoral Laws in Singapore," *Electoral Studies*, last modified July 10, 2013, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261379413001145>.

<sup>10</sup> Elections Department, *1988 Parliamentary General Election Results*, [https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections\\_past\\_parliamentary1988.html](https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary1988.html).

<sup>11</sup> Elections Department, *1991 Parliamentary General Election Results*, [https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections\\_past\\_parliamentary1991.html](https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary1991.html).

<sup>12</sup> Elections Department, *1988 Parliamentary*.

<sup>13</sup> Elections Department, *1991 Parliamentary*.

<sup>14</sup> Elections Department, *1997 Parliamentary General Election Results*, [https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections\\_past\\_parliamentary1997.html](https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary1997.html).

## Ethnic-Based Election Procedures

The secondary electoral measure the PAP instituted to further secure their electoral dominance was the integration of skewed ethnic-oriented policies in elections and voting processes that heavily favored the PAP. The ethnic minority requirement established by the PAP in 1988 along with Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), mandated that at least one member of a GRC must be of a minority ethnic descent<sup>15</sup> who make up only 23% of Singapore's population.<sup>16</sup> Opposition parties, with much fewer resources to recruit qualified minorities, have limited ability to create GRCs to run against the PAP, further contributing to the increase in uncontested PAP seats after the 1988 elections. Furthermore, while the PAP continued to use racial equality as their guise, they effectively disempowered the success of minority centered SMCs when districts were changed to GRCS, dealing a huge blow to opposition parties. Not only is the PAP interfering in the ability for opposition parties to compete to promote "racial equality", but they've also used similar premises to interfere in voting processes. Because opposition parties had been criticizing the PAP's lack of action on minority issues,<sup>17</sup> The PAP introduced the Ethnic Integration Policy in 1989 which limited the number of citizens of a single ethnicity who can live in the same constituency to 20%.<sup>18</sup> While this policy may seem as though it is in favor of racial integration, it is instead a measure to devalue minority votes. The PAP would divide districts where candidates fielded a lot of minority votes and merge smaller districts with a district that contained a high Chinese population, which would overpower minority votes with pro-PAP Chinese votes. In the 1980s, any districts that had previously reported 35% or more ethnic minority votes to an opposition GRC were restructured in following elections. The PAP restructured the Anson constituency (58% ethnic vote), Kayu constituency (48%), Kambengan (44%), and three others so that those districts would no longer have a large concentration of minorities who support the opposition. Minorities have the potential to corral around a specific opposition GRC that focuses on their issues and though it would not threaten the PAP's parliament majority, it could shake confidence in their regime. The PAP is both devaluing the minority vote and more broadly, eliminating their ability to substantially support candidates who represent their beliefs.

## Election Department Gerrymandering

Using their control of Singapore's Election Department, the PAP has continuously skewed voting districts in their favor in order to secure their success in the general elections. In every general election, the Elections Department, who reports directly to the prime minister, is tasked with re-dividing Singapore into voting districts, deciding which districts are for SMCs and GRCs and calling general election campaigns to start within a certain period of time.<sup>19</sup> Opposition parties then have to assemble qualifying GRCs for all of the new districts and pick candidates who appeal to the population of that district.<sup>20</sup> However, they don't have a lot of time. For example, in the 1988 election, the committee released the division of districts only 9 weeks before the start of the defined period of general election campaigning when it had previously been announced 23 weeks in advance in the 1984 election and in the 2001 election, the division

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<sup>15</sup>Group Representation Constituencies, report no. 8A, 1988, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PEA1954?ProvIds=P1I-#pr8A->.

<sup>16</sup>Tam, Waikung. "Political Representation of Racial Minorities in the Parliament of Singapore." *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 4 (2019): 225–39

<sup>17</sup>Tam, *Political Representation*.

<sup>18</sup>Netina Tan, *Constitutional Engineering and Regulating Ethnic Politics in Singapore*, November 2012, [http://www.law.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/ECM\\_PRO\\_074075.pdf](http://www.law.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/ECM_PRO_074075.pdf).

<sup>19</sup>"Electoral Divisions," Elections Department Singapore, [https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections\\_map\\_electoral.html](https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_map_electoral.html).

<sup>20</sup>Netina Tan and Bernard Grofman, *Electoral Rules and Manufacturing Legislative Supermajority: Evidence from Singapore*, May 5, 2017, <http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~bgrofman/201-TAN%20and%20%20GROFMAN-Plurality%20Bloc%20Voting-j.%20Commonwealth%20-nqf%20Text.pdf>.

of districts was released only a single day before the start of campaigns.<sup>21</sup> The 2001 election had 10 of the 23 districts go uncontested for the PAP.<sup>22</sup> By the prime minister being in charge of the committee who releases the information and plans the districts, the PAP is able to split up districts to benefit their interests and obtain the most seats in congress. The PAP is not just adding new policies that favor them, but they are altering the very fundamentals of the electoral process in any manner possible to ensure their victory. The Election's Department has also been known to create new districts for single member constituencies (SMCs) in places that are advantageous to the PAP. In the 2011 elections, three SMCs were created off the edge or inside of an existing pro-PAP district, meaning that a PAP stronghold was split into two separate districts.<sup>23</sup> Because the PAP now gets to put up more candidates in a district that already supports them, the election's department is thus guaranteeing them more elected officials which correlates to the upward trend of uncontested PAP parliament seats since 1988. The supposedly fair elections department is intentionally strengthening the PAP's candidates at the expense of opposition parties and essentially heavily skewing the election in the PAP's favor. In doing so, the opposition's increasing barriers to legitimately being able to compete against the PAP limit their ability to maintain the diversity of thought needed in a democracy.

## Conclusion

Fair elections are a core value of democracy that requires political competition and an unbiased electoral process. However, the PAP's continued legislation and abuses of power targeted at ensuring their own victory by manipulating voting districts and adding skewed election processes have eliminated political competition and entrenched their own power in Singapore's government. The GRC system has radically expanded the PAP's control over Singapore's districts and is frequently used to eliminate opposition stronghold SMCs by converting them into GRCs. Despite the PAP's history of ignoring the country's minority ethnicities, the Ethnic Integration Policy and the Ethnic Minority Requirement gave the PAP the image of supporting ethnic minorities, when in reality, they essentially devalued their vote and made it harder for opposition parties to form GRCs. To implement new skewed electoral districts or processes, the PAP has abused the Election Department's power to subtly favor PAP political candidates during elections. The PAP has been self-serving their own committees and political leaders while also making it harder for opposition parties to have a legitimate chance of winning an electoral majority or even a district. The trend of decreasing PAP popularity in the 1980s was a threat to the PAP's regime and they have implemented these developments to significantly reduce political competition and disempower the role of the general population, ultimately degrading the fundamental aspect of fair elections in a democracy.

## Section 2: Abuse of Judiciary Power

The PAP has never lost a defamation case with political implications.<sup>24</sup> Singaporean leaders are seen as the pillars of the community by the judiciary and the judges consider it an obligation to protect the reputation of those leaders,<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ngiam Shih Tung, *How Gerrymandering Creates Unfair Elections in Singapore* (2020), [https://newna-ratif.com/how-gerrymandering-creates-unfair-elections-in-singapore/#\\_edn3](https://newna-ratif.com/how-gerrymandering-creates-unfair-elections-in-singapore/#_edn3).

<sup>22</sup>Elections Department Singapore, *2001 Parliamentary General Election Results*, 2001, [https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections\\_past\\_parliamentary2001.html](https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary2001.html).

<sup>23</sup>Tan, N., & Grofman, B. (2016). *The Electoral Authoritarian's Subtle Toolkit: Evidence from Singapore*. (Reihe Politikwissenschaft / Institut für Höhere Studien, Abt. Politikwissenschaft, 142). Wien: Institut für Höhere Studien (IHS), Wien. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssaoar-47766-2>

<sup>24</sup>"Singapore: Defamation," *Amnesty International*.

<sup>25</sup>Singapore Government, *Lee Hsien Loong v Singapore Democratic Party and Others and Another Suit* [2006] SGHC 220, [https://www.elitigation.sg/gdviewer/s/2006\\_SGHC\\_220](https://www.elitigation.sg/gdviewer/s/2006_SGHC_220).

making the judiciary a tool of the PAP, rather than operating as a check on the PAP's power. Consequently, the PAP relies on its control of the judiciary to enforce biased rulings against political opposition leaders for acts such as "breaches in fiduciary duty." Similarly, PAP leaders have charged multiple opposition leaders from the SDP and WP for defamatory comments, resulting in bankruptcy and elimination of their power. Though Singapore's regime has the appearance of three distinct branches of government, the PAP exercises immense influence over the judiciary, threatening opposition leaders with elimination from parliament and in turn, strengthening Singapore's homogeneous parliament.

## Breaches of Fiduciary Duty Lawsuits

The judiciary has had a history of favoring the PAP's interests in "breaches of fiduciary duty" lawsuits which has severely damaged the reputation and financial stability of opposition candidates who have posed a threat to the PAP. Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam, former leader of the Workers Party (WP) until 2001, was the first opposition parliamentary candidate to break the PAP's sixteen year parliamentary monopoly in 1981 and was subsequently deemed by then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew as an opponent that needed to be politically "destroyed." He was expelled from parliament in 1986 after being found guilty of a misuse of party funds, despite the Privy Council in London, Singapore's former highest court of appeals, severely criticizing the trial and outcome as unjust, but the judiciary ruled in the PAP's favor.<sup>26</sup> The alleged breach of duty not only led to the expulsion of Jeyaretnam from parliament, but also discredited and defamed the Workers Party by associating the party with fraud. Furthermore, in 2015, PAP leaders continued with this tactic by accusing then WP secretary general Low Thia Kiang, Sylvia Lim, and future secretary general Pritam Singh of using their control of the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) to make payments to FM Solution and Services.<sup>27</sup> After the judiciary ruled in favor of the PAP-run town council, the WP leaders were only able to stave off bankruptcy after using crowdfunding to raise more than 1 million Singapore dollars.<sup>28</sup> The PAP was also able to use the alleged breach in duty to prosecute the WP and substantially damage their political credibility and financial stability as all three leaders were on the verge of bankruptcy. The expulsion of Jeyaretnam and financial threat of bankruptcy from alleged "breaches of fiduciary duty" represent the PAP's ability to utilize the bias of the judiciary to pursue politically favorable cases.

## Defamation Suits

The PAP has also more prominently weakened opposition leaders through targeted defamation suits, resulting in threats of parliamentary expulsion and inability for opposition candidates to combat the PAP's full consolidation of parliamentary power. In the 1997 general elections, the PAP looked to discredit Tang Liang Hong, the Workers Party GRC parliamentary candidate, by calling him a "Chinese Chauvinist" and "anti-Christian." Hong attempted to file a police charge by saying their comments were defamatory and had incited hatred against him, but instead Hong was

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<sup>26</sup>"Singapore: Defamation," *Amnesty International*.

<sup>27</sup>NG Jun Sen, "How It All Unfolded: The AHTC Case in a Nutshell," Today Online, last modified March 10, 2022, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/how-it-all-unfolded-ahtc-case-nutshell>. FM Services is a company in the constituency that supported WP during the 2011 general elections and 2013 by election. These elections gave WP control of the Aljunied GRC and one seat each in Punggol East and Hougang districts. After WP constituency losses in the 2015 general elections, they lost control of the town councils. The split Aljunied-Hougang Town Council (AHTC) and the Pasir Ris-Punggol Town Council (PRPTC), under control of the PAP after WP loss in the 2015 elections, pushed for lawsuits in 2017 against the WP leaders for damages of an estimated 24 million USD.

<sup>28</sup>Wong, George, and Woo Jun Jie. "SINGAPORE IN 2018: Between Uncharted Waters and Old Ghosts." *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2019, 297-324. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26939701>.

sued for defamation for naming PAP leaders in police reports. He was sued for 4.53 million dollars by the PAP and fled Singapore citing multiple death threats.<sup>29</sup> He was tried in his absence and was forced to declare bankruptcy. The hypocritical standards that the judiciary set for Hong for defaming the PAP did not apply when the PAP defamed Hong reflecting the limited ability for opposition parties to legitimately challenge the PAP in court. In a related case, in 1997, when Jeyaretnam was returned to parliament as a non-constituency member, he was also charged with 145,000 USD in defamation against then prime minister Goh Chok Tong for saying “Mr Tang Liang Hong has just placed before me two reports he has made to police against, you know, Mr. Goh Chok Tong and his people”<sup>30</sup> with these reports being the ones Hong filed against the PAP for defaming him. With Jeyaretnam’s renewed ability to run in the 2001 general elections, Prime Minister Tong revived the 1997 charges and pushed Jeyaretnam to bankruptcy and immediate removal from parliament in July 2001 before the November general elections. Not only did the judiciary support PAP aggressive legal action, but the judiciary also served as a tool for shaping the image of the PAP and fight against what the party viewed as defamation. Lastly, leader of the SDP Chee Soon Juan was similarly reprimanded for defamatory comments toward prime minister Goh Chok Tong. During the campaign period in the 2001 general elections, Chee Soon Juan publicly demanded Goh Chok Tong in a contested district to justify the ten billion dollar loan given by Singapore’s government to former Indonesian president Suharto in 1998.<sup>31</sup> Though Juan apologized for any personal offense his comments had, Goh Chok Tong demanded 393,000 USD in damages in 2002 for the defamatory attack on his “character, competence, and integrity”<sup>32</sup>, bankrupting Chee Soon Juan and preventing from running in the 2006 general elections.<sup>33</sup> In order to win support, the objective of an opposition leader is to point out the flaws or mistakes that other parties have made during the election campaign. However, the limitations on basic electoral practices during an election campaign represents the judiciary’s willingness to help the PAP cover up political mistakes and silence opposition parties. This pattern of multiple Singaporean opposition leaders being targeted by defamatory comments and lawsuits are indicative of not only the PAP’s systematic elimination of strong opposition candidates, but more importantly, the role of the judiciary as a tool of the PAP.

## Conclusion

The judicial branch has shown considerable favor toward the PAP, resulting in opposition suppression, which includes not only candidates for office, but the potential elimination of existing representatives from parliament. In defamatory cases against SDP and WP leaders, the PAP leaders took any opportunity to accuse the opposition of defaming them. Not only has the judicial branch shown a history of ruling in the PAP’s favor in every defamation case, but the PAP has also relied on the judiciary to rule against major opposition leaders in alleged “breaches in fiduciary duties.” These lawsuits are costly for opposition leaders who face the threat of bankruptcy if they do not conform to the PAP’s Singapore. Bankrupting members of parliament results in their immediate expulsion from parliament which allows the PAP to fill empty seats with more PAP members and at the same time, eliminate opposition leaders who have the potential to threaten the PAP’s regime. Ultimately, the PAP and judiciary’s coordinated elimination of political opposition leaders through the judicial branch represents a disregard for the necessary neutrality of the judiciary branch and the purpose of opposition parties: to be the parliamentary voice of dissent and represent a diversity of thought necessary in a true democracy.

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<sup>29</sup>“Singapore: Defamation,” *Amnesty International*.

<sup>30</sup>“Singapore: J B Jeyaretnam --Defamation Suits Assault Freedom of Expression,” Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa360051998en.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup>“Singapore: Defamation,” *Amnesty International*.

<sup>32</sup> “Singapore: Defamation,” *Amnesty International*.

<sup>33</sup>“Singapore: Drop Charges Against Opposition Leader,” Human Rights Watch, last modified February 8, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/08/singapore-drop-charges-against-opposition-leader#>.

## Section 3 - Infringement on Constitutional Civil Liberties

The Protection against Online Falsehood and Manipulation Act (POFMA) was instituted in 2019 to issue corrections and force the removal of what the PAP deems as incorrect online content.<sup>34</sup> Since its implementation up until the end of 2021, 48 corrections have been issued to various anti-PAP protestors, websites, news sites, and other organizations.<sup>35</sup> The use of censorship with the purpose of controlling the PAP's public image is not only used on political leaders, but also against citizens and non-government affiliated organizations residing in Singapore. The Infocommunications Media Development Authority has used the compilation of acts under its power to regulate the spread of anti-PAP sentiment in websites and online platforms. The Minister of Home Affairs has evolved its assembly regulations to prevent the influence of gatherings to incite protests against the PAP. The Attorney General's Chambers criminalization of contempt has silenced any critical opinions on the relationship between the PAP and the judiciary. The PAP's coordinated and increasingly intense efforts to threaten the practice of free speech and assembly by PAP critics contradicts the civil liberties guaranteed by the country's democratic constitution, ultimately enforcing an artificial sense of public support for the party.

### Regulation of Peaceful Assembly

Positions of power outside of the prime minister's office, such as the Attorney-General's Chambers and the Minister of Home Affairs, are empowered to criminalize organized protest against the PAP. Even though Article 14 of Singapore's constitution gives Singaporeans the right to peaceful protest,<sup>36</sup> The Public Order Act, passed in 2009 by the PAP, gives the Minister of Home Affairs (MHA) the power to regulate assembly to preserve public order and requires any public assembly to obtain a permit and can only protest in limited spaces.<sup>37</sup> MHA K Shanmugam has denied permits for marches and assemblies like the 2011 March for Worker Rights and the 2012 March for Women's Housing Rights.<sup>38</sup> If an assembly does proceed without obtaining a permit, they are forced to pay fines and face up to a year in prison. Han Hui Hui, organizer of the 2014 protest against government pensions funds, was fined 2,200 USD for her

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<sup>34</sup>Singapore Parliament, *Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act 2019*, report no. 26, June 28, 2019, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Acts-Supp/18-2019>.

<sup>35</sup>Singapore Government Agency, "Media Centre," *POFMA Office*, <https://www.pofmaoffice.gov.sg/media-centre/>.

<sup>36</sup>Singapore Government, *Constitution of the Republic of Singapore*, August 9, 1965, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963?ProvIds=pr14->.

<sup>37</sup>Singapore Government, *Public Order Act*, October 9, 2009, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/POA2009>. Prior to the Public Order Act, the offense was known as the 1958 Public Entertainment Act, where WP's JB Jeyaretnam and SDP's Chee Soon Juan were fined and jailed on multiple occasions for speaking in open spaces without obtaining a permit. See: James Gomez, "Restricting Free Speech: The Impact on Opposition Parties in Singapore," *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 23 (2006), page 90-91

<sup>38</sup> "Kill the Chicken," Human Rights Watch. K Shanmugam is also the former personal lawyer to prime minister Lee and member of the PAP party. See: Seow Bi Yei, "Everyone Has Right to Choose a Lawyer," *The Straits Times*, last modified February 6, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/everyone-has-right-to-choose-a-lawyer>.



peaceful demonstration.<sup>39</sup> Jolovan Wham was similarly prosecuted in 2017 for holding a silent protest to commemorate the arrest of 22 Singaporean activists in 1987 under the Internal Security Act.<sup>40</sup> Despite the peaceful nature of these protests, because they criticized the PAP and had potential to undermine confidence in the regime, they, along with other smaller protests, posed a threat to Singapore's artificial social stability and the PAP. In 2018, due to increasing protests, the PAP passed an amendment to the Public Order Act, giving the Police Commissioner and the Minister of Home Affairs a greater ability to control unauthorized public protests.<sup>41</sup> Under the 2018 Public Order and Safety Act, Jolovan Wham served his penalty of 22 days in prison after defaulting on his 8,000 USD fine in 2021 for his 2017 demonstration.<sup>42</sup> The PAP has extended "the preservation of public order" to include preserving the power of their regime which they see as a higher priority than Singapore's constitutional right to peaceful assembly.

## Censorship of Online Media

The Info-Communications Media Development Authority (IMDA), a government body established in the 2016 Info-Communications Media Development Authority Act (IMDAA), has repeatedly used a range of censorship and regulatory acts to target anti-PAP journalists, openly dismissing their right to free speech as a Singaporean. The initial creation of the IMDA consolidated all past censorship laws into the authority of the IMDA.<sup>43</sup> One of the most frequently used acts under the IMDA is the 1994 Broadcasting Act which regulates the ownerships and license to operate for Singaporean websites.<sup>44</sup> In 2013, the PAP passed an amendment to the Broadcasting Act adding that online news sites must obtain a license of registration that allows the IMDA to force the removal of any content that they deem threatens "the public interest, public order or national harmony."<sup>45</sup> Following the amended Broadcasting Act, the IMDA enforced its first closure of an independent media outlet, *The Real Singapore*. *The Real Singapore* was prosecuted for an alleged failure to produce funding sources and information, forcing their shut down and two editors, Ai Takagi and Yang Kaiheng, were arrested with a bail of 15,000 USD.<sup>46</sup> This case proved to not be an isolated action

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<sup>39</sup>"Singapore: Authorities Given Broad New Powers to Police Protests," Amnesty International, last modified April 4, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/04/singapore-authorities-given-broad-new-powers-to-police-protests/>.

<sup>40</sup>"Jolovan Wham Fined and Sentenced," Front Line Defenders, last modified 2021, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/jolovan-wham-fined-and-sentenced#case-update-id-9683>.

<sup>41</sup>Kelly NG, "What You Need to Know about the Public Order and Safety (Special Powers) Bil," Today Online, last modified February 27, 2018, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/what-you-need-know-about-public-order-and-safety-special-powers-bill>.

<sup>42</sup>"Jolovan Wham," Front Line Defenders.

<sup>43</sup>Singapore Government, "Acts and Regulations," Infocomm Media Development Authority, <https://www.imda.gov.sg/regulations-and-licensing/Regulations/Acts-and-Regulations>. Among others in the IMDA, the Newspaper and Printing presses Act of 1974 which regulates print media is one of the more commonly used acts. See: Singapore Parliament, *Newspaper and Printing Presses Act*, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/NPPA1974>. Another one is the Films Act of 1981 which regulated the content of films and tapes. Both serve the purpose of censoring any anti-PAP content. See: T.k.k. Iyer, "Censorship of Films and Video Tapes: The Films Act, (No. 22 of 1981)," *Malaya Law Review* 24, no. 2 (1982): [Page 327], <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24863950>.

<sup>44</sup>Singapore Parliament, *Broadcasting Act*, October 1, 1994, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/BA1994>.

<sup>45</sup> Singapore Parliament, *Broadcasting Act*. This forced registration led to the closure of the online independent news source *Breakfast Network*, when they refused to register by the end of 2013. See: "Singapore: Space Narrows for Online News Media," Human Rights Watch, last modified October 15, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/15/singapore-space-narrows-online-news-media>.

<sup>46</sup>"Singaporean Authorities Shut down The Real Singapore News Website," Committee to Protect Journalists, last modified May 5, 2015, <https://cpj.org/2015/05/singaporean-authorities-shut-down-the-real-singapo/>.

from the IMDA. Terry Xu, chief editor of independent news site *The Online Citizen* (TOC), had been targeted by several libel suits since the government deemed TOC as a political organization.<sup>47</sup> In particular, in 2021, Xu was sued by Prime Minister Lee for an estimated 150,000 USD over a 2019 article about Lee's sibling feud over the estate of their father and former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.<sup>48</sup> However, successful crowdfunding attempts after the 2021 suit allowed Terry Xu to continue until the IMDA was able to enforce a more permanent solution. The IMDA charged Xu for receiving funding at risk of "foreign interference" under the Broadcasting Act<sup>49</sup> and TOC was forced to shut down.<sup>50</sup> The IMDA, on several occasions, was able to circumvent the right to freedom of speech in any situation, by attributing free speech to a threat to national security. With their wide outreach in all mediums in which any potential form of dissent is able to travel, the IMDA is able to legally classify any of it as a threat to public safety, negating the right to free speech. Even though Ai Takagi and Terry Xu were clearly not threatening national security and simply voicing or giving a platform for dissent, the IMDA, utilizing the laws that the PAP has passed, were able to criminalize their actions and associate free speech, a core aspect of democracy, as an action with severe repercussions.

### Codification of Contempt

Not only has the prime minister's office and executive branches acted as offenders of the right to freedom of speech and assembly, but as discussed in section two, the courts are also a main proponent as well. Increasing criticisms on the lack of independence of Singaporean judges has led to the frequent use of contempt of court charges by the Attorney General Chambers (AGC) and the codification of contempt in 2016. Before 2016, the AGC had been charging critics under the arrestable offense of "scandalizing the judiciary", which was frequently used to silence any person that poses "a risk that public confidence in the administration of justice would be undermined."<sup>51</sup> In 2008, after the already bankrupt opposition leader Chee Soon Juan had been found guilty of defaming Lee Hsien Loong and Lee Kuan Yew and charged for 450,000 USD, John Tan, Assistant Secretary General of the SDP, and two others wore shirts with kangaroos in judicial robes referencing the term known as "Kangaroo Court", where the court is a sham and is either partial to another body or ignores the rights of the accused in due process. Tan was jailed for two weeks and all three were charged 3,600 USD each for contempt of court and "scandalizing the judiciary."<sup>52</sup> Alan Shadrake

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<sup>47</sup>"Kill the Chicken to Scare the Monkeys' Suppression of Free Expression and Assembly in Singapore," Human Rights Watch, last modified December 12, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/12/12/kill-chicken-scare-monkeys/suppression-free-expression-and-assembly-singapore>.

<sup>48</sup>"Singapore High Court Rules That The Online Citizen Bloggers Defamed Prime Minister," Committee to Protect Journalists, last modified September 3, 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/09/singapore-high-court-rules-that-the-online-citizen-bloggers-defamed-prime-minister/>.

<sup>49</sup>"Singapore Suspends Independent Website, Threatens It with Closure," Reporters without Borders, last modified October 15, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/singapore-suspends-independent-website-threatens-it-closure>. The necessity for transparency in political funding, originally in the Political Donations Act, was replaced in 2021 by the Foreign Interference Act (FICA). See: Ministry of Home Affairs, *First Reading of Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill*, September 2021, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/first-reading-of-foreign-interference-countermeasures-bill/>.

<sup>50</sup>Dewey Sim, "Singapore Website The Online Citizen Goes Offline after Funding Disclosure Row with Government," South China Morning Post, last modified September 16, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3148970/singapore-website-online-citizen-goes-offline-after-funding>.

<sup>51</sup> Attorney General's Chambers, *Contempt of Court*, <https://www.agc.gov.sg/legal-processes/contempt-of-court>.

<sup>52</sup>"Singapore: Academic Jailed over Kangaroo T-shirt, Judiciary Severely Criticized," Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, last modified January 20, 2009, <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=5309>. Following this case and others, in 2008, the International Bar Association published a report called "Prosperity vs. Individual Rights", severely criticizing the judicial system's proceedings and bias. See: "Prosperity versus Individual Rights? Human

was fined 10,000 USD and jailed for eight weeks for publishing *Once a Jolly Hangman* criticizing the lack of impartiality of Singapore's courts and specifically cites Singapore's former formal executioner of having executed over 1000 people for the PAP since 1959<sup>53</sup>, a number that far exceeds official government reports.<sup>54</sup> More contempt cases against cartoonist Leslie Wu in 2013 and blogger Alex Wu in 2015<sup>55</sup> for anti-PAP publications led to the official codification of scandalizing the jury in 2016 in the Administration of Justice (Protection) Act. This act shields the justice department from having to deal with PAP critics and silences any critic from being able to influence the public's opinion on the reputation of the courts. Maintaining the facade of the impartial judiciary is critical to the stability of the PAP's regime and the evolution of "scandalizing the judiciary" to the official codification of contempt in the Administration of Justice (Protection) Act represents how Singaporeans are also denied their freedom of speech when speaking out against not only the PAP, but any branch of government.

## Conclusion

The pattern of advancing censorship laws across Singapore's history under the PAP outpaces the ability of PAP critics to voice their dissent. The IMDA allowed for not only the consolidation of frequently used censorship laws to regulate anti-government websites, but also advanced acts like the Broadcasting Act to institute harsher penalties. The Public Entertainment Acts of 1958, under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Home Affairs, was eventually evolved into 2018 Public Order and Safety Act with stricter regulations and harsher penalties. Contempt against the court, overseen by the Attorney-General's Chambers, has been codified as an arrestable offense when it originally was rooted in defamation. The broadness highlighted in each act demonstrates the flexibility in who the PAP can conveniently prosecute and how they can evolve these laws to empower their leadership and ensure stability in the PAP government. With all three acts representing blatant infringements on Singaporean's right to free speech and peaceful assembly, anti-PAP protestors like Jolovan Wham and Terry Xu have continuously attempted to resist the authoritarian-like censorship of the PAP's regime in Singapore's democracy. However, the PAP shuts down criticism before it has a chance to influence public opinion. Ultimately, they have bankrupted and arrested protestors, leading to the association of any kind of practice of free speech as criminal against the PAP and against Singapore and as a result, there are becoming less and less people able to fight for the fundamental civil liberties of Singaporeans.

## Conclusion

Across Singapore's history, the driving force behind the country's development and prosperity has been the PAP. However, with this prosperity, the PAP has instituted policies and authorities that have entrenched their own power in order to control every aspect of the country's government and society, frequently contradicting the values of a democracy as well as the civil liberties of their own constitution. The PAP have instituted a number of electoral schemes in their parliamentary elections to prevent any potential for an opposition party to rise to power, which eliminates the core aspect of legislative diversity in a democracy. With the judiciary acting as an extension of the PAP rather than a separate entity meant to curb abuse of power, the PAP has used the judiciary to enforce skewed rulings that threaten the expulsion of opposition members when they voice dissent. Opposition parties, unable to combat the

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Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law in Singapore," *International Bar Association*, last modified July 2008, <https://studylib.net/doc/8662096/prosperity-versus-individual-rights%3F>.

<sup>53</sup>Author Alan Shadrake Released from Singapore Jail," BBC News, last modified July 9, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-14091137>.

<sup>54</sup>"Singapore: The Death Penalty: A Hidden Toll of Executions," Amnesty International, last modified January 2004, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/asa360012004en.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup>"Kill the Chicken," Human Rights Watch.

PAP in court, lack the ability to safely voice disagreement with PAP actions and policies, which fundamentally contradicts the purpose of opposition parties and forces them to conform to PAP beliefs in parliament. Even in the daily lives of citizens, the several media regulatory bodies and public order authorities are present not to protect the safety of citizens, but instead to actively infringe on the vital civil liberties of a democracy: free speech and freedom of assembly. The relentless criminalization of protest or dissent by the PAP forcefully imposes the suffocating atmosphere of absolute support for the PAP.

Given the precarious nature of Singapore's young democracy with ethnic disunity and lack of resources, the rejection of wide-spread civil liberties in exchange for economic and political stability might've been in the country's best interest in its early years after independence. That decision has undoubtedly resulted in enormous economic success for Singapore and its citizens. However, now that Singapore's prosperity is unquestionable, the continued and escalated authoritarian measures taken by the PAP seem to only serve the interest of the party, rather than the country as a whole. Ultimately, whether or not the PAP's decisions now are the "right" course of action for Singapore's future is not the focus. Instead, the focus should be on why the PAP strayed from democracy in the first place. Singapore's complex balance between authoritarian stability and democracy is reflective of a trend of developing countries turning toward authoritarianism rather than true democracy. Singapore's prosperity, despite the country's rejection of democratic values, challenges the notion that an absolute democracy is the only path to success.

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